

# A celebration of the Valleys Regional Park Guardians Scheme delivered by Groundwork Wales



Parc Rhanbarthol  
y Cymoedd



Valleys  
Regional Park



This Scheme has received funding through the Welsh Government Rural Communities - Rural Development Programme 2014-2020, which is funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the Welsh Government.



# foreword

Phil Lewis, Valleys Regional Park Lead

Katy Stevenson, CEO of Groundwork Wales



**Phil Lewis**

Valleys Regional  
Park Lead

Valleys Regional Park is proud to be leading a programme, delivered in partnership with Groundwork Wales, that's having such a positive impact on the people, environment, and wildlife of the South Wales Valleys. By connecting individuals with their local landscapes and working with the network of Discovery Gateways, the Guardians Scheme is creating vital recreational and skills-based learning opportunities across the Valleys — arming communities with crucial information on how to care for our rich natural habitats and landscapes, so that they can be enjoyed for years to come.

Since launching in 2021, I have continually been inspired by the impact that the Guardians Scheme sessions have had on our Discovery Gateways, in addition to the commitment and enthusiasm of the volunteers. From pond restoration to path creation and species conservation, each and every volunteer has made a meaningful contribution to the future of the South Wales Valleys and its biodiversity. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to thank everyone involved with the Scheme and congratulate them for making it such a success.



**Katy Stevenson**

CEO of  
Groundwork Wales

I'm delighted to be celebrating the achievements of the Valleys Regional Park Guardians Scheme, delivered by Groundwork Wales — a fantastic initiative that helps people from across the Valleys Regional Park footprint to engage with the outdoors. Over the last three years we have helped deliver an amazing programme to support people, planet, and place — whilst working to our vision of 'Changing Places, Changing Lives'.

We've worked with people of all ages and from all backgrounds, supporting them to develop conservation skills, eco-literacy, confidence, and wellbeing while looking after our amazing landscape, supporting the climate and nature emergency — and accrediting the work they've done through our Agored Cymru offer. Credit is due to the full team of staff involved, to the partners at the Discovery Gateways and within local communities — including all of our community partners who have helped to make this a success, Welsh Government and of course to the wider Valleys Regional Park partnership.

I'd like to congratulate every single volunteer and beneficiary who has taken part in the Scheme, helping to look after the amazing landscape here in the South Wales Valleys for the present day and future generations.





**Valleys Regional Park (VRP) is a partnership of Welsh organisations, including councils and charities, working with nature to help the South Wales Valleys thrive — environmentally, socially, and economically.**



The VRP footprint spans from Carmarthenshire to Blaenavon, bordering the Brecon Beacons — and has a network of uplands, woodlands, nature reserves, country parks, rivers, reservoirs, canals, heritage sites and attractions — all interlinked with the towns and villages which are home to around one million people.

With a network of local attractions, sites, and organisations like the VRP Discovery Gateways, our mission is to improve quality of life, economic prospects, health and wellbeing in the South Wales Valleys. This is achieved by connecting people with the region's growing green spaces — thereby tackling the nature and climate emergency while promoting active lifestyles.

By connecting people with outdoor initiatives, activities, and community projects we are able to create recreational and skills-based learning opportunities across the Valleys — attracting inward investment and making it an attractive place to work, live and visit.



**Groundwork is the community charity with the green heart — dedicated to supporting a society of sustainable communities which are vibrant, healthy, and safe; which respect the local and global environment; and where individuals and enterprise prosper.**

Since 1990, Groundwork Wales has been working with partners in communities where the need is greatest, right across Wales, to deliver grass-roots programmes that have made a real difference to people's lives and prospects.

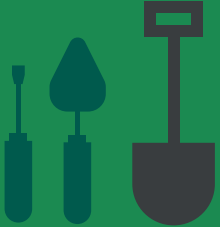
At Groundwork Wales, it's all about regeneration in its fullest sense — using local environmental engagement to realise and release potential in individuals and communities, working towards the wellbeing of future generations and a more prosperous Wales, and ensuring we look after the landscape we rely on.



# Guardians Scheme highlights

Total participants at Discovery Gateways:

887 



Total hours of session delivery:

9,724 (includes all Guardians activity over two years)



Total participants on the programme:

1,430 



Total land improved:

399,497m<sup>2</sup> the size of 56 football pitches!



Total increase in wellbeing:

78.5% (according to Discovery Gateway participants)



Statistics taken from Groundwork Wales quarterly reports, accounting for the Guardians Scheme pilot in 2020 to work undertaken at Discovery Gateways, Wellies in the Woods sessions and Big Bocs Bwyd programme delivery until December 2022.



# Meet our Guardians volunteers

The Valleys Regional Park Guardians Scheme, delivered by Groundwork Wales, has undoubtedly had a positive impact on the lives of those involved with the sessions. Here's what just some of the Guardians had to say about their experiences...

## Alan Redfern

Joined the Guardians  
Scheme: September 2022



**Discovery Gateway attended:**  
Bryngarw Country Park.

**Background:** Alan joined the Scheme after retiring from a corporate career because he was looking for a new challenge.

**Favourite part of the Scheme:** Alan enjoys being part of an enthusiastic team and utilising his life skills across a range of projects. Alan's favourite projects include building an 18-post fence to redirect a footpath away from river erosion and rebuilding a bridge.

*"A year after retiring, I found myself in a bad place — I was not happy about retiring and needed something else to put my time and effort into. I was invited to my first Guardians Scheme meeting where I registered for my first session. And I have to say, I've never looked back."*

## Matthew Jenkins

Joined the Guardians  
Scheme: July 2022



**Discovery Gateway attended:**  
Dare Valley Country Park.

**Background:** Matthew started volunteering with Groundwork Wales and the VRP Guardians Scheme to gain new skills and grow his confidence — with the hopes of securing a green career in the future.

**Favourite part of the Scheme:** Matthew enjoys making friends from all walks of life — people with a wealth of knowledge and experience that he can learn from, who he might not have met otherwise.

*"I've had a genuine interest in nature, plant life and growing healthy foods for a while. The sessions at Dare Valley Country Park are one of the main reasons why I get out of bed early — it's a very wonderful place to be, having a positive impact on my mental and physical wellbeing."*

## Luke Garrod

Joined the Guardians  
Scheme: March 2022



**Discovery Gateway attended:**  
Dare Valley Country Park.

**Background:** Luke moved to the Valleys in 2021 and found it difficult to meet new people and make friends. He stumbled upon the Guardians Scheme by chance after a bike ride through Dare Valley Country Park — spotting the Guardians in action whilst painting fences. Soon after, Luke had signed up to the Scheme which presented him with opportunities to gain a range of skills and experiences. In turn, this enabled him to begin a career at the café in Dare Valley Country Park, which he thoroughly enjoys.

**Favourite part of the Scheme:** Meeting new people, making good friends and feeling like part of a community.

*"If it wasn't for the time I'd spent gaining confidence and experience within the volunteer group, I would never have got the job at the café. Thank you for taking the time to help me and thank you for the friendship."*

## Julie Smith

Joined the Guardians  
Scheme: January 2022



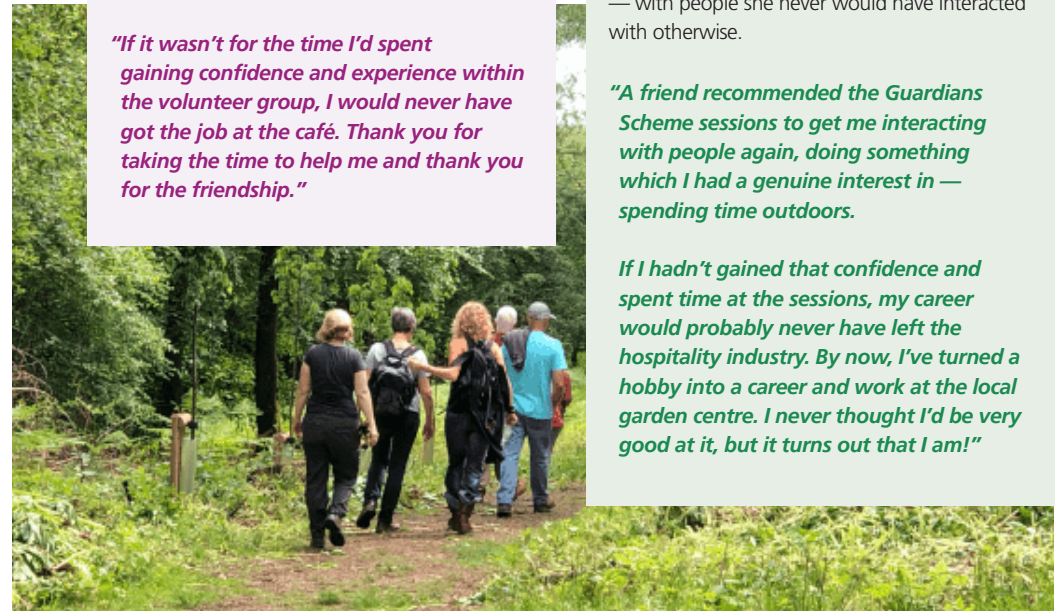
**Discovery Gateway attended:**  
Bryngarw Country Park.

**Background:** Julie joined the VRP Guardians Scheme after being made redundant due to the pandemic. Having decided on a complete change of scene after working in the hospitality industry, Julie began attending sessions at Bryngarw Country Park as a volunteer. This is when she discovered her love for working outdoors. Her new-found hobby soon turned into a career via a qualification with Agored Cymru.

**Favourite part of the Scheme:** Julie thoroughly enjoys being around like-minded people who are interested in conservation and the environment. Julie has made a whole new group of life-long friends through the Scheme — with people she never would have interacted with otherwise.

*"A friend recommended the Guardians Scheme sessions to get me interacting with people again, doing something which I had a genuine interest in — spending time outdoors."*

*"If I hadn't gained that confidence and spent time at the sessions, my career would probably never have left the hospitality industry. By now, I've turned a hobby into a career and work at the local garden centre. I never thought I'd be very good at it, but it turns out that I am!"*



# Meet some of the Guardians Project Officers

Our valued Project Officers who deliver the Guardians Scheme sessions — Faye, Ian, Cal, Elin, Peter, Ant and Chris — truly inspire the Scheme's volunteers. Here's what just some of them had to say about the Guardians Scheme sessions they've helped deliver...



## Faye Williams

Senior Project Officer



**Background:** Faye became a Guardian in 2021 and began running the volunteer sessions at Bryngarw Country Park – equipped with knowledge from completing a Masters in Environmental Conservation Management.

**Favourite part of the Scheme:** Faye loves the sense of community created within these sessions — everyone working together, finding a role that suits them as part of each project and working to improve the local environment for everyone to enjoy.

*“The activities are so important to the environment of the South Wales Valleys. These can be things like removing invasive species, tree planting and creating habitats and wildlife corridors — all positive steps towards improving biodiversity.”*

## Ian Dennis

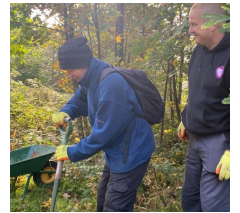
Senior Project Officer



**Background:** Ian has over twenty years' experience leading conservation, employability and eco-literacy programmes at Groundwork and has an HNC in Countryside Management and ILM Level 5 Qualification. What's more, having lived in the Valleys all his life, Ian has always had a love for Dare Valley Country Park and being out and about in nature.

**Favourite part of the Scheme:** Ian enjoys being able to play his part in maintaining and improving the area through the Guardians Scheme.

*“People from a variety of backgrounds — from sixteen-year-olds right the way through to seventy-year-olds — come along to the sessions to spend time outdoors and give something back to their local environment. The volunteers have always got a smile on their faces, even when it's raining. And whether you're sixteen or sixty, we're one team — all working hard to ensure our green spaces are here to be enjoyed for years to come.”*



## Cal James

Project Officer



**Background:** Cal previously volunteered in the conservation sector, which is where he discovered his love for volunteering. His educational experiences – a Bsc in Ecology and a Masters in Conservation Practice – provided him with the skills and knowledge needed to help deliver the sessions.

**Favourite part of the Scheme:** Cal really appreciates the value of contributing to the community through everything done in the sessions.

*“Because of its industrial past, I think South Wales is quite ecologically depleted in places. A lot of the parks we work at are amazing examples of previously industrial sites being regenerated and becoming amazing places for wildlife. To be a part of the continual regeneration of these places is quite special.”*



# And finally...

Thank you once again to all of the Guardians who have coordinated, managed, and led Valleys Regional Park's Guardians Scheme sessions, delivered by Groundwork Wales. Your contribution to creating a greener and healthier South Wales Valleys is immeasurable. We'd also like to thank the Rural Development Programme for its funding that has made the Guardians Scheme possible.