

October 2022

Evaluation of the Valleys Regional Park Guardians scheme

Mid-Term Evaluation Report

Author: Heledd Bebb
Quality Check: Nia Bryer

Browerdd
Heol yr Ysgol
Llanarthne, Sir Gâr
SA32 8HJ

99, Fairwater Grove West
Llandaff
Cardiff
CF5 2JP

07792 609821
nia@ob3research.co.uk

07815 772242
heledd@ob3research.co.uk

Contents

1.	Introduction	4
2.	Methodology	6
3.	An overview of the VRP Guardians scheme	8
4.	Delivery of the scheme	15
5.	Progress and achievements to date	23
6.	Priorities for the future	37
7.	Conclusions and recommendations	39

Glossary

Acronym	Definition
ARC	Assisted Recovery in the Community
BAVO	Bridgend Association of Voluntary Organisations
BBB	Big Bocs Bwyd
DGs	Discovery Gateways
GAVO	Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations
KPIs	Key Performance Indicators
NRW	Natural Resources Wales
ToC	Theory of Change
VRP	Valleys Regional Park
VTF	Valleys Taskforce
RDP	Rural Development Plan
SMNR	Sustainable Management of Natural Resources
SSSI	Site of Specific Scientific Interest
WG	Welsh Government

1. Introduction

1.1 OB3 Research, in collaboration with BRO Partnership, has been commissioned by Groundwork Wales to undertake an evaluation of the Valleys Regional Park (VRP) Guardians scheme.

1.2 The Guardians scheme aims to educate and develop the capacity of deprived communities across the Welsh Valleys to conserve and regenerate local natural environments, and build pride in, and connection with, these environments.

1.3 The aim of the evaluation is to ascertain the extent to which the Guardians scheme is:

- increasing valleys residents' involvement in activities (landscape based, not just visiting) in and around the Discovery Gateways (DGs), helping the DGs become recognised hubs for health and wellbeing
- helping engage new volunteers and beneficiaries who will provide sustained support in the maintenance and improvement of the landscapes in and/or around the DG sites
- enabling residents to take on other projects in their communities
- reaching the harder to reach and less advantaged communities and residents of the valleys and supporting them to improve their life chances.

1.4 The objectives of the evaluation are to:

- ensure there are robust, appropriate, and effective monitoring and evaluation tools with which to evaluate scheme efficacy against aims and Welsh Government policy priorities
- undertake periodic reviews as the scheme progresses to verify data capture and analysis
- advise the project managers and staff on the analysis of scheme data and preparation of the concluding project evaluation report.

1.5 The evaluation involves three key stages:

- a Theory of Change and evaluation framework, which was prepared in November 2021

- this mid-term evaluation report prepared in September 2022
- a final evaluation report by March 2023.

1.6 This mid-term evaluation report is presented in six chapters as follows:

- chapter one: this introduction to the report
- chapter two: outlines the study methodology
- chapter three: provides an overview of the VRP Guardians scheme and what it expects to achieve during this funding period
- chapter four: reviews the VRP Guardians key achievements and progress to date including performance against targets
- chapter five: sets out some of the priorities for the remaining funding period
- chapter six: presents our conclusions and offers recommendations for the remaining phase of the funded scheme.

2. Methodology

2.1 This chapter sets out the method adopted for undertaking the evaluation and outlines any methodological considerations.

Method

2.2 The mid-term phase, undertaken between August and October 2022, involved the following elements of work:

- an inception stage, which included attending an inception meeting with Groundwork Wales
- a desk-based review of VRP Guardians data and documentation, including quarterly progress reports, case studies and updated KPI data
- preparing qualitative discussion guides for interviewing delivery staff, stakeholders, and beneficiaries, as well as a supporting Privacy Notice for the study
- arranging site visits and interviewing a total of 41 individuals including:
 - seven VRP Guardians delivery staff, including the scheme lead and four Guardians
 - four members of the Valleys Regional Park team
 - 21 stakeholders including local authority and Natural Resources Wales (NRW) representatives, a focus group with 12 Discovery Gateway leads and on-site discussions with a further two representatives from the Discovery Gateway sites
 - nine beneficiaries on site at four different Discovery Gateways
- synthesising the findings of the fieldwork and desk-review and drafting this mid-term report.

Methodological considerations

2.3 The fieldwork for the mid-term evaluation of the Guardians scheme ran concurrently with a wider mid-term evaluation of the Valleys Regional Park, which is also being undertaken by OB3 Research in collaboration with BRO Partnership. There were many overlaps in possible stakeholders, and therefore specific questions regarding the Guardians scheme were posed to relevant stakeholders

as part of the VRP evaluation. Those findings have been considered in the drafting of this report.

- 2.4 The fieldwork for the mid-term evaluation of the Guardians occurred during the summer period of 2022. Beneficiaries were to be interviewed on site during activities at four Discovery Gateways. The numbers ranged from one to six at each session. The views of beneficiaries captured through self-evaluation materials collected by Groundwork Wales has also been considered.
- 2.5 To date, 680 beneficiaries have benefitted from the Guardians scheme, however the demographic data provided for all registered beneficiaries add up to lower numbers. The data is gathered at Groundwork Wales using a COUNT IF function, but if cells are left blank no data is counted. These are likely to be individuals who preferred not to say. This data issue will be addressed for recording in the final evaluation report.
- 2.6 For this mid-term evaluation report, headline data has been provided on beneficiaries and outputs achieved. Some information on wellbeing outcomes captured via the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales (WEMWBS)¹ and Outcomes Star² instruments has also been reported upon in quarterly reports and have been highlighted here. For the final report, a more in-depth analysis of all the relevant data captured will need to be undertaken.

¹ The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales were developed to enable the measurement of mental wellbeing in a population to be undertaken in the evaluation of projects or programmes which aim to improve mental wellbeing. The 14-item scale has 5 response categories, summed to provide a single score. The items cover both the feeling and functioning aspects of mental wellbeing.

² The Outcomes Star is an evidence-based tool developed by Groundwork UK to measure and support change when working with people. It is a person-centred approach aimed at capturing a service user's perspective and priorities.

3. An overview of the VRP Guardians scheme

- 3.1 This chapter provides an overview of the VRP Guardians scheme and what it expects to achieve within the current funding period, illustrated via a Theory of Change model for the intervention.

Background

- 3.2 The Valleys Regional Park (VRP) has been a movement for over a decade, with Groundwork and other providers working in partnership, and with some sporadic funding in place. The current VRP offer has been in place since 2018 and was originally aligned with the Valleys Taskforce (VTF). The VRP formed a pivotal element of the VTF's third priority which was focused on the Valley's local community and was intended to 'celebrate and maximise the use of the natural resources and heritage'³.
- 3.3 The current VRP was established within the governance arrangements of the VTF, but responsibility was soon transferred to the 13 Valleys local authorities, led by Cardiff City Region. Bridgend County Borough Council has hosted the current VRP core team on behalf of these partners since its formation and an initial scheme, funded via a mix of revenue and capital funding, was delivered between September 2019 and March 2021. The VRP was designed to focus on three delivery workstreams: landscape, culture and identify; recreation and wellbeing; and communities and enterprise.
- 3.4 The VRP was allocated £7 million funding via the VTF to establish 12 Discovery Gateway sites across the Valleys region, with the aim of increasing the level of outdoor recreation and encourage communities to develop their local landscapes. establishment of 12 Discovery Gateways across its area as shown in Figure 3.1 below.

³ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-05/our-valleys-our-future-delivery-plan.pdf>

Figure 3.1 Discovery Gateway locations within the VRP area⁴



- 3.5 A second aspect of the first phase of the VRP involved the delivery of a proof-of-concept Guardians scheme, which aimed to enhance community involvement with the Valleys' natural and cultural heritage assets, by providing educational, skills development and wellbeing activities. Following a competitive tendering process, the VRP awarded £240,000 to Groundwork Wales to deliver the Guardians scheme as a 'proof of concept' project between 2020/21.
- 3.6 A team of eight Guardians were appointed to work with children, families, elderly people, and community groups to get them involved in environmental volunteering, conservation work, wellbeing walks, creating community gardens, and bushcraft activities. The scheme supported over 450 participants and improved nearly 6,000 square meters of land.
- 3.7 OB3's evaluation of the initial phase of the VRP found that the Guardians scheme faced initial delays in becoming established due to COVID-19 restrictions and as a result, a team of eight rather than six Guardians were appointed over a shorter delivery period. Guardians were found to have supported children, families, elderly

⁴ The potential Carmarthenshire site (Llyn Llech Owain) was later secured

people, and community groups to get them involved in environmental volunteering, conservation work, wellbeing walks, creating community gardens, and bushcraft activities.

- 3.8 A range of partner organisations referred people to the scheme including schools, GP clusters, housing associations, Jobcentre Plus, family centres, local councils for volunteer services and hospitals. Participants reported having benefited from improved mental and physical health, improved confidence, increased pride in their local area and gained new skills and qualifications. Local communities also benefited from the conservation and reparation work carried out by local teams.
- 3.9 The Guardians scheme reported several achievements over its first phase of delivery, despite the challenges associated with COVID-19 restrictions. These included:
- nearly 6,000 square metres of land was improved, and 20 kg of waste was removed from public spaces
 - over 100 trees were planted across four heritage orchards at Discovery Gateway sites
 - engagement with 21 community organisations including local authorities, health boards and third sector organisations
 - 113 physical activity sessions were delivered at four Discovery Gateway sites and attended by 459 people
 - a number of volunteers gained Agored Cymru qualifications on growing and environmental conservation projects.
- 3.10 The VRP secured funding via the European Social Fund (ESF) from 2021-23, and it also submitted a successful bid for Rural Development Programme (RDP) funding under Measure 16 which is designed to encourage and support co-operation, and Measure 16.2 specifically to support the delivery of pilot projects in this area. This funding was secured to deliver the Guardians scheme and Groundwork Wales was again appointed to deliver the scheme following a competitive tender process.
- 3.11 The Guardians scheme's second phase received £884,308.83 of funding to deliver a two-year project which commenced in April 2021. The funding was allocated per annum as follows:

Table 3.1 Allocation of Guardians scheme project costs

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Guardians Scheme	£176,982.83	£311,500	£395,826
Overall Total	£884,308.83		

- 3.12 The VRP Guardians scheme for 2021-23 was envisioned with the aim to enhance community involvement and connectivity with the valleys natural and cultural heritage assets, through the provision of a community connectors scheme. It works within the Valleys Regional Park (VRP) area of 570 square miles (917 square kilometers), stretching from the western fringes of Monmouthshire to Carmarthenshire.
- 3.13 The RDP funding bid described how the Guardians scheme's objective during this funding period was to 'better connect communities with their natural and cultural heritage assets, through educational, skills and wellbeing activities.' It aimed to work primarily on collaborative projects mainly within the network of Discovery Gateways, but also in communities themselves. It was developed and part-funded by the VRP and was expected to add value to local skills and physical assets, aligning these to the VRP sense of place and experience.
- 3.14 To achieve the long-term sustainable management of the natural and cultural heritage resources across the VRP, the Guardians scheme was required to adopt and trial new ways of working and embed the principles of Sustainable Management of Natural Resources (SMNR) in its design and its delivery. It was also tasked with trialling innovative ways to engage people, businesses, and organisations to encourage bottom-up collaborative mechanisms so that projects and work packages link coherently and deliver the strategic objectives of the VRP.
- 3.15 The evaluation specification for this study set out seven aims for data collection in relation to the VRP Guardians scheme:

Figure 3.1 VRP Guardians scheme aims set out in the original specification

Aim 1	Increasing valleys residents' involvement in activities (landscape based, not just visiting) in and around the Discovery Gateways (helping DGs become recognised as hubs for health and wellbeing).
--------------	---

Aim 2	Promoting an increased feeling of ownership of and pride in the valleys' natural assets.
Aim 3	Ensuring sustained involvement in those activities (or other environment-based activities) - i.e., that the residents don't simply take part in a short-term project and then leave without trace.
Aim 4	Helping valleys residents to have an increased feeling of wellbeing as a result of being involved in outdoors, nature/landscape-based activities.
Aim 5	Helping engage new volunteers and beneficiaries who will provide sustained support in the maintenance/improvement of the landscapes in and/or around the DG sites.
Aim 6	Enabling residents to take on other projects in their communities – even if just a newfound interest in growing in their own gardens.

3.16 The original tender specification for the Guardians also included a set of outcomes as set out in Figure 3.2 below:

Figure 3.2 Original Guardians outcomes (as set out in the tender document)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local people better connected with local natural assets and heritage through Discovery Centre engagement activities • Local people have a greater sense of pride in the area, positive sense of identity of the Valleys through participation • Increased confidence of local people to engage with the Gateway sites and take ownership of local initiatives • Increased Community Capacity to support & collaborate with Gateways through accredited training & creation of a trained Network of Volunteer Environmental Rangers • Enhanced employability & Enterprise Skills in local communities e.g., promoting opportunities to local people & businesses to provide recreation & tourism facilities at sites, referral to Wales Co-operative, Business Wales • Increased usage of Gateways for health and wellbeing activities at Gateways, through promotion to & collaboration with Connector services e.g., Blaenau Gwent Integrated Wellbeing Network; Blaenau Gwent Physical Activity Network, GP referral networks, Bridgend Mental Health, and Wellbeing forum • Improved health & well-being of local people through engagement activities, eco therapies, greater awareness of natural & cultural assets, improved access to the VRP area

- 3.17 A Theory of Change model was developed at the outset of this evaluation, in collaboration with Groundwork Wales staff, which is intended to reflect the current delivery of the scheme. It sets out the activities undertaken, and the outputs and outcomes expected from the intervention.
- 3.18 This ToC, set out at Figure 3.3., was drafted on the basis of the background documentation (including analysis of the original outcomes, as seen in Annex A) made available by Groundwork Wales and from a workshop session held with the team. It was felt that the outcomes and steer from the VRP for the Guardians project were longer-term and therefore generating a ToC for the two-year funded programme which included more directly attributable programme outcomes was helpful.

Figure 3.3 VP Guardians Scheme 2021–2023 Theory of Change Logic Model

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Programme Outcomes	Long-term outcomes (VRP)
<p>£866K of funding over two years</p> <p>Delivery plan involving ‘tried and tested’ intervention</p> <p>A team of up to seven Guardians with a wide range of skills and experience</p> <p>10 Discovery Gateway sites</p> <p>Referrals from partner organisations</p> <p>Agored Qualifications</p>	<p>Promote opportunities via social media, communication materials and other networking opportunities</p> <p>Engage with community groups and partners to establish referral routes to recruit new beneficiaries</p> <p>Establish beneficiary groups to work at Discovery Gateways</p> <p>Identify opportunities for activities at each Discovery Gateway</p> <p>Organise and deliver environmental improvement activities with groups, schools, and individuals within a DG locality</p> <p>Organise and deliver heritage-based activities with groups, schools, and individuals within a DG locality</p> <p>Organise and deliver health and wellbeing activities (e.g., walking groups and outdoor activities linked to social prescribing sessions)</p> <p>Signpost beneficiaries to further opportunities and support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. of social media posts and communication materials produced No. of community groups/partners engaged Areas of land maintained/improved Amount of waste removed/recycled No. of Big Bocs Bwyd initiatives delivered No. of beneficiaries involved No. of beneficiary volunteer hours secured No. of DG sites delivering activities Hours of training received No. of accreditations/qualifications gained No. of physical activity / wellbeing sessions delivered No. of beneficiaries progressing into employment, volunteering, and training opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local people aware of the work of VRP Guardians and Discovery Gateways Local people engaging in the design and delivery of improvements to landscape Local people feel connected to their local natural assets and heritage Beneficiaries gaining new skills Beneficiaries gaining qualifications/accreditation Beneficiaries progressing into employment Beneficiaries reporting wellbeing/physical health benefits Beneficiaries continue to contribute to improvements in local area after involvement with the Guardians programme 	<p>The Valleys is recognised and celebrated for its green landscape</p> <p>There is greater use of Valleys landscapes for exercise, work, education and access to nature and heritage</p> <p>The Valleys landscape underpins a resilient local economy</p>

4. Delivery of the Guardians scheme

4.1 This chapter draws out some of the key findings from the fieldwork in relation to the Guardians scheme design, delivery, management and promotion, and performance against targets, drawing upon desk-based research and fieldwork with delivery staff and stakeholder organisations.

Design of the scheme

4.2 Staff and stakeholders alike described the design of the Guardians scheme in a similar way – as an approach aimed at providing people with positive outdoor experiences for their wellbeing, education, or careers. It was described as a scheme which aimed to improve the mental wellbeing of individuals, whilst upskilling them, and showcasing the value of the valleys and what was available on their doorstep.

4.3 Whilst the scheme had been designed in such a way that it provided ‘sufficient flexibility’ to adapt, there was a feeling that there had been some shift in the scheme’s objectives early on. Some contributors to the evaluation had noticed this shift and whilst they felt that whilst there was a common understanding of the original objectives of the scheme, the delivery approach had been interpreted differently by funder (i.e., the VRP conveners) and delivery partner (i.e., Groundwork), with further evolution over time. Others explained that any shift in objectives had always been agreed as a result of robust consultation between the VRP and Groundwork. It remained the case, however, that some stakeholders felt that the Guardians scheme had lost focus somewhat:

‘Looking at the spec – what was written, and what’s been delivered – I can’t see how we got here’

‘Are we simply trying to do too many things?’

4.4 There was recognition that the Guardians scheme had morphed into something different to what was originally intended, and there seemed to be several interpretations across the various interviewed stakeholders and staff as to what the objectives of the Guardians scheme should be. Whilst some felt that training should be an integral part of the focus and reflected Groundwork Wales’s core values and objectives, others suggested that there was too much focus on qualifications and eco-literacy rather than engagement:

‘Training and qualifications seem new. The focus was meant to be about developing relationships between people and the environment. Training was meant to be the icing’

‘The pressure on qualifications does kill the programme a bit for some participants’

‘The focus should be on wellbeing rather than on education’

- 4.5 It was also felt that there was an initial different interpretation of where and how the Guardians scheme was intended to operate. Aligning the scheme strictly to working within the Discovery Gateways, soon after the awarding of the tender, was one of the changes made at the behest of the VRP Conveners. It was felt that this worked well where Discovery Gateways were within easy distance of local communities e.g., Bryngarw or Cyfarthfa Park but it had made it more challenging to reach others e.g., Parc Slip. Contributors suggested that communities were losing out as a result of not being within easy reach to a Discovery Gateway.

‘The vision of the VRP gets lost in translation’

‘The convenors have lots of different visions, but I’m not sure there is one coherent one’

- 4.6 More recently, the Guardians had been tasked with supporting the VRP’s Big Bocs Bwyd (BBB) scheme. Again, many stakeholders felt that this was mainly ‘a distraction’ with no clear rationale as to its fit with the Guardians scheme. Whilst the Guardians had the necessary skillsets to deliver the work, more staffing and funding was required to make an impact on this aspect of the work.
- 4.7 Stakeholders generally appreciated the flexibility afforded within the design of the scheme to allow individual Guardians to deliver in a way that worked to their individual passions, skills, and strengths. For example, some Guardians were knowledgeable about history or natural history, whilst another would arrange pond dipping sessions, or teach or share knowledge about various species.

Delivery arrangements

- 4.8 The quarterly progress reports provide detail of the activities taking place at the various Discovery Gateways as part of the Guardians scheme. Examples include:
- ground, ditch, or invasive plant clearance
 - hedging work

- habitat creation
- litter picking
- maintaining or constructing new pathways or fencing
- re-fitting protective guards for heritage fruit trees
- undertaking 'kick surveys' in streams
- eco-literacy – learning about the local environment and tree, animal or bird identification, pond-dipping, and survey work.

- 4.9 Engagement with the scheme does vary according to Discovery Gateway but 8-12 sessions were held between April-June 2022 at several Discovery Gateway sites including Bryngarw Country Park, Cwmcarn Forest Drive, Dare Valley Country Park, and Park Penallta with strong attendance at sessions averaging 8-12. There was strong communication with park rangers at these sites – who provided activities and who are supportive and appreciative of the work being undertaken and feel that it fulfils the needs of each individual Discovery Gateway.
- 4.10 Other Discovery Gateways struggle to attract the same number of participants. For example, Parc Slip delivered three sessions during the same quarter but with low number of volunteers – never more than two at each session. However, those who do attend engage well and are keen to remain involved. Park Bryn Bach had relatively low engagement during the same quarter, but it is a long-running group with well-established working relationships with Discovery Gateway staff. As such there is a core group of 4-5 who regularly attend.
- 4.11 The Guardians team described their continuous improvement approach to the scheme, reacting to trends and needs, and adapting delivery to suit individual participant and Discovery Gateway needs, as necessary.
- 4.12 Some contributors described how the scheme had originally been intended to be delivered as a 10-week intervention but through an evolutionary process, it had become a much more fluid, rolling programme where individuals could join at any point and leave when they wanted to, during the 10 week course. Volunteers can also attend subsequent 10-week courses. It was felt that this responded to the needs of volunteers, reduced the barriers to joining and also helped to embed the Guardians in a given location. However, on speaking with the Guardians

themselves, the delivery model currently being used continued to be described as a 10-week approach:

'I run 10-week courses and ongoing groups as well. Some want more than that and want to keep on volunteering, so I try to signpost them to opportunities'

'It tends to run for 10 weeks. They can sometimes stay longer if they don't feel it is enough'

'No one size fits all and flexibility is needed'

- 4.13 There was evidence of more flexibility in the provision than perhaps was originally intended, and this was generally welcomed by stakeholders as the fluidity of the approach responded better to the needs of the beneficiaries of the project, and enabled individuals to join at any time. For example, sessions attended by participants from Drive Wales at Bryngarw were run as short morning and afternoon sessions for two different groups as this was agreed to be the most appropriate provision for them.
- 4.14 Guardians described their planning approach, working closely with the site managers and rangers of the Discovery Gateway sites to understand what needed doing and what they wished the volunteers to do. Over the course of the scheme thus far, the Guardians have delivered something in all Discovery Gateways, although some have proved easier to hold activities in and to recruit volunteers to than others. Sites such as Caerphilly Castle have proved challenging (due to the fact that there has been limited opportunity to undertake work), as has Llyn Llech Owain (which faced difficulties due to issues surrounding an SSOA area). Each site has been distinct in their approach – some Discovery Gateways want the Guardians to take the lead, whilst others had specific tasks and activities that they wished the Guardians to undertake.

'Each Discovery Gateway is different – and some groups, and some of the links with the Discovery Gateways are working well, and some aren't. A lot depends on the Discovery Gateway staff and the relationship between them and the Guardians'

'Some Discovery Gateways treat the Guardians like rangers and give a list of jobs – so they end up just doing fencing and litter picks so there needs to be a balance'

- 4.15 The Guardians team adapts its delivery approach according to need. For example, at Bryngarw, some shorter two-hour sessions are delivered alongside the traditional Tuesday sessions to provide opportunities for those who could not commit longer hours. Stakeholders also highlighted some of the new and innovative approaches being undertaken by the team – from bat watching, to making elderflower cordial with their volunteers. These sessions are provided to increase engagement.
- 4.16 Some stakeholders suggested that the Monday-to-Friday approach of the Guardians scheme is slightly of an ‘old school mentality’ and that delivering provision during the evenings and on Saturdays might enable the scheme to engage with more and different cohorts of people. The Guardians team has begun to scope some evening and weekend delivery
- 4.17 The Guardians scheme has seen three members of the team moving on during the last three months and it had proved challenging to find suitable staff to appoint in their place due to the current national recruitment challenges. The team consisted, for a short period, of four full time and one part-time member of staff⁵. Staff were generally happy that they could continue to deliver the scheme at this capacity, although they might not be able to cover such a broad area. Team members had increasingly been working individually rather than in pairs, and whilst this was not seen as ideal, the relationships with park staff meant that it worked well, and it is safe to continue in this way. Guardians have always worked across a number Discovery Gateways, to ensure appropriate resource and skills match.
- 4.18 The Guardians team was consistently praised for its hard work, determination, and positive attitude in delivering the scheme:
- ‘The Guardians are flat out’*
- ‘The Guardians work well as a team and support each other’*
- ‘They [the Guardians] are all so positive and engaged and they care. They are a fantastic team’*
- 4.19 During the initial stages of the Guardians scheme, contributors discussed how Groundwork and the VRP convenors would meet regularly. Whilst the meetings

⁵ In more recent months, the Guardians has been able to return to a team of seven in post.

were now being held less often, the communication between them remained good with a strong and positive working relationship. The VRP convenors were seen as responsive to queries and supportive of work that had been developed on the wellbeing and environmental aspects. A few contributors would have appreciated a more hands-on approach from the VRP – with a more focused approach as to how they wanted the Guardians teams to deliver on site or to undertake site visits to better understand how the scheme worked.

Big Bocs Bwyd (BBB)

- 4.20 After a period of consultation, 20 schools showed an interest in developing the food-growing element of the BBB scheme, and the Guardians initially focused on schools which already had a growing area identified, alongside a lead member of staff willing to oversee a growing project. Schools were also required to have a group of volunteers in place.
- 4.21 Seven schools were chosen by the Wellbeing Convenor for the first cohort. Engagement at each school has varied, but the Guardians were able to come in and help volunteers to put an allotment plan together, identify what could be grown and provide advice on what plants would encourage and support wildlife. To date, the Guardians team has worked with five schools and 145 children, teachers, and volunteers. The Guardians have developed a menu of options that they can offer schools, with the schools providing the materials themselves, or accessing the Guardians materials budget if required. Some of the schools already had growing areas, so the work has concentrated on improving and enhancing existing spaces. At other schools, the Guardians are working to restore previous attempts and breathe new life into neglected areas. Feedback from contributors to the evaluation was positive about the ‘good job’ that the Guardians was doing on the Big Bocs Bwyd element of their provision.

Communication and engagement

- 4.22 The main communication and promotional activities reported upon by the Guardians scheme to date include 70 social media and attendance at events such as the Go Wild event at Parc Bryn Bach and the Our Futures Festival at Bridgend College.

- 4.23 Contributors recognised that they probably could do better in their communications and do more to reach out to communities to raise awareness of the Guardians project. Some felt that they had been quite narrow in their approach and that the posters put out by the VRP had not gained much traction. Whilst there is an attempt to utilise social media to highlight the activities of the Guardians, the lack of a dedicated individual with responsibility for the marketing and communications meant that this is often not prioritised. A few felt that the branding of the Guardians is somewhat confusing and does not effectively convey what they are trying to do.
- 4.24 The data provided within the quarterly reports seem to support this view. For example, during Quarter 4 2021/22 only two social media posts were posted – although they did reach 1,055 people. However, during Quarter 3, 11 social media posts were produced reaching over 7,000 people. Quarter 2 of the same year reported 36 social media posts being produced.
- 4.25 In general, contributors felt that the scheme had connected with key partner organisations within the third sector including Community Voluntary Councils (CVCs) such as Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations (GAVO), Bridgend Association of Voluntary Organisations (BAVO) along with Careers Wales, ARC⁶, DRIVE⁷ and other disability and mental health organisations. They had also received referrals from GP surgeries directly, although there was some frustration that nothing more had come from the proposed social prescribing aspect outlined in the original bid.
- 4.26 Several contributors also highlighted the specific targeting of a younger cohort for this two-year scheme, with linkages made with local colleges including Bridgend College and Coleg y Cymoedd. There had been contact with the DWP, to inform them of the provision, but the communication had been minimal.
- 4.27 Some contributors noted that there had been little attempt to foster and develop new contacts through the Guardians scheme, and that they had mainly relied upon existing Groundwork Wales contacts. This was not necessarily considered a negative, as Groundwork Wales is very well-connected in the area. However, some felt that the scheme had not necessarily reached new, diverse groups. With

⁶ Assisted Recovery in the Community provides practical advice, guidance, and structures support for individuals with mental health issues.

⁷ A South Wales based organisation providing innovative support to people with learning disabilities to live their lives within their local community.

Guardian sessions now seeing a slight dip in numbers it was suggested that it might be timely to work on word of mouth engagement and develop new contacts.

'We have engaged with stakeholders – the ones we would have anyway'

'I'm not sure if the stakeholder engagement has been impactful'

5. Progress and achievements to date

5.1 This chapter considers some of the Guardians scheme's achievements to date and the difference made to beneficiaries, drawing upon self-evaluation data, quarterly reports and evidence collected by Groundwork Wales and interviews with beneficiaries undertaken during the mid-term fieldwork phase.

Progress against targets

5.2 The Guardians scheme is making good progress against its targets and reports upon these in its quarterly reports. Delivery against many of the targets has remained high throughout the delivery period, and there is a tangible increase in the achievement of targets as the scheme has progressed and established itself.

5.3 Stakeholders identified the strengths of the Guardians scheme as being managing groups of volunteers to undertake conservation work, getting volunteers involved and feeling comfortable, and forming strong group dynamics.

5.4 Stakeholders were generally aware that the Guardians scheme was exceeding its targets and that things are going well overall. Comments were made about the good quality of the case studies and the digital marketing and promotion associated with the activities.

5.5 Table 5.1 shows the achievements of the Guardians scheme to date. Where targets had been set from the outset, they are included in the table. Additional information collected by the project is also included for information.

Table 5.1 Cumulative achievements of the Guardians scheme
(up to June 2022)⁸

Key Performance Indicator	Target	Achieved to date	% Achieved against target
Contracted targets			
No. of registered beneficiaries	550	680	124%

⁸ The KPIs that are required to be reported upon to the VRP have an associated target. Groundwork Wales also provide data on several additional KPIs, that do not have specific agreed targets, but provide useful output data.

Hours of beneficiary sessions delivered	4,400	7,384	168%
Marketing social media posts published	50	70	140%
No. of Discovery Gateways supported	10	10	100%
Wider, non-contracted targets			
Areas of land improved (m2)	n/a	451,838	n/a
Areas of land maintained/managed (m2)	n/a	213,085	n/a
Beneficiary attended sessions	n/a	418	n/a
No. of Big Bocs Bwyd initiatives delivered	n/a	8 ⁹	n/a
Registrations for Agored qualification units	n/a	120	n/a
No. of accreditations gained	n/a	60	n/a
No. of beneficiaries progressing into employment, volunteering, or training	n/a	89 ¹⁰	n/a

⁹ This figure is to the end of Q1 2022/23

¹⁰ This is the number of progression forms completed to date. Not all beneficiaries fill in a progression form when they leave the scheme.

- 5.6 The environmental outputs in terms of areas of land improved, maintained, or managed by the Guardians scheme to date are substantial. The scheme has also already achieved all the quantifiable outputs set, by a significant margin. In particular, the scheme can demonstrate that it has supported almost 700 individuals to date at 418 sessions across the Discovery Gateways. The hours of support provided has also far exceeded expectations.
- 5.7 Just under a fifth of beneficiaries have signed up for Agored qualifications and 60 accreditations have been achieved. Whilst this is not an insubstantial number, it does suggest that this is not a key driver for participants.
- 5.8 The table below shows how the Guardians scheme has progressed over time. By looking at the figures achieved during each quarter (taken from the quarterly reports), whilst the number of sessions has remained relatively constant, the numbers of participants each quarter have increased (Quarter 4 is likely to be lower due to the winter months covered). The environmental impact of the sessions has increased dramatically during the last six months of reported data, suggesting that the higher number of participants in attendance at sessions, and the scheme finding its feet, has enabled it to cover more ground.

Table 5.2 Progression of targets over last year

	Q2 2021/22	Q3 2021/22	Q4 2021/22	Q1 2022/23
Area of land improved or maintained (m2)	22,633	51,976	164,737	170,325
Number of sessions	148	106	98	100
Number of participants attended	170	313	207	408
Number of Discovery Gateway sites supported	8	6	8	9
Number of hours delivered	2,025	1,277	1,277	1,739

Difference made to beneficiaries

5.8 The Guardians scheme has been effective in reaching a wide range of age groups to take part in activities, as seen in Table 5.3 below. It has been particularly successful in reaching younger cohorts, with a third of all beneficiaries from the 17-24 age group, but it also has broad coverage of all age groups. The younger age groups are as a result of recent BBB activity and will likely increase between now and project end.

Table 5.3 Age range of all registered beneficiaries on the Guardians scheme

All registered beneficiaries	Total
0-5	13
6-9	23
10-16	32
17-24	159
25-34	67
35-44	52
45-54	56
55-64	49
65-74	16
75 +	7
Age not given	19
All	493

- 5.9 The project has also achieved strong gender balance, with 46% of those who have provided the information identifying as female, and 52% as male.

Table 5.4 Gender (sex) of all registered beneficiaries on the Guardians scheme

Gender	Total
Female	207
Male	232
Other	0
Prefer not to say	7
Information not provided	7
All	446

- 5.10 The ethnic background of participants is predominantly white, at 96% of all beneficiaries who provided a response to this question. The Guardians scheme has achieved participation which is in line with the proportions of non-white ethnic groups in the valleys areas where the scheme is delivered. However, had the scheme reached out proactively to this audience a higher percentage than this could possibly be achieved.¹¹

Table 5.5 Ethnic background of all registered beneficiaries on the Guardians scheme

Ethnic background	Total
White British	232
White English	26
White Welsh	134
White Scottish	1
White Irish	1
Other White	5
White & Black Caribbean	5
White & Black African	1
White & Asian	0
mixed Other	0
Asian/Asian British	5
Black/Black British	0
Other Ethnic Origin	3
Unknown	46
All	459

¹¹ Census data from 2011 shows that 96% of all residents in Wales are White, with many of the percentages at their highest in the valleys areas such as RCT (97.4%), Blaenau Gwent (98.5%), Caerphilly (98.4%) and Bridgend (97.9%), NPT (98%) and Carmarthenshire (98%)

- 5.11 Only 22 (5%) of all beneficiaries who provided information stated that they were Welsh speakers which is lower than expected for the area. For example, 11% of Caerphilly residents, 15% of Neath Port Talbot, 43% of Carmarthenshire and 12% of RCT local authority areas are able to speak Welsh (according to the 2011 census). No local authority area in Wales has less than 8-9% Welsh speakers (Blaenau Gwent, Newport, Merthyr Tydfil) suggesting that this is an under-represented group within the scheme.
- 5.12 123 beneficiaries stated that they had a disability representing 26% of all those who responded to this question upon registration, which is significantly higher than the 6% who state that they had a disability in the annual population survey undertaken in Wales in 2022, suggesting that the Guardians scheme has been very effective in reaching this cohort.
- 5.13 In terms of employment status, the scheme has attracted a wide range of individuals, and has been successful in reaching those who are currently unemployed. The data suggests that a third of all beneficiaries taking part in the scheme to date are unemployed as shown in Table 5.6 below.

Table 5.6 Employment status of all beneficiaries to the Guardians scheme

Employment Status	Total
Full-Time	80
Part-Time	39
Self-Employed	13
Retired	27
Unemployed	160
Other	109
Under 16	41
All	469

- 5.14 The data collected from participants as they complete the scheme show that 100% of individuals to date have enjoyed the scheme and would recommend it to family and friends.
- 5.15 To date, 434 of Guardians scheme participants have started a WEMWBS survey and 134 have completed the exit survey (a conversion rate of around a third of all participants). The quarterly reports state that not all volunteers engaging with the Guardians scheme are willing to complete the wellbeing surveys, and that it is also challenging to collect the data at the end of a participant's involvement as people often stop attending with no prior warning.

- 5.16 Some contributors noted that they have seen a pattern of WEMWBS scores recorded being lower at the end of the Guardians intervention – possibly because the volunteers know that their involvement with the scheme is about to end.
- 5.17 For example, at the end of 2021/22 the Quarter 4 quarterly report mentions that whilst 47% of participants showed an increase in their overall wellbeing, 53% felt that their overall wellbeing had decreased. It is not clear why this is the case, although staff felt that stresses within individuals' personal life could affect how they felt on the day of filling in the form, or the (wintery) weather during the period could also be a reason for the results.
- 5.18 In terms of Outcome STARs data, 419 participants have started using this tool and 147 have been completed (a completion rate of 35%).
- 5.19 Outcome Star Data is available from 31 outcome star readings completed between April 2022 and June 2022. Of these, 90% of participants feel better at the end of their participation in the Guardians scheme. 100% of participants also stated an improvement against the 'getting to know people' criteria. During Quarter 4 of 2021/22 the Outcomes star results showed a relatively similar pattern to the WEMWBS survey (suggesting they are outlier findings compared to previous quarters and data collected since).
- 5.20 Progression to employment is currently recorded on forms when individuals leave the scheme. Not all participants choose to fill in this form and many leave without prior warning, which suggests that these achievements might be under-reported by the project. Data on the numbers progressing into employment, volunteering, or training has not been made available to us and these outcomes will need to be explored in more detail in the final evaluation report. Some examples are provided in the quarterly reports. For example, the quarterly reports state that of those participants who joined during Quarter 1 of the Guardians scheme, four individuals have since entered employment whilst one individual has gone on to participate in another programme. One participant has also enrolled on a full-time education course.
- 5.21 Improvement to wellbeing and mental health was seen as a key benefit to the beneficiaries of the Guardians scheme and staff highly involved in the delivery concurred that volunteers had experienced improvements in their mental health as a result:

‘Everyone that comes to the sessions that [Guardian name] works on says that they really enjoy it, and it really improves their mental wellbeing...it highlights why the scheme is needed’

5.22 Guardians saw how being part of a group of people working towards a common aim was powerful as it developed a sense of achievement and camaraderie as well as boosting confidence and improving physical and mental wellbeing. Some stakeholders, whilst certain that wellbeing benefits are being achieved by the scheme, felt that they were not being sufficiently captured at the moment and that there was a challenge facing the scheme in being able to record, and therefore demonstrate this impact fully.

5.23 Guardians described how one of the unintended benefits of the scheme was the intergenerational interaction between volunteers, which was seen as particularly beneficial to young volunteers who are long term unemployed (LTE):

‘Having a 20 year old working shoulder to shoulder with a retiree – that generational stuff is more valuable than a qualification. The bigger problem for LTE younger people is not qualifications it is a lack of experience of working with and alongside a range of people who have different life experiences to you. It’s about learning to get along with people who are different to you. That’s the stuff that’s pretty intangible’

5.24 Similarly, Guardians also felt that the wellbeing and mental health benefits of taking part in the scheme are powerful for individuals:

‘A programme like Guardians can’t fix employment issues in deprived areas. But it can improve the mental health of someone without a job. It can give people a sense of purpose – something to do and somewhere to go’

‘Engaging with nature helps when you are in no job, a shit job or a great job’

‘Being here working in the outdoors really lifts my spirits’

‘I’ve been messed up with sleep patterns and struggled to get out of bed in time. I’m feeling a lot healthier now and ready to start again’

5.25 The Guardians scheme also allows for participants to learn about the environment. For examples, a group of participants undertaking a survey within a local stream collected invertebrates and small creatures into trays to be observed, identified, and recorded. As such, the participants learn about the biodiversity in the rivers and help Discovery Gateways in their ongoing monitoring of local biodiversity:

'I really enjoyed getting in the river today and seeing those amazing creatures'

'It was fantastic to see a live crayfish, they really look like something from out of space'

5.26 Stakeholders thought that the Guardians scheme was supporting skills development and the achievement of accredited training. The Guardians themselves felt that there are also benefits from sharing skills and experiences with the volunteers. It was hoped that some of those individuals would develop their skills further out of personal interest which could, in future, lead to getting them back into work, further improve their mental health or ensure they lived more sustainably.

'I'm looking forward to learning new skills'

'I've enjoyed using the power tools'

5.27 At Llyn Llech Owain park for example, eighteen young people who were supported by Carmarthenshire's youth team were registered for a 10-week course devised around a series of Agored Cymru qualifications. Of the 18 participants registered, eleven completed the course, with 17 units delivered.

5.28 Specific Discovery Gateways (such as Parc Bryn Bach and Bryngarw) were particularly complementary about the interaction between the Guardians and local authority staff such as rangers or biodiversity officers. Stakeholders praised the way that the Guardians had raised awareness of the Discovery Gateways in their areas, and the biodiversity within them:

'They are doing a great job of getting people involved in activities'

'It has allowed the VRP to bring something into communities and into the Discovery Gateways'

'The Guardians scheme...[is] making a real difference to people's lives'

5.29 The case studies below, based on conversations held with beneficiaries as part of our fieldwork during the mid-term evaluation phase, demonstrate some of the individual stories, and the benefits realised from taking part in the Guardians scheme:

Case study 1

John*

John had been a director at a large firm and had worked for the government and other companies before finally retiring.

Looking for something to do with his time during retirement, as he enjoys being busy, an acquaintance sent him details of the Guardians volunteering sessions.

He thoroughly enjoys the sessions. He loves working in the outdoors and the work they do. He has now created five walking sticks during craft sessions and has also been able to utilise his engineering skills to help replace a bridge at the park. He was able to draw up the plans and work out the quantities of materials they would need.

Attending the sessions have given him a new lease of life. He had been retired for a year when he joined the group and was not happy but coming along to the sessions once a week makes him feel like he can cope with whatever else life throws at him.

Case study 2

Sam*

Sam suffers from depression and is unemployed. He has previously run his own business but lost it as a result of a marriage break up and his depression. He has tried other employment, but his mental health makes it hard to retain a job.

He was signposted to the Guardians sessions by a support worker. He has been attending for about 5 or 6 weeks now.

He doesn't really enjoy coming along. He understands that he needs to get out more and try to do things, but he finds it hard with his depression and doesn't really want to do anything.

He enjoys many of the activities once he's here however, especially those that involve walking such as litter picking or pulling Himalayan Balsam. These also give him an opportunity to pick the blackberries!

Sam will continue to attend but his depression is such that he can't see much of a future for himself.

Case study 3

Peter*

Peter is a young man who has left school but wants to go to college.

He contacted BAVO to look for some volunteering opportunities and when he mentioned his appetite to undertake environmental activities, he was told to contact Groundwork. When he rang them, he was told about the Guardians scheme and invited to come along. He has been attending for over a year now.

He likes the work they do and being in the outdoors. He enjoys working with other people and helping to improve things. He particularly enjoyed building a fence and some raised beds. He also likes building and tending to the fire.

He enjoys getting to know other people and helping out. Peter says he feels happier meeting and interacting with other people now. It has made him more confident, and he is about to start his college course in painting and decorating.

When he starts his new course, he hopes to keep involved with the group, even if he can only come during college breaks.

Case study 4

Haydn*

Haydn, who's 50, has been participating in the Guardians scheme every Thursday for the last year or so. He lives about a mile away and doesn't drive, so he cycles there.

His interest started about 25 years ago and he volunteered with Groundwork at the time and got a lot out of it. At the time there was a huge amount of activity, and Groundwork were on site for at least 3 years, doing some amazing work. He thinks it's a wonderful site and an ideal place for a picnic or to quietly reflect on things.

Haydn is currently doing a bricklaying course four days a week during term time at Merthyr College. He has completed a City and Guilds level 1 qualification and has been promised an apprenticeship with a local firm once he's finished his course.

He really enjoys the sessions and has attended every session, rain, or shine. He would like to see a larger volunteering group at the Discovery Gateway and then they would make a real mark!

Case study 5

Dave*

Dave is in his early 20s and is not in employment or training. He was told about the Guardians scheme by his support worker at ARC who also attends the sessions with him. He was initially anxious about coming along but gave it a go and now enjoys it.

He was keen to improve his communication skills as he feels he's quite shy and doesn't really like talking to people. However, he settled into the group quickly and now enjoys coming along and really feels part of something. He thinks that participating has really helped him in this regard.

He studied agriculture at college and the work they have been doing in the sessions have reminded him of a lot of what he learned there, so he has enjoyed putting some of what he learned into practice. He loves the things they learn during the sessions, not only from the work they are doing but all the facts that the Guardians share with them as well.

Dave remains unsure about what he wants to do in the future but attending the sessions has brought him out of his shell and he finds it much easier to speak to people now, so hopes this will help him, going forward.

Difference made to Discovery Gateways

5.30 The scheme is seen as adding value to a number of Discovery Gateways, with the volunteers in essence providing an additional workforce to park staff, to enable them to get more environmental work done than would otherwise be the case. Some stakeholders felt that the main achievement of the Guardians scheme was the amount of land that would be improved during its funding period. Footpath access, rubbish collected from sites, created, or improved woodland and grassland had all been achieved to date.

‘Very rewarding session today’

‘To actually finish a gate section was a good feeling’

5.31 It was suggested that the scheme ‘went in heavy’ in some areas without mapping out existing groups and activities. Whilst a few stakeholders alluded to these initial ‘teething problems,’ and ‘disgruntled’ individuals, particularly in Discovery Gateways where ‘Friends of’ groups were already established, they felt that these issues had been quickly ironed out.

5.32 It was suggested that had the scheme been more focused on delivering within the community, a wider valleys footprint could have been achieved, with more provision available within walking distance of local, disadvantaged communities. There was also a view that, possibly as a result of Groundwork’s existing, strong links in some areas such as Caerphilly and Bridgend, that the focus of activities had been too narrowly focused on those areas, rather than being more widely available across the whole of the VRP footprint.

5.33 The data collected from beneficiaries in terms of their county of residence supports the perception above, as shown in Table 5.7 below. 80% of all beneficiaries of the Guardians scheme to date are from just five local authorities (Bridgend, Merthyr Tydfil, Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent, and Rhondda Cynon Taf). Indeed, almost half of all beneficiaries are from just two local authorities (Bridgend and Rhondda Cynon Taf). This suggests that the requirement placed upon the Guardians (by the VRP) shortly after its inception, to concentrate activity within Discovery Gateways, has negatively impacted on its ability to reach beneficiaries across the VRP area. For example, the scheme has been asked not to work at the Discovery Gateways in Torfaen and Neath Port Talbot due to a lack of infrastructure and in Carmarthenshire they have been asked to only deliver two projects. As such, it is not surprising that most clients are from the five local authorities where Gateways are concentrated.

Table 5.7 Guardians scheme beneficiaries by county of residence

County	Total
Blaenau Gwent	34
Bridgend	128
Caerphilly	79
Cardiff	13
Carmarthenshire	31
Merthyr Tydfil	49
Monmouthshire	2
Neath Port Talbot	8
Newport	20
Rhondda Cynon Taf	101
Swansea	3
Torfaen	11
Vale of Glamorgan	8
Total	487

5.34 Feedback from stakeholders in relation to the difference made by the scheme was overwhelmingly positive, with the Guardians concept consistently described as one of the biggest successes of the VRP to date:

‘The biggest achievement of the VRP has been...the work of the Guardians...but this has only just started – there’s a lot to do’

‘The Guardians scheme has been very useful and made a significant impact – but this should be available across the whole of the VRP’

6. Priorities for the future

6.1 This chapter sets out the key findings from the fieldwork on the priorities for the VRP Guardians between now and March 2023.

6.2 Stakeholders agreed that the Guardians scheme was set to achieve its targets, but its legacy was likely to be limited without further funding. It was deemed unlikely that many of the projects would continue independently, and specialist skills are needed to deliver the activities.

‘It’s a shame – we will lose some amazing staff with amazing skills who can engage with people and build confidence’

6.3 Many stakeholders felt that they would like to build on the work already undertaken by the Guardians, to further add value to the Discovery Gateways in particular. Others felt that the Guardians scheme could easily be broadened to a wider area, with scope to work within communities. There was an opinion amongst contributors that whilst the Guardians had managed to achieve what it had set out to achieve during the two years of funding, it had the potential for so much more and that a lot of economic impact and support against ongoing social issues had yet to be realised:

‘We could have a legacy – developed social enterprises and employment opportunities that would have made a difference’

‘If there was another three years, we could replicate best practice and build good relationships in the local community’

6.4 Contributors felt that additional capital resources in the budget might have enabled them to travel to some of the more isolated Discovery Gateways, whilst others remained convinced that the scheme should not have focused on Discovery Gateways and been delivered at a more community-level in order to achieve greater sustainability. Some contributors also felt that better accredited training, such as City and Guilds or LANTRA qualifications might have helped some volunteers become more employable than utilising Agored training.

6.5 In the time remaining for the Guardians scheme, staff were keen to continue to work on building up the relationships with park rangers, park staff and existing 'Friends of' groups at the Discovery Gateways to explore opportunities for volunteers to continue as part of that community. There was optimism that some sort of legacy could be secured in some places, such as Cwmcarn and Cyfarthfa, where the relationship had been established or was continuing to develop. In many of these instances, the Discovery Gateways were already being run by volunteers under trust arrangements. In other areas, the focus remained on embedding the work of the Guardians in the Discovery Gateways. Opportunities for more cross-park working during the final stages of the scheme were also being explored.

6.6 Feedback from stakeholders about what the future of the Guardians scheme could look like generally fell into one of two categories:

6.7 There were several stakeholders of the view that whilst the Guardians scheme had been successful, there had to be some acknowledgement now that funding post March 2023 would be difficult to achieve:

'Whilst I'm a firm supporter...it will be challenging to maintain the budget for the Guardians in full'

'It will finish in March and as far as I can see, there are no plans for the future'

6.8 Other stakeholders felt that there might be a glimmer of hope if the Guardians scheme could be integrated into the future developments of the National Nature Service (NNS), playing a key role in developing links with the Discovery Gateways and across the VRP region:

'Is there a role for the Guardians in the NNS?'

'The NNS initiative is a cracking idea which could secure money for the continuation of the Guardians'

7. Conclusions and recommendations

- 7.1 This chapter sets out our conclusions on the work of the VRP Guardians scheme to date and makes recommendations for the remaining funding period.
- 7.2 The Guardians scheme has been an important component of the VRP's activity within the valleys footprint in which it delivers, from the outset. This two-year funding secured via the RDP has embedded the Guardians further at the Discovery Gateways. It is a scheme that is well-known by a range of strategic stakeholders who view it as a success. There is agreement as to what the Guardians scheme is aiming to achieve – to connect people with nature and the environment. However, there is evidence of early adaptations and an evolving interpretation of how the scheme should be delivered. The funder had firm ideas that the Guardians scheme needed to be focused on Discovery Gateways, whilst the delivery organisation, Groundwork had always anticipated that it would be delivered in more community settings. It is also apparent that over time, there has been a greater emphasis placed upon education and qualification outcomes than was originally anticipated.
- 7.3 Original documents focus on delivering heritage-based and health and wellbeing activities, yet the programme seems to increasingly prioritise education and qualification elements that did not feature as prominently in the original approach. Perhaps this is conveyed most clearly by a quote from a contributor to the evaluation:

'So now it's a programme about environmental benefits AND upskilling AND education AND improving wellbeing'

- 7.4 One clear example of this is the absolute focus for the delivery of the Guardians scheme via Discovery Gateways. This does not reflect what was originally expected of the programme, but the team has worked hard to make this work. In areas where the Discovery Gateways provide obvious opportunities for environmental work, and where they are close to communities, this approach has been successful. It has proven much harder to make the approach work in other areas, where the location of the Discovery Gateways does not make them easily accessible to the very communities that the project is trying to reach. As such, the activity of the Guardians has not always been able to be undertaken in the communities that it would wish to, and there are areas of the valleys footprint that have not benefited as much as they could from the scheme.
- 7.5 This is of no fault of the Guardians team themselves. The evidence clearly points to a team of dedicated, knowledgeable, and passionate team who have utilised many innovative ways to deliver activity that aims to achieve the Guardians objectives. The team has also adapted its delivery approach over time, constantly reflecting on what works and what could be improved and removing barriers to participation by providing flexibility to the planned 10-week intervention approach and allowing beneficiaries to join as and when they want, and to remain on the scheme for as long as is required. Whilst the Big Bocs Bwyd programme is another addition to the scheme that was not set out originally, Groundwork Wales has developed an approach that seems to be useful and valued by the schools which have engaged thus far.
- 7.6 The Guardians scheme has undoubtedly already been successful in achieving all its measured outputs. It can point to substantial areas of land within Discovery Gateways that have been improved or maintained. Feedback from key stakeholders from some of the Discovery Gateways in which it has been most active also point to the difference and value added that this additional capacity has made.

- 7.7 Communication and engagement has not been a major focus of the scheme, and whilst the scheme has achieved the number of social media posts it was required to deliver and has reached out to a range of partner organisations, there are few newly forged relationships, due to the substantial partnership working already in play at Groundwork Wales, and referrals from the health sector or via employability schemes have not been as forthcoming as was originally envisaged.
- 7.8 The scheme has managed to support more beneficiaries than originally planned, suggesting that it will overachieve by some margin by programme end. The scheme has managed to attract a more diverse group of individuals to become involved in the scheme over time and that Groundwork Wales has strong relationships with referring agents who work and support those who are unemployed and disabled people, and this is a real strength of the approach, but it could benefit from similar collaborations with ethnic minority groups and Welsh speaking communities. The Guardians scheme has been mainly delivered to beneficiaries from five local authorities rather than from the wider footprint of the VRP, following the focus asked by the Convenors team. It will be important for the final evaluation to look in more detail at the background of beneficiaries and to consider the way in which the scheme has achieved the RDPs cross-cutting objectives, particularly in terms of equal opportunities, gender mainstreaming and tackling poverty.
- 7.9 The scheme is clearly making a difference to those beneficiaries which it has supported to date. Our case studies and the self-evaluation information collected by the scheme consistently demonstrate the benefits to individual's mental health and wellbeing. Many of the benefits seem to be softer outcomes – a feeling of belonging, an increase in confidence, and a renewed sense of purpose – but these should not be under-appreciated. It will be important for the scheme to capture as much evidence of this as possible between now and funding end, particularly as some of the outputs and outcomes are probably being under-reported at present due to several factors such as early leavers or non-completion of monitoring forms.
- 7.10 There is emerging evidence of success in terms of beneficiaries progressing to employment or education at the end of their tenure with the Guardians, but more evidence needs to be captured to report on the full impact of this.

- 7.11 The scheme comes to an end in five months' time and the bleak winter months are ahead which often pose challenges for environmental-based delivery and in attracting participation. The project has done well to recruit replacements for the remaining delivery period, but it could become increasingly difficult to maintain capacity as the project nears the end of its funding.
- 7.12 Whilst contributors raise some options in terms of future funding possibilities for the Guardians scheme, there is certainly no guarantee that further funding will be secured from March 2023. As such, the recommendations below have been designed with this in mind – taking a pragmatic approach to what can be achieved under the circumstances.
- 7.13 We make the following recommendations at this mid-term point:

Recommendation 1: With five months remaining, the Guardians should consolidate their activity at the locations where they are able to continue to deliver.

Recommendation 2: Focussing on the Discovery Gateways that are easily accessible to local communities, the Guardians scheme should utilise the remaining period of the funding to build in as much sustainability as possible to the provision, building links with rangers and integrating activities with existing volunteer groups on site so that opportunities for existing beneficiaries can continue post funding.

Recommendation 3: For the final evaluation report, the Guardians scheme should concentrate on building up as much data and evidence as possible to demonstrate the full impact achieved. This should include a number of self-evaluation case studies that outline the various benefits achieved by individuals particularly the softer outcomes and those relating to mental health and wellbeing.

Recommendation 4: A focus on capturing WEMWBS and Outcome Star data should be prioritised during the final stage of the scheme, with the aim of understanding the possible anomalies identified, where wellbeing measurements decrease over time. This can be achieved by follow-up informal, one-to-one interviews with beneficiaries, to explore the reasons and context to their answers where possible.

Recommendation 5: The Guardians scheme should ensure that data and evidence against the RDP cross-cutting objectives is captured for reporting in the

final evaluation report. It should focus on capturing evidence of equality and gender mainstreaming and tackling poverty. The independent evaluation research instruments should also focus on capturing this information.

Recommendation 6: Further exploration of possible funding opportunities should be considered, in partnership with the VRP at this stage. In particular, the possibilities of integrating elements of the Guardians scheme and/or its key learning into the proposed National Nature Service should continue to be investigated.

Annex A: Topic guide for VRP Guardians Delivery Staff and Stakeholders

A: Background

1. What is your current role?
2. In what way have you been involved with the current VRP Guardians project?
 - Nature and duration of involvement
 - Any involvement with the previous pilot project

B: Aims of the project

3. What do you understand to be the aims and objectives of the Guardians project?
 - What is it trying to achieve by March 2023, and beyond that?
 - To what extent are these priorities appropriate?
 - How does the current project differ to the pilot project? What lessons have been taken on board?

C: Design and Rationale

4. What are your views about why the Guardians project is needed?
 - What issues is it trying to tackle?
 - To what extent has the project been designed in a way that allows it to address these issues effectively?
 - What contribution is it expected to make to the VRP programme?
 - What if anything, needs to be changed to make it work better?

D: Delivery Arrangements

5. [\[staff only\]](#) How appropriate is the **delivery structure** for the Guardians project?
Probe re:
 - staffing capacity and expertise
 - governance and management structures
 - monitoring, evaluation, and reporting arrangements
 - relationship between Groundwork Wales and funding body
6. [\[stakeholders only\]](#) How well has Groundwork managed and delivered the programme?

7. [staff only] How appropriate is the structure of the provision made available to participants? Probe re:
 - 10-week intervention structure
 - approach taken at different Discovery Gateway sites
8. How appropriate is the nature of the interventions made available by the project? Probe around:
 - environmental conservation activities
 - wellbeing, nature, and walking activities
 - social prescribing activities
 - Big Bocs Bwyd
 - training and development opportunities such as the Agored accreditation
9. What is working well in the way that Guardians is being delivered?
 - What added value [if any] is achieved in Groundwork Wales's involvement in the delivery of the Valleys Regional Park programme?
10. What, if anything, could be improved about the way the Guardians is being delivered?

E: Communication and engagement

11. How effectively has the Guardians project **engaged and communicated** with:
 - the community and the public?
 - stakeholder organisations?
12. What communication and recruitment methods have worked well?
 - Which partners refer participants into the project? Which don't and why?
 - How effective has any direct recruitment of participants been i.e., via direct promotional activities?
13. To what extent is the Guardians project engaging with and recruiting the most appropriate individuals? Probe re:
 - geographical location (i.e., approach at different DG sites)
 - need for types of support – health, wellbeing, employability
14. How could communication and recruitment be improved or be done differently in the remaining period?
15. How well has engagement with stakeholder organisations worked?
 - Probe re: Discovery Gateways; health and social care partners; CfW+
 - What accounts for the different levels of engagement across DG sites?

16. What improvements could be made to the Guardians project's engagement with partners?

17. What challenges have been faced in ensuring strong engagement between the Guardians project and key stakeholders?

- Are there any gaps?
- How have these challenges been overcome?

E: Benefits and difference made

18. How is the Guardians project making a difference to those individuals who are supported by it? Probe re:

- wellbeing and mental health
- physical health
- skills development
- training opportunities and qualifications
- employability and progression into employment

What evidence do you have of these differences?

19. How sustainable are these benefits to the individual in the longer term in your opinion?

- How are participants supported after engaging with the project?
- How well are they being supported?
- How could this be improved?

20. What would you say are the project's main achievements to date?

- [staff only] How well has the project been achieving its KPIs?
- What accounts for good or under performance?

21. In what way does the Guardians programme contribute to the VRP's vision?

- Probe for evidence about the difference made to
 - levels of awareness about natural heritage landscape
 - use of Valleys landscape facilities
 - peoples' health and wellbeing
- Probe for evidence of contribution to wider policies and priorities for the region?

E: Lessons learned and the future

22. To what extent do you think the Guardians programme will have achieved its aims and objectives by March 2023?

23. What are the key lessons learned from the delivery of the Guardians programme to date, that could inform the remaining period of delivery?

- What should be the key priorities?

24. What lessons can be learned from the delivery of the Guardians programme that could inform any potential future provision post March 2023?

- What good practice could be adopted or replicated in future?

Thank and close

Annex B: Participant Case study template

Background and introduction

Tell me about

- Yourself (education, work, interests, family)

B: Getting involved with the Guardians project

- How did you hear about the Guardians project/specific opportunity? Were you referred to the project by another organisation?
- Why did you get involved with the Guardians project?
- What were you hoping to achieve from the programme [as a participant/volunteer]?

C: Services accessed

In what way have you been involved with the Guardians project?

- Where did you become involved? [check which Discovery Gateway]
- What has been the nature of any activities/volunteering you've undertaken?
- What type of support and advice accessed/shared?
- What has been the nature of any training accessed/shared?
- Ask about duration, who delivered it, what equipment was used etc

What have you gained/learnt from your involvement with the Guardians project?

- What new skills or knowledge have you gained?
- Have you since used these new skills or knowledge in any way since?
- [if relevant] What qualifications have you achieved?
- How helpful will these/have these new qualifications been to you?
- What other benefits have you experienced [probe around softer outcomes e.g., meeting new people, getting out of the house, spending more time outdoors, gaining confidence etc]

What are your views on the quality and relevance of the activities and support accessed?

- What are your views on the quality and knowledge of the Guardians?
- What has gone well?
- What could have been improved?

D. Difference made

What difference, if any, has your involvement with the Guardians project made to you?

Ask about any difference to:

- skills which are relevant to your work and life:
 - What new skills have you learnt?
 - How are you applying these new skills in your work and everyday life [if at all]?
- Your health and wellbeing:
 - in what way has your involvement with the project helped to improve your physical health and/or mental wellbeing?
 - To what extent have you continued to implement these improvements [if at all]?
- Your understanding of the local environment:
 - In what way has your involvement with project helped to increase your appreciation of the local area and its environment?
 - To what extent have you continued to be involved in activities that improve your local area?

E. The future

In what way do you anticipate being engaged with the programme in the future?

- Were you signposted to any further support or advice?
- Did you progress into employment, training, or volunteering work? If so, how important was the Guardians project in helping you progress into this opportunity?
- What further support/training would you like to receive? In what way would that support, or training help you in the future?