

Green Connections

Final Evaluation Report January – March 2023

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GWLAD CONSORTIUM:

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Executive Summary

The Gwlad Consortium was contracted to provide external evaluation of the Green Connections project. A midterm review was conducted in January to March 2022. This exercise was primarily for the benefit of project staff, management, partnership and steering group. It sought to: Measure the progress of project delivery; highlight key successes and challenges; and to make recommendations to address issues and maximise the impact of the project in the final year of its implementation.

The final evaluation, to which this report relates, was undertaken in January to March 2023 and builds on the findings of the midterm review. In contrast to the latter, this review is more outward and forward looking. The target audience is not only the project management team (in its widest sense) but also the funders (EU and Welsh Government), wider stakeholder groups, and other parties who might wish to engage in or fund similar activities in the future. It seeks to assess the extent to which the project delivered on its stated objectives; the impact the project had during its life time and, perhaps most importantly the longer term impact and the extent to which the project built capacity within organisations and stakeholder groups it worked with to deliver benefits more effectively and on a larger scale in the future.

Key findings were:

Project delivery and administration

- Delivery was highly successful – only one target was not met. All others were exceeded.
- Feedback on staff performance was overwhelmingly positive; the only negative feedback related to a few instances of delays in landowners receiving reports and results.
- Recordkeeping was exemplary. This enabled the achievements of the project to be fully captured, the challenges highlighted, and the key learning to be effectively articulated – not only to the evaluation team but to other groups interesting in doing similar work in this area.
- There were significant administrative challenges at scheme level including delays in: project approval; reprofiling applications; and procurement procedures. Communication with WG was slow and difficult, and the absence of a case officer who was familiar with the detail of the project meant that RPW staff found it difficult respond to specific questions. These issues are common to many other projects, and suggest that resources and management structure at WG level are inadequate to manage the programmes.
- The late start of the project put significant pressure on the delivery staff. This impacted in a number of ways; it was a major contributor to the underspend; it put pressure on staff to deliver to reduced timetable, and it necessitated a reprofiling application, which itself took a long time to approve and presented significant administrative difficulties.

Governance

- The project partnership worked well; the three Powys based Wildlife Trusts working together has many benefits, including knowledge exchange between staff, efficiencies in delivering work on the ground; strengthening of relationships with local authorities.
- The steering group was effective in its role to monitor the progress of the project. It worked less well as a strategic oversight body. This is common to the vast majority of projects the Gwlad Consortium has evaluated and suggests that steering groups are not the most appropriate form of governance for this type of project.

Capacity building

- Staff developed their technical skills and capacity, and gained basic health and safety certificates which will significantly enhance the quality and scope of work they can carry out in the future; 5 trainees were supported and trained up in technical aspects of the work and general workplace skills, and as a direct result of the project subsequently found employment in the conservation sector.
- Landowners benefited from green infrastructure and training which will enable them to deliver environmental benefits beyond the lifetime of the project.
- Community groups likewise benefited from green infrastructure and training, and as a result of GC support are better connected with one another, have enhanced skills and knowledge to carry out practical projects and are in a stronger position to attract funding for future work.
- Community members are better informed on biodiversity and more aware of their environmental impact as a result of the project. However, the reach of the project was skewed towards older, often retired people, who were often starting from a strong knowledge base. Greater emphasis could have been placed on attracting a wider demographic to public events, and reaching new audiences.

Feasibility studies

- On the whole feasibility studies were effective in identifying opportunities and barriers. and setting out how these could be grasped and addressed respectively. In one case, the study focused too much on the technicalities, but fell short of providing guidance on issue such as applicability beyond the case studies, costs, and key success factors
- The majority of the feasibility studies were conducted at the end of the project to deal with underspend, which reduced the extent to which they could inform and influence the direction of the project. It also meant the opportunities for wider dissemination of the findings within the life time of the project were limited

Collaboration

- Building connections was at the heart of the project. The project was successful in facilitating this across all stakeholder groups including landowners, community groups, local government, and researchers.

- Collaboration between landowners was successful but was only really achieved toward the end of the project. It is of the utmost importance the collaboration initiatives established continue to be supported.

Strategic development

- The project made significant contributions to Local Nature Action Recovery Plans
- The enhancement of the Nature Recovery Map is an important resource that will inform the development, and improve the impact of future work in Powys

Recommendations were:

Future projects of this type are delivered in a longer time frame; a minimum of 5 years, and potentially 10 years with a 5 year break clause

- The Welsh Government ensures that for future programmes of this type (e.g. successors to ENRaW and SMS), sufficient resources are made available and appropriate management structures are put in place to support effective delivery of project
- Alternative approaches are considered to wider governance, specifically replacing steering groups with more focused working groups, and transferring the strategic oversight role in the project partnership.
- The approach to record keeping exemplified by this project is adopted in projects more widely.
- The role and implementation of feasibility studies is reviewed, such that they are more relevant outside the specific context of the project and are delivered at a point in the project where their finding can influence the direction of the project to a greater extent.
- Securing funding to facilitate the continuation of the great many collaborations that have been built during the project is a priority.

1 Introduction

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The structure of the report is as follows:

Overview. This section sets out the aims and objectives of the project, and its timescale and budget. It briefly describes the activities undertaken to date meet those, and progress towards the targets and outcomes associated with those actions. It also articulates the need for the project, and rationale behind it describes the governance and staffing structure, and the project delivery model,

Implementation: This section covers the effectiveness of partnership working and range of stakeholders involved. It also comments on the effectiveness of governance and internal and external communication and interactions.

Evaluation methodology The approach and methodology of the evaluation process is described including the research activities undertaken, and the evidence on which the evaluation was based.

Achievements, outcomes and impact. This section examines the extent to which the targets set out in the original/ revised project proposal were met.

Conclusions and recommendations This set out the evaluator's conclusions on the implementation, outcomes and impact made by the project and the key learnings from the project at this stage. It makes recommendations for the priorities for the remaining time left to the project, and highlights and potential improvements around partnership working and project management

2 Overview of the Green Connections project

2.1 *Aims and activities*

Green Connections is a collaborative project, bringing the three Wildlife Trusts in Powys together to work with community groups, small businesses, landowners and statutory organisations to take local action to address climate change and biodiversity loss, and create a nature recovery network across the county. It had 7 objectives:

- Support Powys CC and other statutory bodies to take action for climate change and the ecological emergency.
- Encourage landowners to undertake work to improve management of habitats, connect habitats and strengthen ecological networks.
- Undertake specific habitat management work for rare or uncommon species on identified target areas in wider countryside.
- Help community groups improve their natural environment and take action for climate change and the ecological crisis.
- Support rural businesses in making changes in their land management to implement nature-based solutions and support biodiversity.
- Create a Nature Recovery Map for Powys showing opportunities and achievements on both the local and landscape scale
- Develop feasibility and pilot studies

Activities to undertaken to achieve these aims are summarised in Table 1

2.2 *Timescale and budget*

The project duration was 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2023. A 'proceed-at-risk letter' was issued on 18/12/2020, but the proposal was not formally signed off until 23/7/21 following additional justification and changes in expenditure budget lines and a new delivery profile. The project formally started on 1 April 2021 with a skeleton staff, as planned, with new staff being taken on in April and August of that year.

The budget for the project was £785,080, and there was no match funding. While activities were rescheduled in the light of delayed approval in a reprofiling exercise, the budget remained unchanged.

:

Objective	Activities
Support Powys CC and other statutory bodies to take action for climate change and the ecological emergency	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identifying, designating, mapping and encouraging PCC to embed Local Wildlife Sites and SINCs into the planning system• Advising on management of road verges to benefit wildlife and add to the ecological network• Supporting PCC in planning green infrastructure, managing community green space and declaring a climate emergency
Encourage landowners to undertake work to improve management of habitats, connect habitats and strengthen ecological networks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Management advice to landowners on opportunities for nature-based solutions and funding streams/applications• Work with landowners and volunteers to survey, record and monitor wildlife, contributing to a Wales-wide understanding of biodiversity distribution• Organise Bioblitzes with BIS to get intensive recording on special sites• Update habitat management and species monitoring toolkits to build capacity among landowners & communities• Feasibility Study looking at opportunities for clusters of collaborative working on conservation grazing, habitat management and species surveying to break down barriers between different rural sectors
Undertake specific habitat management work for rare or uncommon species	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Targeted habitat management on at least 3 wildlife sites• Pilot study to reintroduce or reinforce uncommon species into certain habitats
Help community groups improve their natural	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage groups to discuss and share ideas of what is possible

<p>environment and take action for climate change and the ecological crisis</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help people set up groups to safely look after community spaces or gardens (toolkit) • Provide activities for all ages and abilities that benefit health and well-being • Feasibility study into community enterprises growing native species and trees to sell/ improve their green spaces • Map people’s actions on a nature recovery map for Powys • Species/habitat identification and recording activities to help people discover nature on their doorstep
<p>Support rural businesses in making changes in their land management to implement nature-based solutions and support biodiversity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support tourism businesses and industrial estates where there may be opportunities for changes in green space around the buildings. • Create and establish a ‘merit’ badge for businesses, landowners and communities who are looking after wildlife • Provide advice on land management and nature based solutions, e.g. rain gardens, pollinator friendly planting
<p>Create a Nature Recovery Map for Powys showing opportunities and achievements on both the local and landscape scale</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build on mapping work being undertaken by other organisations and show land like nature reserves, road verges, local wildlife sites, and community green space being managed for nature • Identify places where connectivity of habitat is needed for rare species like dormice, bats, water voles • BIS will also provide the project with data searches and maps for landowners and reports.
<p>Develop feasibility and pilot studies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rarer plants reintroduction • Collaborative conservation land management: exploring collaborations and breaking down barriers between farmers (SMEs) and lifestyle landowners and volunteers, to improve habitat management and give mutual gain • Community/SME growing of native plants and trees • Opportunities and challenges in implementing a results-based payments package • eDNA analysis for White Clawed Crayfish (M Abram, 2022) • eDNA Analysis of Soils for Grassland Fungi (G Griffiths, 2023)

Table 1: Summary of activities

2.3 Governance

The project partnership was made up of the three Wildlife trusts active in Powys:

- Radnorshire Wildlife Trust (RWT) – Project lead
- Montgomeryshire Wildlife Trust (MWT)
- Wildlife Trust for South and West Wales (WTSWW), also referred to as the 'Brecknockshire Wildlife Trust'

Delivery was overseen by a steering group, membership of which included a representative of each of the partner organisation, BIS and NRW. The project evaluator was invited to attend meeting as an observer. Terms of reference for the steering group were:

- Monitoring project progress against the agreed targets
- Providing strategic direction
- Ensuring good joint working between the three WTs and taking account of cross-over issues with other projects
- Providing advice where requested or needed

Working groups were set up to focus on specific area of work including:

- The feasibility of some pilot collaborative habitat land management between landowners /volunteers/small machinery contractors
- Community/SME involvement in growing native plants/saplings for use locally

2.4 Staff

The project employed a total of 15 staff, representing 8.8 FTE, including 5 short term trainee posts. Details of role, responsibilities and affiliation are provided in Table 2.

Role	Person	Organisation	FTE	Responsibilities
Project manager	Darylle Hardy	RWT	0.8	<p>Ensure the project is delivered and risk management as per application</p> <p>Main point of contact for WG/ ENRaW team</p> <p>Financial claims, monitoring and reporting</p> <p>Reporting back to CEO and RWT Council</p> <p>Steering group and staff meeting co-ordination</p> <p>Recruitment</p> <p>Line management of Admin Assistant and Conservation Officer</p> <p>Procurement external contractors and management</p> <p>Production, translating, printing of project resources and final reports</p> <p>Identify grants for communities/landowners and support applications</p> <p>Identify continuity funding</p>
Admin assistant	Deri Griffiths	RWT	0.6	<p>Maintaining cash book, collation of financial data for claims</p> <p>Collating timesheets, attendance sheets, volunteer timesheets, inputting data as evidence for targets</p> <p>Minute-taking at meetings</p> <p>Supporting staff for arranging and attending events</p>
Conservation Officer	Sarah Woodcock	RWT	1.0	<p>Landowner and business advice species surveys</p> <p>Written management advice</p> <p>Nature based solutions advice</p> <p>Training and working with volunteers</p> <p>Setting up volunteer species survey teams</p> <p>Helping to organise species recording days</p>

Conservation Officer	Tammy Stretton	MWT	0.6	<p>Setting up and supporting landowner/volunteers in local collaborative activities</p> <p>Local wildlife site (LWS) surveys, management advice</p> <p>Checking sites against criteria for LWS</p> <p>Implementing targeted habitat management</p> <p>Liaising with landowners and contractor on potential locations for rare plant reintroductions</p> <p>Road verge management liaison with PCC, recommending new road verges for designation as Road Verge Nature Reserves</p>
Wildlife Trust Officer	Steph Coates	WTSWW	0.6	<p>Supporting Community Officers with ideas for habitat management & activities</p> <p>Work with BIS on mapping of LWS, ground truthing of habitats, opportunity mapping and identification of land being managed for wildlife</p> <p>Newsletters and social media</p>
Wildlife Volunteers Officer	Phil Ward	RWT	0.6	<p>Undertaking species surveys with volunteers and trainees on landowner sites in central Powys</p> <p>Recruiting and supporting species survey volunteers</p> <p>Training volunteers to monitor species in standard methodologies</p> <p>Species data recording and mapping; submitting data to county recorders and BIS</p> <p>Practical work with volunteers on landowner sites</p> <p>Supporting trainees in undertaking wildlife surveys and practical habitat management</p> <p>Newsletters and social media as necessary</p>
Community Wildlife Officer	Janice Vincett	RWT	0.6	<p>Helping community groups identify what can be done to address ecological and climate crises and supporting them to undertake activities</p> <p>Setting up and running community activities with groups</p> <p>Attendance at community events</p> <p>Talks and presentations to communities</p> <p>Leading on Comms, social media, film, newsletter articles</p> <p>Supporting, working with and line managing trainees</p> <p>Meet and share ideas and achievements between other Community Wildlife staff</p>
	Lottie Glover	MWT	1.0	
	Pauline Hill	WTSWW	1.0	

				Encouraging community groups to survey and record wildlife Helping community groups identify and apply for small grants for work in green space
Trainee	Phoebe Neville Evans	MWT	0.4	Helping to engage visitors and warden the nature reserve Helping conservation officers and community wildlife officers with surveys and activities as needed Individual project developing own knowledge about species or habitat
Trainee	Kirsty Martuccio	MWT	0.4	
Trainee	Megan Abram	MWT	0.4	
Trainee	Sally Morris, Lara	RWT	0.4	
Trainee	Catrin Sparrow	RWT	0.4	

Table 2: Staff roles, responsibilities and affiliations

3 Implementation of the project

3.1 Delivery

The project was delivered successfully. Section 5 examines progress against targets for individual areas of activity, and an overview is provided below in Table 3.

The level of engagement with all stakeholders was excellent. In terms of the numbers of stakeholders, nearly all targets were exceeded, some by a considerable margin. The only exception was advice delivered to community groups, where the target was only partially met, primarily because the support needs of this group changed between developing the proposal and starting the project. In terms of the quality of engagement interaction, feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The quotes highlighted in Boxes 2 – 7 are representative of the vast majority of beneficiaries interviewed as part of the evaluation, and is consistent with other evidence (feedback forms etc) provided by the project team. There were a small number of instances where landowners commented on long delays between arranging visits and those visits being delivered, and between receiving advisory visits and receiving reports. There was a single instance of negative feedback from community groups, however, many of the issues raised were about wider issues of access to funding for community groups and less about the support delivered by the project itself. If there is a learning point here, it is around making sure that the expectations of the beneficiaries are aligned with the scope of the support the project is design to deliver.

The project also very successful in delivering training in terms of the number of events organised, the number of participants and the quality of the courses (details in Section 5.5). As discussed in section 5.6 the feasibility studies all contributed to the knowledge and a useful basis on which further work can develop in the future, although the scope and timing of some could have been improved.

Advice to community groups aside, there were only two areas where the targets were not met.

- 'Community Group Case Studies': These were not delivered in the form originally envisaged in the application. The purpose of these were to inspire the community groups, and there was strong evidence that the project did achieve this in other ways. For example, of organising a series of roadshows towards the end of the project during which over 10 projects made presentations about the work they were doing and the contribution of the project.
- Road Verge Nature Reserves: PCC took the management of the verges 'in house' and a result there was less involvement from the project.

Feedback from stakeholders and beneficiaries regarding project staff was highly complementary, and among the stakeholders interviewed they were almost universally described in positive terms; 'knowledgeable, inspiring; great to work with'.

	TARGET	DELIVERY			
		RWT	Brecknock	MWT	Total
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT					
Total Number of Landowner stakeholders	60	38	33	39	110
Landowner advice initial	60	34	33	35	102
Landowner man plan/species list	30	17	24	35	76
Community or landowner group visits organised to see good	6	3	4	3	10
No of advisory visits to businesses, tourism sites	30	16	12	9	37
Recording days with BIS or others	6	3	2	3	8
Sites of targeted habitat management works		6	10	3	19
Number of Community group stakeholders (inc councils)	60	28	40	32	100
Community groups land management advice	60	13	25	12	50
Advice to town/community council (statutory body)		2	5	4	11
Com group activity to improve/ survey community sites or	30	14	24	15	53
Support for com groups: steering group meetings; funding		2	12	13	27
Individual volunteers taking part	30	188	41	11	240
TRAINING					
Formal Training days (generally with external orgs)	15	31	18	21	70
Number of Participants in formal training days	90	192	55	112	359
Informal in-house training activity or zoom training Training		45	14	13	72
Event attended or presentation/talk given to promote project		21	8	11	40
COMMUNICATIONS					
Social media posts	60	118	2	314	434
Press releases	4	7	8	0	15
Newsletter articles	3	10	2	0	12
Community group case studies to showcase and inspire	6	1	1	0	2
CONSERVATION CLUSTERS					
New conservation cluster groups set up during project	3	1	2	2	5
SUPPORTING PCC					
RVNR meetings with PCC	2				0
LNP/PCC					2
LWS meetings with pnship group	2				4
FEASIBILITY STUDIES					
Rare plants feasibility study - Introductions	12	12			12
Community or SME set up to grow native species	1				1
Collaborative land management feasibility study	1				1
NATURE RECOVERY MAP	1				1
COLLABORATIONS					23

	Target exceeded
	Target met or almost met
	Some progress
	Little or no progress
	No Target

Table 3: Overview of delivery against targets

The record keeping by the project management team was exemplary. This was important for the delivery of the project, including monitoring progress and meeting the administrative

challenges highlighted in section 3.4. It is also vital for the assessing the impact of the project; as evaluators it meant we had comprehensive information on which to base our assessments. More widely, it has allowed the Trusts to comprehensively evidence the impact of the project, which will strengthen their position for future funding applications. While some staff have felt the data collection was burdensome its value cannot be overstated.

3.2 External communication

The project communicated its aims and activities successfully. They used a range of media, including: social media posts, press releases, newsletter articles. All targets were met, and in the case of social media posts, far exceeded (Table 4). They also made effective use of networks of beneficiary organisations, for example through newsletters and social media posts. During the final project celebration events, a small number of participants commented they were not previously aware of the project. However, it is unrealistic to expect that communications reached everyone who might have an interest in what was a Powys-wide project, and the success in stakeholder engagement is clearly evident.

	TARGET	DELIVERY			
		RWT	Brecknock	MWT	Total
COMMUNICATIONS					
Social media posts	60	118	2	314	434
Press releases	4	7	8	0	15
Newsletter articles	3	10	2	0	12
Community group case studies to showcase and inspire	6	1	1	0	2

	Target exceeded
	Target met or almost met
	Some progress
	Little or no progress

Table 4: External communications activity

3.3 Collaboration with other initiatives and organisations

The project worked well with other initiatives. At community level, there were several examples where the project's contribute to specific elements of an existing project (e.g. provision of green infrastructure), without which the project as a whole would been less successful or unable to proceed. GC staff also provided support to help projects apply for additional/future funding – support, which the beneficiaries concerned said was vital, and serve as good examples of how the GC resources were used to lever additional funding. The project also took some important steps in enhancing collaboration between producers, detailed in Section 5.4

Powys County Council were very positive about the contribution GC staff made to the development of strategic plans, for example the Nature Recovery Plans. Council staff said that the 'relationship between the Council and the Wildlife Trusts is 'Stronger now than at any time previously and that can be attributed directly to the Green Connections Project'. The development of if the Nature Recovery Plan has been highly beneficial to Powys CC. including; developing better relationships between different council departments; placing nature recovery at the forefront of council decision making; and underpinning initiatives such as 'A greener future'. This work was a result of large number of organisations and stakeholder

groups and cannot be attributed solely the project, but the contribution of the GC project was significant and highly valued by PCC.

3.4 *Project governance – partnership and steering & working groups*

3.41 Effectiveness of the partnership

The partnership worked well. 'The Wildlife Trusts' is a federation, and while the individual Trusts work under the same umbrella, they are separate organisations with their own management structures, administration systems, budgets and local priorities. While this structure clearly works well, it does create some barriers for joint working. The Green Connections project provided the opportunity for the three Trusts to work together on a single Powys wide basis, and this brought significant benefits:

- Staff in the individual trusts developed stronger working relationships, able to draw on each other's' experience and knowledge and working across the sub county borders which delivered important efficiencies. This was true at several different levels, from the delivery teams on the group to CEOs.
- It created opportunities for resource sharing between the organisations.
- Externally, PCC welcomed the opportunity to work jointly with the Trusts (one officer commented 'it's great to work with just one group instead of three')
- The project provided a collaboration model that can be effective in the future, especially in the context of delivering projects of this type in the future

There were some difficulties, mostly around different administration systems between individual Trusts, but these were far outweighed by the benefits.

3.42 Steering group and working groups.

The steering group was partially effective. As set in Section 2.3 it had 4 roles: monitoring project progress against the agreed targets; providing strategic direction; ensuring good joint working between the three Trusts; and providing advice where requested or needed.

It was a useful means to monitoring progress, and the majority of the time in meetings was allocated to reports from the project manager and staff. As a strategic oversight body, it was less effective. It responded to requests well from staff on the occasions on which they were made and engaged actively in discussion during group meetings. However, the groups were mostly receiving information rather than actively setting the direction of the project, and responding to questions from the project staff rather than taking a more active role in decision making. While the impact on project delivery was minimal (as evidenced in section 3) there were areas where stronger strategic direction would have benefited the project, for example dealing with the issue of underspend more effectively earlier.

Some steering group members commented that they lacked the capacity to engage more fully with the steering group, and in some cases, they were serving on groups of other projects at the same time. Staff turnover in the organisations represented on the steering group meant that some individual members were new to the group.

In terms of the make up the steering group, there was a lack of representation from farmers and landowners, and this was commented on by a number of people interviewed by the evaluators. It is difficult to say what the impact of this was, given that the engagement with farmers was excellent, as was feedback from farmers participating in the project.

These issues are by no means unique to the Green Connections project. The Gwlad Consortium is / has been involved in evaluating 9 SMS projects, and while they funded under a different programme, that experience is relevant. Many steering groups are experiencing issues almost identical to those described for this project. This suggests that steering groups generally are not the most effective governance models for this type of project. We suggest that the project oversight is a more appropriate function of the partnership groups, which to all practical purposes has been the case across the board. It is of course vital that all the main stakeholders involved can influence the direction of the project, but we suggest this is most effectively achieved through other means. Working groups or task and finish groups, which tend to be smaller, time bound and more relevant to the experience and interests of individual stakeholder groups are likely to be more effective. Integrating feedback sessions into other events organised by the project (rather than expecting participants to come to steering group meetings) could also be a valuable approach, especially in respect of farmers and landowners.

3.5 Key challenges

3.5.1 Scheme level administration

The project staff experienced a number of administrative challenges at scheme level including:

- Delays in approving the project proposals. As highlighted above, delays in approving the project meant that the already short time of the project was reduced still further, and in the initial stages the project had to operate on a reduced staff on an 'at risk basis'.
- Approval for reprofiling costs was very slow, and meant that in the interim, the project was working to two delivery profiles and operating in a very uncertain financial environment.
- Communication with RPW was very slow. There was no specific person responsible for the project so getting useful answers to project specific questions was difficult.
- The requirement for procurement documents to be reviewed/ approved by WG caused delays implementing work.
- The claims process was very difficult and WEFO online is far from intuitive. The project team learned to navigate it better toward the end of the project, but initially it took a disproportionately large amount of time.

This mirrors, almost exactly, issues that have come up consistently across all the SMS projects in which we have been involved. The inescapable conclusion is that resources and the management systems allocated by Welsh Government to the management of these schemes is insufficient and inappropriate respectively. For future programmes of this type we strongly recommend the Welsh Government ensures adequate resources are available to their staff to manage the scheme, and works with delivery organisations to develop appropriate management systems.

3.5.2 Short project time frame

The delay in getting the project off the ground at the outset exacerbated the issues around the already short time frame the project. In a large part, the Green Connections project was about building relationships, and this takes time to do. Staff, steering group members and beneficiaries all commented that many relationships were only really beginning to gel towards

the end of the project, and this was evidenced by a number of comments along the lines of 'we only really got going towards the end of the project'. There was a general view that projects of this type needed a longer time frame – 5 years was commonly suggested, and preferably 10 years with a 5-year break clause – and where resources are limited, spreading the same funding across more years would be a preferable strategy. The short duration of the project was also an issue in terms of demonstrating the impact of habitat management and infrastructure, and it was unrealistic to expect to see ecological changes within the lifetime of the project.

4 Evaluation methodology

4.1 *Aims*

- Provide an assessment of the impact of the project including: Delivery against targets; cost benefit analysis, including highlighting the main environmental, economic and social benefits delivered; and commentary on the strengths and weaknesses of the project design.
- Identify opportunities to replicate and expand the impact beyond the life of the project
- Document key learning, not only for the project team but for the ENRaW programme more widely
- Preparation of a final report

4.2 *Approach*

4.2.1 Development of a monitoring framework

A framework for monitoring and evaluation was established which:

- Recorded the progress of project delivery against the targets set out in the application.
- Identified activities that do not directly contribute to project targets but add value.
- Detailed the nature of data that needs to be collected in order to fully evidence project delivery.

The framework took the form of an excel spreadsheet, based on the outcomes of discussions with the project team on the above. Data relating to targets, or groups of targets were entered on individual tabs, with a summary sheet that collated all the information in a single table. The data sheet was populated using a range of sources as detailed in Table 5 below:

Tab	Description	Data source
Jobs created	Details of posts, and FTE	RWLT documentation
Training	Description of events, date, location, number of participants	Registration forms
Business supported	Large and SME businesses; name & contact details; no. hours contact	Project team records & progress reports
Stakeholders	Event participants; public exhibitions; oral history participants	Registration forms & progress reports
Health & Wellbeing	Volunteering, craft workshops; connecting with nature workshops	Registration forms & progress reports
Access	Capital works (maintenance of foot paths, construction of stiles)	Documentation from contractors; progress reports
Habitat management, monitoring and surveying	Scrub removal; grazing management plans; Ecological surveys	Documentation from contractors; progress reports
Governance	Details of partnership, steering and working group membership & meeting	Minutes and attendance records
Communications	Details of presentations, newsletters social media posts	RWLT records

Table 5: Structure of monitoring framework and data sources

4.22 Semi structured interviews

Representatives of all key stakeholders were interviewed online or over the telephone, depending on preference of the interviewees. The questions (detailed in Table 6) were deliberately left broad and open ended, in order to maximise the depth and breadth of information we could gather. Broadly speaking the questions sought feedback on:

- The perceived successes and challenges of the project
- Key learning/ lessons
- How participation in the project had built capacity

Staff, partnership members and steering group members were also asked to comment on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the management and governance system.

4.23 Attendance at key events

Members of the evaluation team attended a series of ‘end of project’ events, celebrating the achievements of the project. At these events they listened to case study presentations and carried out face-to-face interviews with landowners, farmers, community groups, training course participants, volunteers and members of the public.

Group	Questions
Staff	What do you think are the main successes of the project?
	What were the main challenges you faced and how were you able to meet them? What, if anything, would you do differently if you had your time again?
	<p>How effective was the partnership/ management group and the advisory group? For example:</p> <p><i>Were the right skills/organisations represented and if not, who/what was missing? As staff did you get the support you needed? When the management and advisory groups needed to make decisions, were those decisions made in a clear and timely manner, and did you feel you had an input to the decision-making process?</i></p>
	<p>How has the project the built capacity for future work of this type to be continued after the end of the project? For example:</p> <p><i>What can you and the different stakeholders/ beneficiaries achieve now that you/they couldn't at the start of project? Is the partnership in a better position to expand/develop as result of having worked together on this project? If not, why not?</i></p>
Partnership and steering/ working groups	What do you think are the main successes of the project?
	What were the main challenges you faced and how were you able to meet them? What would you do differently if you had your time again?
	<p>How effective was the partnership and the steering/working groups? For example:</p> <p><i>Were the right skills/organisations represented and if not, who was missing? Did you feel you had the information and resources to make the decisions/recommendations you needed to enable the project to run effectively? If not, why not?</i></p>
	<p>How has the project the built capacity for future work of this type to be continued after the end of the project? For example:</p> <p><i>What can different stakeholders/ beneficiaries achieve now that they couldn't at the start of project? Is the partnership in a better position to expand/develop as result of having worked together on this project? If so, how. If not, why not?</i></p>
Landowners, farmers & Community groups	How were you involved in the project/ how did you benefit?
	What were your motivations for getting involved?
	To what extent were your expectations met?
	<p>How has the project enabled you to meet your environmental goals/ ambitions for your land? For example: <i>Has it enabled or inspired you to do additional work of this type in the future, and/ or get involved other projects of this type? Have you gained new skills/ knowledge as result of participating? If so how you use them in the future?</i></p>

Volunteers & Training course participants	What activities did you get involved in?
	How do you feel you have benefited from the project: <i>For example:</i> <i>What new skills/ knowledge have you gained? Did you forge new relationships/ meet new people of organisations</i>
	How will you use those new skills/ knowledge in the future?
	Has participation in the project inspired you to get more involved more activities? If so you can you give some examples?

Table 6: Interview questions

5. Achievements, outcomes and impacts

5.1 Job creation

As identified in 2.4, the project employed a total of 15 members of staff equivalent to 8.8 FTE, exceeding the target. As discussed in section 3.41, joint working between the three Trusts brought significant benefits. The trainee programme was highly effective. Over the course of the project, five trainees were taken on (although one only for a limited period of time). Three of the five were interviewed as part of the evaluation process. They were unanimous in their view that that the trainee ship had benefited them significantly in several ways including:

- **Technical skills and knowledge**, including deeper understand of ecology and wildlife, ID skills. practical skills such as using and maintaining brush cutters, and fencing; operating QGIS, understanding e-DNA diagnostics and much more
- **Better understanding of farmers and farming systems**, and the conservation opportunities and challenges farmers face
- **Transferable workplace skills** such as 'how to be a good worker'; how to interact with different stakeholders; managing inboxes, etc

Young people at the beginning of their careers often find themselves in a 'catch 22' situation where they need experience to get a job, but cannot get a job because they have no experience. Offering traineeships has played a very important role in breaking that cycle; Three of the trainees now have jobs in conservation related posts and the remaining two are currently applying for such posts.

5.2 Landowner and farmer engagement

Delivery against targets is summarised below in Table 7.

	Target	Delivery			Total
		RWT	Brec	MWT	
Total number of Landowner stakeholders	60	38	33	39	110
Landowner advice initial	60	34	33	35	102
Landowner man plan/species list	30	17	24	35	76
Community or landowner group visits organised to see good sites	6	3	4	3	10
Recording days with BIS or others	6	3	2	3	8
Sites of targeted habitat management works		6	10	3	19

	Target exceeded
	Target met or almost met
	Some progress
	Little or no progress
	No Target

Table 7: Landowner and farmer engagement

Where targets were set, they were exceeded, in some case by a considerable margin. Landowners and farmers interviewed were positive about their interaction. From the point of view of the long-term impact of the project, what is most significant is the future intentions. There was good evidence that the investment provided by the project will enable ongoing management to deliver environmental benefits, For example, where ponds were created or improved, farmers intended to monitor species on a regular basis (and benefited from ID training provided by the project to enable them to do so); where fencing was erected, the intention was graze with cattle or ponies, in many cases based on management plans developed with support from the project. There were some instances where there were delays in sending reports and results of visits and surveys to farmers.

The additional information received and the variety of projects in which we can now become involved has been extremely useful so over and above expectations.'

'The support we received was really helpful. Partly confirmed what we already were doing was appropriate, but it also helped us think more clearly about, for example whether our future tree planting plans were appropriate, and to develop our grazing plans'

Box 1: Comments from Landowners

The team were effective in linking activity on farms with other aspects of the project, example holding 'Bioblitz' events and volunteering days on participating farms. This benefited both the farm environment directly (e.g. Invasive species management), and helped to build stronger relationships with local communities, which farmers valued.

Initially there was limited interaction between individual landowners and farmers involved in the project, and at the midterm review some farmers commented they had 'no sense of being part of a wider project'. This was addressed towards the end of project, in a number of ways:

- The establishment of conservation 'cluster groups' as landowner or wildlife survey groups, both building on existing structures and establishing a new group, the 'North Brecknock Landowner Group'. The latter has proved particularly successful, with farmers from outside the area wishing to join, and creating the case for a second group be established in the south of the sub county.
- Commissioning the 'Collaborative Land Management Feasibility Study' (section 5.61) and the additional facilitation projects, several based around Commons (5.65)
- Developing management plans for grazier groups on commons

The project also played an important role in supporting existing groups. Examples included:

- 'Gwneud Gwair Cymreig/ Making Welsh Hay Project', which received steering group support, attendance at events, habitat advice, wildlife surveys and training.
- The Ciliau Farm Restoration Project, where RWT were instrumental in helping the farm owners obtain a grant from the NRW/NLHF fund; the only farm enterprise to successfully do so. A phase II application will be going forward for further funding to Nature Networks. This is one example of where GC resources were used to lever additional funding from other sources. Others included the feasibility studies on *Opportunities and challenges of results-based payments* and *Exploring Collaborative Habitat Land Management in Powys*.

These activities are central to the future impact of the project. They are key mechanisms by which the benefits of the project can be extended beyond the lifetime of the project. However, it is vital that some facilitation support is provided to these groups in the future. There are many, many examples of where groups have been set up with project funding and have folded for lack of basic facilitation support after the end of the project.

5.3 Community group engagement

This is summarised below in Table 8. Most targets were exceeded, with the exception of advice to community groups where the target was only partially met. This was due to changes in the support needs of this group. When the project proposal was first developed, a need for support in preparing management plans was identified, but by the time delivery started, it became clear that many had those plans in place already. Support was delivered to the groups in other ways including training, technical support, participation on steering groups and support for preparing funding applications.

This was one of the most successful elements of the project. The comments in Boxes 2 – 10 are broadly representative of the feedback received from community groups included in the evaluation process, and evidence from elsewhere (progress reports and feedback forms) indicate that this positivity is representative of the project as a whole.

	Target	Delivery			Total
		RWT	Brec	MWT	
Number of Community group stakeholders	60	28	40	32	100
Community groups land management advice	60	13	25	12	50
Advice to town/community council		2	5	4	11
Com group activity to improve/ survey community sites or their local area	30	14	24	15	53
Support for com groups: steering group meetings; funding help etc		2	12	13	27
Individual volunteers taking part	30	188	41	11	240

	Target exceeded
	Target met or almost met
	Some progress
	Little or no progress
	No Target

Table 8: Community Group engagement

The project visited a number of existing groups and projects to advise on the management of their sites for wildlife value. This took a number of forms including one to one visits, the preparation of management plans, and the ongoing participation on committees/ governance groups. This area of activity was particularly important with respect to the long term impact of the project, particularly where new habitats were being established (Box 4, Box 6). The plans were also important in communicating the reasons behind particular management strategies (Box 7) for example deliberately leaving areas of park unmown as a wildlife refuge. Advice was given on the appropriate siting, and management of habitats, for example bug hotels, wild flower strips. This was supported by training, for example, pollinator ID, scything techniques etc. In so doing the project has built capacity and put in place green infrastructure that will ensure the delivery of benefits far beyond the lifetime of the project. Involvement in these activities provided the opportunity to engage with local politicians, who themselves were members of the groups, and played an important part in raising the profile of such projects and helping to prioritise funding at community/ town council level, helping to create the underlying conditions that will enable more projects to establish in the future.

The advice and support also enabled new initiatives and projects to start up, for example a meadows project in Llandysul and the establishment of a local 'Swift group' in Brecon. In addition to technical/ practical advice the team also offered advice on sources of funding and assisted in the development of funding bids. This was highly valued by community groups, many of whom commented they found funding programmes hard to navigate and preparing applications daunting. Assisting the projects in this way was important in securing their longer-term futures.

Alongside the advisory visits, Green Connections organised a large number of events, including: presentations and talks; wildlife walks; volunteering events, wildlife recording/ bioblitz events; roadshows. It is more difficult to assess the long-term impact of these events. However, they unquestionably played an important role in raising the level of interest and the appreciation of the importance of wildlife/biodiversity. Some community groups, and indeed the Wildlife Trusts reported increased membership over the course of the project, and while it is hard to directly attribute this to the Green Connections project, it is reasonable to suggest that the events programme was an important contributor.

Many community groups also commented how the Green Connections project had helped them establish new, or strengthen existing, relationships with other projects (Box 3). This was common theme in the feedback received during the end of project roadshows. Without exception, the groups who participated in the evaluation process are committed to, and excited by the prospect, of finding ways to continue this type of work. The expansion and strengthening of the network of community organisations has built a strong foundation on which future programmes/projects can build. The same groups also highlighted that the project had helped generate and sustain energy and enthusiasm for wildlife projects

The team was effective at linking the community engagement element with other aspects of the project. A good example of this related to the Swift Group; A new regional group was established in Brecon during the lifetime of the project with significant support from the GC team; nest boxes were provided, working with a Menshed project to produce them; training was provided to communities on monitoring; a Facebook page was established and actively engaged with; and a member of the Brecon Swift Group was interviewed for Radio Wales

Country Focus Programme, raising the profile of not only the Swift group but the Green Connections project more widely; and walks were organised during Swift Awareness Week to raise awareness in the wider communities.

There was a single instance of negative feedback from one community group who felt they had been excluded. However, there wider external factors at play in this case; Because of their geographical location - separated from the majority of Powys by the Brecon Beacons National Park – they felt that they were not benefitting from any support or connectivity to the PNP more widely. There were also historic issues between the project and the town council. The GC team worked to resolve these issues, culminating in GC supporting the development of a management plan for the site.

<p>'[The Green Connections] project has been so important in raising environmental issues and helped councils prioritise funding on them'</p> <p><i>Box 2: Comment from community group member</i></p>	<p>Green Connections has done what is says on the tin – I linked up with many community groups I had not come across or worked with before'.</p> <p><i>Box 3: Comment from community group member</i></p>
<p>'The advice on hedge laying was invaluable – it one of those things you really have get right first time!</p> <p><i>Box 4: Comments from community group member</i></p>	<p>New skills that we will use to assess the impact on wildlife of our coppicing work'.</p> <p><i>Box 5: Comment from community group member</i></p>
<p>'I would like to suggest our lane become a verge reserve'.</p> <p><i>Box 6: Comment from community group member</i></p>	<p>Our management plan has really helped communicate our vision for the park to the local community'.</p> <p><i>Box 7: Comment from community group member</i></p>
<p>The wildflower meadows near Llandysul would not have happened without the [Green Connections] project.</p> <p><i>Box 8: Comment from community group member</i></p>	

5.4 Business engagement

This is summarised below in Table 9. The target was exceeded.

	Target	Delivery			Total
		RWT	Brec	MWT	
No of advisory visits to businesses, tourism sites	30	16	12	9	37

	Target exceeded		Some progress		No Target
	Target met or almost met		Little or no progress		

Table 9: Business engagement

The project engaged with a wide range of business/ settings including industrial estates; retail businesses; tourism and hospitality businesses; care homes; leisure centres; food banks; farms; food businesses and even a sewage works. Businesses were at different stages in developing their sites for biodiversity and wildlife; for example organic market gardens actively promoting biodiversity to underpin production; other businesses earlier on in their 'journey' and or facing barriers to improving biodiversity to the degree they would have liked. Support provided included: providing inputs and infrastructure, such as seed, swift boxes, bug hotels; advice on potential opportunities to support wildlife; training on monitoring and surveying; and interpretation boards. Feedback from the businesses who participated in the evaluation was positive, and many highlighted benefits including better staff welfare, more engaged communities, new skills and knowledge and a better understanding of environmental and sustainability issues. Box 9 includes a case study which illustrates the impact of this area of work.

Winnicare

This company designs and manufactures equipment to support physically disabled people, for example bath lifts. A 'green team' is responsible for health and wellbeing, environment and sustainability. Green Connections supported the team in several ways including:

- Providing wildflower meadow seed and inviting staff to get involved in sowing them on the premises and the Industrial estate more widely.
- Providing interpretation boards giving detailed information on the meadows and why they are important.
- Leading ecological surveys and monitoring exercises.
- Providing swift boxes and solitary bee hotels along with information about swifts and providing training on how to monitor occupancy.
- Providing ad hoc support and advice.

As a result of the support

- The 'Green Team' were inspired to plan more activities, including planting pear trees and setting up composting facilities.
- GC supported activities featured in the company Newsletter and generated significant interest among the staff, encouraging them to think more about the environment impact of the company.
- The wildflower plantings stimulated interest from local community, and other businesses on the estate. The latter will plant up other areas on the estate.
- Staff gained new knowledge and skills, for example monitoring swift and insects and species ID, for example many learned about waxcap fungi for the first time

Box 9: Winnicare Case Study

5.5 Training

Training was a key element of the project which cut across all objectives of the project. In terms of the number of events, targets were exceeded by a factor of between 3 and 4 (Table 10)

	Target	Delivery			Total
		RWT	Brec	MWT	
Formal Training days (generally with external orgs)	15	31	18	21	70
Number of participants in formal training days	90	192	55	112	359
Informal in-house training activity or zoom training volunteers		45	14	13	72

	Target exceeded
	Target met or almost met
	Some progress
	Little or no progress
	No Target

Table 10: Training provision

5.51 Staff training

Areas in which training was delivered included:

- Health and safety issues, which enable staff to deliver safer, better events over the course of the project and in the future. This included things like first aid courses, safe use of equipment, tree safety.
- Practical skills such as machinery maintenance and fencing.
- Skills to enhance skills and knowledge, of example operating QGIS, monitoring and surveying techniques and ID skills.

These courses were vital to building the capacity within organisations, and their impact – enabling staff to deliver project based and core activity more safely and to a higher standard – will be important for the future of the Trusts in all their work.

5.52 Training for landowners and farmers

Training for landowners was effective in building capacity to ensure that the impact of the project extended beyond the lifetime of the project. This included surveying, monitoring and ID techniques, so farmers could, for example: monitor the impact of changes in grazing, or the colonisation of ponds created under the project by fauna and flora over a number of years. Training was provided in the DAFOR scale, so the relative abundance of species can be measured in a way that will allow valid comparisons to be drawn with and between farms in future. As well as monitoring, training was also provided on enhancing habitats, for siting pine marten boxes; again, skills that will enable landowners to enhance – and measure – biodiversity on their land with reduced input from the trusts.

5.53 Training for volunteers, community groups and members of the public

These stakeholder groups were the main focus of the training activity, and the project delivered training on a wide range of topics. This included 'formal' workshops, talks and presentations, and informal activities such as wildlife walks,

- Practical skills such as scything, orchard pruning.
- Monitoring and ID skills
- Managing habitats for wildlife
- Event organising skills such using 'Eventbrite'.

Both attendees and training providers took part in the evaluation process.

The success of the programme is likely to be down to a number of factors, including the range of topics covered, the reputation of the staff delivering the courses, and good external communications of the project activities. The lifting of COVID restrictions during the lifetime of the project is also likely to have an impact. There was a 'pent up' desire to get out and about after a prolonged lock down, and the project was ideally placed to meet that need.

In terms of attendees, the feedback from events was positive for the general experience, and expectations were met or exceeded in all cases. Participants were asked whether they gained new skills and knowledge and if so, how they would use those in future.

Whether or not new skills and knowledge were gained depended largely on knowledge and experience of prior to attending the event. Those who had little knowledge of ecology reported they had found the events extremely informative and were, for example now able to identify more species. More significantly, perhaps, they said they had gained a much greater awareness of the natural world around them; they would stop and look more often, be more aware of birdsong and in often intangible, but very significant, ways become more aware of their impact on the environment. In some cases they were able to identify specific actions they would take (e.g. put bug hotels in the garden or not mow until flowering had finished).. Some of those interviewed were long term members of the wildlife trusts, and highly knowledgeable and experienced wildlife watchers. While these participants were less able to specifically identify new information they had gained, they found the experience valuable and made comments like 'it always great to meet people, and listen to opinions, and be able to ask questions of experts'.

Training deliverers were asked for their views on the reach of the activities. They commented that while a range of demographics were represented, the majority of participants were older, and probably retired. Participation of younger people could be increased by arranging events at times and on days more accessible to families and working people. They also highlighted a high drop out rate on some courses (where people booked but didn't turn up). This is very common where training is offered for free. Various solutions were proposed, including asking for deposits, or changing nominal fees, but often the increased complexity and administrative burden is disproportionate to the benefits.

All the wildlife trusts reported increases in membership, and while it is difficult to attribute this to the training courses specifically, it is likely they were a contributing factor.

5.6 Feasibility studies

A number of studies were carried out and are considered individually below. Many of these were commissioned towards the end of the project as a strategy to use up underspend, and therefore came too late to inform delivery of the project; however they form a useful basis for future work, and are valuable and useful in that context.

All contactors interviewed said that briefs were clear, and that ongoing communication with the project team was excellent (queries were answered promptly and clearly, there were regular meetings, and draft reports were commented on when requested). Some were less clear about how their work fitted into the wider project, and precisely which objectives the study they were contributing to, but on the whole, this aspect of the project was delivered effectively.

5.61 Exploring Collaborative Habitat Land Management in Powys

This study looked at different ways to use collaboration to help address habitat management difficulties by bringing different sectors or skill-sets together. It sought to address some difficult issues, at the centre of which are the economic challenges (for contractors) around small-area work.

The study was useful in identifying that some contractors were prepared to invest in appropriate small scale machinery if demand for their usage could be demonstrated. It also identified opportunities to access machinery through local equipment hire firms but acknowledged that the cost of doing so means that it is often not an economically viable option for small areas of habitat.

Existing structures such as meadows groups could be a vehicle through which some of these issues could be addressed – for example volunteer workshare days, and shared equipment hire. However, the onus is on individual groups to find an agreed arrangement that addresses different land sizes or required work needed, and they made need support to do this.

The study suggested some useful avenues to explore, which was its purpose. It also highlights the need for public funded support for delivery of environmental benefits, and stresses the importance of structures such as the meadow groups in delivery solutions, and the crucial role of facilitators to support them.

5.62 Rare Plants Reintroduction Pilot Study

The pilot was commissioned from the Rare Plant Nursery (Builth Wells), and successfully introduced 12 species of rare plants to the Brecon Beacons. The study was successful in a number of ways:

- The 12 introductions were successful.
- Landowners were actively involved and engaged in this important conservation project.
- A network of highly skilled and knowledgeable local experts/ specialists was brought together.
- Important links with Kew Gardens were established/ strengthened.
- It generated significant press attention and created opportunities for promote the project more widely.

However, the report focused heavily on the technical aspects of these 12 specific plants. Some discussion of plant introductions more generally might have been appropriate, and may have made the study more relevant more widely. For example: what are the characteristics that make plant suitable for re-introduction or not? Some idea of costs and what they depend on (clearly species dependent but an indicative range would have been useful) What are some success rates and risk factors associated with introductions? What are the on-going costs in terms of maintenance and care post-planting (again, likely to be species specific but ranges and ballpark figures are helpful).

5.63 Opportunities and challenges of results-based payments packages

This report was carried out to assess the relevance of an existing score card system to three mid Wales commons – the Begwns in South Radnorshire and the Golfa and the Frochas in East Montgomeryshire. The three commons studied were all of high environment significance, notably for ponds and grassland fungi (the Begwns), for pearl-bordered fritillary *Boloria euphrosyne* (y Golfa and y Frochas) and hazel dormouse (y Frochas). The work resulted in improvements and amendments the original systems, drawing on and adapting an existing area scoring methodology (developed by plant life) to make it applicable to grassland fungi, A new species-specific approach for use in polygons delimited by butterfly experts was designed. Both amendments to the score-cards require field testing.

Discussions and meetings with stakeholders of all three commons suggested an interest in being involved in a results-based payment package although there are challenges to be worked through: dividing funds between mowers and graziers; rewarding activity without increasing the number of grazing sheep; recognising and contributing to the costs of non-graziers, and so forth.

As a feasibility study this was successful in that it represented a further developmental step for existing scoring systems, engaged with grazier and other stakeholders, and proposes some specific areas for further work.

5.64 Community/SME production of local provenance native plants

This study identified the opportunity for community and SMA enterprises to produce local provenance plants to supply landowners, community groups, councils, and other stakeholders undertaking wildlife and biodiversity projects. It worked closely with 5 potential growers to explore the opportunities and barriers. The study identify a strong demand for these plants locally. Significantly it examined the message behind different ‘pollinator friendly’ logos, highlighting that some identify only that the species benefit pollinators, but say nothing about the production system. The project identified the National Botanic Garden Scheme as the only one – other than organic farming - that prohibited the use of pesticides. Given the importance of this, the study recommended the adoption of the scheme supported by an information campaign highlighting the environmental benefits. It also made recommendations to develop the market, including exploring public procurement; providing training for garden centre staff; the development of a Participatory Guarantee system to strengthen growers claims of agroecological growing systems, and exploring the opportunities for commercial seed production to address a serious shortage of supply.

5.7 Nature Recovery map

In the interim between the project application being prepared and the effective start date, this activity was overtaken by events, and was created by another project in the form of a potential

SINC map. The team adapted and used the project funds to commission some work overlaying that map with priority species distribution. A second contract explored the use of two Community Nature Recovery Maps that identify existing and potential wildlife opportunities between parish boundaries.

In terms of developing the tools for future planning and prioritisation the result is a powerful, and much needed strategic tool, which can be used by a wide range of groups and stakeholders. It makes particularly important contribution to improving connectivity between habitats which is vital, but hard to achieve in practice.

In a wider context, the involvement of BIS in this project was very important. Ecological monitoring data is often collected by individual projects for specific purposes, which means the overall picture is patchy and incomplete. BIS play a vital role ensuring the data from different sources can as far, as possible, be collated and interpreted. The involvement of BIS in this project was important in making sure the (considerable amount) of information that was collected in this project fed into a wider database.

As well as developing the map, the project also contributed valuable survey information directly, for example through the monitoring with landowners, the recording/ bioblitz days and two studies that were commissioned to examine the potential for eDNA Analysis techniques to survey white-clawed crayfish and grassland fungi.

6. Conclusions

6.1 Project delivery and administration

- Delivery was highly successful – only one target was not met. All others were exceeded.
- Feedback on staff performance was overwhelmingly positive; the only negative feedback related to a few instances of delays in landowners receiving reports and results.
- Recordkeeping was exemplary. This enabled the achievements of the project to be fully captured, the challenges highlighted, and the key learning to be effectively articulated – not only to the evaluation team but also to other groups interesting in doing similar work in this area.
- There were significant administrative challenges at scheme level including delays in: project approval; reprofiling applications; and procurement procedures. Communication with WG was slow and difficult, and the absence of a case officer who was familiar with the detail of the project meant that RPW staff found it difficult respond to specific questions. These issues are common to many other projects, and suggests that resources and management structure at WG level are inadequate to manage the programmes.
- The late start of the project put significant pressure on the delivery staff. This impacted in a number of ways; it was a major contributor to the underspend; it put pressure on staff to deliver to a reduced timetable, and it necessitated a reprofiling application, which itself took a long time to approve and presented significant administrative difficulties.

6.2 Governance

- The project partnership worked well; the three Powys based Wildlife Trusts working together has many benefits, including knowledge exchange between staff, efficiencies in delivering work on the ground; strengthening of relationships with local authorities.
- The steering group was effective in its role to monitor the progress of the project. It worked less well as a strategic oversight body. This is common to the vast majority of projects the Gwlad Consortium has evaluated, and suggests that steering groups are not the most appropriate form of governance for these type of projects.

6.3 Capacity building

- The project built significant capacity among all stake holder groups
 - Staff developed their technical and skills and capacity, and gained basic health and safety certificates which will significantly enhance the quality and scope of work they can carry out in the future; Five trainees were supported and trained up in technical aspects of the work and general workplace skills and as a direct result of the project subsequently found employment in the conservation sector
 - Landowners benefited from green infrastructure and training which will enable them to deliver environmental benefits beyond the lifetime of the project
 - Community groups likewise benefited from green infrastructure and training, and as a result of GC support are better connected with one another, have enhanced skills and knowledge to carry out practical projects, and are in stronger position to attract funding for future work.
 - Community members are better informed on biodiversity and more aware of their environmental impact as a result of the project. However, reach of the project was skewed towards older retired people, who were often starting from a strong knowledge base, and greater emphasis could have been placed on attracting a wider demographic to public events.

6.4 Feasibility studies

- On the whole feasibility studies were effective in identifying opportunities and barriers, and setting out how these could be grasped and addressed respectively. In one case, the study focused too much on the technicalities, but fell short of providing guidance on issues such as applicability beyond the case studies, costs, and key success factors
- The majority of the feasibility studies were conducted at the end of the project to deal with underspend, which reduced the extent to which they could inform and influence the direction of the project. It also meant the opportunities for wider dissemination of the finding with the lifetime of the project were limited. However the reports have been added to the 'Resources' section of the RWT website and will be available after the end of the project.

6.5 Collaboration

- Building connections was at the heart of the project. The project was successful in facilitating this across all stakeholder groups including landowners, community groups, local government, and researchers

- Collaboration between landowners was successful but was only really achieved toward the end of the project. It is of the utmost importance that the collaboration initiatives established continue to be supported.

6.6 Strategic development

- The project made significant contributions to Local Nature Action Recovery Plans
- The enhancement of the Nature Recovery Map is an important resource that will inform the development, and improve the impact of future work in Powys

7. Recommendations

- Future projects of this type are delivered in a longer time frame; a minimum of 5 years, and potentially 10 years with a 5 year break clause
- The Welsh Government ensures that for future programme of this type (e.g. successors to ENRaW and SMS), sufficient resources are made available and appropriate management structures are put in place to support effective delivery of project
- Alternative approaches are considered to wider governance, specifically replacing steering groups with more focused working groups, and transferring the strategic oversight role in the project partnership
- The approach to record keeping exemplified by this project is adopted in projects more widely.
- The role and implementation of feasibility studies is reviewed, such that they are more relevant outside the specific context of the project and are delivered at a point in the project where their finding can influence the direction of the project to a greater extent.
- Securing funding to facilitate the continuation of the great many collaborations that have been built during the project is a priority.