

# Farming the Gwent Levels Sustainably

**Lead organisation:** RSPB Wales

**Grant Award:** £554,953

**Location:** South East Wales Wetlands

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A project taking collaborative action with stakeholders including farmers and other partners such as Gwent Wildlife Trust and Bumblebee Conservation Trust (BBCT) to develop the understanding, knowledge, skills and experience need to deliver the sustainable management of natural resources within the Gwent Levels.

Participating farmers and project partners have taken action to improve the natural resources in the area, particularly water and soil management. Outcomes include habitat improvement and creation, offering significant potential to improve soil condition, and establishing habitat strips for pollinators, which will also act as buffers alongside water courses. Taking advantage of the flat geographical nature of its area the project seeks to maximise opportunities for traffic free cycling, as well as existing access and recreation facilities on farms, and creation of new facilities.

The overarching aim of the Sustaining the Gwent Levels (SGL) SMS project:

- Establish best practice sustainable land management and in doing so identify land use/management that will reverse damage to ecosystems and then continue to maintain them in a healthy state.
- Influence and establish mechanisms to facilitate sustainable land management at the landscape scale to secure healthy ecosystems.



These objectives were achieved through:

- Capital works and vegetation management such as ditch management, orchard restoration, pollarding, establishment of herbal leys, construction, and erection of nesting boxes.
- Preparation of an advisory booklet for farmers on key management actions for Sustainable Land Management on the Levels.
- Facilitating access to externally funded advisory services including Nutrient.
- Management Plans (funded by Farming Connect) and Water Quality Assessments (funded by NRW).
- Commissioning feasibility studies which included Impact of underdrainage on hydrology, Opportunities for Payment for Ecosystems Services, Costings for wetland landscape restoration and maintenance in the Gwent Levels, and the impact of environmentally sustainable farming practice on profitability and financial viability.
- Ecological modelling and monitoring.
- External communications.



**Training and job creation:** One new full-time member of staff employed for the duration of this project and facilitated three (PES) workshops completed with a minimum of 60 attendees

**Community engagement:** Engaging stakeholders including 10 farming families, NRW, Farming Reps and NGOs, and diverse local communities; 60 individuals, 30 farmers, policy and decision makers through advocacy visits and demonstration days

**Woodland management and planting:** 150 Tree Sparrow nest boxes have been erected on the Caldicot Levels. 8 Barn Owl boxes have been built and erected. 10 Kestrel boxes have been built. 24 Little Owl built. 259 nest boxes sited in suitable habitats

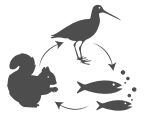
**Community engagement:** Organised community litter pick in Parc Taff Bargoed around the lake in conjunction with Keep Wales Tidy, Councillors and staff of local Assembly Member. Project also participated in Commons Clean up event arranged by Gelligaer and Merthyr Commons Ranger and attended by many local and governmental agencies

**Community engagement:** 26 volunteers involved (25 landowners engaged) with making nest boxes and monitoring, including a workshop with young people



**Community engagement:** engaging stakeholders, farmers and families, NRW, Farming Reps and NGOs, individuals, policy and decision makers through advocacy visits and demonstration days.

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**Habitat restoration:** positive management of SSSI features, including ditch work, willow pollarding and orchard management and assessments for water, nutrient and pollinator habitat improvements and positive action to secure water quality, nutrient management improvements and provision of pollinator habitat carried out on multiple farms.

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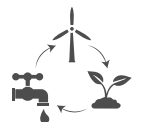
**Developing Green Infrastructure:** a study to develop bespoke local PES schemes, and an investigation into the impacts of underdrainage on the landscape of the Gwent Levels undertaken, and an Ecosystem Services Assessment of the project area completed.

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**Soil Quality Management:** Nutrient Management Planning three farms benefited from free nutrient management planning service through farming connect. These farms were given written reports addressing savings on time and cost as well as contributing to water quality targets.

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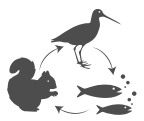
**Educational Programmes:** Water Quality Assessments – some farms involved in the project are dairies and the farm infrastructure of these operations were scrutinised by NRW's water quality assessment project. Two farms have received recommendations which will help them with any new water quality regulations.

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**Educational Programmes:** shrill carder bee monitoring shows the extent of this monitoring, including, photographs of sites surveyed, a map of sites visited, and an explanatory document. The monitoring was carried out with advice from Sinead Lynch from Bumblebee Conservation.

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**Woodland management and planting:** establishing and re-establishing orchards across the Levels by using local variety fruit trees to establish new orchards. Purchasing local variety fruit trees to help re-establish orchards that have fallen into decline, using contractors to clear orchards that have become overgrown with scrub and are as a consequence, unproductive and finally, donating fruit trees and giving advice to orchard owners.

**Get Involved:** If you would like to get involved with work on the Gwent Levels, contact the Living Levels Partnership [www.livinglevels.org.uk/whats-on](http://www.livinglevels.org.uk/whats-on)

 RSPB Cymru [www.rspb.org.uk/about-the-rspb/at-home-and-abroad/wales/](http://www.rspb.org.uk/about-the-rspb/at-home-and-abroad/wales/)  
Celebrating the Gwent Levels [www.livinglevels.org.uk](http://www.livinglevels.org.uk)

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