

LEADER PROGRAMME

Final evaluation



MAY
2022

NEATH PORT TALBOT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AT A GLANCE:

37 projects implemented.

5,499 people benefitted.

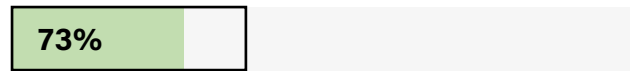
Total spend of £2.12m out of a grant of £2.16m – 98% of spending achieved.

All but 2 targets achieved with considerable over achievement in relation to participants, dissemination, and community hubs.

Jobs Created through Supported projects (LEADER)



Number of Feasibility Studies



Number of Networks Established



Number of Jobs Safeguarded through Support Projects



Number of Pilot Activities undertaken/supported



Number of Community Hubs



Number of Information Dissemination Actions



Number of Information Dissemination Actions



Number of Participants Supported



Indicator Name	WG Target	Achieved Total at March 22	% achievement
R.24 - Jobs Created through Supported projects (LEADER)	7	11	157
LD-CL.001 - Number of Feasibility Studies	11	8	73
LD-CL.002 - Number of Networks Established	10	6	60
LD-CL.003 - Number of Jobs Safeguarded through Support Projects	3	6	200
LD-CL.004 - Number of Pilot Activities undertaken/supported	14	21	150
LD-CL.005 - Number of Community Hubs	8	19	238
LD-CL.006 - Number of Information Dissemination Actions	300	724	241
LD-CL.007 - Number of Stakeholders	740	1255	170
LD-CL.008 - Number of Participants Supported	2200	5499	250

Individually and collectively the projects have contributed to the achievement of the LAG's vision of **"Working together to make our valleys more accessible, vibrant, environmentally sustainable and enterprising."**

Although it is not possible to isolate the impact of a relatively small project from broad movements in the national and local economies (which are due mainly to external forces), a comparison with the 2014/15 baseline position shows that much has been achieved:

- Population is up – including an increase in the working age population and an inward migration of young people.
- Employment levels are now above the Welsh average and economic inactivity rates have fallen.
- Jobs have increased.

However, much remains to be done; and transport issues, low wage levels for women, poverty, physical health and mental well-being have all been identified as on-going areas of concern.

The LAG has operated effectively supported by a strong and well-regarded administrative team. The mid-term evaluation, revised LDS and new leadership gave the latter part of the programme a new impetus so that it successfully achieved its ambitions despite the challenging environment within which it was operating.

The LEADER principle of having a local leadership board was seen as central to the programme's success and is a principle that should be taken forward in successor funding programmes.

INTRODUCTION

01

In October 2019, Pleydell Smithyman and Red Box Research were commissioned to undertake a mid-term and final evaluation of the LEADER programme in Neath Port Talbot. The overarching aim of the commission was to evaluate the delivery of the LEADER programme against the aims and objectives of the Local Development Strategy (LDS) and to measure the impact of the programme in rural Neath Port Talbot. The mid-term evaluation reported in 2020 and this final evaluation has been undertaken between March and May 2022.

The emphasis of this final report is to evaluate the impact of delivering the Rural Development Programme locally. The Brief was clear, with a requirement to:

- Assess the extent to which activities have met the agreed objectives and outputs of the programme to include additional indicators set by the LEADER team as well as achievement against the national wellbeing indicators of Wales.
- Assess the extent that the activities delivered have addressed/ incorporated the cross-cutting themes of the programme.
- Evaluate the success of the role of the LAG in implementing and managing the programme in Neath Port Talbot.
- Assess the extent that the activities delivered as part of the LEADER programme in Neath Port Talbot have contributed to the strategic aims of the Local Development Strategy and the priorities as identified within the Intervention Logic Table.
- Evaluate the added value and impact that the LEADER programme has provided to rural areas in Neath Port Talbot.
- Explore the possibilities of future funding aimed at rural development post 2020.

METHOD OF APPROACH

The approach to the evaluation has encompassed a mixture of primary and secondary research including the following:

1. Inception – meeting with LEADER manager to discuss aims and objectives of the evaluation.
2. Fieldwork design – including LDS background document and mid term evaluation reviews.
3. Financial performance review and analysis of performance monitoring data.
4. Surveys and consultation including:
 - A workshop with LAG members
 - One to one interviews with LEADER programme staff
 - One to one interviews with the project leads (2019 -2022) (15 interviews in total)
5. Reporting – draft and final reports.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The remainder of this report has been structured as follows:

Section 2: LEADER programme development – An overview of the background to LEADER and an outline of how the LEADER programme has been designed and delivered in Neath Port Talbot.

Section 3: Programme delivery – efficiency and effectiveness – Analysis of the success of the Local Action Group in delivering and managing the local programme and consideration of the impact of Covid-19.

Section 4: Programme performance – outputs, outcomes and impact: Assessment of LEADER’s contribution

to the aims of the Local Development Strategy and its cumulative impact.

Section 5: Lessons learnt and future needs – Concluding remarks on lessons for future funding and on-going challenges faced by NPT’s rural communities.

LEADER PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT

PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES

The LEADER 2014 – 2020 programme and subsequent extension to March 2022 has been funded through the Rural Development Plan for Wales (RDP) as part of the Welsh Government and European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. LEADER is based on seven principles all of which must come together for it to be successful. These include:

1. Local public/private partnerships - Local Action Groups
2. Networking
3. Co-operation
4. Area based local development strategies
5. Innovation
6. Integrated and multi sectoral actions
7. Bottom up elaboration and implementation of strategies

In sum, LEADER is designed to support rural development initiated at the local community level in order to improve the quality of life and prosperity through locally driven initiatives and projects. It is underpinned by the principle that local people are best placed to understand the challenges their communities face and are able to mobilise resources in a way that does not happen in a traditional 'top down' approach.

In Wales, the Welsh Government identified five specific themes for the LEADER programme. All activities must be linked to one of them, as listed below:

Theme 1: Adding value to local identity, cultural and natural resources.

Theme 2: Facilitating pre-commercial development, business partnerships and short supply chains.

Theme 3: Exploring new ways of delivering non-statutory local services.

Theme 4: Renewable energy at community level.

Theme 5: Exploitation of digital technology.

These individual themes are supported by four cross-cutting themes which comprise of equal opportunities, sustainable development, tackling poverty and social exclusion, and Welsh language.

DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY (LDS)

Local Development Strategies are a key component of the LEADER approach and are used to support and guide the work and decision making of Local Action Groups. Typically, the LDS sets out the social and economic needs and demands/opportunities of the area it covers, helping to establish priorities for funding and mapping a development path that reflects local assets and opportunities, resources and aspirations. In developing an LDS, choices have to be made to focus on those objectives that add value to what already exists and have the most chance of contributing to the change the Local Action Group wants to see.

Following a Welsh Government template, the RDP Team in Neath Port Talbot developed its Local Development Strategy (LDS) in 2015 to guide implementation. The LDS was developed on the basis of community consultation and designed to tackle key issues and harness opportunities for change. It was subsequently updated in 2017 to keep it 'live'. By the time of the mid-term evaluation in 2020 it was clear that the

intervening years since its inception had seen unprecedented change to the operating environment of the LEADER programme. In 2015 when the LDS was first developed, the term Brexit had not even been coined and the last pandemic had been recorded almost a hundred years ago. At a strategic level, a new approach to partnership working had been ushered in by the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. Accordingly, the LDS was updated in May 2021 to keep it as a 'living' document and to provide a sound and relevant framework for the remaining allocation for project funding. Aware of the challenges that community groups faced in accessing LEADER funds it was also vital to make sure that the LDS had sufficient flexibility to ensure that the programme could meet its objectives within the remaining timescale available.

The most recent iteration of the LDS sought to build on the findings and recommendations of the mid-term evaluation supplemented by an extensive process of community and stakeholder engagement and desktop research to identify needs and opportunities. The updated LDS now contains a broadened scope of projects and aligns with the most recent national and local strategic policies e.g. NPT Well-being Plan 2018-2023, the Corporate Plan 'Shaping NPT' 2019-2022, and 2019's declaration of a Climate Emergency.

Despite these changes, throughout the 2014-2022 period, the vision for Regenerate NPT has remained broadly constant as **"Working together to make our valleys more accessible, vibrant, environmentally sustainable and enterprising."** Similarly, the four broad priorities identified by the LAG have remained consistent throughout, but in each case the supporting rationale for the objective, and in some cases the wording of the priority itself have been expanded



and/or amended to reflect new realities and the emergence of changing strategic priorities around climate change and well-being across Wales. At a meeting on 9 March 2021 the LAG membership was presented with the findings and recommendations of the LDS update, including proposals for updating the intervention logic and priorities for the remainder of the fund. These proposals were well received. The meeting also included a question and answer session which resulted in minor changes to the LDS. Accordingly, the LAG resolved to rebalance the current four priorities to give more weight to action to address climate change, tackle poverty and social exclusion and improve the wellbeing of people of all ages.

NPT's four key priorities for the programme, which have been linked to a set of specific objectives and actions are:

GREEN NPT

Maximising the potential for the green economy in NPT, including tackling climate change, the development of renewable energy at a community level and the promotion of eco-tourism.

VIBRANT NPT

Building on the unique physical, social and cultural assets of NPT, enhancing the image of NPT as a good place to live and do business with vibrant, sustainable and resilient communities.

ENTERPRISING NPT

Creating an enterprising environment that sustains and encourages the growth of new and existing micro and social businesses within NPT.

ACCESSIBLE NPT

Improving access to basic services and tackling social exclusion considering new, innovative ways of supporting individuals (of all ages) and their communities to maximise their well-being.

The updated Intervention Logic (See Appendix 2 of LDS) showed how these priorities and broad parameters for types of project activity will be supported by the LAG. The intervention logic includes an outline of the proposed outcomes from the project activities supported by the LAG, and how they fit with the cross-cutting themes.

FUNDING

In May 2015, following the submission of the Local Development Strategy, the Local Authority were successful in applying for £2,156,000 of LEADER funding. The new programme officially started on 1st July 2015 and ran until 31st March 2022.

LEADER is an important, targeted, but relatively small player in relation to the wider policy, strategic and funding environment. Therefore, it was considered appropriate to align LEADER with this wider funding support and funding environment, in as much as such linkages can bring shared outcomes and added value to rural communities without compromising the independence and principles of LEADER.

Achieving value for money is fundamental to the LAG's approach to maximise benefit for the community. To support this, when invited to re-profile in June 2020 a request was made to increase the value allocated to projects in NPT and to extend the LEADER programme by 3 months to March 2022. This was

achieved by moving funds to utilise underspend and to increase available funds to support more/new projects, post COVID-19 recovery. This increase acknowledged a reduction in staff costs and less travel than anticipated due to 'lockdown restrictions' and is an example of how the LAG and Rural Community Development team have worked to ensure value for money and the best use of available funds.

LEADER projects are funded on a minimum 80/20 basis whereby applicants must have secured at least 20% of the total project cost in order to apply for up to 80%. Since the previous report in July 2020 the LAG has approved 22 new projects, 20 of which were implemented, taking the total approved projects to date to 39. Two of the 39 projects are 'Co-operation' projects working across Wales RDP regions to deliver specific projects e.g. the most recently approved Co-operation project is 'Prescribing Woodlands for Wellbeing' delivered by Coed Lleol (Small Woods Association). To date, total project costs committed to the 39 projects is £1,423,082 (80% RDP & 20% Match).

In April 2022 Welsh Government announced £227m of funding designed to ensure that there is continuity of support for actions previously funded through the EU Rural Development Programme. However, the funding is largely aimed at farming, forestry, land management and food businesses and will not cover the majority of socio-economic interventions and activities approved through the LEADER programme. In a briefing session for the voluntary sector in April 2022, Huw Bryer, UK Government, confirmed that they are keen to see the learning from the innovative approaches of LEADER and CLLD in the delivery of interventions via the Communities & Place Investment Priority of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

Welsh Government analysis shows the UK Government's approach to replacing EU funds means Wales will lose around £750 million over three years (2021-22 to 2023-24) for the Structural Funds. Further, Wales now faces the prospect of a centralised, Whitehall-led approach instead of a regionalised, made-in-Wales approach, suggesting that the LEADER approach to delivery will come to an end. As noted elsewhere in this report, the 'bottom up' approach to funding is seen as one of the strengths of the LEADER programme.

PROGRAMME STRUCTURE AND DELIVERY ARRANGEMENTS

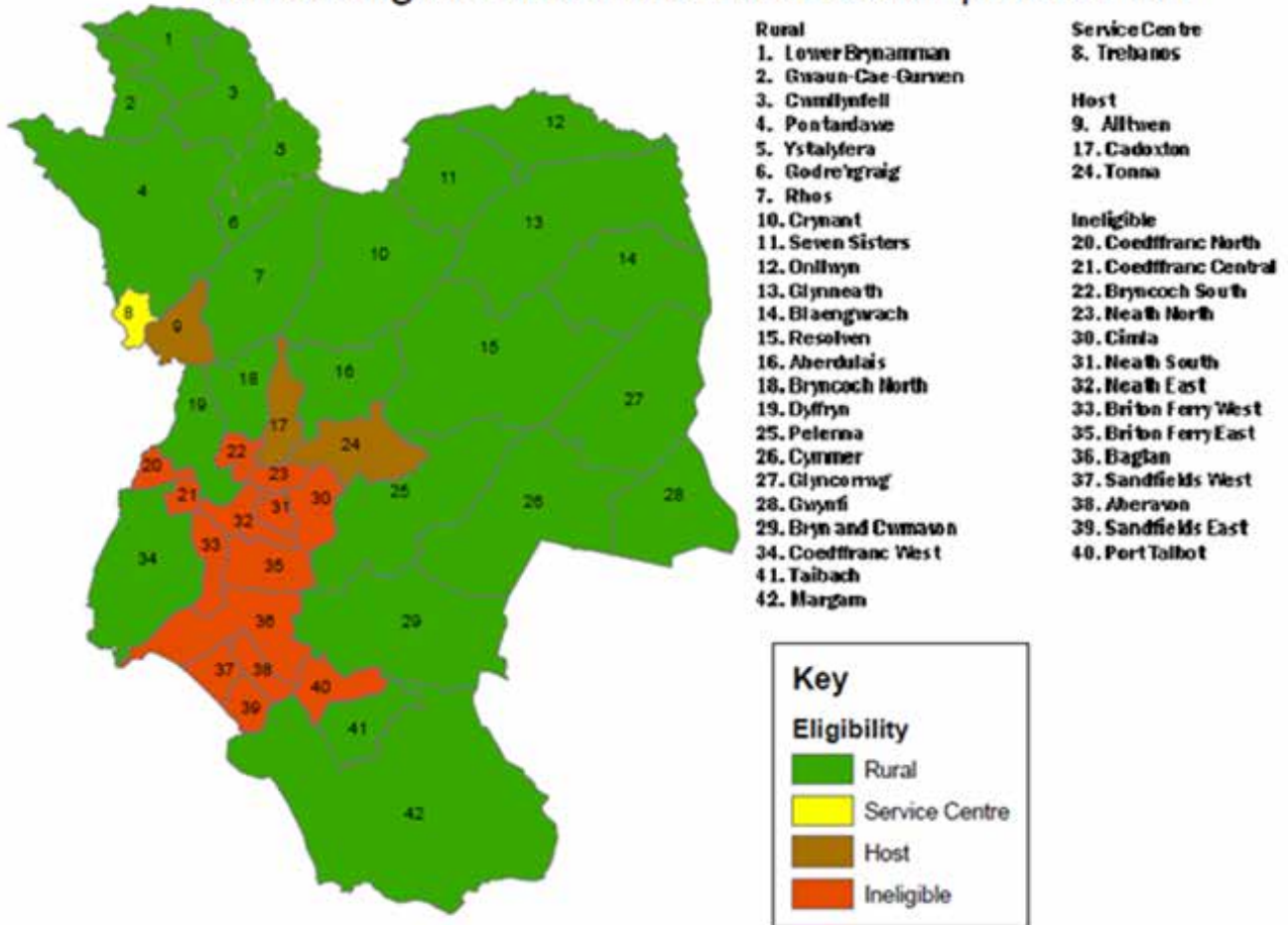
The Welsh Government is the Managing Authority and Paying Agency for the 2015-2022 Programme in Wales. It manages the budget, monitors the delivery of LEADER programmes, and reimburses Accountable Bodies for eligible LAG expenditure.

Local Action Group (LAG)

The Local Action Group (LAG) known as Regenerate NPT was established in May 2014 to oversee the LEADER activity in Neath Port Talbot. The process of developing the membership of the group was designed to reflect the diversity of stakeholders across the rural wards of Neath Port Talbot and to ensure representation from: local businesses; social enterprises; the local authority; town councils; and government bodies. At the decision-making level neither public authorities nor any single interest group were to represent more than 49% of the voting rights. For the group to be quorate there must be at least a third of members present with at least 1 member from each sector in attendance. A key requirement was that the final group of stakeholders represented the private, third and public sectors evenly as well as

each of the 5 rural valleys in the eligible wards as shown below:

Wards eligible under the Rural Development Plan





Over time, the membership of the LAG has changed and adapted to reflect the needs of the fund and the communities it is seeking to support. The mid-term evaluation found that the current make-up of the LAG was compliant with Welsh Government guidance, but included a recommendation to reshape the role the LAG. In the past, its core role was focused around evaluating applications against established criteria. Latterly, the LAG has taken on more responsibility for driving the programme, using the updated LDS, and individual members' knowledge, as a basis to put out calls for specific projects/programmes to address targeted need.

The Local Action Group is responsible for the overall management and the strategic direction of the LDS under the authority of its Administrative Body. The LAG itself is governed by a constitution and an agreement with its Administrative Body which outlines the roles of all parties involved in delivery of the programme.

The LAG has appointed an independent Chair from its membership through an open and transparent process that is outlined in the group's constitution, which has been reviewed annually throughout the lifetime of the fund. The Board meets quarterly as a minimum.

MANAGEMENT AND DELIVERY ARRANGEMENTS

The LAG has been supported by the Administrative Body and the Rural Community Development team (delivery staff and animators) in its operations. The LAG voted unanimously that Neath Port Talbot Council should provide the administrative function as it has in place the necessary systems to maintain full audit trails for expenditure and indicators. The Administrative Body is supported by the Council's accountants and auditors

to ensure the correct information is maintained. Financial and monitoring information is reported to the LAG at every meeting.

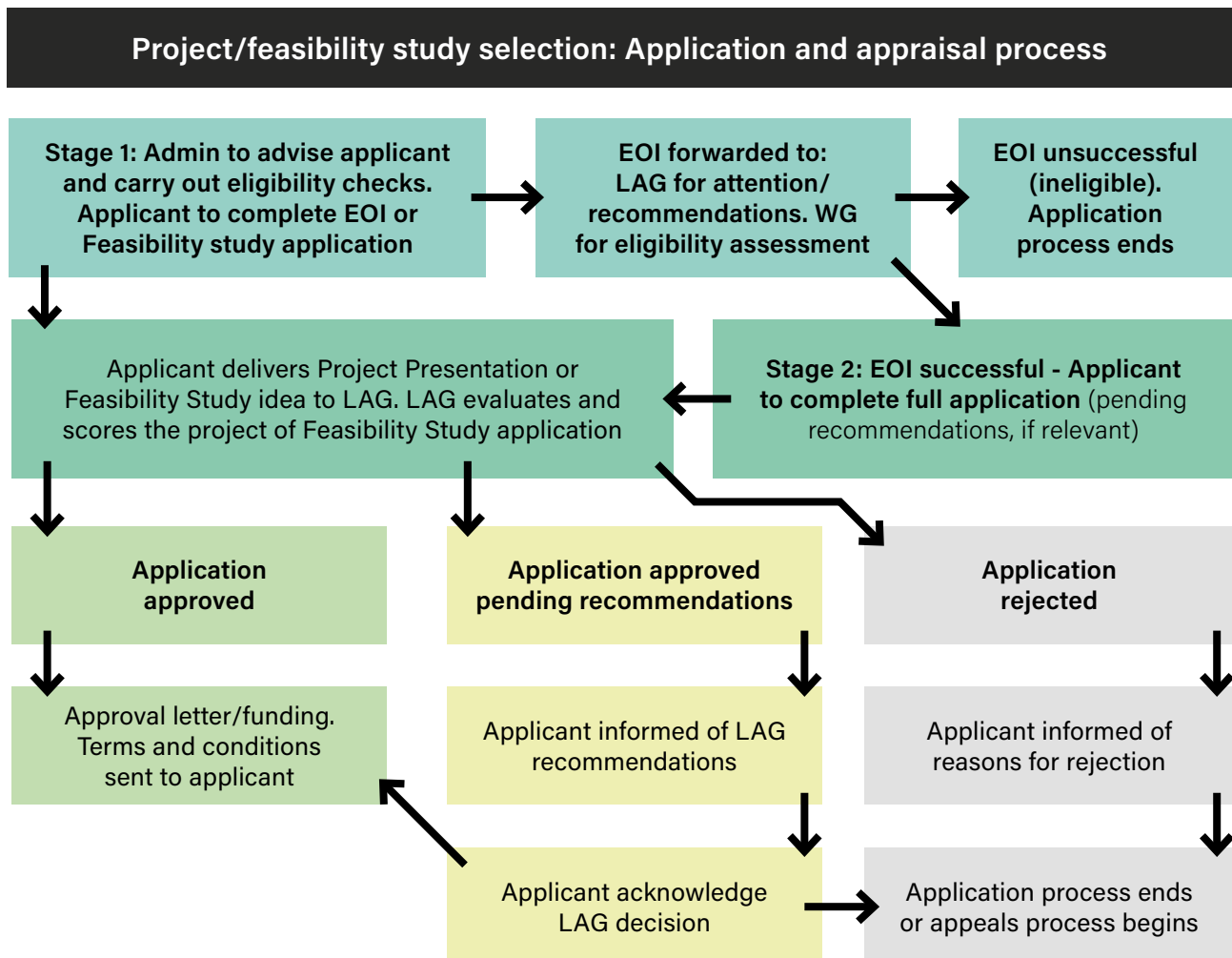
Neath Port Talbot Council has a proven track record of providing the secretariat for many different funding programmes including Objective 1 and Convergence Funding. The programme team has been based in the Education Directorate of Neath Port Talbot Council whose staff have the skills and ability to work with community groups to sufficiently animate the rural areas. Community Groups within the area already had a working relationship with many of the staff, having worked together on a wide range of projects. It must be acknowledged that latterly, COVID-19 has impacted on the

team's ability to engage with and work closely with rural communities in Neath Port Talbot, and whilst digital approaches have been used and explored, some barriers to participation still remain.

The administrative team is made up of 1 Regenerate NPT Local Action Group Manager, 1 Finance and Monitoring Officer and 2 Rural Community Facilitators. Full details of the management and administration of the LAG can be found at section 4.1 of the Local Development Strategy.

PROJECT SELECTION, APPRAISAL AND APPROVAL PROCESSES

The application process is set out below:





APPRAISAL OF PROJECTS

Appraising projects is a matter of applying judgement. No project will be perfect in all respects. It is a matter of selecting the best available. The appraisal process was designed to ensure that the following principles are followed:

- a. Project application, appraisal and approval functions are kept separate.
- b. Project application must align with and contribute to the themes and priorities of the LDS.
- c. Equality issues are taken fully into account.
- d. The project is designed and developed ensuring viability and sustainability.
- e. The value of technical and specialist knowledge is recognised and utilised wherever required.
- f. The value of adequate networking and consultation with key partner organisations is recognised and utilised wherever required, particularly in relation to ensuring there is no duplication with other projects operating locally.
- g. Project provides good value for money.
- h. Sufficient, accurate information on all projects and alternative options will be sought before undertaking a project appraisal to avoid badly informed decisions.

To assist Regenerate NPT Members with scoring and prioritising projects in line with LDS themes and priorities, a number of criteria (see LAG Handbook) have been used when scoring Full Applications. Separate criteria are set out for appraising feasibility studies.

PROGRAMME DELIVERY

EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS

INTRODUCTION

In this section, the way the programme has been delivered is evaluated to assess the success of the role of the LAG in implementing and managing the programme in Neath Port Talbot.

PROCESS AND ADMINISTRATION

Following on from the Mid-Term Evaluation in 2020, a number of changes to the administration of the programme were made to reflect recommendations made and lessons learnt. The revised LDS also supported an approach which better reflected the changed strategic context and the impact of Covid-19 on local needs. It was said by a member of staff that these changes “breathed fresh air into the programme.”

The continued evolution of processes since the programme was launched has been a strength of its administration. At the time of the mid-term, the application processes had already been simplified but the opportunity to further ease the process for smaller grant applications was identified and has since been implemented with different application forms for bids under £1000, under £10,000 and over £10,000. This has been very successful, attracting applications that were previously deterred by a time-consuming bureaucratic process for the value requested. Indeed, prior to 2020 only 2 of the applications were for sums under £10,000; after the mid-term this rose to 10 projects, providing a valuable resource to small scale community projects such as the Crynant Community Association and Dove Workshop to pilot new approaches. In addition, support to bidding organisations was boosted to ease their way through the process, something that was said to be invaluable in feedback for this final evaluation.

These changes proved to be particularly important to supporting community-led action in response to the pandemic when new needs became evident and different responses were required.

Feedback from the interviews with project leads shows that the majority found the revised application process to be a relatively straightforward (at half the length of previous forms) and contrasted favourably with experience before the new forms were introduced, when it was said that project staff “had given up applying”:

“It was easier second time round, there were few hoops to jump through.”

“The first time was quite difficult, the second time was easier, slicker.”

Of course, these views are relative, and some of the project leads who had no previous experience of applying for LEADER still found the process ‘far from simple’ and that it took much longer than expected which in turn impacted on delivery timescales. This complexity is a feature of European programmes and it is considered that the Regenerate NPT staff adapted the RDPE guidelines as much as was feasible to secure the application information necessary to appraise proposals.

All project leads recognised that the Regenerate NPT staff did their utmost to help and support applicants through the process and the support from the team was universally acknowledged to be good or very good: “We couldn’t have asked for better support.”

GOVERNANCE: THE LAG BOARD AND THE LEADER APPROACH

In a workshop in April 2022, the LAG

considered how effective the LEADER approach had been against its seven guiding principles – an area-based LDS, a bottom up approach, integrated and multi sectoral actions, co-operation, innovation, networking and the Local Action Group.

In terms of the LAG itself, the grassroots approach was felt to be a key strength of LEADER bringing a ‘hands on’ community perspective and understanding of the problems different communities face. At the same time, LAG members had links with the people trying to tackle those issues. It was said that this helped decision making to be ‘grounded in reality’. A key message from the workshop was that this ‘bottom up’ approach should be central to any future funding programme, but there were fears that tension between the Welsh Government and Westminster meant that the local voice could be lost accompanied by a loss of understanding of ‘what works’ at grassroots level.

In terms of the LAG’s operation, it was felt that it had a high level of engagement from different sectors, with a broad mix of skills and linkages to other local strategic partners. It was acknowledged that it had been difficult to engage the private sector and in an ideal world the LAG would have had greater private sector representation. To maximise the value of the fund members said they would include representatives from other funders such as the National Lottery, if they were starting out again.

The LAG felt it had been well supported by the administrative staff and said that the new management in the last two years had breathed fresh life into the programme, bringing clarity and eliminating confusion. At the time of the mid-term evaluation there was evidence that it was difficult to recruit to the LAG, reflecting its reputation for bureaucracy,

but stakeholders from the voluntary sector nevertheless felt it important to be represented. A number of LAG members commented that the success of the LAG is dependent on its membership, and it was said that there are not many funds 'that bring together a group of people from a range of who are able to get in a room and make decisions about funding in an equitable way.'

The introduction of virtual meetings during the past two years has helped engagement and attendance and a hybrid approach in the future would be welcomed. LAG members at the workshop would not hesitate to participate in a similar board post-LEADER, which is a testament to the value they consider it brings.

Networking and co-operation was considered to be hindered by a lack of leadership from the Welsh Government. There was a plea for a more 'hands on' approach to managing the funding to share good practice effectively, broker linkages and support **LAG** members (not just the Chair) to network and learn from each other. Members who had not been involved from the outset felt that they did not have the training and support that they needed to grasp **LEADER** funding and how it had developed prior to their involvement. Several felt frustrated by what they perceived to be a lack of participation and guidance from the Welsh Government.

At the time of the mid-term evaluation, the LDS was not being extensively used to guide decision-making since significant changes had come about in the interim. In policy terms, climate change and well-being had risen up the agenda and in operational terms rising levels of poverty, the introduction of Universal Credit and the onset of the pandemic meant that there was an urgent need for a refresh of the LDS.

Accordingly, the LAG commissioned an update and were involved in shaping the final document. This brought a fresh perspective to the LAG; focused their minds; and brought a clearer understanding of where they could make a difference. As a result, the LAG felt able to help address the specific challenges arising in NPT from the pandemic. Application forms were revised, the fund relaunched, and the LAG was able to fund the delivery of the sorts of small community projects which were much needed at the time.

Innovation was seen as a challenge. Whilst it was a requirement of the funding, it stood in the way of sharing good practice across communities. It was said to be a barrier to using LEADER to sustain or develop projects that 'we know are working.' This also ties in with another point that although small community organisations have benefitted from LEADER funding they are still fighting day to day to survive. What is needed is core funding, rather than project funding.

GOVERNANCE: RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME WALES - NATIONAL SUPPORT

Stakeholders were positive about their personal relationships with the Wales Rural Network team/project links and Rural Payments Wales staff in Welsh Government, but some expressed concern about the significant number of staff changes and staff shortages. It was felt that this led to lengthy delays in processing claims and confusion/inconsistency in the advice proffered throughout the duration of the programme.

This had adverse knock-on effects on small community-led organisations with limited reserves. Administrative staff reported concerns about "Lots of

problems with reporting requirements changing half way through."

In turn, this impacted on the claims process with Rural Payments Wales. There was a strong recommendation that the system and process for uploading claims requires improvement for any future funding programmes. Delays in dealing with claims being processed created additional burdens on the team with regards to timetabling, future claims planning and internal reporting processes, it also meant that new claims could not be submitted until open claims had been settled, impacting organisations financially. This is especially pertinent given that LEADER funds are paid in arrears which can cause significant cashflow issues for smaller organisations.

It is recommended that in any future funding rounds a process is implemented to inform RDP teams if there is a gap in information from project leads e.g. issues encountered relating to project Customer Reference Numbers (CRN) at submission stage. This would avert further delays since prior knowledge would have enabled local administrative teams to have worked with Project Leads to resolve any issues prior to a claim submission, thus avoiding further delays and averting the prospect of not meeting an invite deadline.

Seven years is a long time for a programme to run and whereas training sessions were organised at the outset, these were not regularly repeated to take account of changing LAG membership and local LEADER administrators. A more regular national programme of events and networking and availability of support would have been welcomed by staff and Board members, particularly given the complexity of the programme's guidance manual.



The South West LAG group was appreciated as a forum for sharing good practice but it was considered that the Welsh Government could have taken more of a lead role in facilitating networking. As a relatively small country, it was considered that a lot more could have been done to promote pan-Wales networking so that LAGs could learn more from each other more readily. Greater involvement from Welsh Government staff in the local area through attendance at meetings, visits and Q and A sessions would have been welcomed.

Whilst Covid-19 has had many adverse impacts it has ushered in a new era of meetings via technology, which in the longer term will do much to overcome the challenges brought about by geography, time and distance. It is recommended that technology continues to be used to maximum effect in future programmes to promote networking and training uptake/ continuing professional development.

MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION

With a small administrative team and limited budget the Regenerate NPT team have had to be creative in promoting the programme. The original plan outlined in the LDS was to use:

- Social media
- Newsletters
- A launch event
- Website
- Brochure
- Drop in events
- Relationships with key partners

All of these methods have been used to varying degrees and in 2020-2021 the team increased the promotion and publicity activities and hosted a

number workshop and engagement activities to promote and relaunch LEADER funding. This has been successful and in interviews it was said that the lessons learnt from the mid-term evaluation, together with new management and relaunch had re-energised the programme and given it new impetus. Obviously, the impact of the pandemic has meant that direct marketing activity has been constrained in the last two years, but the use of social media has been boosted and the programme's Facebook page is clearly well-connected with CVS and up-to-date with illustrations of completed and active projects. It attracts hundreds of followers.

When asked how they had heard of the LEADER fund, project leads identified a range of methods including previous experience, social media, referral from LAG Board members, referral from CVS and local news coverage. Against this generally positive backdrop, a couple of project leads expressed the view that the programme could have been better advertised with a lack of a central resource to look for information. Whereas the use of Facebook has been an excellent way of showcasing success, its vibrancy contrasts markedly with the official website (to which Facebook signposts) which is very outdated but was designed to be the central source of information about the programme and its objectives. For any future funding programme it is essential that the administrators have either the capacity or budget to keep official sources of information accessible, relevant and up to date.

One of the concerns of LAG members at the mid-term evaluation was that they had little feedback on the subsequent implementation of projects. This has been successfully addressed and case studies and reports have been introduced to share success, lessons learned and

to provide an ongoing update of, project achievement, delivery, and the impact the project has had on the communities (See Appendix 1). A number of NPT case studies have been featured in the Welsh Government's 'Wales Rural Network' newsletters e.g. in June's 2021 edition 6 NPT projects were featured.¹

NPT also featured in the Welsh Government's first Sharing Success 'Celebrating Rural' newsletter in August 2021 demonstrating a small sample of the support that LEADER has provided in rural areas and the difference it has and continues to make to rural communities.

CLAIMS AND MONITORING

The Lead Body has adopted rigorous processes for monitoring on a monthly or quarterly basis to ensure that any emerging risks are identified and mitigated as early as possible. Site visits are undertaken in the form of visits during the life of each project (Covid protocols permitting) and where any issues are identified appropriate action is taken.

The Claims and Monitoring Officer is responsible for monitoring progress of the programme and individual project progress. A monitoring form details action points, spending, progress against performance indicators, hard evidence available. Projects are RAG rated and financial and monitoring information is reported to the LAG at every meeting.

In general, the claims process was considered satisfactory and Regenerate NPT staff were supportive from start to finish.



A key point raised by some project leads is that in response to the pandemic creative use has been made of the internet and social media to hold virtual meetings, accelerate virtual delivery and to develop hybrid models. However, the evidence required to support achievement of Performance Indicators remains very much behind the times with requests for hard copy paper evidence, email addresses of participants and so on. Photographic evidence and social media have not been accepted as evidence and it has been challenging to meet requirements:

'We collected public opinion and expressions of support via social media on our Facebook page, however for LEADER purposes we had to reach out to the people who commented in order to ask for their email addresses etc to fulfil LEADER requirements. This was an added pressure, which could have been avoided if social media could have been utilised.' Project lead.

It is outside the remit of Regenerate NPT to reduce the amount of evidence required to justify claims submitted and the local approach reflects Welsh Government guidance and European requirements. However, it is recommended that the LAG advises the Welsh Government of the views of VCS partners made clear in this Evaluation, that future programmes should have far greater flexibility on the forms of evidence eligible, particularly in the face of new norms of virtual working.

It is a testament to the smooth running of the programme, and the programme team, that most project leads did not report any issues at all with the processes.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

The impact of the pandemic has been significant for the management of the programme and for the running of individual projects. The major impact was on staff/project leads/participants becoming ill which created pressures to deliver within the timeframe available. People were unable to join events because of lockdown, and project leaders were not able to use their usual face to face methods to recruit project beneficiaries/undertake surveys. Opportunities for work placements were severely impacted and training took longer because of absences through illness.

On the positive side, organisations responded creatively by re-shaping their services and communications. LEADER has enabled projects to come forward to support local resilience and respond successfully to the impact of the pandemic. For those engaged in outdoor projects the positive encouragement of people to be out of their homes supported engagement and involvement. The upsurge in volunteering has meant that volunteering has been integrated into people's lives, strengthening community spirit. The major change has been the ability to use virtual delivery for training and meetings which has overcome the barriers of distance and remoteness for many. However, several cautioned that the use of technology is not the right approach for many of their clients.

From an administrative point of view, Covid-19 has ushered in some change which will not be reversed – new ways of working and the need for digital skills for both life and work - are here to stay. It has helped LAG members overcome issues of time and distance in terms of attending meetings.

PROGRAMME PERFORMANCE

OUTPUTS, OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

PERFORMANCE OVERVIEW

A total of 39 applications were approved between 2014 and 2022 (including two co-operation projects). Subsequently, 2 of the projects withdrew so 37 projects were implemented.

APPROVALS AND TARGETS

The following paragraphs set out approvals implemented against each of the LEADER themes:

Theme 1: Adding Value to local identity and natural and cultural resources

Reflecting NPT's rich cultural history and natural resources and the aspiration to do more to make NPT an attractive place to live and work, Theme 1 has attracted the majority of successful applications (17 or 46% of the total). Past to present, Working with Nature and Neath Abbey Ironworks stand out as having especially strong performance in relation to their targets.

Theme 2: Facilitating pre-commercial development; business partnerships and short supply chains

Theme 2 had originally been allocated the largest proportion of funds, but only attracted 3 successful applications (8%) of the total, in part this is likely to reflect the severe contraction of the economy in the light of the pandemic. Growing Healthy Together achieved significantly over its target outputs.

Theme 3: Exploring new ways of providing non-statutory local services

This theme rose in importance in the latter stages of the programme, accounting for 1 in 3 successful applications as organisations sought to build community resilience and provide

new services in response to Covid-19. Major contributors to targets against this theme were the Amplify; Glantawe Outdoor Education project; and the Welsh Language Youth Club.

Theme 4: Renewable energy at community level

Theme 4 attracted 4 (11%) of approvals. Each of these largely met or exceeded their targets.

Theme 5: Exploitation of digital technology

Only 1 application was approved under this theme, underlining the difficulty of developing community level responses to issues of broadband unavailability and lack of connectivity in the rural areas. The single project, 'Go for IT' was nevertheless very successful in more than meeting its targets and proved invaluable to residents during Covid-19 in helping them stay connected digitally.

ACHIEVEMENT OF OUTPUT INDICATORS

All LAGs are required to report on output indicators, agreed as part of approval of the LDS and the LEADER programme is expected to make a contribution to the Welsh Government's RDP indicators. The Regenerate NPT team present a cumulative record of targets, commitments and achievements to the LAG at its meetings, with RAG ratings on outstanding projects. This informs the LAG on the progress and achievement against the programme indicators. The following table sets out the indicators that are targets for Regenerate NPT and the reported progress against these targets to the end of March 2022. The table below shows a breakdown of targets and achievements in relation to each theme.

Table 1: Output achievement relative to targets, March 2022

Indicator Name	WG Target	Achieved Total at March 22
R.24 - Jobs Created through Supported projects (LEADER)	7	11
LD-CL.001 - Number of Feasibility Studies	11	8
LD-CL.002 - Number of Networks Established	10	6
LD-CL.003 - Number of Jobs Safeguarded through Support Projects	3	6
LD-CL.004 - Number of Pilot Activities undertaken/supported	14	21
LD-CL.005 - Number of Community Hubs	8	19
LD-CL.006 - Number of Information Dissemination Actions	300	724
LD-CL.007 - Number of Stakeholders	740	1255
LD-CL.008 - Number of Participants Supported	2200	5499

As shown in Table 1, overall, the programme has achieved or over-achieved the majority of its Welsh Government targets. The only two target areas where there has been a shortfall is in connection with networks established and feasibility studies. One project lead made a strong case for preferring pilots to feasibility studies as they help projects learn and develop at a faster rate than feasibility studies. Excellent performance has been achieved in terms of stakeholder engagement and participants engaged. Overall, the programme has benefitted 5,499 people in Neath Port Talbot.

Table 2: Outputs achieved March 2022 against Welsh Government LEADER themes

	R.24 - Jobs Created		CL.001 - Feasibility Studies		CL.002 - Networks established		CL.003 - Jobs Safeguarded		CL.004 - Pilot Activity		CL.005 - Community Hubs		CL.006 - Marketing & Information Actions		CL.007 - Stakeholders engaged		CL.008 - Participants		
	T	A	T	A	T	A	T	A	T	A	T	A	T	A	T	A	T	A	
T = Target A = Achievement																			
Theme 1: Adding Value to local identity and natural and cultural resources																			
Outputs	2.2	2.2	3	3	3	1	0	0	1	1	2	2	337	304	523	1058	2375	3372	
% achievement	100	100	100	100	33				100	100	100	100	90		202		142		
Theme 2: Facilitating pre-commercial development; business partnerships and short supply chains																			
Outputs	1	1	2	2	5	5	1	1	9	10	7	9	20	38	70	79	80	167	
% achievement	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	111	111	129	190	113				209		
Theme 3: Exploring new ways of providing non-statutory local services																			
Outputs	6.56	6.56	2	2	1	0	4	4	8	9	0	0	289	320	90	87	1220	1046	
% achievement	100	100	100	100	0		100		113				111		97		86		
Theme 4: Renewable energy at community level																			
Outputs	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	14	0	1	0	35	29	21	11	100	401	
% achievement	100	100	100	100					0	0	0	0	83		52		401		
Theme 5: Exploitation of digital technology																			
Outputs							1	1	1	1	8	8	20	33	20	20	500	513	
% achievement							100	100	100	100	100	100	165		100		103		
All																			
Targets	10.8	10.8	8	8	9	6	6	6	33	21	18	19	701	724	724	1255	4275	5499	
% achievement of targets	100	100	100	100	67		100	100	64		106		103		173		129		

ADDITIONAL LAG OUTPUTS

Further to the above indicators set by Welsh Government, Regenerate NPT identified a range of its own output indicators. These were considered relevant to the particular local circumstances of rural Neath Port Talbot, and to its particular themes, priorities and target groups. They connect with the Welsh Government Cross Cutting Themes: Equal Opportunities & Gender Mainstreaming; Sustainable Development; Tackling Poverty & Social Exclusion; and Welsh language.

Overall performance has been very good with overachievement of the majority of indicators, particularly in relation to the participation of people with disabilities. Formal training and advice surgeries were inevitably impacted by Covid-19 and the consequent lockdown, so it is unsurprising that there has been a shortfall in these targets.

Table 3: Achievement of NPT LAG outputs

Indicator Name	LAG Targets	March 22 Achievement figures	% Achievement
NPT01- Communities Engaged	141	152	108
NPT02 - Groups Engaged	95	100	105
NPT03 - Young People Participating	1880	2406	128
NPT04 - Women Participating	1147	1593	139
NPT05 - Welsh Speakers	775	810	105
NPT06 - Older People Participating	1871	2122	113
NPT07 - Disabled Individuals Participating	89	159	179
NPT08 - Environmental	31	32	103
NPT09 - Under employed	33	42	127
NPT10 - Formal Training	100	25	25
NPT11 - Community Transport Schemes	1	1	100
NPT12 - Advice surgeries	10	8	80

ALIGNMENT OF OUTCOMES WITH THE STRATEGIC AIMS OF THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

For this final evaluation it is worth considering how these individual outputs have contributed to the Vision of the LDS of "Working together to make our valleys more accessible, vibrant, environmentally sustainable and enterprising."

Green outcomes: Environment, Culture and Tourism

This theme was especially successful in attracting applications and generating significant outputs, particularly in relation to stakeholder engagement

and participation. Outcomes within this priority included the development of green energy in order to address climate change and to tackle rising energy prices for residents and enterprises. Several of the larger projects supported action to enhance culture, tourism, biodiversity and environmental sustainability. Through the 'I dig Margam' project, children and adults have had the opportunity to learn about local archaeology. In turn it is hoped that by educating local residents about Capel Mair it will help secure buy in to the long-term future of Capel Mair Iron Age hillfort site. Other projects have improved local residents' knowledge of wildlife and biodiversity, for instance, the Working with Nature project enabled the Countryside & Wildlife Team, to build up a bank of volunteers and

community groups to take a more active role in the management of local, natural greenspaces, whilst fostering a greater understanding and connection with the natural environment.

A series of Awel Aman Tawe projects have delivered energy savings, reduced carbon emissions by 1,000 tonnes and raised millions to invest in solar power. The organisation is currently developing projects which engage pupils in learning about climate change and helping them to understand its impact in Wales and the world. In this way it is helping pupils develop the values that are needed to become ethical and informed citizens, ambitious in their thinking and confident and creative in taking action to help restore and protect the planet. In 2019, Egni Co-op won Outstanding Renewable Energy Project in an award sponsored by Welsh Government & Awel Aman Tawe was recognised as Environmental Organisation of the Year in the Social Enterprise UK Awards.

Vibrant outcomes: Sustainable communities

Projects within this priority have latterly put more focus on resilience to support volunteering and tackle physical and mental well-being, in response to the pandemic and many projects reported vibrant community outcomes. Projects have supported families, people and communities affected by poverty and helped people to live healthier lives. For example, the Age Connects NPT Caring at Christmas project achieved much in a short space of time and enabled their volunteers to drop by and carry out wellbeing checks on residents spending Christmas alone. The Upper Afan Valley Fresh Start project delivered individual tailored training sessions aimed at enhancing the lives of those individuals who had experienced a particularly difficult time throughout the pandemic.

Covid-19 resulted in an upsurge in volunteering and projects were able to tap into this and grow their own volunteer base and improve the diversity of their volunteers, especially through recruiting younger people. As a result, several project leads considered that they were able to help with community recovery from Covid-19. Through the Welsh Language Youth Club, delivery was able to boost Welsh language speaking, helping young people who would otherwise have had little opportunity to communicate through the medium of Welsh.

Enterprising outcomes: Business growth

This priority aimed to develop and expand opportunities for new business start-ups, and support the growth of existing enterprises as a way of creating and safeguarding jobs. Against a difficult backdrop with lockdowns and staff on furlough the theme nevertheless delivered support to farming and tourism. For instance, through the Planning for Commons Support Project, LEADER was used to explore ways of supporting the sustainable management of common land. The core of its approach was to unite the three aspects of sustainable development for common land, making the delivery of environmental outcomes central to the business rationale of commoning and thereby making sustainable commoning practice socially acceptable to both farmers themselves and wider society.

A further small number of the projects reported business outcomes including, promoting new businesses and stimulating the local economy; identifying ways of strengthening the income of marginal farmers; and developing the skills and qualifications of recruits. One project was able to work with Swansea University to support its STEM

ambassadors programme designed to recruit young people into science, tech and engineering careers.

Accessible outcomes: Tackling social exclusion and maximising well-being

This priority aimed to develop innovative projects relating to, for instance transport options; childcare availability; skills development and Welsh language services. In this, it was very successful, ranging from projects such the Upper Amman Valley Community Transport project which has piloted the provision of electric bikes for the local community, to the Welsh Language Youth Club and Mess up the Mess young people's project.

A key theme for many of the projects was to support people through Covid-19 or to help communities recover from its impact and become more resilient. The outcomes identified by project leads have been many and varied including:

- Improving people's well-being and reducing social isolation and loneliness.
- Improving local residents' mental and physical health.
- Helping identify community needs.
- Empowering people to regain their confidence after months and years of isolation.
- Improving resilience through raising awareness of services and signposting people to organisations that can provide support.

It was also noted that projects approved in earlier funding rounds such as the 'Go for IT' project 2016-2019 delivered skills that proved invaluable in lockdown, helping people setup up virtual support groups on WhatsApp and giving them the skills to keep connected.

Individually and jointly, it is considered that through achievement against each of the LDS themes the programme has successfully had a sustainable impact towards achieving the LDS vision.

IMPACT

It was noted in the mid-term evaluation that the targets set by the EU/Welsh Government do not fully capture the outcomes and impact of the programme. Assessing the changes in the baseline position, therefore, is a fundamental aspect of the evaluation of any project. Consideration of progress against baseline indicators ensures that more than just outputs are counted, and the impact/outcome of the project as a whole is considered, i.e. the wider changes brought about by the project and programme.

Of course, it is necessary to bear in mind that it is not always possible to isolate the impact of a relatively small project from broad movements in the national and local economies which are due mainly to external market forces. Although the contribution and impact of LEADER - with its modest resources - is impossible to identify at a macro-level it is nevertheless useful to review and identify key changes, and importantly for the development of future strategy, the extent to which deep-seated issues continue to contribute to social exclusion and disadvantage within rural communities. Much has been achieved, but as the latest data suggests, much remains to be done. Table 4 compares progress against baseline indicators.

Table 4. Progress Against Baseline Indicators

Progress against baseline indicators 2014/15	RAG rating
Population	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There has been a small increase in the estimated population of NPT of 2.8% between 2014 and 2020, slightly above the all Wales increase of 2.5%. ▪ It is encouraging to note that the rise has not been driven entirely by the population getting older. There has been a 1.3% increase in the working age population (16-64) in NPT equivalent to 1,100 adults, almost twice as high as the increase in Wales (0.8%). ▪ There has been a net increase in inward migration amongst people aged 15-29 in the most recent year for which data is available (2019/20) compared with a net outflow in 2014/15. 	
Economic inactivity	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Economic inactivity rates have fallen from 28.8% in 2014/15 to 23.9% in 2020/21. This represents a sharp fall and the rate is now in line with the Wales rate of 24%. 	
Employment rate	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The local employment rate has risen by 6.6% in the 7 years of the programme. This is more than double the Welsh average of 2.5%. At 73.3%, the employment rate in NPT is now above the Welsh rate of 72.8%. ▪ An estimated 3,189 people were claiming work-related benefits in NPT at November 2021. (Note: Changes in the way data is calculated means that comparison with 2014/15 is not advised.) 	
Average weekly earnings (Gross weekly)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Average residents' weekly full-time earnings are £589.60 (2021), driven up by relatively high men's wages. In contrast, women's wages in NPT, at £398.70, are below the Welsh average. Note: These wages will reflect commuting out of the county for work. 	
Workplace jobs	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Jobs in NPT have risen by 3,000 between 2015 and 2020, a rise of 6.4%, compared with an increase across Wales of 2.2%. 	

Compared with the baseline indicators set in 2014/15, it can be seen that overall progress is positive: employment is up; jobs have increased and the population has risen. However, set against this rosy picture, engagement undertaken in connection with the mid-term evaluation and the update of the LDS in 2020/21 showed a perception that poverty and its impact was increasing. When the original LDS was developed, work was seen as the main route out of poverty, however, nationally nearly 60% of benefits go to households where someone is in paid work but not earning enough to achieve an adequate standard of living and two-thirds of working-age poverty occurs among working households. The presence of 6 of the 9 foodbanks in the valley areas of NPT gives some validation to this perception, given the high employment rate in the county borough. Further, as a result of the pandemic, issues of mental and physical well-being have come to the fore.

This evidence is backed up by the Bevan report² published in December 2021 which showed that across Wales:

1. Nearly four in ten Welsh households (39 per cent) do not have enough money to buy anything beyond everyday items.
2. Falling incomes continue to be an issue exacerbated by rising living costs.
3. More than one in five families had to cut back on items for children including books, toys, nappies and clothing.

There is limited local statistical data to shed light on where NPT stands on these issues but the following analysis illustrates that these will indeed be real issues for NPT to tackle in the years ahead, despite the positive progress made to date.

National Living Wage

The National Living Wage Foundation estimates the number of jobs that are below the National Living Wage (NLW) of £9.50 per hour (2021). The National Living Wage is an estimate of what is needed to live on and is higher than the minimum wage which was £8.36 per hour at that time. Provisional data for 2021 shows that an estimated 1 in 5 jobs in NPT pay below the National Living Wage, equivalent to 10,000 people in the county. At 20% this rate is above the Welsh average of 17.9% and is a mid-range position compared with other authorities in Wales. Amongst women the rate of pay below the NLW in NPT rises to 29.9%, the greatest proportion in Wales after Monmouthshire (32.8%) and Powys (30.7%).

Barriers to better paid work include care responsibilities, health, rurality, housing costs and poor or expensive public transport which mean that some workers – typically women – have few alternatives if they want flexible work close to home especially in an area like NPT with its limited public transport offer. The rise of home working can help to alleviate this issue, but for those with low qualification levels this is less of an opportunity.

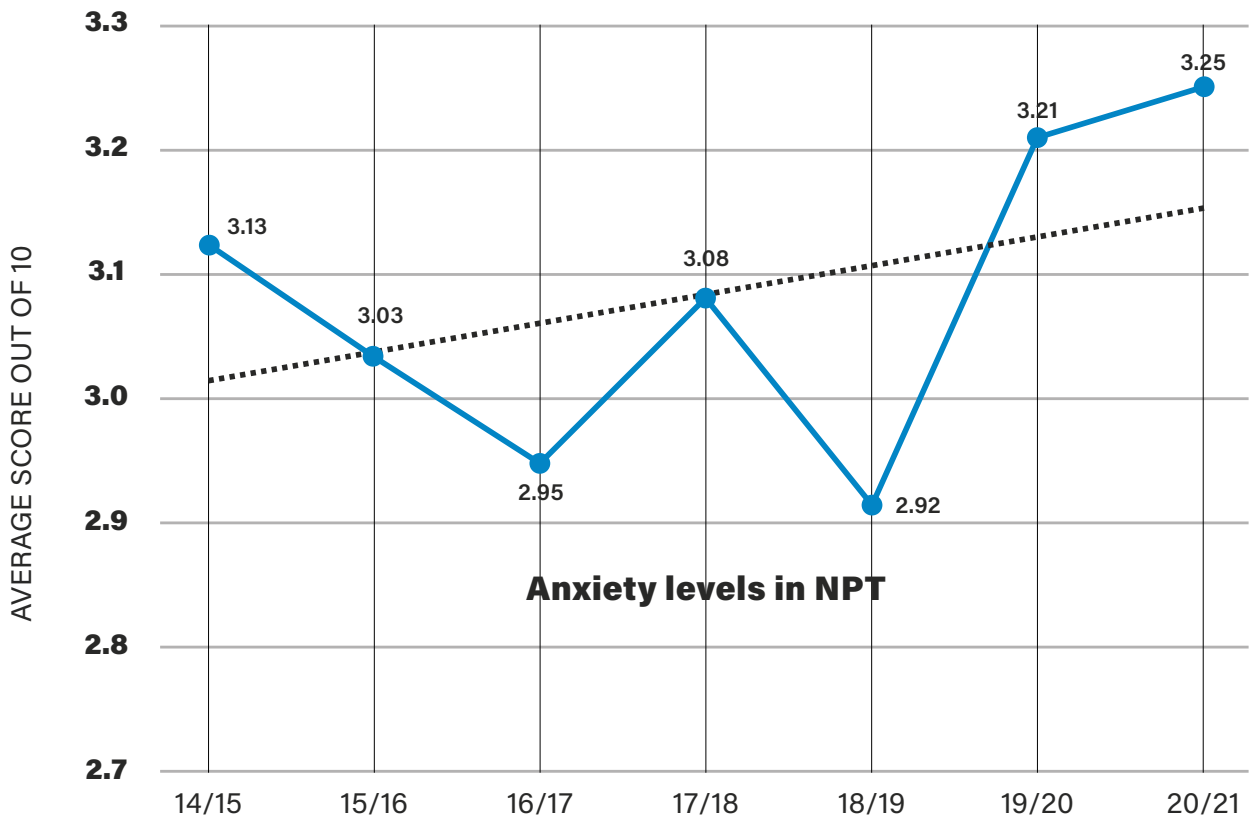
Personal well-being

National well-being indicators³ provide estimates of life satisfaction, a feeling that the things done in life are worthwhile, happiness and anxiety in the UK. Answers are given on a scale of 0-10 where 0 is 'not at all' and 10 is 'completely' and averages are calculated for each local authority.

As might be expected, during the pandemic both men and women saw a rapid increase in anxiety levels as shown on the chart below. Whereas 2018/19 marked a low point in anxiety levels in NPT, 2020/21 has seen anxiety levels rise to their highest level in the past 7 years:

Chart 1: Trends in levels of anxiety in Neath Port Talbot over the life of the programme

Similarly, both happiness and life satisfaction have fallen during the pandemic, with life satisfaction at an all time low:

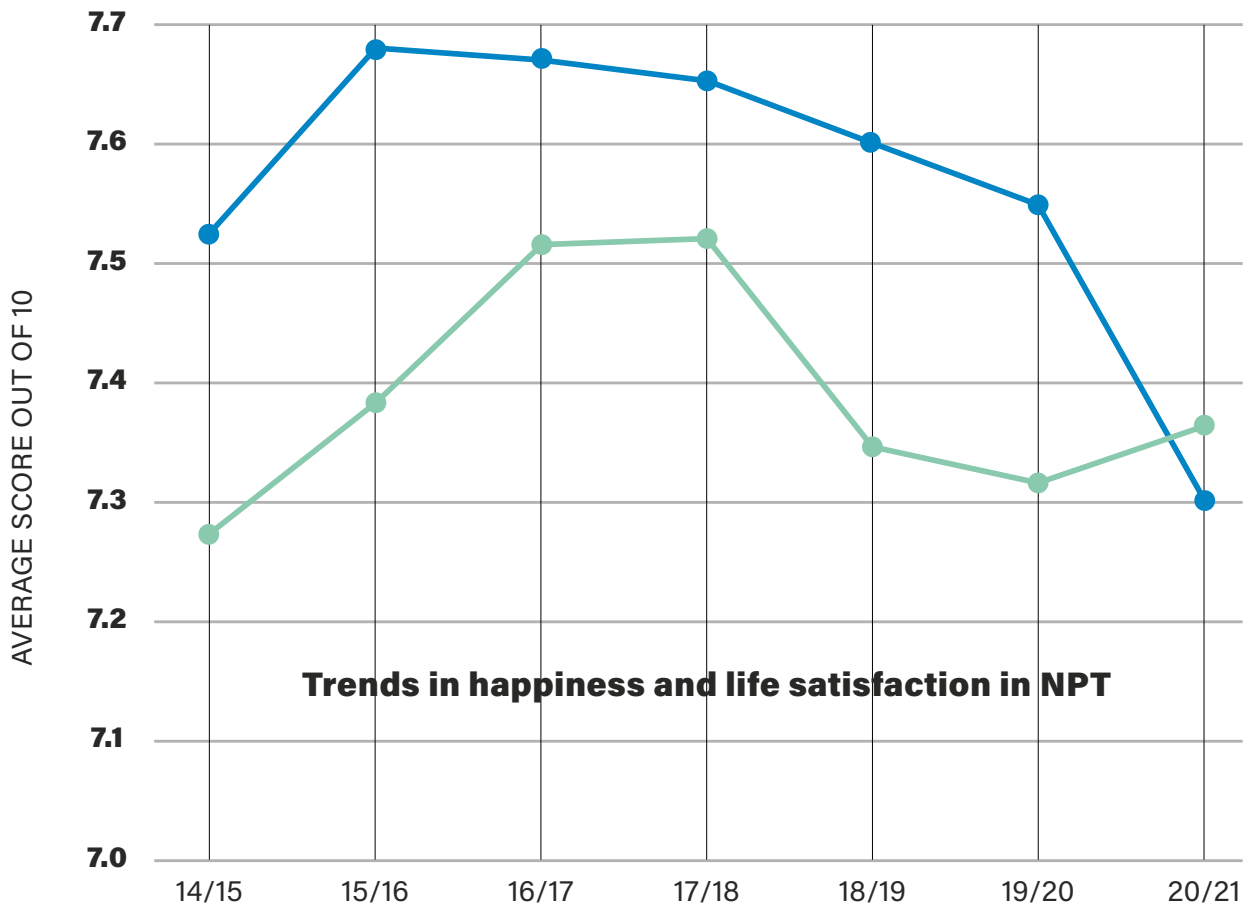


Source: ONS Well-being indicators (dotted line represents the trend)

..... Trend

Chart 2: Trends in happiness and life satisfaction in Neath Port Talbot over the life of the programme

These datasets help support anecdotal evidence around rising poverty rates and rising issues around mental health, indicating on-going needs for support.



Source: ONS Well-being indicators

- Happiness
- Life Satisfaction

IMPACT ON THE NATIONAL WELL-BEING INDICATORS FOR WALES

At a strategic level, the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act has ushered in a new approach to partnership working and defined a new set of outcomes we want to achieve across Wales. In 2019, the declaration of a Climate Emergency brought to the fore the green agenda and sustainability.

Table 5 below sets out the differing contribution that the NPT LEADER programme has made against the well-being indicators:

Table 5: The LEADER contribution to national well-being indicators

Goal	LEADER activities	LEADER impact - project examples
A prosperous Wales	Supported a low carbon society in rural communities.	A number of projects have contributed to this goal including the Tourism Development Programme designed to boost tourism in the NPT economy. The Caonlfan Maerdy project has directly improved the qualifications of young people and supported their training as youth workers, giving them aspirations in life for a career. They have developed from NEETS into young professionals with job aspirations and the local youth club is now open more often providing a safe space for young people to go. The project team are now working with the Welsh Government to explore the opportunities for developing youth work apprenticeships. Several of the projects have contributed directly to Wales' ambition to be a low carbon economy through education and investment in solar and wind power. Neath Port Talbot now leads the way in Wales with the highest total installed renewable energy capacity of any of the 22 local authority areas.
	Created opportunities for people in rural communities to develop their skills.	
	Supported mainstream initiatives e.g. Kickstart with other support.	
	Addressed poverty and its impact.	
A resilient Wales	Protected and enhanced the natural environment.	Supporting biodiversity though the Ty Banc project has engaged young people and children in understanding and appreciating the biodiversity of the Neath Canal. The Crynant Forest Walks Project has been designed to encourage more people to appreciate the countryside on their doorstep through a series of new forest trails. As a result, people are more confident about exploring the forest and have improved their knowledge of local flora and fauna.
	Connected people in rural communities to their natural environment for the benefit of their health and well-being.	

Goal	LEADER activities	LEADER impact – project examples
A healthier Wales	Fostered more engagement in physical activity.	The final two years of the programme has coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic and as a result, many of the projects have been designed to tackle its impact on health and well-being. The Caring at Christmas project was designed to foster connections and reduce isolation and loneliness. The Glantawe Outdoor Education Academy programme has had significant benefits for mental health and well-being, boosting resilience and fostering healthy eating. Cook slow, learn fast project has given young people and families the skills to prepare and cook meals from scratch.
	Reduced social isolation and loneliness	
A more equal Wales	Enabled young people to access education and employment.	All the projects have embraced the cross cutting equal opportunities theme of the programme. The Upper Afan Valley Fresh Start project was designed to support people with learning difficulties and additional needs and has impacted on participants' confidence and well-being. The pandemic meant that families, parents, carers of the people they support have been staying at home for months, but through the project were able to recover from the social isolation they had suffered.
	Tackled the cause and impact of poverty.	
	Mitigated the impact of Covid-19 in rural communities.	
A Wales of cohesive communities	Created capacity in rural communities.	Transport is a key issue for the valley communities and LEADER has supported a number of projects such as Baytrans, Cognation and the Upper Amman Valley Community Transport project to pilot new ways of tackling transport barriers. This latter project has had wide-ranging benefits as a pilot and introduced electric bikes into one of the rural valleys at affordable prices.
	Supported new and innovative approaches.	
A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language	Celebrated and enhanced the rich heritage of Neath Port Talbot. Enabled people in rural communities to participate in arts, sport and recreation.	A feasibility study at the Neath Abbey Ironworks has been the first stage of a study which will culminate in the opening of a heritage/educational centre. The local community will have access to the site not just to learn about its history but as a leisure facility for outdoors relaxation. At Capel Mair, the I dig Margam project has been the springboard to develop ambitions to open a national centre for young people's archaeology.
A globally responsive Wales	Supported and implemented	The Canolfan Maerdy project referred to above is being used to develop new pan-Wales programmes. The Planning for Commons Support project has developed refined costed proposals for field testing, trial and rollout, which will be presented to Welsh Government.
	projects that improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural Well-being of our rural communities.	





INTERNAL IMPACT - ORGANISATIONAL BENEFITS

As well as external benefits of the programme, project leads were asked if their own organisations had benefited from LEADER. All of the funded project organisations identified at least one internal benefit that they or their staff/members have gained through the LEADER process. Key benefits included:

1. The development of new relationships and partnerships – several projects successfully joined forces with other third sector organisations to aid delivery and to broaden the scope of their offer to new participants.
2. A strengthening of existing relationships and partnerships.
3. Increased the knowledge and understanding of their communities. In particular, lockdowns brought forward new needs and clients which organisations and VSOs had not previously come into contact with. The resources then allowed them to respond to those needs.
4. Improved staff skills e.g. in project planning and bid writing.
5. Increased capacity/Helped improve internal processes in managing demand for services and the logistics of managing volunteers. This became essential during Covid-19 when demand for services was rising and more people began volunteering for the first time. LEADER enabled organisations to refine their Covid response.
6. Enhanced awareness of the organisation and built its reputation/profile to the extent of gaining new board members.

As a result of these gains many of the projects felt that they had been able to strengthen their service offer and were better placed for the future, despite a huge disruption to their income streams. For those involved in feasibility studies the ability to try out ideas proved invaluable in refining costings and service demand.



SUSTAINED IMPACT

These benefits are not short-term: through education and skills development, the recruitment and training of volunteers and local investment in green energy projects the impacts are expected to be long-term and have already generated more investment. For instance, the Community based Youth Work pilot scheme has resulted in 4 new youth worker trainees who have developed professional skills, e.g. working with young people, planning and delivering activity sessions, event delivery and management. Whereas the youth club had been closed since before the pandemic, it is now open and staffed well, running multiple sessions per week. This has enabled the continued use of the youth centre, and as a result it has attracted further investment. For the individual trainees the project has given them aspirations in life for a career. The Team has now started the process of promoting policy with Welsh Government in terms of looking at apprenticeships for young people within their communities to train as youth workers.

ADDED VALUE

LEADER funding has generated high levels of additionality and the majority of project leads said that their project would not have gone ahead without LEADER. The remainder said that they would not have been able to go ahead with their projects in their current form but may have gone ahead at a later date or at a smaller scale.

“Without LEADER neither project would have happened.” - Project lead

FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

Overall, the NPT programme achieved 98% spend, spending £2.12m out of a

total grant of £2.16m. Running costs totalled 9% of total project costs and animation totalled 15% of total costs:

Project Name	PPIMS Case ID	Approved Grant (after re-evaluation)	Total of Paid Claims To Date	March 22 claim	Total Spend	Grant Spent
LEADER NPT Implementation Costs	80760	£1,585,306	£1,299,154.45	£276,171.20	£1,575,325.65	99%
LEADER NPT Running Costs	80794	£202,595	£188,055.00	£5,245.92	£193,300.92	95%
LEADER NPT Animation Costs	80793	£336,404	£315,674.44	£11,267.00	£326,941.44	97%
LEADER NPT Co-operation Costs	80871	£31,690	£0.00	£25,485.00	£25,485.00	80%
Total		£2,155,995			£2,121,053.01	98%

It is a tribute to the administration team and the project leads that all projects have been completed by the end of January 2022 giving some projects a very short turn-around time at a challenging time with Covid-19.

The minimal underspend of **£34,941.36** is a result of staff moving on to new jobs before the end of their contracts – a typical cause of underspend. Underspend against each element is itemised below:

Project Name	Expected Underspend Per Case
LEADER NPT Implementation Costs	£9,980.00
LEADER NPT Running Costs	£9,294.00
LEADER NPT Animation Costs	£9,462.56
LEADER NPT Co-operation Costs	£6,205.00
Total underspend	£34,941.56

Match funding was secured against the grant at a ratio of 80/20 and totalled £393,832. (Note these figures are not /will not be confirmed until final payments are received).

LESSONS LEARNT AND FUTURE NEEDS

The project leads, Programme team and LAG Board members were asked to reflect on their experience of the 2014-22 LEADER programme, and whether there were any lessons learnt that should be taken forward in future funding programmes.

As might be expected, the key issue raised was the need to reduce the bureaucracy associated with the funds, with a plea to make the process simpler. Payment in arrears was also a huge issue for the smaller community groups and needs to be addressed in future funding programmes. Because LEADER is a European Union funded programme, it is subject to EU auditing regulations, currently project payments cannot be made upfront. However, Brexit presents the chance to re-examine this principle. The Lottery Fund approach is a good example that distinguishes between small grants of up to £10,000, medium ones of £10,000 to £100,000 and large grants of over £100,000. Depending on the grant size, payments differ, with small grants paid up front, medium and large ones paid 50% upfront followed by 40% after the first instalment and 10% when the project is finished. If LEADER funding followed a similar approach to the Lottery Fund, this would overcome the key challenge small community groups have faced in accessing the fund. Alternatively, it was suggested that the Managing Authority should be able to pay costs up front and reclaim the costs from LEADER direct.

Another challenge has been the requirement for innovation. Projects have to be innovative in order to receive funding. However, as described (particularly in the mid-term evaluation) the need for innovation is perceived as counterproductive for rural development. It was considered that projects that contribute should not necessarily have to be innovative as long as they fill a

need. Latterly, the LAG has adopted a more flexible approach to innovation, but guidance could be a lot clearer in this respect.

Frustrations were expressed that the EU 'moved the goalposts' throughout the lifetime of the programme meaning that projects that were rejected in one phase of the programme would subsequently have been allowed in another phase. This made it difficult to manage the programme's reputation and integrity.

A couple of project leads suggested that when assessing bids the LAG should have brought in people with particular specialisms to help decide on proposals which were outside members' areas of expertise, as they felt that the LAG did not properly understand their proposals and the needs they were trying to tackle.

As noted elsewhere, in future programmes there should be the facility to evidence claims through social media and photographic evidence. It was felt that the programme's claims demands had not moved with the times.

FUTURE NEEDS

A final evaluation would normally look ahead to influence the delivery of the next **LEADER** programme, but of course, Wales will no longer receive funding for regional economic development directly from the EU. Instead of the regionalised LEADER approach there is now the prospect of a centralised, Whitehall-led approach. Furthermore, analysis by the Welsh Government shows that current funding levels are likely to be reduced and that the Welsh budget will be £1 billion worse off by 2024⁴.

Despite this, interviewees were clear that community needs remain high and rural areas such as those supported

by LEADER in Neath Port Talbot have particular needs which demand a rural focus to funding. Currently, these areas are excluded from a lot of funding that is made available from (for example) the levelling up funds, because they are designed for towns. The key issue identified is transport, which impacts on access to employment, education, health and in turn impacts on social exclusion. Typically, rural areas lose out to urban areas because of their lower population density so that projects generate fewer outputs and cost more per head.

As the foregoing sections demonstrate, LEADER funding has made a difference, but rising poverty, the cost of living, the legacy of the pandemic on mental and physical health means that there is much to be done to tackle the factors that lead to economic inequality; to support the transition to a zero carbon economy and to develop healthier and more resilient rural communities across the rural valleys of Neath Port Talbot.

06

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06

APPENDIX 1

Regenerate NPT: 2014 - 2021



The Rural Development Programme

is the mechanism by which the Welsh Government delivers LEADER funding to support our countryside and rural communities. In Neath Port Talbot the following projects and feasibility studies have been approved by the Local Action Group (LAG):



PROJECT: Growing Healthy Together, NPTCVS

Timescale: July 2016 to November 2017

To build up an interest in community growing, volunteering and locally produced food, enabling local people to develop skills through friendly workshops and training held at Rheola Walled Garden in Glynneath and at the DOVE Workshop in Banwen.



PROJECT: Cognition Bike Give Sustain, Cognition

Timescale: February 2016 to June 2019

To encourage mountain bikers and walkers to make contributions via donation boxes based at various locations, towards the upkeep of bike tracks at Glyncorrwg Ponds and Afan Forest Park and to establish the Afan Trail Volunteers Group, to maintain the tracks.



PROJECT: Go for IT, Age Connects NPT

Timescale: May 2016 to April 2019

Free classes to support adults aged 50+ get to grips with modern technology like mobile phones and computers. With help for those wanting to access information on-line, internet banking, social media, shopping and personal interest sites – like looking for and booking holidays!



PROJECT: Tourism Development in NPT, NPTCBC

Timescale: July 2016 to December 2019

Employing a Tourism Development Officer to help tourism businesses in our rural wards promote Neath Port Talbot as an attractive and convenient base for a visit to South West Wales by working with them to develop their aspirations and understanding of visitor requirements.



PROJECT: Working with Nature, NPTCBC

Timescale: August 2016 to March 2021

Run by the Countryside & Wildlife Team, to build up a bank of volunteers and community groups to take a more active role in the management of our local, natural greenspaces, whilst fostering a greater understanding and connection with the natural environment.

PROJECT: Past to Present, South Wales Miners Museum

Timescale: July 2016 to March 2020

Digitalising the museum's collection of historical artefacts and training volunteers to pass their knowledge of the coal industry's part in the culture of the Afan Valley, on to visitors.



PROJECT: Promoting Public Transport to the Countryside, BayTrans

Timescale: February 2016 to September 2018

To encourage visitors to Neath Port Talbot valleys using public transport by mapping the attractions, activities and walks in our rural wards that are all accessible by bus.



PROJECT: The Engagement Retreat, Whitehead-Ross Consulting

Timescale: March 2016 to February 2018

Designed to add value to existing Youth Service provision in Neath Port Talbot's rural wards, with a programme of exhilarating outdoor pursuits and activities for young people aged 14-18.

PROJECT: Glantawe Outdoor Education Academy, Pontardawe Arena Partnership

Timescale: September 2016 to September 2019

To provide outdoor educational programmes for disengaged young people whilst giving them opportunities to achieve nationally recognised qualifications and to become skilled and confident by providing training in a non-school setting within the 25 acre Glantawe Riverside Park in Pontardawe.



PROJECT: Energy Local, Awel Aman Tawe

Timescale: June 2018 to June 2020

To employ an Energy Local Development Officer to promote sustainable and efficient measures to communities in NPT and communicate the advantages of low carbon, decentralised, locally owned generation, energy efficiency and electrified heat and transport.



PROJECT: Egni Rural, Egni Co-op

Timescale: June 2019 to March 2020

To secure leases for solar panels on community buildings across NPT by carrying out structural surveys and ensuring grid connection at each site. These buildings and their users will benefit from cheaper electricity and the project will significantly reduce carbon emissions.



PROJECT: Solar and Battery, Awel Aman Tawe

Timescale: June 2019 to August 2021

To secure planning for a 2.2MW ground mounted solar farm, and a 5MW battery storage facility on Mynydd y Gwrhyd located next to the two existing Awel Co-op wind turbines. Funding covered legal support to secure leases on the common land and farm where the solar is located and the planning application fee.



PROJECT: Mess Up The Mess, "Amplify: Trowch e Lan"

Timescale: August 2019 to September 2020

Working in partnership with Pontardawe Arts Centre, this Theatre Company delivered a package of activities targeted to engage local young people in creating, managing and delivering events.



PROJECT: Community Play Worker, NPTCBC

Timescale: September 2019 to July 2020

Play Sufficiency Assessments are undertaken by Welsh Local Authorities every three years as part of the Welsh Government's anti-poverty agenda. This places a duty on LAs to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children. Findings of the most recent NPT assessment revealed that children were not playing as much as they would like to or need to. Run by the Children and Family Team, the project employed 4 Community Play Workers to work with children at 4 schools during lunchtimes to ensure they had direct access to a play professional and would be able to experience good value play sessions.



PROJECT: Caring at Christmas, Age Connects NPT

Timescale: Throughout December 2020

Providing gift bags to elderly residents that Age Connects NPT have engaged with since the start of the Covid19 pandemic. The bags included cards and gifts from local school children as well as donated food and gifts from other community groups. It also gave the organisation a last opportunity for their volunteers to drop by and carry out wellbeing checks on residents spending Christmas alone.



PROJECT: Welsh Language Youth Club, NPT Council Youth Service

Timescale: June 2021 to December 2021

To pilot a 'virtual' youth club through the medium of Welsh and provide opportunities for young people to improve their Welsh language skills through activities which will help them with team building, problem solving and personal development (with an added option of gaining formal qualifications) in a safe and supportive environment, staffed by qualified youth workers.



PROJECT: Return to Play, Bryn Rovers AFC

Timescale: April 2021 to August 2021

Funding for works to be carried out to the pitch area to ensure the safety of players and spectators in terms of social distancing measures due to Covid19 restrictions.



PROJECT: Crynant Community Forest 'Exploring the Forest',

Crynant Community Council

Timescale: June 2021 to January 2022

Enabling local residents to learn about, and experience, wildlife and nature. They will have the opportunity to participate in activities and learn about supporting the biodiversity of the forest through taking part in surveying and learning about birds, plants, fungi, bats and other mammals.



PROJECT: Hwb Y Gors, Awel Aman Tawe

Timescale: June 2021 to December 2021

Employing an Engagement Officer to take forward the development of the Hwb Y Gors centre, Cwmgors into a low carbon social enterprise, arts and education centre.



PROJECT: Community Food Growing Pilot,

Pontardawe Arena Partnership

Timescale: April 2021 to January 2022

Increasing well-being through supporting the community to discover the benefits, and develop the skills, to grow their own produce. Provision will be open to both adults and young people where early intervention programmes for schools will include horticultural and energy efficiency principles.



PROJECT: Crynant Volunteer & Support Programme,

Crynant Community Association

Timescale: July 2021 to January 2022

To kick-start a structured community volunteer programme by employing a Volunteer Development Officer who would be appropriately trained (paid for by LEADER) and solely invested in raising the profile of a volunteer programme in order to adequately serve the elderly and vulnerable residents and also engage with the young people in the village of Crynant.



PROJECT: Neath Canal Biodiversity Trail,

Ty Banc Canal Group

Timescale: July 2021 to December 2021

To increase education around biodiversity, QR codes placed along canal pathway mooring posts from Resolven to Glynneath encouraging children to engage with educational quizzes woven into stories of wildlife characters.



PROJECT: Upper Neath Valley Development Project Funding Officer Pilot, Glynneath Town Council

Timescale: July 2021 to January 2022

This project brings together four rural community town councils who have formed a Cluster to employ a Development Officer whose aim will be to explore grant funding opportunities that will benefit all four communities based in the Upper Neath Valley.



PROJECT: Cook Slow Learn Fast,

Neath Port Talbot Council Youth Service

Timescale: September 2021 to January 2022

To teach young people basic, practical cooking skills over a 10 week on-line programme, empowering them to plan, prepare and cook affordably nutritious balanced meals for themselves and their families as part of a healthier lifestyle.



PROJECT: Community Based Youth Work Training and Services Pilot, Canolfan Maerdy

Timescale: September 2021 to January 2022

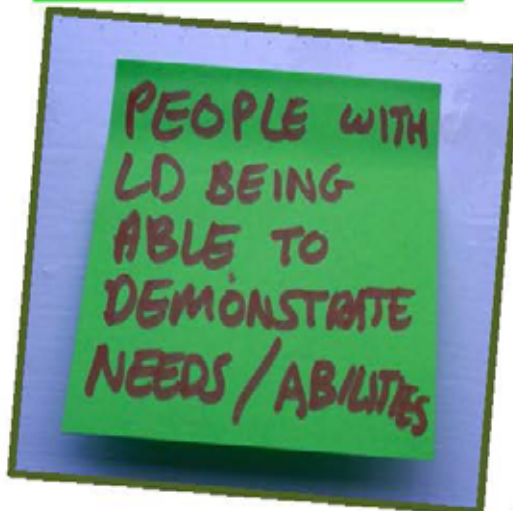
To pilot the development of a new Youth and Community Work Apprenticeship Scheme by providing hands on training in youth and community work to local unemployed young people to enhance their employability skills and provide guidance and increased provision for young people living in the Upper Amman and Twrch Valleys.



PROJECT: Upper Amman Valley Green Transport Pilot Project, Upper Amman Valley Community Transport

Timescale: November 2021 to January 2022

The project will acquire three e-bikes, secure e-bike storage, safety equipment and a booking system to develop a sustainable green community transport scheme in the area. Residents will for the duration of the pilot have free use of the e-bikes, enabling them to actively travel around the communities of the Upper Amman Valley using this environmentally friendly mode of transport.



PROJECT: Upper Afan Valley Fresh Start, Positive Attitudes to Wellbeing

Timescale: November 2021 to January 2022

Individual tailored training sessions aimed at enhancing the lives of those individuals who have experienced a particularly difficult time throughout the pandemic. The regular sessions will instil confidence and help service users with learning disabilities and autism cope with ever changing situations and support them to reintegrate into their local community after a prolonged period of isolation and massively reduced social interaction.



PROJECT: VIEW (Glynneath) Limited,

Growing for the Future

Timescale: November 2021 to January 2022

Working in partnership with a local nursery school to create a community allotment with children, parents, teachers and volunteers preparing the land, constructing raised beds and a polytunnel in which to plant fruit and vegetables. In addition, school information packs about maintaining and developing the area to include lesson plans for ongoing learning delivery will be provided.



PROJECT: Cwm Market Pilot Project, Bryn and Cwmafan Events

Timescale: December 2021 to January 2022

To add value to the group's offer of activities, opportunities and services in these rural valley communities, 10 all-weather gazebos will be bought to pilot a new Cwm Market local produce/craft event. Building on strong community resilience and spirit the return to face to face shopping through an outdoor market will enable residents to socialise, buy local produce, supports local jobs and the local economy whilst projecting the environment.



PROJECT: Planning for Commons Support, European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism (EFNCP)

Timescale: December 2021 to January 2022

Aims to build on the work of the Regional Co-operation project 'Developing Shared Visions for Common Land' with workshops in NPT with National and Regional stakeholders. Workshops aim to address perceived barriers identified, to support the common lands to progress and adopt the new proposed payment model. This project will analyse proposals set out in the final report from the Co-operation project and develop refined costed proposals for field testing, trial and rollout, which will be presented to Welsh Government.



COOPERATION Projects whereby Local Action Groups from different regions can work together to provide opportunities to improve the potential for overcoming challenges for people in Wales, UK or Europe.



PROJECT: Shared Visions for Common Land, European Forum for Nature Conservation and Pastoralism

Timescale: October 2020 to October 2021

Swansea LAG leading the project, partnered with Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent, NPT, Merthyr Tydfil, RCT, Powys and Torfaen. To ensure that commoners and other stakeholders involved in common lands, have the best possible advantages in terms of capacity to engage with policy around Government legislation.



PROJECT: Prescribing Woodlands for Wellbeing:

Coed Lleol (Small Woods Association)

Timescale: April 2021 to December 2021

Ceredigion LAG leading the project, partnered with NPT and Cwm Tâf (Merthyr & RCT), bringing together organisations working in the field of outdoor nature-based health, with health care providers interested in green social prescribing, and to pilot the development of new digital resource as a tool for sharing experiences and learning, over geographical distance and in times of isolation or lockdown.



FEASIBILITY STUDIES can be funded through LEADER to provide revenue costs for a combination of staff time and consultancy costs to undertake background research for a specific problem or issue.



PROJECT: Developing Neath Abbey Ironworks, Friends of NAIW

Timescale: April 2018 to June 2019

An investigation into the feasibility of conserving the Ironworks through structural repairs, with the possibility of eventually opening up the site to the public to encourage visitors to the area, and increase community knowledge through research and sharing of information on this relatively unknown site of major historical interest and importance.



PROJECT: Transport, NPTCVS

Timescale: December 2017 to September 2018

On behalf of the Neath Port Talbot Transport Sub-Group to explore alternative transport models and provide a costed options appraisal for alternative ways of providing transport to meet the needs of our rural communities so that residents can access the opportunities they need to live healthy and fulfilling lives.



PROJECT: Green Business, NPTC, Countryside & Wildlife Team

Timescale: February 2016 April 2017

Exploring new approach to delivering the biodiversity requirement of building and construction developments, to redress the on-going decline in biodiversity in NPT and the delays to the planning and development process that can result from such issues. An ecological consultant was appointed to develop this new approach and to identify a number of potential compensation sites that might be used to offset the biodiversity losses or impacts that occur due to a development.



PROJECT: Renewable Energy Storage, Awel Aman Tawe

Timescale: April 2018 to December 2018

To tackle climate change and engage people in renewable energy: investigate a solar farm installation alongside the existing 4.7MW wind farm (sharing its existing grid connection), a 9MW wind farm extension to the existing site and battery storage to store excess power from the solar and/or wind extension site.



PROJECT: From Black to Green, Seven Sisters RFC

Timescale: March 2018 to September 2018

To explore the creation of a community hub as part of the club, focussing on health, wellbeing, education and tackling poverty. To research the feasibility of creating a modern community facility which could offer a range of services and activities, including a café, gym, meeting rooms that might draw in existing professionals from various health and wellbeing services.



PROJECT: Sarn Helen Care & Support Service, DOVE Workshops, Banwen

Timescale: July 2021 to October 2021

To explore the formulation of a local support service for vulnerable and elderly people who find it difficult to secure help at home. The idea would be to run a co-operative of skilled local workers and to train them in safeguarding issues and provide a hub to support them to market their services, have access to training and to manage a booking and payment system.



PROJECT: To explore an accessible and sustainable future for Ffynnon Capel Mair and its ancient well at Margam Park, Friends of Margam Park

Timescale: August 2021 to January 2022

The future of this small 14th Century church and the recently discovered well is in danger. The study will identify how the site can be developed by exploring conservation through an educationally centred proposal around the site's heritage and cultural importance.

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