

9 August 2023

Valleys Regional Park

Final Evaluation Report

**Parc Rhanbarthol
y Cymoedd**



**Valleys
Regional Park**



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Glossary

Acronym/Key word	Definition
CCT	Cross Cutting Theme
CJC	Corporate Joint Committee
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
KD	Key Deliverable
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
NERS	National Exercise Referral Scheme
NRW	Natural Resources Wales
PSB	Public Service Board
RPB	Regional Partnership Board
RDP	Rural Development Programme
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SMNR	Sustainable Management of Natural Resources
ToC	Theory of Change
VRP	Valleys Regional Park
VTF	Valleys Taskforce
WEFO	Welsh European Funding Office

1. Introduction

- 1.1 OB3 Research, in collaboration with BRO Partnership, was commissioned by Bridgend County Borough Council, as host authority for the Valleys Regional Park (VRP), to undertake an evaluation of programme delivery between 2021 and 2023. The VRP is an environmental vision for the Valleys, developed and delivered through a partnership approach to improve the quality of life, health, and wellbeing for local people, generate pride in the area and create an environment that stimulates inward investment and becomes an attractive destination for visitors.
- 1.2 The aim of this evaluation was to review the VRP's operations delivery during the 2021-23 period, and to assess the contribution it made to enhance the Valley region's natural and cultural assets and bring about social, economic, and environmental benefits.
- 1.3 The evaluation objectives were to:
- ascertain whether the project achieved its aims and objectives as set out in the activities within the 2020-2023 Delivery Plans and approved ESF Priority 5 Business Case
 - validate the data collected by VRP against the approved performance indicators within the VRP delivery plan and ESF Priority 5 Business Case
 - validate how the project met the Cross Cutting Themes (CCT)
 - measure the extent to which the project contributed to facilitating and enabling greater strategic cooperation across the Valleys
 - evaluate whether the project acted as a catalyst for longer term collaborative cross-sector, cross boundary approaches
 - assess whether the various demonstrator project activities were showing signs of being integrated and starting to deliver collective benefits
 - identify examples of best practice that could be replicated or modified that are relevant to VRP's future delivery model
 - evaluate the effectiveness of the project's governance, management systems and delivery arrangements

- evaluate the effectiveness of the wider partnership, its commitment, and collaborative ways of working.

1.4 The evaluation was undertaken across three key stages:

- a baseline report and evaluation framework which was prepared in September 2021, and which set out a Theory of Change model for the programme
- a mid-term evaluation report in October 2022 which reviewed the VRP's implementation and progress made to date
- this final evaluation report prepared in July 2023 which reviews the impact of the VRP and the extent to which the programme achieved its aims and objectives.

1.5 This final evaluation 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 VRP, what it was funded to deliver, and the key findings from the mid-term evaluation
- chapter four: considers the key developments to the VRP since the mid-term evaluation
- chapter five: presents the VRP's achievements across its three workstreams since the mid-term evaluation and the views of stakeholders on the difference made
- chapter six: considers the VRP's engagement and communication work
- chapter seven: considers programme performance against funded targets, including cross-cutting themes
- chapter eight: considers future priorities for the VRP
- chapter nine: presents our conclusions and recommendations for the future.

2. Methodology

- 2.1 This chapter sets out the method adopted for undertaking the final evaluation study. A theory-based methodology complying with the principles set out in the HM Treasury's Green Book and the Magenta Book was adopted to undertake the evaluation. It involved a mixed-method approach using primary and secondary research methods, to include desk-based research and in-depth qualitative fieldwork. A thematic analysis of the evidence was undertaken to allow for the findings from the desk-research and qualitative research to be triangulated, to offer robust conclusions and recommendations for the client.
- 2.2 As part of the first stage report, a Theory of Change (ToC) Logic Model was developed to set out the expected outcomes for the VRP during this delivery period (set out at Annex B). The ToC report also set out a detailed Evaluation Framework (included at Annex B) which was subsequently used to monitor and evaluate the work of the VRP over the current delivery period.

Method

- 2.3 The final phase evaluation, undertaken between May and July 2023, involved the following elements of work:
- an inception stage, which included attending an inception meeting with VRP officials and preparing a refined methodological approach
 - a desk-based review of VRP delivery documents, including ESF monitoring returns setting out progress and outputs achieved between August 2022 and June 2023; and other deliverables such as the insight and mapping research. It also considers the findings of a separate evaluation of the VRP Guardians scheme, also undertaken by OB3 Research in collaboration with BRO Partnership
 - agreeing upon a sample of contributors to approach for interview and interviewing a total of 17 individuals including:
 - three members of the VRP core team (the programme lead and two theme convenors)
 - four VRP Programme Board members (all members were invited to attend a focus group)

- four other stakeholders who had collaborated with the VRP on a specific workstream or project. These stakeholders were put forward by the programme conveners as partner organisations who have had meaningful collaboration with their workstream
- six representatives from across four Discovery Gateway sites, via focus group discussions. All Discovery Gateway sites were invited to attend these discussions
- synthesising the findings of the fieldwork and desk-review and drafting this final report.

2.4 This final phase report also reflects, where appropriate, upon the evidence gathered during the mid-term evaluation phase which involved interviews with a total of 32 individuals and a small number of web-based survey responses. Some of those interviewed during the final phase fieldwork also contributed to the mid-term fieldwork, notably staff, members of the Programme Board and Discovery Gateway representatives.

Methodological considerations

- 2.5 Given that the response to the stakeholder web survey administered during the mid-term evaluation was low, a decision was taken not to repeat this for the final fieldwork.
- 2.6 Two stakeholders who were approached for views during this final stage declined to participate as they did not think they had been adequately involved with the VRP recently to offer feedback.
- 2.7 It was also the case that capturing feedback from beneficiaries who had directly engaged with a VRP project was not possible during this final phase fieldwork, as the VRP had not directly supported any beneficiaries over this delivery period. Rather, this final phase evaluation draws upon beneficiary feedback captured as part of the evaluation of the RDP funded Guardians scheme. It also considers the findings of two audience awareness surveys undertaken by the VRP during 2022 and 2023.

3. An overview of the Valleys Regional Park

3.1 This chapter provides an overview of VRP and what was expected of the programme during the current funding period. It also sets out the key findings from the mid-term evaluation.

Background

3.2 The Valleys Taskforce (VTF) Programme was established in July 2016 as a cross-governmental body to tackle some of the deep-rooted challenges across the south Wales Valleys. The VTF set out to establish good quality jobs, improve public services and develop a stronger sense of local community across the Valleys. It was expected that the Valleys Regional Park would play a key role in the development of the local community and to unlock the potential of the natural and cultural heritage of the region.

3.3 The VTF came to a close in 2021 and its final report¹ provides a review of the impact of its intervention and the effectiveness of new approaches piloted over its five-year delivery period. The final report identifies the VRP as one of the Taskforce's 'most noteworthy and successful projects' and whilst the direct impact of the Taskforce upon the Valleys communities was considered to have been 'fairly limited', the positive impacts were found to be mostly associated with initiatives such as the VRP.

3.4 The VRP was initially allocated £7 million funding via the VTF to deliver up to ten Discovery Gateway sites, develop discovery trails, increase the level of outdoor recreation, and encourage communities to develop their local landscapes. The VTF's first delivery plan anticipated that the VRP would 'provide and sustain the improvement and management of a highly visible network of uplands, woodlands, nature reserves and country parks, rivers, reservoirs and canals, heritage sites and attractions across the Valleys, linking with our towns and villages'.²

3.5 It was also expected that the work of the VRP would focus on three delivery workstream themes which were set out in the VTF's second delivery plan as:

¹ [The Valleys Taskforce, 2016-2021: a final report \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales)

² Delivery Plan, 2018 <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-11/our-valleys-our-future-delivery-plan-2018.pdf> p.34

- landscape, culture, and identity
- recreation and wellbeing
- communities and enterprise.

Timeline

3.6 This section sets out a brief timeline of the VRP and its operations since its inception and initial phase of funding:

- between 2009 and 2013 a Valleys Regional Park was piloted, funded through two European-funded initiatives as part of the City of the Valleys concept
- in 2018 the concept was revived via the VTF and the VRP published its prospectus³ setting out its aim to unlock and maximise the potential of the natural and associated cultural heritage of the Valleys to generate social, economic, and environmental benefits. The prospectus also placed an emphasis upon developing a distinct model and gaining formal designation of the Regional Park as an entity
- for the period between September 2019 and March 2021, Welsh Government revenue funding was provided to Bridgend County Borough Council to host the VRP on behalf of a partnership of 13 local authorities. The £829,000 funding was used to appoint a core team and to fund the Guardians scheme. The project team were appointed to post from early 2020 onwards
- in September 2019, the VRP made available £7 million capital funding to 12 Discovery Gateway sites to develop safe and welcoming spaces to be enjoyed by the local community and visitors. The capital funding was administered by the Welsh Government and the VRP was expected to support sites and monitor progress
- the VRP awarded £240,000 to Groundwork to deliver the Guardians scheme as a ‘proof of concept’ project between 2020/21. A team of eight Guardians were appointed to work with children, families, elderly people,

³ <https://gov.wales/valleys-regional-park-prospectus>

and community groups to get them involved in environmental volunteering, conservation work, wellbeing walks, creating community gardens, and bushcraft activities. The scheme supported over 450 participants and improved nearly 6,000 square meters of land.

Current funding period

3.7 A business plan was submitted to the Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO) under European Structural Fund Priority 5 (Public Services Reform and Regional Working) to secure £1.1 million funding to support the work of the VRP between April 2021 and June 2023. The aim of the current programme was to improve the capacity and capability of public sector organisations to manage the Valleys landscape assets through a regional approach. The business plan set out the main long-term aim as being:

‘to provide more effective regional arrangements that can better integrate investments in places and improve the effectiveness and impact of those investments both collectively and individually’.

3.8 The VRP was expected to achieve three aims and five outcomes during this current funding period. These were:

Aim 1	The Valleys landscape is recognised for its quality through a regional commitment to co-ordinated promotion and management.
Aim 2	People are re-connected to the Valleys landscape for their wellbeing, so that it becomes a place for exercise, work, relaxation, and nature, as well as for arts and heritage, and for education.
Aim 3	The Valleys landscape underpins a resilient local economy, supporting businesses, community enterprise and the development of skills and learning.

Outcome 1	A regional focus for the management of Valleys landscape assets.
Outcome 2	A greater use of green spaces for well-being through personal choice and social prescribing.
Outcome 3	The number of visitors to Valleys’ destinations and visitor spend will increase.
Outcome 4	Increased skill and capacity to deliver the VRP vision and build partnership working across all sectors and with communities.

Outcome 5	Public sector policies are influenced to reflect the needs of Valleys communities and the long-term improvement to landscapes across the Valleys.
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- 3.9 It was expected that the VRP achieved four key deliverables (KD) as a condition of its ESF funding. These were:

KD 1	Create a skilled, experienced team and to develop a regional partnership to enact Key Deliverables 2, 3 and 4.
KD 2	Establish effective robust, transparent, and nimble governance mechanisms for oversight and scrutiny of progress of the VRP project and development of options for appropriate operating model, governance, and finance structure for the sustainable regional long-term delivery of the Valleys Regional Park.
KD 3	Facilitate enhanced cross-sector, cross-boundary cooperative working to provide the basis of the VRP.
KD 4	Test and strengthen the strategic collaboration by implementing a delivery plan comprising a comprehensive, coherent package of initiatives and activities to deliver the initial objectives of the VRP via its three delivery focus themes.

- 3.10 WEFO funding conditions also required that the VRP achieved and reported against three output indicators and one results indicator. These were:

Output/Result	Definition	Target
Output 1	Number of projects targeting public administrations or public services at national, regional, or local level	1
Output 2	Number of entities participating in projects targeting public administrations or public services at national, regional, or local level	20
Output 3	Number of methods, processes and tools being developed with support	4
Result	Number of methods, processes and tools developed and disseminated	4

- 3.11 It was expected that Output 1 would be achieved as a result of establishing an organisation that would bring together public sector partners, by putting in place a dedicated team to manage and co-ordinate activities and by developing a range of options for a long-term operating model and structure. Output 2 was expected to be achieved as a result of the VRP collaborating with partner organisations, such as local authorities, and would be evidenced via project documentation.

3.12 The four output indicators ‘number of methods, processes and tools being developed with support’ and four result indicators ‘number of new methods, procedures and tools developed and disseminated’ were initially agreed as those set out below, but were later amended via a discussion between WEFO and the VRP so that they better reflected the programme’s work during this funded period:

Tool 1	Development of the long-term governance, funding, and operating model for the regional management of the Valleys landscape.
Tool 2	Consideration of a land designation for the Valleys.
Tool 3	A regional approach to the use of social prescribing and the delivery of wellbeing activities.
Tool 4	Development of a regional peer-to-peer networking to support community led development of landscape and heritage assets.

3.13 It was also a requirement of the 2014-2020 ESF Programmes that all operations contributed towards the three cross-cutting themes (CCT) of equality of opportunity and gender mainstreaming (including the Welsh language); sustainable development and tackling poverty and social exclusion.

3.14 It was expected that the VRP would deliver activities in support of the following CCT case (project) level indicators:

Equal Opportunity and gender mainstreaming (including the Welsh language)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability access group engagement • Positive action measures supporting young people • Activity promoting the Welsh culture and language • Workplace health programmes supported
Sustainable development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration of small-scale green infrastructure • Activity which is supporting biodiversity on a site funded through Structural Funds
Tackling poverty and social exclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activity which builds skills within the community • Peer support activity • Volunteering schemes
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholder engagement good practice activity • Developing CCT champion

3.15 Alongside the ESF programme, the VRP also submitted a bid for Rural Development Programme (RDP) funding under Measure 16 which was designed to encourage and support co-operation, and Measure 16.2 specifically to support

the delivery of pilot projects in this area. This funding was secured to support the delivery of the Guardians scheme and Groundwork Wales was appointed to deliver the programme following a competitive tender process.

- 3.16 A Theory of Change model for the VRP's current funded period is set out at Annex B. It sets out the outputs and outcomes expected from the intervention.

Findings from the mid-term evaluation

- 3.17 The mid-term evaluation found that:

- the VRP was engaged in a small number of excellent demonstrator projects but as these were still in their infancy it was not clear what impact they would have
- stakeholders did not have a common and clear understanding of the VRP's remit and purpose
- there had been a shift in the political support in place for the VRP, but that this had not transpired into a financial commitment
- the VRP was engaging well with stakeholder organisations from certain sectors, but was finding it more challenging to do so in other sectors such as health
- public engagement had been fairly limited due to factors such as the pandemic, lack of staffing resources and lack of clarity about the messages to be conveyed
- governance arrangements were complex and would benefit from being simplified and embedded into stronger, existing structures
- the VRP had a committed and highly skilled team, but staff retention would likely be an issue given the short-term nature of funding
- the VRP was influencing policy development in key areas such as the environment and social prescribing.

- 3.18 The mid-term evaluation report concluded that:

- the VRP's earlier involvement in awarding capital funding to Discovery Gateway sites had made a meaningful difference to the range, quality, and accessibility of provision at these sites

- the VRP was at a crossroad in trying to obtain consensus around its future and was inhibited from achieving its longer-term goals by being reliant on short term funding streams
- there was a strong case for the VRP to become embedded into more permanent and simpler, governance arrangements and delivery structures if it were to survive
- a wide range of partner organisations, including local authorities, the Welsh Government, and Natural Resources Wales needed to commit financial resources to the VRP in order to survive post 2023
- there was still work to be done to secure a shared understanding of what the VRP is aiming to achieve and how it should achieve it
- there was a need to explore what level of resource would be required to deliver the transformative ambition of the VRP in the future, as responsibilities such as valleys-wide tourism destination management functions would require additional resources and skills.

3.19 The mid-term evaluation offered three specific recommendations for the VRP to consider over its remaining period of funding. It recommended that the VRP:

- prioritise the development of the Discovery Gateway network, by bringing representatives together on a face-to-face basis to explore and develop collaborative opportunities, and work with them to explore possible funding avenues
- maintain the momentum gained and progress made across the landscape, culture, and identity workstream by furthering Nature Service Wales⁴ and the roadside verge project concepts
- explore what further steps it could take to progress the cross-cutting theme of equality of opportunity and gender mainstreaming, particularly in terms of ensuring that promotional material reflects all protected characteristics.

⁴ Previously referred to as the National Nature Service for Wales, a pan-Wales movement which is intended to adopt action to restore nature whilst at the same time create jobs and opportunities for people to develop new green skills.

4. Key developments since the mid-term evaluation report

Policy developments

- 4.1 Our mid-term evaluation report considered the key policy developments which had taken place during 2021 and mid-2022 and their impact upon the work of the VRP. These were three key Welsh Government policy developments (Programme for Government (2021-2026)⁵ and the Co-operation Agreement between Labour and Plaid Cymru; Economic resilience and reconstruction mission⁶; and Smarter working: a remote working strategy for Wales⁷). We also considered the development of Nature Service Wales, the development of Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs), and UK Government Shared Prosperity Funding plans.
- 4.2 The mid-term evaluation found that the VRP was an active player in many policy areas which were important to the Welsh Government and other partner organisations such as local authorities, and which have been the focus of more recent policy developments (since 2021).
- 4.3 However, the mid-term evaluation also found that there had been very little direct policy reinforcement to the VRP as a regional mechanism. The ending of the VTF in 2021 created much uncertainty about the future of the initiative. Progress has been made to start addressing the risks associated with having no ongoing funding post June 2023. As discussed in detail later in this chapter, Welsh Government funding has been secured to until end of March 2024 and discussions are underway to explore a longer term shared funding model via local authorities and the Welsh Government thereafter. This offers the programme a much firmer footing to plan for the future.
- 4.4 The VRP has continued to be a key partner in the development of Nature Service Wales and helped secure over £166,000 in grant funding from the Welsh Government to deliver a six-month pilot project by early 2023. The pilot project involved preparing a detailed business plan for a proposed VRP demonstrator of Nature Service Wales, as well as an engagement and communication plan to disseminate the learning from the pilot phase. At the time of drafting this report, the partnership was awaiting the outcome of the Welsh Government's decision to

⁵ [Welsh Government Programme for government: update \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)

⁶ [Economic resilience and reconstruction mission | GOV.WALES](#)

⁷ [Smarter working: a remote working strategy for Wales | GOV.WALES](#)

fund future activities, which could secure £4.65 million over a three-year period to deliver a Nature Service Wales demonstrator project across the Valleys region. Of this funding, it is anticipated that £50,000 per annum would be used to fund the role of a co-ordinator and £1.5 million per annum used to administer a Nature Recovery Skills Fund to support project activity.

Governance developments

- 4.5 Over this funding period, the work of the VRP has continued to be overseen by a partnership of 13 local authorities, mirroring the regional approach adopted by the Capital City Regions. These have been the 10 authorities within the Cardiff Capital Region⁸ as well as Swansea Council, Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, and Carmarthenshire County Council from the Western Bay Capital Region.
- 4.6 The Programme Board, which has political membership from all local authorities, has continued to oversee the work of the VRP, although it has only met as required (in April 2021 and October 2022) to make key decisions. The smaller Executive Group, which was formed during late 2020 has met on a bi-monthly basis and has taken on a more active role to oversee the work of the VRP over this funding period.
- 4.7 The larger VRP Forum, which was established during the initial phase of the VRP and made up of officer representatives from all local authorities as well as other key partner organisations, has not been met during this funding period. Instead, the VRP has maintained contact with this wide network of stakeholder organisations via alternative methods, such as through direct one to one contact, direct email, and social media updates.
- 4.8 Feedback from those consulted during the final evaluation fieldwork suggests that governance arrangements have evolved appropriately over time in response to changing needs, and that the Executive Group has worked effectively. It has been well attended by a core group of committed individuals, which has made it easier to drive forward the ambitions of the VRP. Stakeholders observed that recent Board and Executive Group discussions have focused on immediate future governance and financing arrangements which, whilst instrumental in securing the

⁸ Blaenau Gwent, Bridgend, Caerphilly, Cardiff, Monmouthshire, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Torfaen and Vale of Glamorgan

future of the VRP, has meant that there has been less of a focus on discussing strategic delivery priorities.

4.9 An independent review was undertaken during the autumn of 2022 by Cwmpas to explore future governance and funding options for the VRP. The report recommended that the VRP:

- clearly identifies and promotes its USP
- be clear where it has secured added value and where it has not, and use this to inform future workstreams
- play a strategic coordination role across the region
- maintain its links with Welsh Government and discuss how their work can be highlighted and shaped by different Ministerial portfolios
- interlink future work themes to maximise impact
- articulate the economic significance of the work that they have undertaken
- develop a marketing strategy for its future activities.

4.10 The review offered four possible future governance models for the VRP and recommended that the preferred governance structure would be to become a sub-committee of the South East Corporate Joint Committee (CJC) with representation from the Western Authorities co-opted to the CJC where VRP decisions would be required. It recommended that the VRP explore future funding from both the Welsh Government and local authority partners.

4.11 This report was considered by the VRP Executive Group and subsequently the VRP Board in October 2022. They requested that a detailed business plan be developed for consideration. A fully costed business case, with support from an external contractor David Swallow Consulting, setting out roles, budgets and governance arrangements was developed and put forward to the VRP Board in February 2023. The business plan was informed by a stakeholder planning workshop and sets out a detailed transition plan for the VRP for June 2023 onwards.

4.12 The business case highlighted that, without immediate action, the VRP would end in June 2023 and the work achieved over its 14 years of existence would be at risk. It outlines a case for annual funding of £523,000 for a period of five years

(compared to circa £600k per annum for the current delivery period), after which the VRP would be able to transition into a self-sustaining organisation funded via the delivery of programmes and consultancy services. The cost savings are anticipated through operational efficiencies achieved by becoming part of the South East CJC.

4.13 The business case sets out five investment objectives for the VRP post June 2023:

- 'promote and facilitate a growing and more cohesive network of high quality, highly visible and highly accessible green space within a regional approach to green infrastructure
- support the safeguarding and creation of new nature-based jobs and career pathways through facilitating landscape-based skills, learning, social prescribing and engagement opportunities, including supporting existing and emerging SME businesses in a forward-thinking wellbeing economy
- measurably improve community engagement and resilience through identifying socio-economic opportunities (health, recreation, and the visitor economy) to help establish a more Nature Positive economy in the Valleys
- measurably improve landscape biodiversity and ecosystem resilience through delivery of SMNR in practice via the growing VRP partnership of government and non-government agencies, with a focus on deriving multiple benefits (economic, environmental, social, health and well-being) through a co-ordinated regional approach to green infrastructure
- bring greater cohesion and coordination to associated stakeholders and their work across the region, whilst facilitating more effective links between policy objectives and potential delivery mechanisms'.

4.14 The business case draws upon a detailed appraisal of the four governance options set out within the Cwmpas review and recommends the same preferred governance arrangement for the future i.e., a sub-committee of the South East CJC. The VRP Board agreed to work towards this recommended governance arrangement for the future but given that the South East CJC will not be fully operational until the latter part of the 2023, it was agreed that the VRP would continue to report to the existing Board in the meantime.

4.15 The VRP Board also agreed that it would work towards a 50:50 funding model for 2024/25 onwards, with the objective of securing an equal share of funding from local authorities and the Welsh Government. An initial positive response from the Deputy Minister of Arts and Sport has been secured to this proposal and a formal request for longer-term funding, up until the end of March 2029, will be submitted by the VRP to the Minister during the autumn of 2023. As of June 2023, seven local authorities had confirmed their financial commitment to the VRP for the 2024/25 financial year, with each authority contributing £30,000 each. The Welsh Government also agreed to provide transition funding to support the VRP between July 2023 and end of March 2024.

Delivery arrangements

4.16 The original core team has continued to be hosted by Bridgend County Borough Council during this current funding period. The team has consisted of:

- an operational and strategic lead officer on loan from the Welsh Government to Bridgend County Borough Council
- three convenor officers with responsibility for each of the three workstreams, two of whom have been seconded from Awen Cultural Trust and Cardiff Council
- a business and partnership co-ordinator
- an administrative support officer, later replaced by a communications and marketing officer when this role was identified as a gap within the team.

4.17 The VRP core team has experienced some staff changes over the current funded period, with roles not replaced, thus there has been reduced capacity over the later stages of the programme due to the following:

- the lead officer reduced their hours to work on a part time basis from March 2022 onwards and the business and partnership co-ordinator took on additional responsibilities as a result
- the appointed communications and marketing officer postholder left their role in April 2022 and another postholder was appointed in August of that year.

- the Recreation and Wellbeing Convenor became part time from September 2022 onwards and
- the Communities and Enterprise Convenor left their position in February 2023.

4.18 The VRP also enlisted the services of a communications and public relations agency, Equinox, to help deliver its engagement and promotional activities from July 2021 onwards.

4.19 Stakeholders who were interviewed during the final phase of this evaluation were aware that the VRP had operated with reduced capacity at times over this funding period and acknowledged that programme resources had been stretched to cover a wide ambition and large geographical area. A key lesson raised for the future was that the ambitions of the VRP should be realised by a wider resource drawn from partner organisations, and not solely rest with a small team of project staff. Another key lesson was the need for project staff to be funded on a permanent, rather than short-term grant funding basis, to reduce staff turnover and make it easier to recruit to vacant positions.

Other studies and evaluations

4.20 The VRP has commissioned, or been involved in, several studies over its current delivery period. It is not our intention to summarise these studies here in any detail, but it is worth highlighting the key messages which have bearing upon the VRP's remit and work post June 2023. We consider:

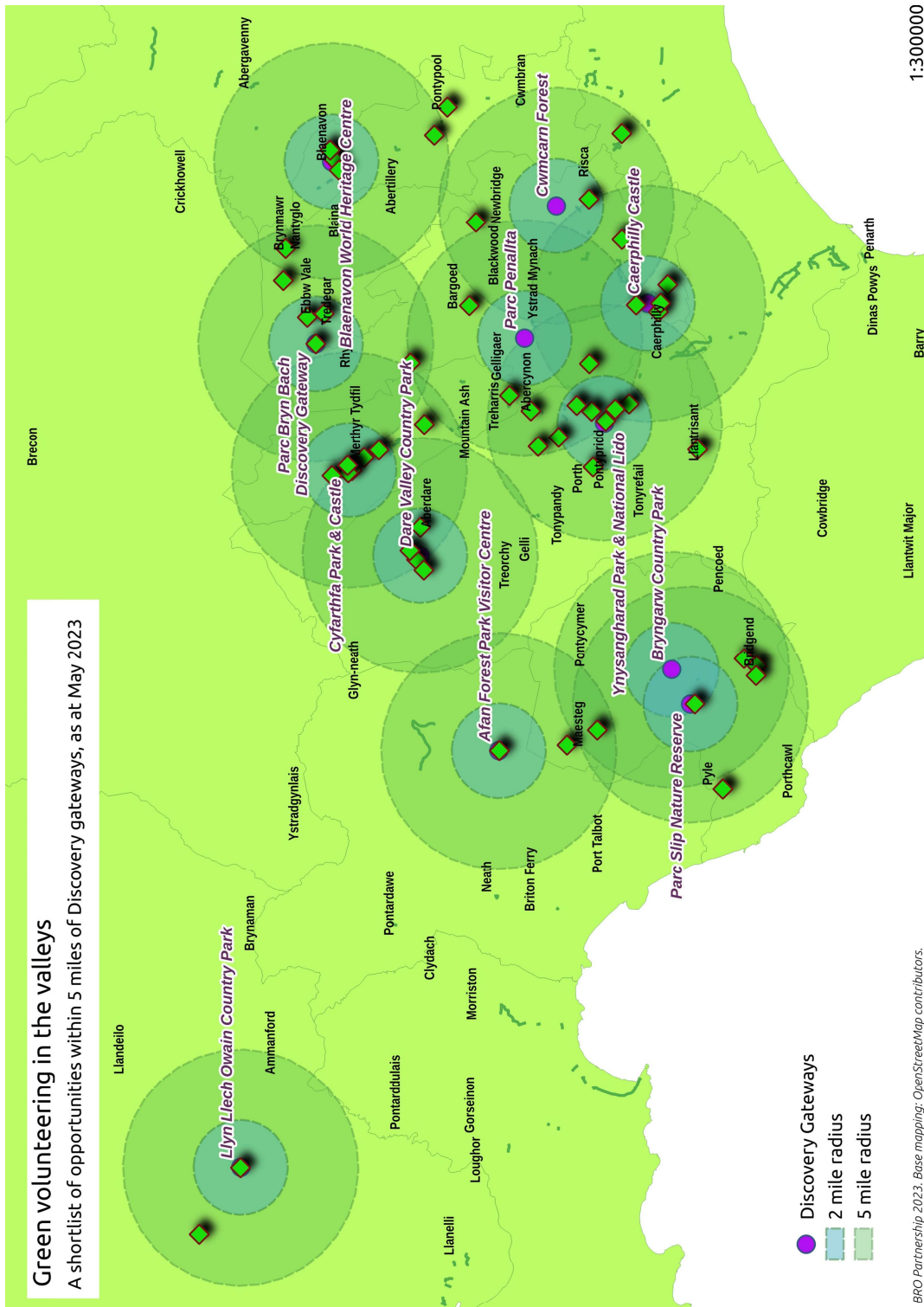
- the VRP's mapping exercise
- the VRP's insight research
- an evaluation of the Guardians scheme
- an evaluation of Big Bocs Bwyd
- a review of Nature Service Wales.

The VRP mapping exercise

4.21 This exercise mapped opportunities for volunteering or obtaining green skills through landscape and nature projects within close proximity to Discovery

Gateways. A database was created of all opportunities, which were then mapped spatially and broken down into types of activities.

Figure 4.1: Green volunteering opportunities within 5 miles of Discovery Gateways



Source: VRP Mapping Research by BRO partnership, May 2023

4.22 The exercise highlights the potential of developing an overall database and spatial mapping tool across the VRP region which brings together all landscape and nature volunteering opportunities. The report recommends establishing an interactive mapping platform which would help identify areas of overlaps and gaps in provision; and which could also be an integral part of Nature Service Wales within the footprint of the VRP. There are many lessons to be learnt from the methodology adopted, which could be used to inform any future data collection approach e.g.:

- several providers, who already collaborate with the VRP, already collect and share information about their own volunteering opportunities
- transport availability has bearing upon likelihood of active engagement, so mapping travel routes and times could be helpful
- a visual map of opportunities can't record frequency and timings of sessions, therefore that information has to be presented as a database record.

4.23 The mapping exercise raised a number of questions, including:

- whether the Discovery Gateways are in fact in the right location for green volunteering given that only half of them are in conveniently accessible locations for potential green volunteers to travel without a car
- whether Discovery Gateways are competing with each other and other green volunteering opportunities as some geographical areas were well served by such opportunities
- the Guardians scheme, which accounted for some of the volunteering opportunities mapped available at Discovery Gateways, has since closed.

The VRP insight research

4.24 The insight research set out to identify how more people could get involved in green and nature-based activities, and how referrals into these projects could be increased. The research showed that people enjoy and appreciate the benefits of spending time outdoors and in nature although levels of engagement in green- and nature-based group activities varies. Harder to reach audiences tend to be the least engaged and interested in such activities. The research found that there is a

need for a wide range of opportunities to be made available to appeal to the wide-ranging interests of different audiences. It also found that the main barriers to engagement are lack of time, not knowing about opportunities, accessibility, and proximity of provision, expected physical ability, social anxiety and lack of confidence.

4.25 Increasing referrals from agents could be achieved by adopting some key principles:

- key principle 1: providers must provide a supervised, safe, and welcoming environment for participants and provide suitable activities to suit their needs
- key principle 2: referrals processes must be simple, straightforward, and timely
- key principle 3: providers need to outreach to venues which already host potential participants and explore the delivery of initial joint sessions with referring agents
- key principle 4: agents need to ensure that their internal practices can better identify potential participants and have the appropriate level of staffing and resources to do so.

4.26 The research found that better information about opportunities could be made available to potential participants and referrals, and that the VRP could potentially play a role in developing a single comprehensive portal of activities, building upon good practice examples identified via the research.

4.27 It also found that green- and nature-based provision is currently supported via short-term grant funding which presents major challenges and uncertainty for providers and referring agents alike. There may be a role for the VRP to advocate for a more sustainable and ongoing fund to support provision in the future, in a similar manner to that made available by the Welsh Government for the National Exercise Referral Scheme (NERS).

Evaluation of the Guardians scheme

4.28 An independent evaluation of the Guardians scheme found that the programme supported large numbers of Valleys residents to become more involved in

landscape-based activities at Discovery Gateways and supported them to make a tangible difference to their respective Gateways. Beneficiaries were also found to have improved their wellbeing as a result of spending time outdoors and many gained new skills and knowledge as a result of their volunteering work.

4.29 Between April 2021 and December 2022, the Guardians scheme was found to have:

- supported a total of 940 beneficiaries
- delivered 9,053 hours of beneficiary sessions
- supported beneficiaries to gain a total of 41 accreditations
- supported 74 beneficiaries into employment or further volunteering or training
- improved 611,958 m² of land
- maintained 219,646 m² of land.

4.30 A clear message from the evaluation is that the activity will never realistically become self-sustaining due to the ongoing need to recruit, manage, and train volunteer input and because the Discovery Gateways do not have the resources, expertise, or capacity to take on this role. Beneficiaries enjoyed their experiences and wanted to continue with it, rather than see it as a stepping stone to something else such as progress into employment.

4.31 The evaluation found that components of the model worked well and that the VRP should consider the direction which the Guardians scheme could take in the future. The report offered three possible routes for the programme:

- to align itself with the climate change agenda and achieve substantial environmental benefits through the delivery of a climate change programme for specific groups such as young people or under-represented groups
- aligning itself with the social prescribing route, which was initially explored for the scheme, although this would require overcoming the challenges of collaborating and securing funding from the health sector

- aligning itself to Nature Service Wales. The Guardians would be well positioned to recruit participants who are out of work and unemployed but would need to place a greater focus on recruiting those wishing to find/return to work and seek green job opportunities. If this option were pursued there would also need to be considerable adaptations to the Guardians offer with a greater focus on higher level qualifications than the current Agored accreditations offered, clear career pathways and specialist support into employment.

An evaluation of Big Bocs Bwyd

- 4.32 An independent review of the second phase of Big Bocs Bwyd was conducted during the first half of 2022. The Big Bocs Bwyd initiative involves providing schools with a steel container and resources to sell food on a ‘pay as you feel’ basis. The VRP supported the roll out of the initiative by supporting the funding application to the Welsh Government, supporting school recruitment, undertaking stakeholder management, developing school support resources, preparing a baseline survey evaluation report, and managing the second phase review.
- 4.33 The review focused on the roll out of Big Bocs Bwyd to 25 schools across the Valleys, having been previously piloted in two stages across a total of 10 schools, five of which were within the VRP region. The evaluation found that:
- the second phase roll out was achieved in a very quick timeframe and the energy and commitment of a small team at Cadoxton and Oakfield Primary Schools, who led the project, was instrumental in making this happen
 - the success of each Big Bocs Bwyd depends on the leadership at each participating school, and selecting the right schools to participate is therefore crucial
 - the initiative fully reflects the aspirations of the Well-being of Future Generations Act, and is an innovative model which has the potential to be replicated across Wales
 - evaluating the impact of Big Bocs Bwyd after the completion of phase 3 of the programme will be important and would help explore how the initiative could be rolled out across Wales.

- 4.34 The report offers a number of recommendations, including:

- consolidating governance arrangements around Big Bocs Bwyd, given the confusion about its ownership
- developing resources and information for schools setting up new Big Bocs Bwyd projects
- reviewing the processes for selecting schools to ensure that those in areas of need are able to participate
- developing simple and effective monitoring systems to better evidence the difference being made
- establishing local clusters to bring Big Bocs Bwyd units in touch with local food initiatives
- developing better links between Big Bocs Bwyd units, and with key Welsh Government food poverty initiatives.

An evaluation of Nature Service Wales pilot phase

4.35 This review found that the VRP had played an instrumental role in developing the Nature Service Wales and was one of a core group of organisations committed to its design and development. The evaluation found that ‘contributors thought that the VRP had played an important role in shaping the proposed demonstrator project and there was much support for this, since the VRP, as a placed-based organisation with well-established networks and similar ambitions to that of Nature Service Wales, was well-placed to take the project forward’. The evaluation concluded that the inclusion of the VRP to deliver Nature Service Wales as a demonstrator project was appropriate.

4.36 The evaluation found that there is a need to better define the Nature Service Wales for the long-term as it is an ambitious and potentially transformational approach. It also suggests that in the context of the VRP demonstrator project, should the Welsh Government award the funding for the next phase of development, that:

- a targeted spatial approach within the VRP region should be adopted, as spreading resources across the whole area could be limiting

- ongoing long-term sustainability should be a criteria when awarding project-level funding via the demonstrator project with a focus on filling gaps and avoiding duplication.

5. VRP workstream achievements and difference made

5.1 This chapter considers the VRP's achievements across the three workstreams over the June 2022 to June 2023 period, drawing upon desk-based research and fieldwork with the core team and stakeholder organisations. A detailed overview of achievements up to June 2022 are set out within the mid-term report and are not repeated here. It also considers the views of stakeholders on the difference made by the VRP over its ESF funded delivery period.

Landscape, culture, and identity workstream

5.2 Across the landscape, culture, and identity workstream the main achievements since June 2022 have been:

- further development of Nature Service Wales and advocating the case for this amongst partners and by attending conferences such as the Wales Biodiversity Partnership Conference in October 2022
- successfully securing Welsh Government funding to deliver the Nature Service Wales pilot phase and playing a key role in the core project team. This involved contributing as a key member of the working group tasked with drafting the business plan. The business plan and engagement plans were submitted to the Welsh Government in February 2023. The VRP has been proposed as a Nature Service Wales demonstrator project. At the time of drafting this report, the partnership was waiting for the Welsh Government to make a decision regarding funding the proposals set out within the business plan
- developing green infrastructure and roadside verges opportunities. This has involved sharing local authority survey findings and identifying opportunities to develop a regional roadside verge initiative. A better understanding of the different approaches to managing roadside verges has been developed as well as an initial insight into how green waste could be used to make biochar and biofuel
- collaborating with the Tech Valleys Programme, which aims to develop the Valleys as a centre of new technologies, to better reflect the natural landscapes of the Valleys in its promotion to businesses and inward investors. The Tech Valleys programme is also now using the Wellbeing

Workhub at Parc Bryn Bach as a demonstrator for their own approach and are considering funding the Workhub to improve the offer available at the site

- collaborating with Cynnal Cymru to design and deliver a bespoke 'Nature Wise' eco-literacy course for the VRP Board and other local authority leaders
- exploring how the VRP could be a delivery mechanism to help achieve National Forest for Wales ambitions. The convener encouraged Discovery Gateways to apply for the National Lottery Heritage Fund Woodland Investment Grant (TWIG) and actively supported Bryngarw Park to submit an application. Over £200k funding was awarded to the park to improve woodland management, engage volunteers, and purchase equipment.

5.3 Stakeholders continued to take the view that the VRP had made significant achievements across this workstream over the past year, with the work on the Nature Service Wales highlighted as a key achievement. VRP's role in convening different organisations and helping to draft the business plan were highlighted as important contributions in the development of Nature Service Wales.

5.4 Given the focus on Nature Service Wales, time available to develop the roadside verge project over the latter period of this funding had been reduced. The feedback from stakeholders suggests that there is still significant interest and an appetite to further this project idea, and that the VRP could play an important role in facilitating engagement between local authorities.

5.5 Stakeholders also thought that the VRP had played an important role in helping to align the National Forest for Wales' work with that of Public Service Boards (PSBs) and with the NRW Area Statements for South Central and South East over the past year. In addition, stakeholders observed that the convener had played a valuable role in helping to facilitate collaboration between Discovery Gateways and the National Forest for Wales, which led to one site securing funding via this route.

Recreation and wellbeing workstream

5.6 Across the recreation and wellbeing workstream, the main achievements since June 2022 have been as follows:

- the development of an evaluation framework to be deployed during the roll out of the Caerphilly Nature on Prescription project
- the development of the Sustainable Food project led by Bridgend County Borough Council
- food growing and food poverty projects, including the development of Big Bocs Bwyd case studies, networking with related projects and exploring how food poverty projects could be replicated regionally
- the development of an evaluation framework for the two Wellbeing Workhubs at Llyn Llech Owain and Parc Bryn Bach
- oversight of externally contracted work which focused on mapping research and insight research to inform future VRP developments.

5.7 The two key achievements across this workstream which were highlighted by stakeholders who contributed to the final phase fieldwork have already been discussed in detail within the mid-term report. They relate to the contribution of the VRP to the Big Bocs Bwyd project and across the social prescribing agenda. The VRP was found to have played an important role in expanding the Big Bocs Bwyd project to 25 school settings across the VRP area, and the VRP convener prepared an observational report on the delivery of the project.

5.8 In terms of the VRP's input into social prescribing, the mid-term report highlighted the convener's work into an evaluation report of the Nature on Prescription pilot project in Caerphilly in collaboration with Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (UHB). The pilot project has since been extended by Aneurin Bevan University Health Board and the role of a green social prescribing co-ordinator funded to continue the model.

5.9 The mid-term report also highlighted the input of the convener into a research paper published in the British Medical Journal, which had been used to inform Welsh Government's approach to social prescribing policy going forward. The convener has continued to contribute towards policy development in this area, including providing advice to the Welsh Government's Healthy Weight Healthy Wales agenda.

Communities and enterprise workstream

5.10 Under the Communities and Enterprise workstream, the main achievements reported by the VRP since June 2022 have been:

- facilitating two formal Discovery Gateway network meetings (held in October 2022 and February 2023) to explore collaboration opportunities between the sites. The two network meetings have been attended by around half of the 15 organisations put forward as members, suggesting that there is a healthy degree of interest in the opportunity. Terms of Reference for the group has been adopted and an online shared folder set up to share resources.
- researching and scoping the concept of 'Valleys Way', a Valleys-wide cycle trail network. This included establishing a stakeholder group to develop the concept, which met in December 2022. Progress reports indicate that interest from local authorities has been modest with only six of the 13 local authorities invited to engage responding formally to such a request
- ongoing engagement with key tourism partners such as Visit Wales and Southern Wales, to shape the VRP's role within tourism for the future. No definitive way forward has been established during this funding period and there is still much work required to clarify the role that the VRP could undertake as a tourism destination management player.

5.11 Stakeholders were well informed about the VRP's work across the Discovery Gateways, but less informed about other developments across this workstream possibly as some of the demonstrator projects were still in their very early stages of development. There was enthusiasm to see the Valleys Way being progressed in the future and to explore how the VRP could play a role as a tourism destination management provider.

5.12 The broad consensus amongst stakeholders over the course of this evaluation is that there has been a lack of clarity about what was expected of this workstream during the funding period, and whilst ideas have been explored, tangible deliverables have been limited.

Peer to peer Discovery Gateway network

5.13 Stakeholders considered the work of the VRP around establishing the Discovery Gateway sites to have been a key achievement of its work to date. Six representatives from four Discovery Gateway sites provided feedback during the final phase fieldwork which suggests that:

- the capital investment provided to Discovery Gateways has been beneficial and continues to make a significant difference to sites' appeal and use e.g., investment in children's play areas has increased footfall in one area; it has improved accessibility in another, and improved interpretation and signage in a third site. Furthermore, there is some evidence that the investment made has stimulated further private sector investment e.g., in one case there has been private sector investment into a bike shop and hire facility facilities, which has helped to improve the offer at the site
- Discovery Gateway representatives considered the Guardians scheme to have been successful and added value to the provision available to their communities. They were also disappointed to have lost this provision and only one example was cited of a Discovery Gateway sustaining some of the Guardians activities since March 2023, due to limited capacity and funding on their part to continue the offer
- the Discovery Gateway networking group is considered valuable and useful. Contributors observed that networking between the Discovery Gateways lost momentum during the pandemic period and there was a general welcome to see the network reinstated recently. Two Discovery Gateways based within the same county have started to share ideas and undertake joint marketing of events since the network has been reconvened. In this case there is joint marketing of bushcraft sessions at one and nature watching at another. Discovery Gateway representatives suggested that the VRP could develop an annual programme of networking meetings in advance, which would allow members to keep dates free for attending. Contributors were also keen to explore the possibility of developing a Discovery Gateway tourism offer in the future.

Stakeholder views on the difference made by the VRP

- 5.14 Feedback gathered from interviewed stakeholders during the interim and final stage evaluation would suggest that the VRP engaged well with stakeholder organisations from some policy areas, such as the environment sector, whilst engagement with others, such as the health sector, proved more challenging due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the pressures facing the health sector more broadly. It was also suggested that collaboration with Public Service Boards (PSBs) could be strengthened in the future. Stakeholders reflected that engagement with local authorities had been mixed over the two-year delivery period, with some authorities and specific departments within them, as well as individual leaders, having been more engaged than others. Stakeholders suggested that efforts to re-engage local authority leaders during recent discussions about the ongoing funding of the VRP had proved effective in securing their greater involvement.
- 5.15 It therefore followed that stakeholders thought that the VRP had made positive inroads to influence and inform policy in key areas such as the environment, food, and social prescribing although it's contribution to some of these areas was not always visible or recognised. It continued to be the case that contributors didn't think that the VRP was automatically considered by policy makers as a conduit to help shape and develop policy, evidenced by its lack of representation at key strategic discussions and taskforces. The VRP was therefore thought to still have some way to become an integral and valuable player in this respect.
- 5.16 Stakeholders took the view that the VRP had been involved in a small number of excellent demonstrator projects which had the potential to inform longer-term approaches. Stakeholders also believed that the VRP had funded interesting research studies during this funding period, notably the mapping exercise and insight research, which had the potential to inform future policy and decision making, provided they be published and disseminated effectively.
- 5.17 Stakeholders interviewed during the interim and final stage evaluation also thought that the VRP had played a key role in stimulating and supporting long-term collaborations. A frequently cited example was the VRP's contribution to the development of Nature Service Wales, which was thought to have the potential to become a long-term collaborative intervention should future funding be secured. The enablement of cross-border collaborations was mostly thought to have been

stimulated via local authority engagement, with the VRP having helped to facilitate discussions between local authorities across the Valleys region. In addition, reference was made to the work of the VRP in stimulating cross-border collaborations between Discovery Gateways. Stakeholders argued that these collaborations would not have taken place in the absence of the VRP although they thought that more could have been achieved over the delivery period in the absence of the pandemic and a greater effort to bring Discovery Gateway representatives together in-person.

- 5.18 Stakeholders thought that some of the demonstrator projects which the VRP had been involved with provided good examples of cross-sector working, such as in the case of Nature Service Wales which spanned environmental and skills sector; and the Discovery Gateways which spanned environmental, health and wellbeing, and tourism sectors. Stakeholders thought that a key strength of the VRP model was its co-ordination role across different sectors, and that it had acted effectively as the 'glue' between local authorities, third sector and other public bodies such as NRW. Stakeholders suggested that its success in securing funding for the immediate future meant that regional collaborative approaches could be sustained for the medium-term, although longer-term sustainability of the VRP was still questionable.
- 5.19 Stakeholders interviewed during the final stage evaluation were not particularly sighted about what would have happened in the absence of the ESF funding for the VRP. It was suggested that a smaller team and some activities might have been delivered had Welsh Government funding only been available, but the VRP would not have continued had neither ESF nor Welsh Government funding been available over the delivery period.

6. Engagement and communication

6.1 This chapter considers the engagement and promotional work undertaken by the VRP since the mid-term evaluation report. It also considers the findings of the audience awareness surveys deployed directly by the VRP.

Engagement and communication

6.2 The main communication and promotional activities undertaken by the VRP since June 2022 include:

- further maintenance and improvement to the website⁹
- quarterly newsletters to provide updates on activities
- contribution and attendance at various conferences and events such as the Aneurin Leisure Trust partnership conference
- production of a Discovery Gateway legacy brochure to showcase how funding has been spent at each site
- commissioning of professional photography and short promotional videos of the Discovery Gateways to use on their social media
- production of a promotional video of Nature Service Wales
- promotion of Wellbeing Workhub launch
- a social media campaign. As of June 2023, the VRP had¹⁰:
 - a Facebook reach of 60,814
 - an Instagram reach of 2,167
 - 5,572 Twitter followers.

6.3 The feedback from those interviewed during the final evaluation phase about the promotional work of the VRP was positive, and reinforced the messages heard during the mid-term evaluation. Contributors continued to recognise the challenge facing the VRP of reaching two different audiences (residents and stakeholder organisations) via its communication work. Direct public facing engagement undertaken by the VRP has continued to be fairly limited over the final year

⁹ [Valleys Regional Park](#)

¹⁰ Social media reach has fluctuated over time across the social media channels but has increased overall during the delivery period.

although engagement with residents via demonstrator projects such as Big Bocs Bwyd and the Guardians scheme has been effective. Stakeholders suggested that a key lesson from this experience is that the VRP is better placed to engage with local communities via its partner organisations and networks, including via the Discovery Gateways, as opposed to undertaking this directly itself.

- 6.4 Despite this, stakeholders thought that the VRP had built up promotional and communication momentum over the final year of this funding period and had produced useful resources which would help sustain the project's legacy. Several stakeholders commented positively upon the resources produced by the VRP for Discovery Gateways and thought that these would be widely used over the coming few years.
- 6.5 In terms of engaging with partner organisations, stakeholders observed that there had been tangible progress over the past year to secure greater commitment and ownership of the VRP amongst local authorities and that this was evidenced by the fact that seven of them had agreed to support the VRP financially during 2024/25. Stakeholders continued to observe that organisations from some sectors, such as the health sector, were more difficult to engage and that efforts to engage other sectors, notably the private sector, had perhaps been less of a feature of the VRP's work during this funding period.

Audience awareness surveys

- 6.6 The VRP has administered two audience awareness surveys via its social media accounts, with the first of these conducted as a baseline in early 2022 and a second during June 2023. The sample sizes are small and draw upon the views of those who have already signed up to the VRP's social media feeds, so some caution must be taken when interpreting the findings. The data does nonetheless provide a useful insight into attitudes and awareness of the VRP and its work amongst a small group of target audience, which will be useful as a comparison source on an annual or bi-annual basis in the future.
- 6.7 Table 6.1 shows that there has been an increase in the proportion of respondents who consider themselves to be a resident of the Valleys, from 75% to 87%, suggesting that the social media campaign is improving its reach to the VRP's

target audience. Most of the 2023 survey cohort¹¹ came from the four counties of Rhondda Cynon Taf (33%), Bridgend (23%), Blaenau Gwent (15%) and Caerphilly (15%) suggesting that further work is required to reach the remaining local authority counties covered by the VRP.

Table 6.1: Audience Awareness Surveys – whether respondents consider themselves to be a resident of the Valleys

	2022 survey	2023 survey
Consider themselves a resident	75%	87%
Do not consider themselves a resident	25%	13%
Sample	40	70

6.8 There has been an increase in the proportion who had previously heard of the VRP, from 30% to 44% as shown at Table 6.2, suggesting improved awareness of the programme. Perhaps unsurprisingly given that the Guardians scheme came to a close in March 2023, there has been a very small drop in awareness of the scheme, and awareness remains fairly low at 10%, as shown at Table 6.3.

Table 6.2: Audience Awareness Surveys – whether respondents had heard of the VRP

	2022 survey	2023 survey
Heard of VRP	30%	44%
Not heard of VRP	70%	56%
Sample	40	70

¹¹ Based on 60 who responded to the question

Table 6.3: Audience Awareness Surveys – whether respondents had heard of the Guardians Scheme

	2022 survey	2023 survey
Heard of VRP's Guardians Scheme	12%	10%
Not heard of VRP's Guardians Scheme	88%	90%
Sample	40	60

- 6.9 The 2023 survey cohort was asked to explain 'what is the VRP', and of the 22 responses received it appears that people have very different interpretations of what the programme does, with a few (3) stating they were unsure. The most common theme mentioned was the VRP's work around supporting environment, nature, country parks and well-being; followed by the VRP's role as an 'umbrella' organisation that connected and co-ordinated other organisations.
- 6.10 Some respondents offered a very succinct and accurate explanation of the VRP, including:
- 'a long-term vision and movement for the social, economic, tourism and landscape of the Valleys'
 - 'a chance for local authorities and parks to work together and share ideas to benefit a wider community'
 - 'a project that develops sites and environmental awareness and wellbeing across the Valleys.'
- 6.11 The 2023 survey cohort was asked if they knew whether, and which, of the Discovery Gateway sites the VRP worked with. Three-fifths (59% or 35 respondents) stated that they were not aware that the VRP worked with any of the 12 Discovery Gateways listed as options. The most cited Discovery Gateways identified by the remaining survey respondents were Bryngarw Country Park (27%), Parc Slip Nature Reserve (17%) and Parc Bryn Bach (15%). Perhaps unsurprisingly given the low number of responses from counties such as Carmarthenshire and Caerphilly, that the numbers citing sites such as Llyn Llech

Owain Country Park (7%), Parc Penallta (7%) and Caerphilly Castle (8%) were low.

- 6.12 All but one of the 2022 survey cohort and all but one of the 2023 survey cohort had previously visited at least one of the VRP's Discovery Gateways. The most frequently visited sites in 2022 were Cyfarthfa Park, Dare Valley Country Park and Parc Bryn Bach whilst the most frequently visited sites in 2023 were Caerphilly Castle, Cyfarthfa Park and Dare Valley Country Park. The main reasons why both the 2022 and 2023 survey cohorts had visited Discovery Gateways were for walking, family days out and to meet friends. The 2023 survey cohort placed more emphasis than the 2022 cohort on visiting a café or having lunch as a reason for visiting a Discovery Gateway site.
- 6.13 Many ideas were offered by the 2023 survey cohort for encouraging more frequent visits to Discovery Gateways, including:
- more events such as craft fairs, music events, nature activities, health activities, family activities and forest schools
 - better facilities in terms of parking, toilets, café, and children play areas
 - better signage e.g., walking and cycling routes
 - better promotion and publicity of the provision available
 - improved public transport links
 - reduced parking costs or even 'a free coffee' if paying for parking.

7. VRP performance

7.1 This chapter considers VRP performance against its funded targets, including performance against its cross-cutting themes targets.

Achieving WEFO targets

7.2 The VRP has successfully delivered upon its three output indicators required as part of its WEFO funding agreement as shown at Table 7.1. In relation to Output 2, the 20 entities which can be reported as having participated in VRP projects are 13 local authorities, four health boards, Natural Resources Wales, the Welsh Government and Cardiff Capital Region; although in reality a much larger number of entities have collaborated with the VRP over the funding period.

Table 7.1: Achievements against funded outputs indicators

Output	Definition	Target	Achieved
Output 1	Number of projects targeting public administrations or public services at national, regional, or local level	1	1
Output 2	Number of entities participating in projects targeting public administrations or public services at national, regional, or local level	20	20
Output 3	Number of methods, processes and tools being developed with support	4	4

7.3 Table 7.2 below sets out the revised methods, procedures and tools agreed with WEFO for the project, and final achievements against these result indicators.

Table 7.2: Achievements against funded result indicators

Tool	Expected output & result	Progress against result indicator	Evidence of having achieved expected result indicator
1	Development of the long-term governance, funding, and operating model for the regional management of	Achieved	The VRP has been established as an intervention with clear governance arrangements and a dedicated team put in place. A longer-term operating model for the VRP post 2023 which forms part of this output has also been agreed.

	the Valleys landscape.		
2	Development of the Big Bocs Bwyd project across the Valleys and identification of best practice	Achieved	The Big Bocs Bwyd project has been implemented, and the VRP has contributed to this and documented best practice. Case studies have been prepared and shared with other partner organisations.
3	A regional approach to the use of social prescribing and the delivery of wellbeing activities.	Achieved	Initial efforts to develop a regional approach were hampered by a number of factors but the VRP's published report on social prescribing has been used as a funded output and result against this tool.
4	Development of a regional peer-to-peer networking to support community led development of landscape and heritage assets.	Achieved	The Discovery Gateway network was established mid-way through the funding period and has met on two occasions over the last year of delivery. Further work is required to strengthen the network to better support community led development.

Cross-cutting themes

- 7.4 The VRP has contributed positively to all three EU cross-cutting themes of equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming (including the Welsh language); sustainable development; and tackling poverty and social exclusion. At a general level, the role of a CCT champion was created and held by two members of staff over the delivery period. In terms of stakeholder engagement, a wide range of engagement activity took place including with representatives from Discovery Gateway sites, local authorities, and other sectors such as health and tourism.
- 7.5 Table 7.3 sets out the achievements made across the CCTs case level indicators and our observations about the extent of this contribution.

Table 7.3: Cross cutting themes achievements

CCT case level indicators	Observations
Equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming	<p>The VRP has made reasonable progress towards its equality of opportunity objectives despite this being challenging given that the VRP does not directly deliver any services to end users. It is difficult to identify how the VRP could have contributed towards the CCT theme of gender mainstreaming during this funding period.</p>
Disability access group engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Insight Research targeted and gathered views from various under-represented groups, including disabled people, young people, and Welsh speakers • The Guardians Scheme supported disabled people, but has not reported on engagement with disability access or advocacy groups • The VRP has ensured that the research commissioned has gathered the opinions of under-represented audiences and it will be important to reflect on these to inform future provision • The delivery of the programme has adhered to all equal opportunity legislation and has ensured that all previous capital expenditure awarded to Discovery Gateway sites complies with the Disability Discrimination Act • The programme has included images of women, men, and some representation from people from ethnic minority communities within its promotional activity. There is scope to ensure that future promotional material better reflects the inclusion of disabled people, accepting of course that not all disabilities are physical and visible.
Positive action measures supporting young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The VRP has contributed to activities such as a festival for young people held by Bridgend College • The VRP has taken appropriate action to undertake some direct activities to engage young people, although as the VRP itself has not been a service deliverer these opportunities have been limited • Activities delivered via the Guardians scheme have also helped to reach young services users
Activity promoting the Welsh culture and language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The VRP has produced bilingual marketing and promotional material • All public facing information and promotional material reviewed by the evaluation team are bilingual.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celebrating Welsh culture and heritage has been at the heart of the VRP's mission, and resources produced convey a positive image of the Valleys culture, landscape, and heritage
Workplace health programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two Wellbeing Workhubs became active during this funding period, offering office space in natural environments for working • As the two Wellbeing Workhubs have only recently become operational, no data is available on their use or the profile of users. It will be important to monitor the take up of these spaces over time and the demographic profile of users to ensure that they can be accessed by a representative cross-section of people from local communities. It would also be worth exploring the perceived benefits for users from working in a natural environment
Sustainable development	<p>The VRP made excellent progress against its sustainable development objectives. Sustainable development demonstrator projects has been a particularly prominent feature of the VRP's work during this funding period.</p>
Integration of small-scale green infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The VRP has supported Discovery Gateway sites to maintain and achieve Green Flag status • The VRP has collaborated with NRW to explore the potential of a shared management of green infrastructure, in particular roadside verges • The VRP has been part of the Gwent Green Grid Resilient Grasslands working group exploring green infrastructure to promote resilient economic networks • The VRP has focused upon helping to implement environmental improvements and access at Discovery Gateway sites as well as the development of key pilot projects such as Nature Service Wales and the roadside verges project • There has been strong collaboration between the VRP and NRW over the funding period to ensure that NRW Area Statements ambitions can be achieved, and initial work on green infrastructure projects looks promising. • Some of the demonstrator projects such as the roadside verges project require further time and resources to become operational
Activity which is supporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The VRP has supported the development of Nature Service Wales

<p>biodiversity on a site funded through Discovery Gateways</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Guardians scheme has delivered biodiversity education and activities to participants • The VRP has worked alongside NRW to align the Discovery Gateway sites with three of the seven NRW area statements and produced a framework paper, including case studies of how the work of the Guardians contributed to the delivery of Area Statements ambitions Feedback from stakeholders suggest that the VRP played a critical role in the development of Nature Service Wales, and provided Welsh Government fund the next phase of the initiative, will undertake a key role in the delivery of the Nature Service Wales demonstrator project across the Valleys • The Guardians scheme evaluation concluded that the project had opened up sites for local people, improved paths, planted trees and shrubs and cleared litter, thereby contributing positively towards supporting biodiversity across Discovery Gateway sites. The scheme improved 611,958 m2 and maintained a further 219,646 m2 of land
<p>Tackling poverty and social exclusion</p>	<p>The VRP made good progress against its tackling poverty and social exclusion objectives, given its focus on deprived Valleys communities and volunteering opportunities available via its demonstration projects.</p>
<p>Activity which builds skills within the community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Guardians scheme has delivered accredited environmental training to participants • The Big Bocs Bwyd project has supported local communities • The National Forest for Wales and Nature Service Wales business plan focus upon on how to develop environmental skills for the future Whilst the Guardians scheme has offered accredited training to participants, the numbers doing so has been relatively modest during this funded period (at 41 accreditations). Participants nonetheless reported improved skills as a result of the training accessed • The VRP has been involved in Big Bocs Bwyd which has focused on supporting local residents to get involved with food growing initiatives and improve access to better and cheaper locally grown food.
<p>Peer support activity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Discovery Gateway network was established, and two formal network meetings have been held over the last year (October 2022 and February 2023)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The VRP has supported the development of a National Forest for Wales and Nature Service Wales. All DGs are in areas of high deprivation, and are maintaining sites which are now more accessible
Volunteering schemes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Volunteers have been engaged through the Guardians scheme and Big Bocs Bwyd. Over 1,000 volunteers have engaged with the Guardians Scheme, with some of these achieving accreditation The VRP has not done much direct community engagement although the RDP Guardians scheme has provided volunteering experiences to local residents who are out of work to improve their skills, including employability skills. The evaluation of the Guardians scheme reported that 940 people had engaged with the project, including vulnerable people and those out of work

7.6 Drawing upon the feedback from stakeholders and our review of key documents, the VRP has also made an important contribution to five of the seven well-being goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, notably:

- a more prosperous Wales: by developing demonstrator projects such as Nature Service Wales and the Guardians scheme which help address climate change and improve environmental awareness and skills
- a resilient Wales: by enhancing biodiversity and the natural environment, particularly across the 12 Discovery Gateway sites
- a healthier Wales: by focusing on improving wellbeing through nature via its research on social prescribing, the introduction of Wellbeing Workhubs and the delivery of the Guardians scheme
- a more equal Wales: by supporting volunteering opportunities and investing in natural environmental assets which are mostly free to access across deprived Valleys communities
- a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language: by investing in the heritage and cultural assets of the Valleys and encouraging residents to participate in nature-based activities.

7.7 Furthermore, the VRP has been used by the Future Generations Commissioner as a case study¹² to illustrate how an initiative contributes towards its seven well-being goals. The case study notes that it does this well as it has invested in valuable green spaces which help with mental and physical health, particularly during the pandemic, and operates via a multidisciplinary team who have different backgrounds and expertise.

¹² [Case-studies New template \(futuregenerations.wales\)](#)

8. Priorities for the future

8.1 This chapter sets out the key findings from the final phase fieldwork on what interviewed stakeholders thought were the priorities for the VRP post June 2023. Many of these themes have already been raised and discussed in detail in the mid-term report and we therefore do not elaborate on these points again.

Secure better alignment between the scale of ambition and resources

8.2 There was a consensual view that the VRP should select a small number of priorities over the coming few years and 'do less well'. It was widely suggested that the VRP should agree upon its USP and stick to it, avoiding the tendency which perhaps has happened in the past of trying to 'be all things to all people'. One of the main reasons stakeholders conveyed this view was that the VRP does not have the resources to match its large scale of ambition, and that there is a need for a more realistic match between goals and capacity. The funding levels secured for the immediate future are modest and insufficient to help achieve the extensive ambitions of the VRP as currently defined. Contributors would welcome having a VRP which is perhaps less vulnerable to changes in response to funding opportunities, but rather a programme which can better influence the funding opportunities as has happened with Nature Service Wales.

Further clarity is required about the purpose and remit of the VRP

8.3 Whilst there has been an improvement in stakeholders' understanding about what the VRP is about, those interviewed suggested that this is possibly limited to those most closely involved with the VRP. It was suggested that the VRP should further invest in partner engagement and dissemination activities to help develop greater understanding about the purpose and remit of the VRP. There was also a desire to see the VRP becoming a greater champion and advocate for the Valleys more generally, in addition to its perceived current focus on the delivery of demonstrator projects.

Maximise the use of Discovery Gateway sites to create opportunities for a healthier and more prosperous Valleys

8.4 Stakeholders, including those from the Discovery Gateway sites themselves, argued that the VRP should build upon the initial investment and network of Discovery Gateways, and make greater use of the sites as assets across the

Valleys. It was suggested that an additional Discovery Gateway might be created in the next phase, to address the current gap across Swansea. To help achieve this ambition the VRP should prioritise its engagement with Discovery Gateways and explore how it can help to facilitate collaborative action between sites to fulfil Welsh Government ambitions across health and wellbeing, nature-based employment, sustainable local food growing, and green social prescribing,

Explore how demonstrator projects could be sustained

- 8.5 A key way of working for the VRP is to develop and pilot demonstrator projects, which can then be scaled up or applied to other areas. However, these demonstrator projects tend to be reliant on short-term funding opportunities which means that when funding opportunities comes to an end, activities end unless an alternative source of funding is secured. Stakeholders observed that the Guardians scheme has found itself in this situation, despite it demonstrating that there is a demand for nature-based opportunities across the Valleys. Whilst the Skills Fund, which forms an important component of the Nature Service Wales business plan, could be used to support successful demonstrator projects in the future, the VRP needs to focus on how to sustain provision which works well.

Explore methods of engaging with the health sector

- 8.6 Accepting that engagement with the health sector had been challenging during this round of funding, there was a desire amongst interviewed stakeholders to see greater collaboration between the VRP and Health Boards, Regional Partnership Boards (RPBs) and Public Service Boards (PSBs) in the future to further the preventative health agenda. It was suggested that the VRP should secure representation at some of these foras to 'champion the Valleys' perspective in the future.

Support LAs to focus on the collective benefit of the VRP

- 8.7 Stakeholders suggested that perhaps the focus over the last year, as a result of discussions to secure future funding for the VRP, has been on what each local authority can get out of the VRP, in terms of the direct return on their investments. This is perhaps not surprising in the context of rising costs and local authority stretched finances, but there was a desire to focus upon the collective benefits of the VRP in the future.

Draw out key lessons and findings from commissioned studies

- 8.8 Some stakeholders observed that the VRP has commissioned, or contributed towards, several research and evaluation studies during the current delivery period, and that it would now be timely to identify common messages and lessons to inform future practice as well as to disseminate and discuss with a wider audience.

Strengthen governance

- 8.9 There was widespread acceptance that the proposed future governance model for the VRP was appropriate, and an enthusiasm that alignment with the CJC would bring about positive benefits. There was a strong desire to see the Executive Group being maintained given that this was working effectively and had good levels of commitment from members. There was no desire to reinstate the VRP Forum, but rather for engagement with individual partner organisations to take place as and when would be appropriate.
- 8.10 In terms of changes to governance arrangements, stakeholders suggested that it would be worth the VRP exploring the involvement of local authority Chief Executives in the future, given that the VRP Board was represented by local authority leaders only. It was also suggested that there may be a case for reviewing whether the VRP was still reporting into the most appropriate Welsh Government department, given that much of the programme's work was now focused on the green recovery rather than the anti-poverty agenda.

9. Conclusions and recommendations

- 9.1 This chapter sets out our conclusions on the work of the VRP over the 2021 to 2023 funding period and offers recommendations for the future.
- 9.2 The VRP has made sound progress in establishing itself as a regional structure for the management of Valleys landscape assets over this current funding period, having secured financial support from the Welsh Government until the end of March 2024 and is making progress towards a joint funding model with local authorities thereafter, which needs to be in place until March 2029, when the Welsh Government expects the programme to become self-sustaining. This will ensure that the VRP becomes a stronger partnership initiative as opposed to a programme to be actioned by a small core team, as was perceived to be the case at the mid-point evaluation. It has also made good strides to start embedding itself into more permanent, and simpler, governance arrangements and delivery structures, which will improve its chances of survival in the long-term. We reiterate a point made in the mid-term report that achieving solid governance will require significant input and commitment from the South East CJC to ensure a suitable and smooth transition.
- 9.3 The VRP has successfully achieved its ESF funded output and results indicators. It was appropriate that the methods, procedures, and tools agreed with WEFO for reporting against were revised over the delivery period to take account of both the challenges faced by the VRP in progressing some of the original result indicators as well as some of the opportunities which arose over time. Developing an appropriate set of KPIs for an intervention such as the VRP is challenging, as the VRP does not directly deliver services on the ground. The VRP has also contributed positively to all three EU cross-cutting themes, and sustainable development has been a particularly prominent feature of the VRP's work during this funding period.
- 9.4 In preparing our conclusions we consider the 14 programme outcomes set out within the Theory of Change model (set out at Annex B) which were expected to be achieved during this phase:
- there is some evidence, via the awareness survey conducted by the VRP and sustained social media interest, that Valleys residents are becoming more aware of the work of the VRP. However, in our view, this outcome was not a particularly appropriate one for the VRP to adopt given that the

programme was not directly delivering any services or activities to residents. It is not possible as part of this evaluation to offer an opinion about whether there has been any change in how the community views the Valleys landscape – the VRP may wish to consider how the partnership could gather this evidence in the future

- Discovery Gateway sites have been involved in supporting the delivery of volunteering, education, and other programmes, such as the Guardians Scheme, and see the value of doing so. They are restricted from continuing with these activities in the absence of funding suggesting that there is scope for the VRP to explore how similar activities could be financially supported in the future
- there is good evidence that the VRP is starting to become more embedded as a regional model across the Valleys, in that its contribution towards developments such as Nature Service Wales, National Forest Wales and potential demonstrator projects such as the green verges project and ‘Valleys Way’ is being more widely recognised. In the absence of the strategic Valleys Taskforce however, there is a danger that the VRP could operate within a policy vacuum in the future unless it is championed at a Welsh Government Minister level
- the VRP has contributed towards the social prescribing insights research report which is helping to inform the strategic development of a green social prescribing project across one local authority area. There is scope to broaden the dissemination and discussion around this insight report across a wider geographical area, and consider whether the VRP should advocate the case for a more sustainable and ongoing fund to support provision in the future, in a similar manner to that made available by the Welsh Government for NERS
- the VRP has helped to develop a more cohesive approach to landscape-based activities across the Valleys region, notably through the work on demonstrator projects such as Nature Service Wales and Discovery Gateway collaborations. There is significant scope, and an appetite in place, to strengthen the Discovery Gateway network given that this has only been reinstated over the final year of the current funding period

- the VRP has developed, or contributed towards, valuable demonstration pilot projects over this funding period. Some of these, such as Big Bocs Bwyd, were scaled up over the duration of the current funding period and are already being sustained on an ongoing basis. Others, such as the Guardians scheme, were delivered successfully over this funding period but came to a close when the funding ended. Other potential demonstrator projects, such as the Valleys Way and grass verges projects, are still under development. A key lesson in developing demonstrator projects is to consider at the design stage how they can be sustained, scaled up or rolled out by others post delivery
- there is initial evidence that the VRP is becoming increasingly considered by local authorities and the Welsh Government as an integral and valuable regional player, as demonstrated by the commitment of future funding over the next two years and is now considered an important regional delivery vehicle post 2023. Commitment from remaining local authorities now needs to be secured, including ongoing commitment to implement a long-term regional approach
- the VRP is influencing policy development in key areas such as the environment and social prescribing, and there is some evidence that its work is increasingly being used to inform national and regional policy and decisions.

9.5 Chapter 8 sets out what stakeholders consider to be the VRP's future priorities, and we would recommend that the partnership considers these eight priorities for the next stage of work. The VRP partnership needs to continue its work to define its purpose and USP and ensure that this is clearly articulated and widely understood. Using this as a basis, the VRP will be able to develop a long-term ambition and vision for the future. There is a real danger that the VRP's resources over the next 18-month period will be consumed by the work necessary to transition into CJC governance arrangements and securing further funding post March 2025. There is a risk that programme resources will be directed towards short-term survival which could be to the detriment of longer-term planning and visioning. The complex environmental, economic, health and wellbeing challenges which the VRP is trying

to tackle via a regional approach cannot be resolved via short term funding models, which only serve to reinforce a start and stop ethos of working.

- 9.6 Another key risk for the VRP is that future funding has only been confirmed up until March 2024 albeit that progress towards a longer-term joint funding model between local authorities and the Welsh Government is taking shape. At the time of drafting this report, there is still uncertainty about whether the Welsh Government will fund the VRP up until March 2029, which includes funding over the Senedd election period anticipated to be May 2026, and whether local authorities will commit to funding the VRP post April 2025. A gap, or reduced level of funding, over 2025/26 would result in the loss of staff resources and expertise which would be detrimental to the work of the programme.
- 9.7 It is also worth highlighting that the financial resources which the VRP will have at its disposal from July 2023 onwards will be lower than has been the case historically so it will not be able to commission any service provision, such as the Guardians scheme, or co-ordinate the awarding of any capital funding, such as it did for Discovery Gateways during previous funding rounds, without access to additional funds. This reduced resource will make it more challenging for the VRP to engage stakeholder organisations and achieve its overall objectives. The VRP therefore needs to identify and secure other sources of funding over the next 14-month period to help deliver its ambition. Funding from the Welsh Government for the delivery of Nature Service Wales' demonstrator project is one possible source.

Recommendations

- 9.8 We offer the following set of recommendations:

Strategic recommendations:

Recommendation 1: the VRP partnership continues its work to better define its USP and its long-term strategy

Recommendation 2: the VRP seeks to secure longer-term funding from the Welsh Government and local authorities up to May 2029

Recommendation 3: the Welsh Government reviews whether the VRP is reporting into the most appropriate Welsh Government department or whether it

would be better aligned with the interests of the Deputy Minister for Climate Change

Governance related recommendations:

Recommendation 4: the VRP partnership continues to engage with the CJsCs to progress future governance arrangements. To achieve this, the CJsCs needs to collaborate closely with VRP representatives to progress this objective at pace and to ensure a smooth transition. As part of this transition, it would be worthwhile exploring how the input of local authority Chief Executives into the VRP governance arrangements could be secured

Recommendation 5: the VRP partnership continues to engage with those local authorities who have yet to commit to making a long-term financial commitment to the VRP to enable the initiative to move away from being reliant on short term funding streams to achieve its ambitious long-term objectives. There is also scope for the VRP to look at securing financial commitment from other key partners, such as Natural Resources Wales

Operational recommendations:

Recommendation 6: the VRP should ensure that over the next funding period it achieves a balance between its co-ordination and delivery work on the one hand and setting out a long-term vision and ambition on the other

Recommendation 7: the VRP utilises its relatively modest level of funding over the next two years to focus on a limited number of demonstrator projects, where it can make the greatest contribution to partner organisations and Welsh Government policies, particularly the Well-being of Future Generations Act. It should focus on established concepts, such as Nature Service Wales, and a small number of emerging concepts such as roadside verges, Valleys Way and tourism destination management, ensuring that better links are established with potential sponsor bodies such as Visit Wales

Recommendation 8: the VRP strengthens the Discovery Gateway network to ensure that all Discovery Gateways participate, and explores opportunities for collaborative action and projects, including sourcing possible funding opportunities for the network

Recommendation 9: the VRP explores some of the issues and opportunities raised via the mapping exercise and insight research, notably:

- extending the Discovery Gateway network to include more accessible locations for volunteers without access to a car
- developing a database and spatial mapping tool of landscape and nature volunteering opportunities for potential participants and referring agents to use.

Annex A: Research instruments

Topic guide: Valleys Regional Park Staff

A: Background

1. How has your role changed (if at all) since we last spoke a year ago?
 - Area of interest (including three workstreams: landscape, culture, and identity; social prescribing and wellbeing; and communities and enterprise)

B: Governance, management, and delivery arrangements

2. The mid-term evaluation report found that the governance arrangements were complex and would benefit from being simplified. Have there been any changes to the VRP's governance structure since we last spoke?
 - How effective has the Executive Group been over the past year?
 - How often has the full Board met over the past year? How much clarity do members have about its role and purpose?
 - How effective has engagement with the larger VRP Forum been?
 - How useful are these structures to you as delivery staff? In what way?
3. What impact, if any, have changes to the delivery staff team (including staff turnover) over the last year had upon the delivery of the programme?
4. What are your views about the VRP's communication and promotional activities over the past year, including the work undertaken by Equinox:
 - What promotional activities have been undertaken?
 - What has worked well / not as well and why?

C. Engagement

5. How well has the VRP been able to maintain its engagement with stakeholder organisations over the past year?
 - Which organisations has it been able to engage with effectively? Why is this?
 - Which organisations (or sectors) has it not been able to engage with? Why is this?
6. The mid-term evaluation report recommended that there was a need to secure a stronger shared understanding across the partnership of the purpose, remit, and long-term vision of the VRP. What progress has been made by the VRP on this?

7. The mid-term evaluation report found that the VRP's public facing engagement work had been limited. How, if at all, has this changed over the last year or so?
8. The mid-term evaluation report recommended that the VRP should prioritise the development of the Discovery Gateway network by bringing representatives together to explore collaborative opportunities. How much progress has been made on this?

D: Cross Cutting Themes

9. What **specific examples of good practice** are there of the VRP contributing positively towards the following cross-cutting themes?
 - equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming (particularly in terms of ensuring that promotional materials reflect all protected characteristics)
 - promoting Welsh language and culture
 - tackling poverty and social inclusion and
 - sustainable development
10. In what way has the VRP contributed to the goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015?
 - What specific good practice examples would you identify?

E. Achievements and difference made

11. How well has the VRP **performed against its funded targets** (three output indicators and four result indicators)?
 - What accounts for any strong or weak progress?
12. What would you identify as the VRP's **main achievements across each of the three workstreams** during the ESF funding period 2020-23?
 - *Probe specifically for achievements over the last year*
 - What accounts for these achievements?
 - Which projects or research have you been most involved with?
 - What lessons from demonstrator projects or research findings has VRP shared more widely?
 - In what way, if at all, have lessons from pilot projects or research informed wider practice across the region or pan-Wales?
13. To what extent do you think that the VRP has acted as a **catalyst for longer-term collaboration** over the ESF funding period?
 - To what extent has it enabled **cross-sector collaboration**? What evidence or good practice examples can you provide of this?

- To what extent has it enabled **cross-border collaboration**? What evidence or good practice examples can you provide of this?

14. To what extent has the VRP enabled **greater strategic collaboration** across the Valleys?

- To what extent do stakeholders consider the VRP an integral and valuable player?
- What are your views on the extent to which the VRP is engaging with key policy discussions?
- In what way is evidence gathered by the VRP being used to inform national and regional policy and decisions? What examples are there of this?
- Across which policy areas is the VRP engaging well / not so well? Why is this?

15. To what extent would these regional collaborative approaches mentioned above have happened in the absence of VRP?

- How sustainable are these regional collaborative approaches?

16. What changes, if any, have there been in the way the **Valleys landscape is viewed more positively** by the community during the ESF 2020-23 funding period?

- What contribution, if any, has the VRP made to any changes?
- What evidence is there of this?

F: The future

17. What role do you see the VRP will have as a **regional delivery vehicle** post the ESF funding period?

- What evidence do you have that stakeholder organisations are committed to a long term sustainable regional VRP approach?
- What financial or other resources have partner organisations committed to the approach?
- What accounts for any lack of commitment?

18. What would you identify as the **key priorities** for the VRP post ESF funding?

- For the immediate future (next 2-3 years with a reduced funding allocation) and for the longer-term?
- What are the key lessons from the ESF funding period?
- What changes, if any, should the VRP explore, including in terms of governance and delivery arrangements?

Topic guide: Valleys Regional Park Programme Board members and Key Stakeholders

A: Background

1. What is your current role?
 - *(if relevant)* How has your role changed (if at all) since we last spoke a year ago?
2. In what way have you been involved with the VRP?
 - Nature and duration of involvement
 - Member of Board and/or Executive Group?
 - Involvement with demonstrator project or specific research?
 - Area of interest (including three workstreams: landscape, culture, and identity; social prescribing and wellbeing; and communities and enterprise)

B: What VRP has achieved

3. *(Executive Group members only)* To what extent do you think that the VRP has achieved its key aims and objectives, as set out in the 2020-23 Delivery Plans?
4. *(Executive Group members only)* To what extent do you think that the VRP's priorities for 2020-23 were appropriate?
 - What has worked well?
 - What could have been improved?

C: Governance, management, and delivery arrangements

5. What are your views about the VRP's governance and management arrangements over the past year?
 - *(if relevant)* How effective is the Programme Board and/or Executive Group?
 - How engaged have you been? Why is this?
 - How useful do you find your engagement with the VRP?
 - What has worked well and what could have been improved?
6. What are your views on the VRP delivery arrangements over the past year?
 - What is working well in terms of programme implementation?
 - What are your views on the skills and capacity within the delivery team?
 - What are your views on changes to the delivery team over the last year or so?

- What could be improved?
7. Over the last year, how effectively has the VRP engaged and communicated with:
- the community and the public?
 - stakeholder organisations?
 - What has worked well?
 - What could be improved?
8. How effectively have different stakeholder organisations engaged and collaborated with the VRP over the past year?
- In what way is the VRP facilitating connections between different or new stakeholder organisations?
 - Are the right partners and organisations involved and engaged? What gaps, if any, are there?
 - What accounts for any strong or weak engagement from partner organisations?
 - What challenges (if any) do organisations face in engaging with the VRP? How could they be overcome?

D. Cross Cutting Themes

9. What **specific examples of good practice** are there of the VRP contributing positively towards the following cross-cutting themes?
- equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming (particularly in terms of ensuring that promotional materials reflect all protected characteristics)
 - promoting Welsh language and culture
 - tackling poverty and social inclusion and
 - sustainable development
10. In what way has the VRP contributed to the goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015?
- What specific good practice examples would you identify?

E: Achievements and difference made

11. What are your views on the **progress made** by the VRP during the ESF funding period 2020-23?
12. What would you identify as its **main achievements across each of the three workstreams** during the ESF funding period 2020-23?

13. Thinking about its remit to deliver **demonstrator projects**, what would you identify as good demonstration projects which are being delivered by VRP?

- What have the projects delivered?
- What are the strengths/weaknesses of these projects?
- What benefits are beneficiaries gaining from them?
- What difference are these projects making to communities?
- What lessons are being learnt from them?

14. In what way does the VRP act as a **catalyst for longer term collaborative** over the ESF funding period?

- To what extent has it enabled cross-sector collaboration? What evidence or good practice examples can you provide of this?
- To what extent has it enabled cross-border collaboration? What evidence or good practice examples can you provide of this?

15. To what extent has the VRP enabled **greater strategic collaboration** across the Valleys?

- To what extent do stakeholders consider the VRP an **integral and valuable player**?
- What are your views on the extent to which the VRP is engaging with key policy discussions?
- In what way is evidence gathered by the VRP being used to inform national and regional policy and decisions? What examples are there of this?
- Across which policy areas is the VRP engaging well / not so well? Why is this?
- What difference is the VRP making to the way policy is designed and implemented across the Valleys region? What evidence or good practice examples can you provide of this?
- What difference is the VRP making to help to address 'silo' policies and intervention in the Valleys? What evidence or good practice examples can you provide of this?

16. What changes, if any, have there been in the way the **Valleys landscape is viewed more positively** by the community during the ESF 2020-23 funding period?

- What contribution, if any, has the VRP made to any changes?

E: Lessons learned and the future

17. What role do you see the VRP will have as a **regional delivery vehicle** post the ESF funding period?

- What evidence do you have that stakeholder organisations are committed to a long term sustainable regional VRP approach?
- What financial or other resources has/will your own organisation commit to the approach?
- What accounts for any lack of commitment?

18. What would you identify as the **key priorities** for the VRP post ESF funding?

- For the immediate future (next 2-3 years with a reduced funding allocation) and for the longer-term?
- What are the key lessons from the ESF funding period?
- What changes, if any, should the VRP explore, including in terms of governance and delivery arrangements?

Annex B: VRP 2021 – 2023 Theory of Change Logic Model and Evaluation Framework 2021-2023

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Programme Outcomes	Long-term outcomes
<p>A team of skilled and experienced staff (6 FTE)</p> <p>Robust and transparent governance arrangements (Programme Board, Executive Group and Discovery Gateway peer to peer network)</p> <p>Cross-sector and cross-boundary cooperation with partner organisations, including 9 valleys based LAs</p> <p>A well-considered and comprehensive delivery plan</p> <p>£1.1m ESF funding</p> <p>Informed by community need</p>	<p>Workstream 1 Landscape, culture and identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate greater strategic alignment of DG network's services and opportunities Collaborative promotional and awareness raising activities Work with partners to help foster regional approach to green infrastructure, specifically roadside verges Contribute to partners' work around Valleys ecosystems <p>Workstream 2 Recreation and wellbeing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contribute to tackling food poverty and growing food demonstrator projects Deliver & evaluate green social prescribing projects Work with others to foster cohesive approach to health in landscape-based activities <p>Workstream 3 Communities and Enterprise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and establish a peer to peer network with DGs Oversee Guardians scheme and skills development Identify roles that DGs need at their sites Lead on mapping and community insight research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Joint promotional activities across DG sites Two Wellbeing Workhubs Piloting of National Nature Service design & proposals Established Peer to Peer Discovery Gateway network VRP Local Authorities Roadside verge survey No. of meaningful engagements with partners Results of the work of the CEIC good growing cohort shared with partners Dissemination of lessons from social prescribing projects Dissemination of research findings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More valleys residents aware of the work of VRP DG sites delivering volunteering, education and other programmes Embedded VRP within the emerging Valleys Ecosystem Profile Social prescribing insights informing strategic development of green SP A more cohesive approach to projects relating to landscape-based activities within Discovery Gateways 	<p>The Valleys is recognised and celebrated for its green landscape</p> <p>There is greater use of Valleys landscapes for exercise, work, education and access to nature and heritage</p> <p>The Valleys landscape underpins a resilient local economy</p>
	<p>Demonstrating:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design and test cross-policy and cross-border 'proof of concept' demonstration projects <p>Engaging:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community engagement (including via the Guardians scheme) & insight research Stakeholder engagement Public engagement (via website, social media etc) <p>Influencing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connecting key stakeholders and local/regional partnerships Sharing good and effective practice Develop long term governance, funding and operating model for Regional Park entity, including consideration of land designation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. of demonstration projects delivered Lessons learned from demonstration projects disseminated to key stakeholders No. and profile of community members engaged No. and type of key stakeholders meaningfully engaged Website use Social media followers Connections between stakeholders facilitated Agreed approach for a future Regional Park entity including legal framework and operating structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstration pilot project being scaled up or rolled out by others Key stakeholders consider VRP an integral and valuable player VRP engaged in key policy discussions Evidence from VRP is used to inform national and regional policy and decisions The Valleys landscape viewed positively by community Stakeholder connections facilitated lead to wider benefits for the ecosystem, landscape and economy VRP considered a regional delivery vehicle post 2023 Funding and support post 2023 secured Commitment from partners to implement long term sustainable regional VRP approach 	<p>Local authorities commit funds or resources to the VRP</p> <p>More Valleys landscape assets are managed on a regional basis</p> <p>Public sector policies and intervention are informed by community needs</p> <p>The VRP legacy continues post ESF funding</p>

Evaluation framework

This Evaluation Framework was adopted to monitor and evaluate the work of the VRP between 2021 and 2023. The framework corresponds directly to the outputs and outcomes set out in the ToC logic model. The framework sets out evidence sources which the programme was expected to collect as well as the evidence which would be gathered and analysed by OB3 Research as part of the evaluation. The blue text within the ‘evidence source’ column refers to evidence which was intended to be gathered and analysed by OB3 Research.

Outputs

	Output	Detail/Descriptor	Evidence source
1	Joint promotional activities across DG sites	DGs will engage in VRP facilitated joint promotional activities under the banner of ‘It’s in Our Nature’, including promotion of each other and via social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planned programme of work Social media records for VRP and individual DGs Record of promotional resources, materials, and events External evaluation: OB3 review of frequency, quality and reach of promotional activities
2	Two Wellbeing Workhubs	Two wellbeing workhubs are being established at Parc Brynbach and Llyn Llech Owain Country Park to provide flexible workplaces for local people and businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visual evidence of facilities established Frequency of use made of workhubs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> number of daily uses per month Information on profile of workhub users <ul style="list-style-type: none"> total number of people using workhub demographic profile of users postcode profile of users External evaluation: OB3 will gather feedback from a sample of users about quality and difference made

3	Piloting of National Nature Service co-design & proposals on the VRP / DG footprint	The landscape, culture and identify workstream convener will play a leading role in the co-design of a National Nature Service for Wales, demonstrating alignment between VRP & NNS ambitions and developing proposals for piloting the approach on the VRP / DG footprint. This will include identifying and facilitating opportunities for DGs to strategically align activities (e.g. with Area Statements)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completed VRP/NNS proposals documents (which will be shared with the Green Recovery Taskforce / Welsh Government) • Any response to those proposals. • DG / AS alignment plan • External evaluation: OB3 will gather feedback from NNS convenors (Christian Servini from Future Gens office and Kate Hamilton from FFCC), DGs and VRP staff about extent and value of VRP input into co-design of NNS as well as NNS delivery & strategic alignment opportunities
4	Established Peer to Peer Discovery Gateway network to support community led development of landscape and heritage assets	Monthly meetings of DG staff will be convened and facilitated by VRP in order to meet the ESF tool 'Development of a regional peer-to-peer networking to support community led development of landscape and heritage assets'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minutes of meetings held, setting out attendance (to evidence level of commitment from partners) and actions agreed (to evidence new landscape/heritage developments) • Analysis of progress made against agreed actions (to evidence implementation of actions) • External evaluation: OB3 will gather feedback from DGs and VRP staff about value of network and difference made, in order to test extent to which VRP has achieved one of its ESF 'tools, processes and procedures' •
5	VRP Local Authorities Roadside verge survey	Findings of the survey will be used to inform future proposal and plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey findings prepared and shared with LAs in collaboration with NRW. Findings also shared with Gwent Green Grid 'Resilient Grasslands' working group • Circular economy opportunities for managing verge cuttings / green waste explored and shared with LAs and interested partners External evaluation: OB3 will gather feedback from LAs and VRP staff about the value of the survey and circular economy opportunities

6	No. of meaningful engagements with partners	VRP will engage a wide range of partners over the funding period on a collective and individual basis. These engagements need to be meaningful in that they are not one-offs and focus on specific opportunities or projects relating to the three workstreams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of partner organisations engaged • Project level database of key contacts from partner organisations maintained, setting out nature of engagement • Project level case studies of collaborative work with partners (at least one per workstream per year) • External evaluation: OB3 will gather feedback from sample of partners about the nature and value of engagement with VRP
7	Results of the work of the CEIC good growing cohort shared with partners	Having moved away from food demonstrator projects, VRP will focus on Circular Economy Innovation Communities (CEIC) growing projects which focus on innovative circular economy projects. Findings from these projects will be disseminated to key partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terms of reference in place for the CEIC cohort/community of practice • Programme documentation setting out overview of the work of the cohort over the 10 months • Documented evidence illustrating outcomes from the cohort • External evaluation: OB3 will gather feedback from sample of partners about awareness and value of disseminated information • External evaluation: OB3 will undertake a policy review to explore how findings inform future policy and practice
8	Dissemination of lessons from social prescribing projects	VRP will gather evidence from social prescribing projects delivered across the Valleys about what works, and disseminate this via a lessons learnt report in order to meet the ESF tool 'a regional approach to the use of social prescribing and the delivery of wellbeing activities)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social prescribing report prepared • Number of partner organisations engaging in dissemination activities • External evaluation: OB3 will gather feedback from sample of partners about awareness and value of social prescribing report findings • External evaluation: OB3 will undertake a policy review to explore how findings inform future policy and practice

9	Dissemination of research findings	As part of the communities and enterprise workstream, VRP will map and undertake community insight research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research work programme developed and adopted • Research findings report prepared and disseminated • Number of partner organisations engaging in dissemination activities • External evaluation: OB3 will review evidence of findings informing future policy and practice
10	Number of demonstration projects delivered	VRP will focus on the delivery of the Big Bocs Bwyd as its first demonstration project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of Big Bocs Bwyd projects established and maintained • Number of users engaged (volunteering and those using Big Bocs Bwyd) • Project level monitoring data on value of Big Bocs Bwyd to schools, individuals, and families • VRP to commission external evaluation of Big Bocs Bwyd
11	Lessons learned from demonstration projects disseminated to key stakeholders	VRP will undertake self-evaluation of Big Bocs Bwyd to identify impact and difference made, and lessons learned from delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-evaluation report prepared, to include analysis of project level monitoring data and case studies • Number of partner organisations engaging in dissemination activities • External evaluation: OB3 will gather feedback from sample of partner organisations on the value of demonstration project findings and extent to which lessons learned are informing future policy and practice
12	No. and profile of community members engaged	Community members will engage with VRP activities, primarily via the Guardians scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guardians initiative monitoring data on number and profile of participants
13	No. and type of key stakeholders meaningfully engaged	VRP will strategically engage a number of key stakeholders to disseminate findings and inform future policy and practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of partner organisations engaged • Project level database of key contacts from partner organisations maintained, setting out nature of engagement

14	Website use	The VRP has established and will maintain the website Valleys Regional Park	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google Analytics reports on use and geographical profile of visitors, prepared on a quarterly basis • Feedback from users on the quality of the website via project web surveys
15	Social media followers	The VRP maintains a number of social media accounts including Twitter, Instagram and Facebook	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project monitoring reports, on a quarterly basis, setting out use and trends over time
16	Connections between stakeholders facilitated	VRP will facilitate introductions between different stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of connections facilitated • Project monitoring reports on nature and purpose of connections facilitated
17	<p>Agreed approach for a future Regional Park entity including legal framework and operating structure</p> <p>Regional Park entity, including consideration of land designation</p>	VRP will consult and develop upon a future operating model for a Regional Part entity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of workshops held that inform Future Operating Model proposals • Number of partner organisations contributing to the consultation process • Written proposals developed and disseminated to partner organisations • Agreement from partner organisations to a final future operating model

Outcomes

	Outcomes	Detail/Descriptor	Evidence source
1	More valleys residents aware of the work of VRP	Community engagement and project delivery should help to increase awareness and understanding of the VRP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of data gleaned from project baseline web survey and repeated survey • Change in website use and social media followers
2	DG sites delivering volunteering, education, and other programmes	Through the Guardians project and joint opportunities, DGs will host activities for participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mapping of project delivery at the 12 DGs (via RDP mapping budget) – including some SROI information • DG reporting to VRP on scale of volunteering and education programmes delivered over time, and numbers of participants engaged • Analysis of data from project baseline web survey and repeated survey on residents’ engagement and frequency/purpose of use of DG sites – analysis of change in how DGs are used for exercise, work and education purposes
3	Embed VRP within the emerging Valleys Ecosystem Profile	<p>VRP will contribute to develop the Valleys Ecosystem Profile via the working group</p> <p>VRP will ensure its potential role in facilitating delivery of the ambitions is included in the final document</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VRP will be highlighted in the final document as a regional organisation that can help deliver the ambitions

4	Social prescribing insights informing strategic development of green SP	Findings from social prescribing research on best practice will inform broader policy and practice across the region and pan-Wales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> External evaluation: OB3 will gather feedback from health boards and other partner organisations on the value of VRP findings and whether they are being considered to inform national delivery framework on social prescribing
5	A more cohesive approach to projects relating to landscape-based activities within Discovery Gateways	Ensuring Discovery Gateways are better networked and working across a regional footprint will assist a more cohesive approach to their project delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mapping document The Peer to Peer network of Discovery Gateways
6	Demonstration pilot project being scaled up or rolled out by others	Findings from demonstration pilot projects are being identified and communicated to others; and are being adopted across wider practice across the region, and possibly pan-Wales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> External evaluation: OB3 will gather feedback from partner organisations to explore if pilot projects are replicated elsewhere, using other sources of funding
7	Evidence from VRP is used to inform national and regional policy and decisions	Lessons learnt from VRP are being identified and communicated to others; and are informing broader policy and practice across the region, and possibly pan-Wales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Membership and attendance at various forums/steering groups External evaluation: OB3 will gather feedback from key stakeholders that VRP findings are being considered and informing future policy and mainstream delivery

8	The Valleys landscape viewed positively by community	The work of the VRP will help change peoples' perception about the Valleys landscape as a place to live and work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> External evaluation: OB3 will analyse data gleaned from baseline web survey and repeated surveys (including data available via the Guardians project) as well as qualitative evidence captured by VRP e.g. recorded film footage
9	VRP engaged in key policy discussions	VRP will be represented on key forums and programme developments, and will draw upon their experience and expertise to inform future policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Membership and attendance at various forums/steering groups External evaluation: OB3 will gather feedback from partner organisations as to whether VRP is a valued member of various forums and makes positive contribution to decision making
10	Key stakeholders consider VRP an integral and valuable player	VRP will become an important advocate for the Valleys, and will be considered an important source of information and contacts for delivery bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> External evaluation: OB3 will gather feedback on whether key funding stakeholders are turning to VRP for advice and steer on how to deliver policy objectives
11	Stakeholder connections facilitated lead to wider benefits for the ecosystem, landscape, public health and economy	New opportunities will arise from the facilitation between stakeholders. VRP will have played a vital role in enabling discussions to take place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> External evaluation: OB3 will gather feedback from partner organisations about the added value provided by VRP to key opportunities such as those stemming from the co-design and delivery of the National Nature Service and circular economy opportunities for managing verge cuttings / green waste
12	VRP considered a regional delivery vehicle post 2023	Widespread support from partner organisations to see VRP continue post 2023, and the VRP will have a clear remit and mandate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> External evaluation: OB3 will gather feedback from partner organisations about whether there is a continued need for VRP post 2023 and whether there is clarity about its purpose and what it should achieve

13	Funding and support post 2023 secured	VRP will have secured follow-on funding post 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding application(s) made/evidence of discussions with potential future funders • Funding agreement in place for post 2023 • Funding commitments pledged by local authorities
14	Commitment from partners to implement long term sustainable regional VRP approach	Partner organisations, including LAs, will commit (including financially) to a long term VRP operating model with clear aims and objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memo of understanding/written agreements from partner organisations to VRP • Minutes of, and papers submitted to, Board meetings • External evaluation: OB3 will gather feedback from partner organisations about whether they demonstrate strong commitment to long-term objectives • A consideration of the legal requirement including and assessment of the case for the development of a new type of land designation or the creative use of existing legislation.