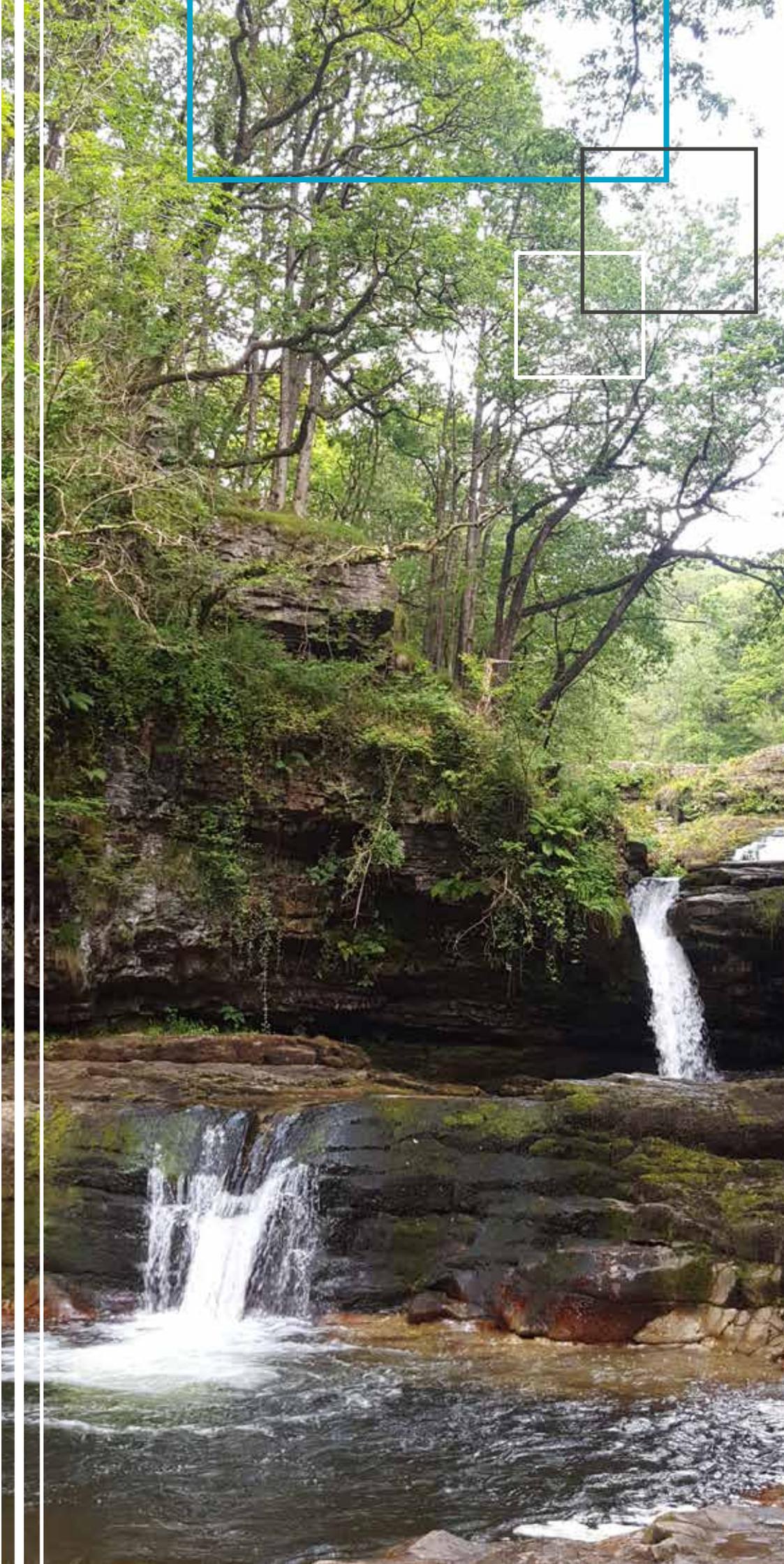
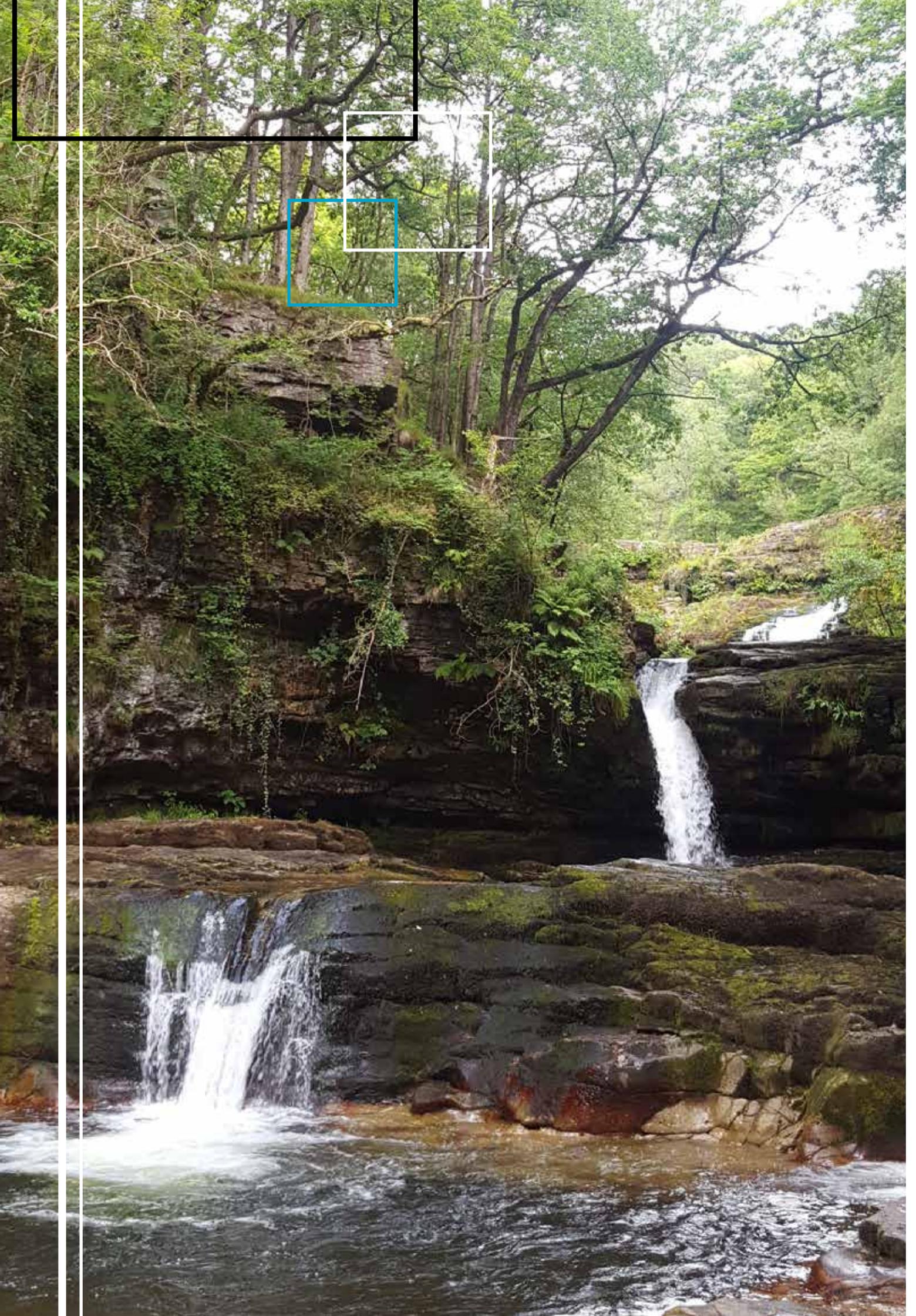


# NEATH PORT TALBOT

Mid-term evaluation of the LEADER programme

JULY 2020





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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The LEADER programme supports people to improve and develop their own rural communities. In Neath Port Talbot (NPT), the Regenerate NPT partnership coordinates and manages the programme which seeks to deliver the Local Development Strategy, with a focus on four high level strategic aims:

### **VIBRANT NPT:**

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

### **ENTERPRISING NPT:**

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

### **ACCESSIBLE NPT:**

Improving access to basic services, considering new, innovative and sustainable ways of supporting individuals to over-come barriers and reach their full potential.

### **GREEN NPT:**

Maximising the potential for the green economy in NPT including development of all aspects of renewable energy at a community level and the promotion of eco-tourism.

LEADER programmes require and benefit from a mid-term and final evaluation process. This mid-term evaluation presents a valuable opportunity to learn from success, and respond to challenges. It is based on an understanding of the LEADER programme at EU, Wales and local level alongside research and stakeholder engagement. At this mid-point in the programme despite an underspend and with some of the projects yet to complete, the programme is on course to meet and exceed the Performance Indicators agreed with Welsh Government.

NPT LEADER to date at a glance:

- **19 projects have been supported.**
- **The Programme has invested £947,720 in projects**
- **£261,910 of match funding has been secured, bringing the total amount directly invested in the NPT rural area to £1.2 million.**
- **2889 beneficiaries have been supported.**

This evaluation explores the current efficiency and effectiveness of the programme through a robust process which has resulted in the following recommendations.

- **Update the Local Development Strategy to ensure the programme is based on a strong foundation.**
- **Work in partnership to explore and establish new strategic themes which align with the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act and the needs identified in the updated Local Development Strategy.**
- **Pilot a commissioning based approach that reflects the aspirations of the LEADER programme and supports the key principle of a 'bottom up' approach.**
- **Tackle the issue around funding in arrears by considering a two tier system**
- **Realign the role of the RDP Team to work in and with the community.**
- **Continue to hone, develop and enhance the application and project processes.**
- **Reshape the role of the LAG.**
- **Develop a targeted promotion and marketing strategy.**



## INTRODUCTION

In October 2019, Pleydell Smithyman and Red Box Research were commissioned to undertake mid-term and final evaluations of the LEADER programme in Neath Port Talbot. The overarching aim of the commission was to evaluate the delivery of the LEADER programme against the aims and objectives of the Local Development Strategy to measure the impact of the programme in rural Neath Port Talbot.

The importance of independent evaluation has long been a requirement of publicly funded programmes. This enables a view to be given on the accountability of the partnership in discharging public funding and on lessons learnt which can be factored into future planning.

The emphasis of this mid-term evaluation report is to evaluate the process of delivering the Rural Development Programme locally. The Brief was clear, with a requirement to assess:

- The Local Development Strategy: how well activities align with the strategy; its continued relevance in the context of changing socio-economic circumstances and whether its priorities are being delivered through initiatives other than the LEADER programme.
- Process and administration: The effectiveness of the Local Action Group's delivery and management of the programme.
- Monitoring and evaluation: The suitability of the systems in place and additional indicators developed.
- Forward planning: Provide recommendations to form the direction for the remaining period of the programme and explore ways in which LEADER activities can contribute towards the National Wellbeing Indicators for Wales.
- Cross cutting themes: Assess the extent to which the programme has delivered against the cross-cutting themes.

## METHOD OF APPROACH

Our approach was based on an evaluation framework which was developed at the start of the process (and is available as a separate document). This links the key questions of the evaluation to the activities required to meet those objectives, and to explain why those tasks were undertaken and how the information collected responded to the evaluation questions. An engagement strategy was developed which comprised of:

**An inception workshop** which focused on ensuring a shared understanding of the evaluation process and the role of stakeholders throughout the lifetime of the project. (18 participants).

A programme of **meetings and face to face interviews** with LAG members to enable an informed discussion of the findings of the process to date (9 interviews).

**Face to face and telephone interviews** with project leads to gain their views and experience of the overall LEADER process from application to final claims (9 interviews). 3 of these interviewees were also members of the LAG.

**Interviews/discussions** with staff from the RDP Team.

**Online surveys** of past and present LAG members and Project Leads to gain a quantitative perspective on the programme.

**Desk-based research** to assess the strategic context for action and the alignment of the Local Development Strategy with key policy developments, including the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Analysis of key data was also undertaken to better understand the way in which socio-economic conditions have changed since the original Local Development Strategy was developed.

## **STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT**

The report has been structured to support informed decision making to plan for the future of the LEADER programme in Neath Port Talbot. It summarises:

- The design and delivery of the programme and resulting constraints and opportunities.
- The aspirations of the programme, how they were developed and what they sought to achieve.
- The roles of the LAG, Lead Authority and the RDP Team.
- The effectiveness and relevance of the Local Development Strategy.
- The impact of the funding programme in Neath Port Talbot.
- The strategic context that the LEADER programme operates in.
- The efficiency of the current delivery model.
- How project monitoring and evaluation is undertaken and its effectiveness.
- Strategic recommendations for the future.



## DESIGN & DELIVERY OF THE PROGRAMME

### INTRODUCTION

To effectively evaluate the success of the LEADER programme in Neath Port Talbot we need to understand how the programme has been designed and delivered. This chapter also considers the role of Regenerate NPT and how this has been shaped by both local needs and the limitations of the LEADER funding. It explores what LEADER is seeking to achieve in the context of EU, Wales and Neath Port Talbot, establishing a baseline to understand the successes and failures of the programme.

### ABOUT LEADER

*The term LEADER is the French acronym for "Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale" meaning, links between the rural economy and development actions.*

The LEADER 2014 - 2020 programme is funded through the Rural Development Plan for Wales (RDP) as part of the Welsh Government and European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. Responsibility for the management and delivery of LEADER has been devolved to local areas via a LEADER partnership, known as a Local Action Group (LAG). Local Action Groups are the main mechanism for the application of the LEADER approach directly involving local representatives in the development and delivery of local strategies, decision-making and resource allocation. The added value of this approach should bring local empowerment through local strategy development, delivery and resource allocation.

The existing rural partnership, 'Regenerate NPT' supports the role of the LAG in Neath Port Talbot. Regenerate NPT successfully secured **£2,156,000** of LEADER funding in 2014 to support the delivery of innovative projects that address the key challenges facing rural Neath Port Talbot.

## FIGURE 1:

Seven key features of LEADER



As illustrated in figure 1, LEADER is based on seven principles - all of which must come together for it to be successful. In sum, LEADER is a method to support rural development initiated at the local community level in order to improve the quality of life and prosperity through locally driven initiatives and projects. It is underpinned by the principle that local people are best placed to understand the challenges their communities face and are able to mobilise resources in a way that does not happen in a traditional 'top down' approach.

### DESIGN OF THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

The Local Development Strategy (LDS) is an essential component of the LEADER approach, mapping a development path that reflects local assets and opportunities, resources and aspirations. In the LDS choices have to be made to focus on base objectives that add value to what already exists and have the most chance of contributing to the change the Local Action Group wants to see.

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

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

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

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

**Theme 4:** Renewable energy at community level.

**Theme 5:** Exploitation of digital technology.

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



Following a Welsh Government template, the RDP Team developed its Local Development Strategy (LDS) to tackle these issues and harness opportunities for change. The main aim of the Regenerate NPT Strategy is: **Working together to make our Valleys more accessible, vibrant and enterprising.**

Embodying the principles of LEADER, a comprehensive evidence base was developed in 2014, funded through RDP Axis 4. The project worked with rural communities including residents, businesses, farmers, organisations working within rural wards, and elected representatives to identify what activities were wanted in relation to each of the above themes. The project was a truly 'bottom up' approach based on place-based consultations and partnerships with local organisations. It engaged over 700 people representative of different ages, genders and ethnicities.

However, whilst the approach involved genuinely close working with local communities to identify needs and priorities, it did not identify the levels of local capacity and support required to be able to deliver and sustain projects. This has proved to be an issue going forward and the capacity of local communities and organisations to drive forward initiatives needs to be considered in any future funding bid.

A SWOT analysis was undertaken which led to the identification of the following priorities for the LDS:

- Potential to capitalise on physical activity in the natural environment.
- Volunteering opportunities for rural residents.
- Need for business tourism support following local authority budget cutbacks.
- Improve availability of local produce.
- Support for farm diversification.
- Support services for enterprise development.
- Pressure on local transportation options through cutbacks.
- Pressure on local authority budgets offers a chance to innovate.
- Improvement of specific skill levels amongst rural residents.
- Opportunity to develop time banking.
- Potential for greater deployment of renewable energy sources.
- Making community transport more energy efficient.
- Potential to fully exploit the capabilities of superfast broadband.

These priorities were then grouped into four key themes, which in turn link to objectives and actions. These are:

### **GREEN NPT**

Maximising the potential for the green economy in NPT including development of all aspects of renewable energy at a community level and the promotion of eco-tourism.

Specific objectives

- To increase the business and employment potential of outdoor activity.
- To encourage local communities to take an active approach to improving their local environment.
- To secure community support for more renewable energy sources.
- To explore alternative sources of fuel for community transport.

### **VIBRANT NPT**

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

Specific objectives

- To increase the business and employment potential of outdoor activity.
- To encourage local communities to take an active approach to improving their local environment.
- To increase the use of local produce to add value and shorten supply chains.

### **ENTERPRISING NPT**

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

Specific objectives

- To increase the business and employment potential of outdoor activity.
- To provide a support service for rural tourism enterprises including networking, promotion and developmental support to improve the visitor experience.
- To increase the use of local produce to add value and shorten supply chains.
- To encourage and support local farmers to develop non-agricultural business opportunities.
- To encourage and support the development of new enterprises in NPT.
- To provide training for rural residents to develop skills levels to address identified gaps.
- To increase exploitation of superfast broadband by all members of rural community.

### **ACCESSIBLE NPT**

Improving access to basic services, considering new, innovative and sustainable ways of supporting individuals to overcome barriers and to reach their full potential.

Specific objectives:

- To identify new and innovative ways of overcoming local transportation barriers.
- To identify opportunities for council services which would benefit from delivery by the community.
- To provide training for rural residents to develop skills levels to address identified gaps.
- To promote and encourage a time banking scheme in NPT
- To explore alternative sources of fuel for community transport
- To increase exploitation of superfast broadband by all members of rural community.

The programme's guidance and marketing uses these four themes and the associated priorities for promotional purposes.

### **DELIVERY**

The LEADER programme is administered by the RDP Team which sits in the Education Directorate at Neath Port Talbot Council. It has four staff:

- 1 LAG Manager
- 1 Finance and Monitoring Officer
- 2 Rural Community Facilitators

### **STATE AID**

Given the community based nature of the programme, it could be assumed that most projects funded by LEADER, will not distort competition or trade. However, State Aid rules apply meaning that funding cannot be used by way of 'direct support to business undertakings and economic operators.' This has proved to be an issue for some applications in NPT leading to a number of projects being turned down.

### **THE LOCAL ACTION GROUP**

There are 16 members and 11 deputies on the LAG. Of these, 8 are from the public sector, 12 from the third sector and 7 from the private sector. This is compliant with Welsh Government guidance. The activities of the LAG are set out in the Terms of Reference. The LAG is currently chaired by a representative of the third sector. Overall, the members have a good mix of experience with a number having first hand experience of managing projects, some having been involved in RDP funding in earlier rounds and the LAG has significant levels of voluntary and business expertise.

## EFFECTIVENESS: THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

### INTRODUCTION

The Local Development Strategy is effectively the foundation on which the LEADER approach is based. It defines the role of the programme in addressing identified need across Neath Port Talbot and was used to identify the key strategic themes. These themes are the elements against which spend and success is measured in this chapter.

### IMPLEMENTATION

The programme became fully operational in 2015 with an award of £2.03m. The LAG prioritised activity relating to:

**(1)** Pre-commercial development, business partnerships and short supply chains which was allocated 25.1% of the funds. Under this approach theme 2 (facilitating pre-commercial development, business partnerships and short supply chains) was allocated the largest proportion of funding as the LAG felt that there was more scope under this theme to achieve the greatest results specifically in relation to assisting rural business and creating jobs in rural areas. The LAG also felt that this theme would contribute most to tackling poverty locally, one of the cross-cutting LEADER themes.

**(2)** Adding value to local identity and natural and cultural resources which was awarded 21.6% of the budget. This reflected a perception that the image of the rural communities needed to be enhanced as a good place to live and do business. Members were keen to build on NPT's strong natural and cultural resources; and

**Theme 3** (New ways of providing statutory services) was awarded 21.2% of funds and the remaining 32% was split between themes 4 and 5.

### SPEND TO DATE

To September 2019 (NPT project update 25.9.19) the programme has allocated £947,720 and levered in £261,910 of investment. There has been significant underspend with only 53% of funds committed across 19 projects. Theme 5 has performed particularly poorly with only 24.9% of spend committed through one project. Theme 4 (renewable energy) has had marginally the highest proportion of spend (55%).

An analysis of applications illustrates that:

- Theme 5 (Digital technology) has had the lowest number of successful applications.
- Theme 1 (Adding value) has had the highest number of successful applications.
- Theme 2 (Supply chains) has levered in the highest level of investment (£84k).

## FIGURE 2:

Summary of Projects by Theme

	No. of projects	Value	Total Value awarded	Average value	Funds levered	Total RDPE	%
<b>Theme 1:</b> Adding Value to local identity and natural and cultural resources	6	£4,800 - £100,000	£234,682	£39,000	£58,671	£438,531	53.5%
<b>Theme 2:</b> Facilitating Pre Commercial Development; Business Partnerships & Short Supply Chains	3	£13,000 - £150,000	£266,029	£89,000	£84,072	£509,816	52.2%
<b>Theme 3:</b> Exploring new ways of providing non-statutory local services	5	£25,000 - £78,475	£232,114	£46,000	£56,431.12	£430,969	53.8%
<b>Theme 4:</b> Renewable Energy at Community Level	4	£16,000 - £66,870	£142,790	£36,000	£35,738	£257,515	55.4%
<b>Theme 5:</b> Exploitation of Digital Technology	1	£72,105	£72,105	£72,000	£26,998	£289,052	24.9%
<b>Co-operation</b>						£105,862	
<b>Total allocation</b>	<b>19</b>		<b>£947,720</b>		<b>£261,910</b>	<b>£2.03m</b>	<b>53.1%</b>

A further £491,397 has been spent on administration costs, including running costs, animation and implementation costs. Overall, therefore 71% of the total budget has been committed to September 2019.

### OUTPUTS

Despite the underspend and with 42% the projects yet to complete, the programme is on course to meet and exceed the Performance Indicators agreed with Welsh Government. From that perspective the programme has been very successful. In particular, there has been excellent performance against:

**Theme 1 (local identity/natural resources)**, where the Neath Abbey Ironworks and Working with Nature projects have achieved particularly strong performance relative to their targets.

**Theme 2 (pre-commercial development)**: There have been 3 projects within this theme and together they have met all but one of their PI targets.

**Theme 3 (exploring new ways of delivering a non-statutory services)** has proved the least successful to date, but at this point in the life of the programme there remain projects yet to claim or complete and it is likely that by the final evaluation targets will be met.

**Theme 4 (renewable energy at community level)**: 3 of the 4 projects have yet to complete under this theme.

**Theme 5: (Exploitation of Digital Technology)**: All targets have been achieved through the successful Go for IT project.

### FIGURE 3:

Achievement by Theme

Achievements	R24 jobs	CL001 Feas Studies	CL002 networks	CL003 Jobs safeguarded	CL004 Pilots	CL005 Hubs	CL006 Marketing	CL007 Stakeholders engaged	CL008 Participants supported
<b>Theme 1</b>									
Achievements	0	2	1	0	0	1	233	737	1499
Targets	0	2	3	0	0	1	217	422	905
% achievement of targets	NA	100	33	NA	NA	100	107	175	166
<b>Stellar performers Neath Abbey Ironworks and Working with Nature</b>									
<b>Theme 2</b>									
Achievements	1	2	5	1	9	7	38	80	220
Targets	1	2	5	1	9	9	20	70	80
% achievement of targets	100	100	100	100	100	78	190	114	275
<b>Theme 3</b>									
Achievements	0	0	0	1	0	0	34	7	256
Targets	4	1	0	2.8	3	0	190	20	1052
% achievement of targets	0	0	NA	36	0	NA	18	35	24
<b>Theme 4</b>									
Achievements	1	1	0	0	0	0	16	10	401
Targets	1	1	0	0	14	1	35	21	100
% achievement of targets	100	100	NA	NA	0	0	46	48	401
<b>Theme 5</b>									
Achievements	0	0	0	1	1	8	33	20	513
Targets	0	0	0	1	1	8	20	20	500
% achievement of targets	NA	NA	NA	100	100	100	165	100	103
<b>ALL</b>									
Achievements	2	5	6	3	10	18	354	553	2889
Targets	6	6	8	4.8	27	17	482	302	2637
% achievement of targets	33	83	75	63	37	106	73	183	110

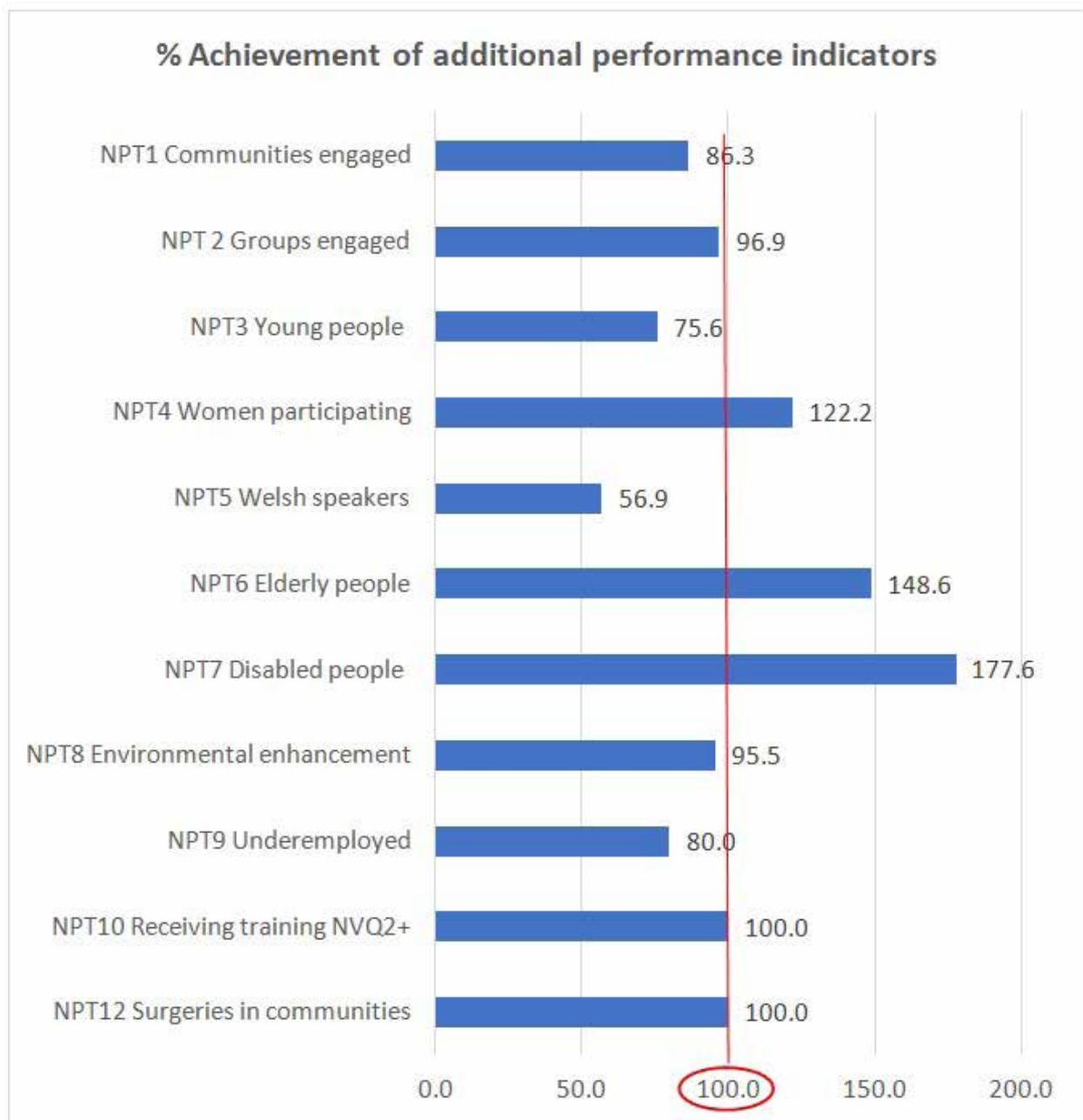
The programme has successfully engaged with a wide range of stakeholders and participants and in relation to its performance indicators is on course to over-deliver. Four of the projects have been feasibility studies and the impact of these will be felt more widely in the years to come if the recommendations are implemented, for example, in relation to green energy and at Neath Abbey Ironworks.

### ADDITIONAL LAG OUTPUTS

Further to the above indicators set by Welsh Government, the RDP Team identified a range of its own output indicators. These were considered relevant to the specific local circumstances of rural Neath Port Talbot, and to its particular themes, priorities and target groups. Overall progress has been very good and with 8 projects still to complete (including one with high target outputs) it is likely that all performance indicators will be met and exceeded.

### FIGURE 4:

Local PI Achievement at February 2020 (NB No target set for NPT1: Community transport)



## **ALIGNMENT OF OUTPUTS WITH THE STRATEGIC AIMS OF THE PROGRAMME**

At this point, prior to the end of the programme, it appears that outputs are on course to meet the targets set by both the Welsh Government and by the LAG itself. However, to strike a note of caution, the PIs - as required by Welsh Government - do not capture the outcomes or impact of the programme. Wider impacts not captured include, for example, personal development and wellbeing and large scale environmental transformations and it is therefore difficult to comment on whether, overall, the projects meet the overarching strategic aims of the programme. No doubt other LAGs will also report that the target setting approach, with a focus on outputs as opposed to outcomes, is an overall weakness of the LEADER programme design.

If the programme is to be extended, then it is suggested that additional outcomes and impacts are collected through an enhanced outcome driven monitoring and evaluation process to better understand success. These need not be onerous or numerous.

## **FEEDBACK FROM THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON THE LDS THEMES**

Discussions with LAG members identified the theme with the smallest funding pot - renewable energy (Theme 4) - as the most successful theme. This was attributed to the presence of one very active organisation, which has made all the successful bids against this theme. This analysis is backed up by the online survey of LAG members which showed that the 'Green' theme was judged to have the most high quality applications, which fitted well with the programme objectives and reflect a high level of community interest in this area.

There was recognition that Theme 5 (Digital) had not been implemented as envisaged and several questioned whether it was an issue that LEADER could address i.e. a perception that it needs statutory undertakers to invest in infrastructure rather than small community led schemes.

The view was expressed that Theme 1 'Adding value to local identity and natural and cultural resources' was too broad. As defined by Welsh Government, it encompasses Welsh language; tourism and heritage (under local identity); cultural resources; and the environment (under natural resources). The breadth of this theme means there is competition for resources within this funding pot and although there is flexibility to move funds between pots, this opportunity has not been taken by the LAG. Looking ahead, any future funding pot could separate out natural resources or local identity resulting in the potential to commit more funding to this theme in recognition of its breadth.

Whilst the Performance Indicators suggest that the approved projects aligned well with the overall aims of LEADER, a key point made by a number of LAG members was that they have had a very restricted pool of applications from which to select. Too many applications were said to be following the funding: "RDP has not delivered as much as it could because people are coming for the money not to make a change." There is no reason why LAG members could not do more to call for themed bids, working with the communities they represent to develop ideas and projects. There is an appetite to do more to shape bids to align with the change they want to see in Neath Port Talbot - conceive and commission. In future, the LAG and RDP Team may wish to take a more proactive role in working with local communities to develop and deliver bids.

One issue arising from the research is that the LDS has not been a 'living' document and as such, it does not appear to be used as a framework for seeking applicants and applications. This has resulted in a lack of clarity amongst LAG members as to the specific objectives of the programme. Several members put an emphasis on its use to support industry, employment and support for small businesses, which in fact is just one strand of the overall programme. The different layers of the LEADER objectives and the LDS objectives were not clearly understood and similarly, project leads were not clear which objective their project was supporting.

## **THE CROSS-CUTTING THEMES**

The four cross-cutting themes are to be integrated into each programme. These are measured by the additional indicators set by the LAG and overall considerable outputs have been achieved. However, we note that whilst applicants have to state how they will address each of the four themes in the Expression of Interest form, there is no such requirement on the application form. We feel that this is an omission which reduces the themes to a series of PIs post approval rather than issues which need careful consideration to maximise the impact of each project in these respects. This finding is given weight by the online surveys which showed that significant minorities thought that the projects had not contributed much or at all to the cross-cutting themes, for example, in relation to equal opportunities 50% thought the projects had contributed 'somewhat' and the remaining 50% replied 'not much', 'not at all' or 'don't know'.

With the length of time, approximately 6 months, between EOI and full application it is quite possible that the crosscutting themes are overlooked by project leads when submitting their applications. In turn, given that they are not itemised on the full application, they do not form an explicit part of the appraisal process by the LAG. It could be argued that the additional outputs required by the LAG integrate the four cross-cutting themes of Equal Opportunities & Gender Mainstreaming; Sustainable Development; Tackling Poverty & Social Exclusion, and Welsh language. To a certain extent, this is true since data is collected on:

- Number of Communities Engaged
- Number of Groups Engaged
- Number of Young People participating in the project
- Number of Women participating in the project
- Number of Welsh speakers participating in the project
- Number of Older People participating in the project
- Number of Individuals with Disabilities participating in the project
- Number of Projects aimed at Environmental Enhancement/Sustainability
- Number of Under-Employed Individuals participating in the project
- Number of Participants receiving Formal Training
- Number of Advice/Support Surgeries in Community Facilities

Clearly, these measures account for equal opportunities and Welsh language and to a certain extent to social exclusion, as disadvantaged groups are most at risk of exclusion. However, this process has been reduced to tick box targets. Crucially, they do not assess how projects are incorporating environmental sustainability nor how they are

tackling poverty, which we see as a missed opportunity.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Programme has been successful in addressing 4 of the 5 themes, with the exception of digital inclusion, leveraging in more than a quarter of a million pounds of investment. However, overall applications have been slow and there has been significant underspend to date. If funding is extended, then the LAG should consider taking a proactive approach to commissioning services from organisations or council departments with sufficient capacity/cashflow to meet identified community needs. This will require more of a community engagement role for staff and LAG members to provide impetus to applications.

In the light of the difficulties community groups face in coping with payment in arrears and the limited number of community groups available to drive bids we believe that co-commissioning could be a potential solution. This is where the team work in communities to understand need and develop project concepts. Commissioning projects, which would be delivered by established third parties, to support the aspirations of the local community. Shaping delivery will be a way of testing out new approaches to commissioning for the future, whilst building the capacity of the community to develop solutions to the issues they face. This process needs to be driven by the LAG.

Going forward the potential for green energy, biodiversity and tourism appears to have most potential, in part because of the competency and capacity of organisations in those fields. Future activity in this area would also tie in with the Corporate Plan which notes that there is "more work to do to deliver our Biodiversity Duty Plan and green infrastructure across the county borough."

In our view the cross-cutting themes are not given sufficient weight and are not properly captured by the additional indicators. This issue is discussed more fully in Chapter 5 and the analysis in Chapter 4 indicates why it is important that this is addressed.



## **THE CHANGING CONTEXT FOR ACTION**

### **IS THE LDS STILL RELEVANT?**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Five years on from the development of the LDS it is worth exploring how the economic, social and political climate of rural Neath Port Talbot and the wider region has changed. Moving forward it is important to understand how these changes should be reflected in the programme's approach, scope and priorities. Of course, it should be noted that one of the key sources of information at a small area level, the Census 2011, has not been updated in the intervening period and in general it is difficult to obtain relevant ward-specific data for the rural areas.

Since the publication of the LDS a number of key policy documents have been produced at national, regional and local level which further frame the on-going context for action.

#### **THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT**

Overall, the picture remains broadly the same with challenges persisting, i.e. an ageing population and a decline in the jobs available in the borough. Encouragingly, there has been a positive change to most of the indicators summarised in figure 5.

## FIGURE 5:

### Changes in Demographic Indicators

#### Key findings

- Population**
- There has been a small increase in the overall population of NPT of 5.1% between 2014 and 2018, a little below the all Wales increase of 6.1%
  - Forecasts predict a steady decline in the working age population of NPT and a 45% increase in the over 65s between 2011 and 2035
  - There has been a reduction in outward migration amongst people aged 15 -29 since 2014/15

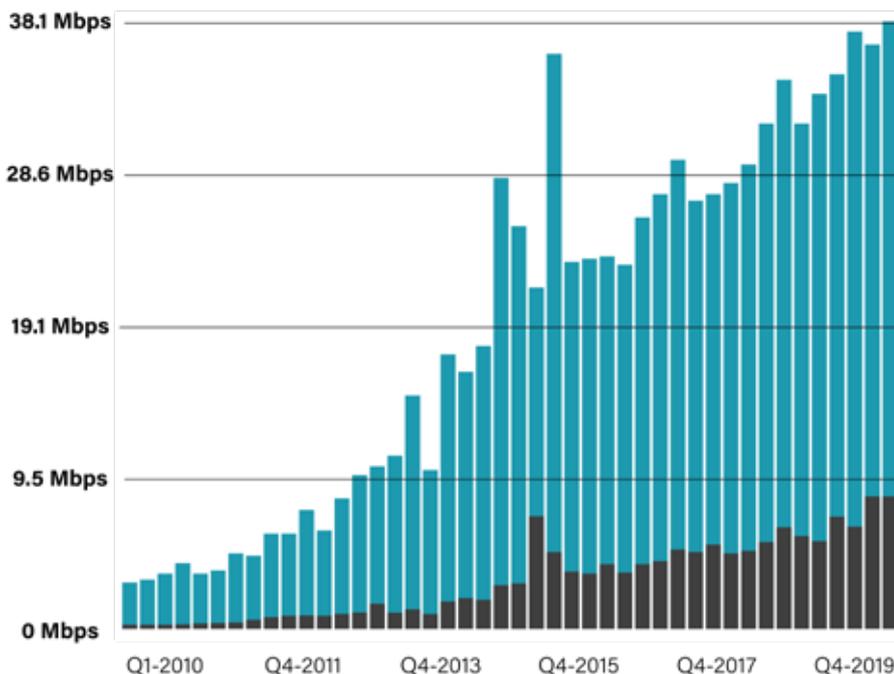
- Economic inactivity**
- Economic inactivity has fallen from 26.4% in 2014 to 24.3% in 2019. This is a slightly faster rate than the fall across Wales, thereby narrowing the gap between NPT and the Welsh average.

- Employment rate**
- The employment rate is up 5.5% in NPT to 72.7% in 2019. This is a faster rate of increase than in Wales which grew at 3.7%. The employment rate in Wales nevertheless remains marginally higher (73.2%)

- Average earnings (gross weekly)**
- Average weekly earnings have increased 14% from £512.9 (2014) to £586.7 (2018). This compares with a 7% increase in Wales

- Workplace jobs**
- Jobs in NPT are down by 900 since 2014. However, since 2017 they have been on an upward trajectory.

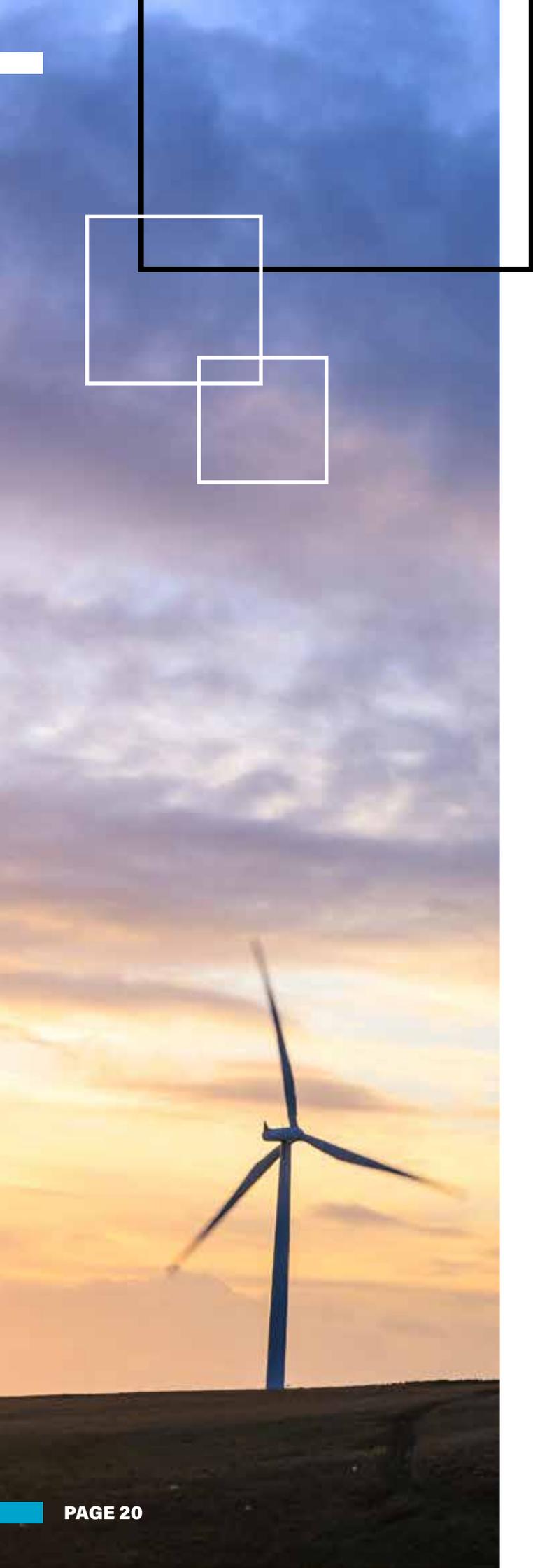
- Poverty**
- There are an estimated 3,600 pupils eligible for Free School Meals in rural areas in NPT (20.6%) higher than the proportion in the urban areas (18.5%)
  - Workless households have fallen and at 20.9% the proportion is in line with the Wales figure
  - According to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019, NPT has 14 Lower Super Output areas (LSOAs) (15% of its total) which are in the most deprived 10% in Wales. 3 of these are in the rural areas of the Upper Afan Valley and Neath Valley.



In terms of broadband, data shows that speeds in Neath Port Talbot have improved significantly since 2014, with 98% having superfast broadband in 2019 (> 24Mbps) compared with 77.4% in 2014. Digital remains a strategic priority of the Wellbeing Strategy however, with a focus on digital literacy.

#### FIGURE 6:

Broadband Speeds in Neath Port Talbot  
Source: <https://labs.thinkbroadband.com/>



## POVERTY

The Welsh Government has supported a wide range of programmes to address rural poverty and yet recent estimates suggest that almost a quarter of the rural population of Wales is living in poverty. The causes of rural poverty are complex and multi-faceted, but lack of economic opportunity, job insecurity and low wages are known to be important contributory factors.

Whatever the level of poverty in the Valleys, it is acknowledged that the challenges faced by families in rural communities living in poverty can be more intense<sup>1</sup>. People in the rural areas experience relatively poor access to services and employment, poor or no broadband connectivity and high transport and fuel costs. All these factors may combine to create a different experience of poverty than that felt by families in more urban areas.

Analysis undertaken by Landman Economics and Aubergine Analysis on behalf of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) published in 2018 estimates that households in Wales will lose 1.5% of their net income on average (or around £480 a year) from the overall package of tax, welfare and National Living Wage reforms announced since 2010. This is especially the case for lone parents in Wales who will lose around £3,720 a year on average. Those families with three or more children in Wales will lose around £4,110 a year on average. Relative child poverty in Wales is estimated to increase substantially, with the reforms pushing an extra 50,000 children into poverty by the time they are fully implemented. Earlier analysis by the Welsh Government and also research undertaken by Sheffield Hallam University shows that, unsurprisingly, the South Wales Valleys, which include the areas in Wales with the highest working-age benefit claimant rates, are the areas in Wales estimated to be worst affected by the welfare changes.

The evidence shows that there will also be a disproportionately negative impact on the incomes of several protected groups, including disabled people, certain ethnic groups, and women, and particularly negative impacts on intersectional groups who experience multiple disadvantages (for example, lone parents with disabled children).

When the LDS was developed, work was seen as the main route out of poverty, however, nationally nearly 60% of benefits go to households where someone is in paid work but not earning enough to achieve an adequate standard of living and two-thirds of working-age poverty occurs among working households<sup>2</sup>.

Discussions with LAG members support these analyses and there is a strong perception that poverty has increased in the rural areas as a result of welfare and benefit changes: "Child poverty is going up at an alarming rate and no-one seems to want to do anything about it. It's the biggest change. Universal Credit is killing people. It should be the priority." The presence of 6 of the 9 foodbanks in the valley areas of NPT gives some validation to this perception. Neath Port Talbot Council has committed to developing a strategic one council approach to tackling poverty which will seek to address these issues and LEADER can support this on a community level. Since not all the benefit changes have been rolled out, it is likely that these impacts

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/environment-food-rural-affairs/RuralCommunitiesconsolidated.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> PWC (2018) Workforce of the future: The competing forces shaping 2030

will become more severe in the years ahead, with knock on effects on health and wellbeing. LAG members were also concerned about the limited provision of youth services and reflected that there was a need to act on the climate change agenda.

## **THE CHANGING CAPACITY OF LOCAL ORGANISATIONS TO RESPOND TO NEED**

The severity of the financial cutbacks has also affected the ability of the 'support infrastructure' i.e. the third sector to take a lead in mitigating its effects in rural communities. Voluntary and community organisations are struggling to survive, while the demand for front-line services, driven by rising inequality and demographic change is increasing.

Locally, data shows that the number of voluntary organisations per 1,000 residents in Neath Port Talbot is the 4th lowest in Wales at 1.5 per 1,000 people compared with, for instance, 6 per 1,000 in Powys. Perhaps this figure underpins some of the success experienced in Powys in administering LEADER. Furthermore, Neath Port Talbot is one of the few authorities to have seen a decline in the number of third sector organisations between 2014 and 2016<sup>3</sup>. According to the 'State of the Sector Surveys,' conducted annually or biannually by the WCVA<sup>4</sup> the financial situation has worsened for most organisations since the early-2010s. Moreover, while funding for most VSOs has declined, the costs have been rising, especially the ones related to product price, utilities, transportation, and taxation.

This reality puts into context the inability of community organisations to access LEADER funding to support change in their community when funds are paid in arrears; in projects which require on-going expenditure, they have difficulties in finding match funding when their own resources are dwindling. This is combined with Neath Port Talbot having a limited pool of organisations on which to draw. A new approach is needed going forward where the Council works collaboratively with communities to identify and understand their needs. The LAG can then commission projects either from organisations/businesses/departments within the Local Authority which have the reserves and capability to meet those needs.

## **THE CHANGING STRATEGIC CONTEXT**

No consideration of the changing context for delivery would be complete without referencing the impact of Brexit on future programmes. The UK has now left the EU and entered a period of transition. Currently Wales receives substantially more EU funds per head (£628 compared with £102 for England)<sup>5</sup>. Between 2014 and 2020, Wales qualified for almost £2 billion of EU structural funding, with the majority going to West Wales and the Valleys. At present, current plans for future funding are unclear. The Government has proposed a Shared Prosperity Fund but the National Assembly has not had any information on how this will work. The UK Government has stated that it will respect the devolution settlements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and will engage the devolved administrations to ensure the fund delivers across the UK.

3 <http://www.walespublicservices2025.org.uk/files/2018/08/Income-and-funding-of-the-Welsh-voluntary-sector-in-the-post-2010-austerity-period.pdf>

4 <http://www.walespublicservices2025.org.uk/files/2018/08/Income-and-funding-of-the-Welsh-voluntary-sector-in-the-post-2010-austerity-period.pdf>

5 <https://www.wcpp.org.uk/commentary/what-will-brexit-mean-for-wales/>





The Welsh Government has set out its proposals for regional investment in Wales after Brexit. It believes that a UK-led approach would potentially mean less funding for the poorest areas in Wales and would not respect the devolution settlement. Instead, the Welsh Government proposes ring-fencing funding for regional investment so that it is spent on economic development. On this basis the Welsh Government have been consulting on a approach moving forward the **'Framework for Regional Investment in Wales'** is a regional investment approach that:

- supports growth and inclusiveness across Wales
- focuses on delivering outcomes
- decentralises funding and decision-making
- integrates with our policies and wider opportunities for investments

The outlined approach enables the Welsh Government to align a way forward with their own strategies such as the Well-being of Future Generations Act. The proposed Framework adheres to the principles of LEADER – taking a bottom up approach, involving communities and delegating decision making to communities, enabling them to be involved in 'Local Delivery Plans' for activities.

A further significant change is the announcement in April 2019 of a **climate emergency** across Wales which gives a greater emphasis on the green/sustainability agenda.

At a national level, the National Assembly has passed three landmark pieces of legislation since the Local Development Strategy was published, the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015; the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 and its economic strategy, Prosperity for All, 2017.

The **Well-being of Future Generations Act** requires public bodies in Wales to think about the long-term impact of their decisions, to work better with people, communities and each other, and to prevent persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change.

It has seven wellbeing goals:

**FIGURE 7:***Well-being of Future Generations Act: Well-being Goals*

Goal	Description of the goal
<b>A prosperous Wales</b>	An innovative, productive and low carbon society which recognises the limits of the global environment and therefore uses resources efficiently and proportionately (including acting on climate change); and which develops a skilled well-educated population in an economy which generates wealth and provides employment opportunities, allowing people to take advantage of the wealth generated through securing decent work.
<b>A resilient Wales</b>	A nation which maintains and enhances a biodiverse natural environment with healthy functioning ecosystems that support social, economic and ecological resilience and the capacity to adapt to change (for example, climate change).
<b>A healthier Wales</b>	A society in which people's physical and mental wellbeing is maximised and in which choices and behaviours that benefit future health are understood.
<b>A more equal Wales</b>	A society that enables people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstances (including their socio economic background and circumstances).
<b>A Wales of cohesive communities</b>	Attractive, viable, safe and well-connected communities.
<b>A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language</b>	A society that promotes and protects culture, heritage and the Welsh language, and which encourages people to participate in the arts, and sports and recreation.
<b>A globally responsible Wales</b>	A nation which, when doing anything to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural wellbeing of Wales, takes account of whether doing such a thing may make a positive contribution to global wellbeing.



Each public body must carry out sustainable development, the actions to achieve this aspiration must include: a. setting and publishing objectives (“well-being objectives”) that are designed to maximise its contribution to achieving each of the well-being goals, and b. taking all reasonable steps (in exercising its functions) to meet those objectives.

In fulfilling their duty, public bodies must act in ways which are:

- Long-term: Short term needs need to be balanced with long term needs
- Prevention: Action needs to prevent problems occurring or getting worse
- Integration: Work in ways which impact on other objectives or on the objectives of other public bodies
- Collaboration: Work collaboratively
- Involvement: Involve people with an interest in achieving the well-being goals.

Chapter 6 examines ways in which LEADER can contribute to Wales’s Well-being goals.

**The Environment (Wales) Act 2016** positions Wales as a low carbon, green economy, ready to adapt to the impacts of climate change. It has a wide remit from promoting the sustainable management of natural resources to charges for carrier bags. Of interest to the LEADER programme are the provisions in respect of the sustainable management of natural resources and climate change. Key requirements are:

**Part 1:** Sustainable management of natural resources: Public bodies must seek to maintain and enhance biodiversity in the exercise of functions in relation to Wales, and in so doing promote the resilience of ecosystems. Section 6 under Part 1 of the Act introduced an enhanced duty (the S6 duty) for public authorities in the exercise of functions in relation to Wales. To follow the S6 duty public authorities should embed the consideration of biodiversity and ecosystems into their early thinking and business planning, including any policies, plans, programmes and projects, as well as their day to day activities.

**Part 2:** Climate change - provides the Welsh Ministers with powers to put in place statutory emission reduction targets, including at least an 80% reduction in emissions by 2050 and carbon budgeting to support their delivery.

### **PROSPERITY FOR ALL, THE NATIONAL STRATEGY, 2017**

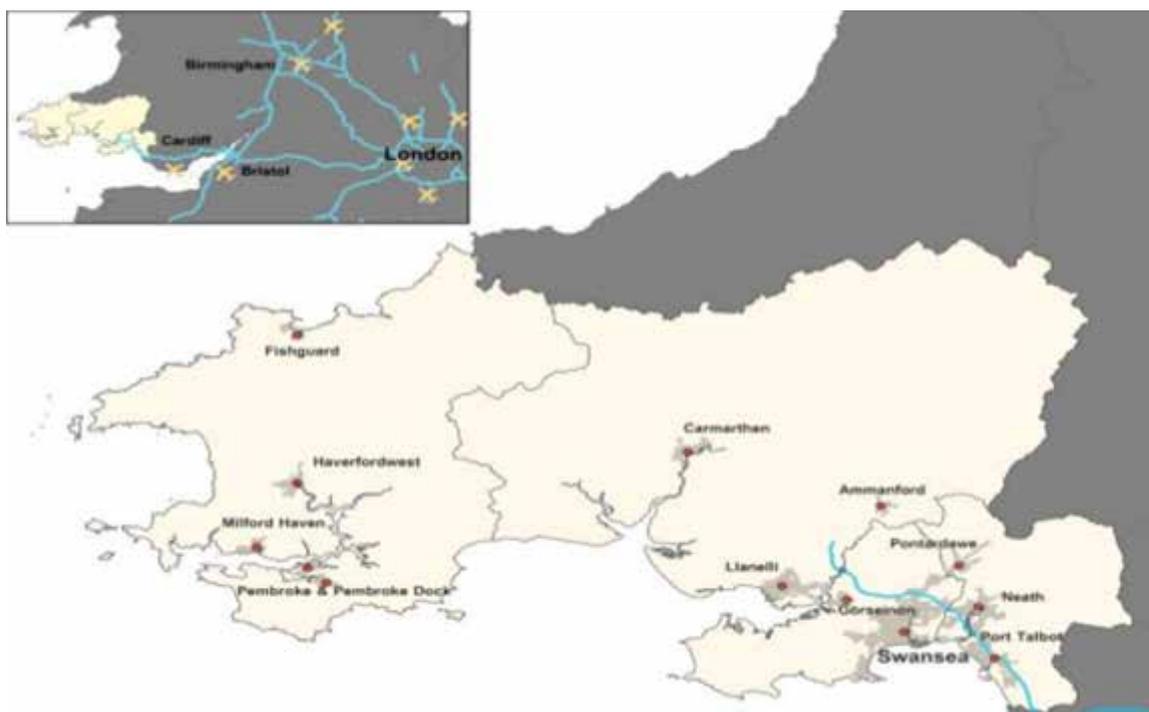
The strategy makes clear that while material wealth is crucial, prosperity is also about every one of us having a good quality of life, and living in strong, safe, resilient communities. Its long-term aim is to build a Wales that is prosperous and secure, healthy and active, ambitious and learning, and united and connected. Through this, people can fulfil their ambitions and enhance their well-being in secure and sustainable employment. A crucial role of government is to break down the barriers many face in getting a job, and create the right environment for businesses to grow and thrive..

### **REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS**

**Swansea Bay City Region Economic Regeneration Strategy 2013-2030** is an ambitious 20 year strategy for an area stretching from the Gower to Neath Port Talbot.

## FIGURE 8:

Situating Swansea Bay City Region and its internal & external context



Source: SQW 2013

Focused strongly on economic growth (GVA) and employment, its five strategic objectives are;

- Business Growth, Retention & Specialisation
- Skilled & Ambitious for long-term success
- Maximising job creation for all: recognises the importance of tourism to the regional economy and identifies it as one of the key sectors with significant potential for growth
- Knowledge Economy and Innovation
- Distinctive Places and Competitive Infrastructures: This aim specifically identifies the rural environment as a strength and looks to boost tourism and investment. At an operational level it proposes to develop a competitive Next Generation Broadband (NGB) infrastructure offer across all parts of the City Region, including rural areas. In a similar vein to the LEADER programme, it aims to empower the **community and voluntary sector to take a role in the development, delivery and testing of new approaches to public service delivery.**

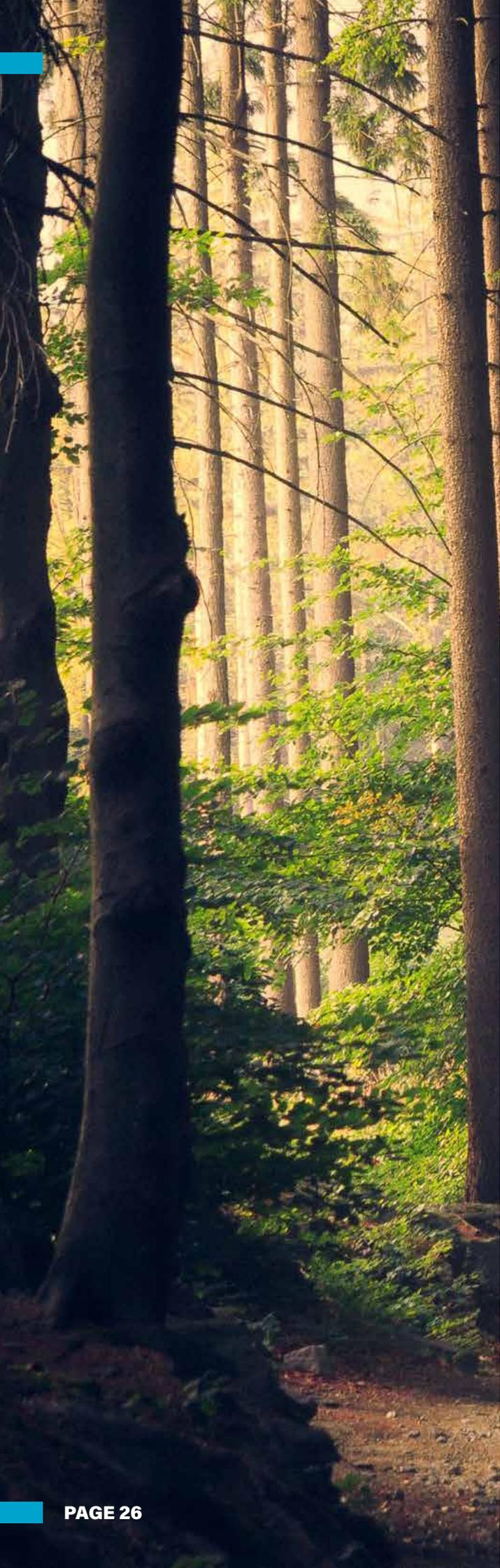
### LOCAL POLICY PRIORITIES

In addition to the well-being duty put on listed individual public bodies, the Well-being of Future Generations Act also puts a well-being duty on specified public bodies to act jointly via public services boards to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of their area by contributing to the achievement of the well-being goals.

In Neath Port Talbot, the Public Services Board set out its long-term vision for the area as well as its priorities for action in its Well-being Plan 2018-2023.

It identifies many of the same challenges facing Neath Port Talbot as identified in the LDS, such as:

- the needs of the ageing population;
- how to deliver excellent public services whilst unprecedented cuts to public spending continues;
- the need to reduce the gap between the least and most deprived in the Borough,
- how to help communities to sustain themselves and build a climate where people look out for one another;
- how to balance the changing expectations of a generation who demand services through new technologies, whilst making sure that those who are presently digitally excluded are not left behind; and
- protecting and enhancing the local environment.



It also places particular emphasis on children and young people so that every child has the best start in life.

#### **THE PLAN HAS 6 OBJECTIVES:**

- Objective 1: Support children in their early years, especially children at risk of adverse childhood experiences.
- Objective 2: Create safe, confident and resilient communities, focusing on vulnerable people.
- Objective 3: Put more life into our later years - Ageing Well.
- Objective 4: Promote well-being through work and in the workplace.
- Objective 5: Value our green infrastructure and the contribution it makes to our Well-being.
- Objective 6: Tackle digital exclusion.

Clearly there are many actions that could be funded and delivered through LEADER to support the implementation of these objectives in the rural areas.

#### **LOCAL FUNDS**

A range of local funding programmes are available these include:

- Third Sector Grants - support is available for community and voluntary organisations within Neath Port Talbot.
- Armed Forces Covenant- Information for the armed forces community in Neath Port Talbot.
- Community Chest - Community Chest offers grants of up to £1500 in any 12 month period for activities that encourage more people to become more active, more often.
- Community Benefit Funds - The Project Development and Funding Unit helps to improve the inward investment of grant aid into Neath Port Talbot by assisting a range of partners (community groups, voluntary groups and Community and Town Councils to name but a few) successfully apply for funding.
- The Newlands Wind Farm Community Benefit Fund is available to community and voluntary groups in the Ward of Margam. The Fund supports projects that have a positive impact on local cultural, educational, environmental or recreational initiatives which will benefit the wider community.

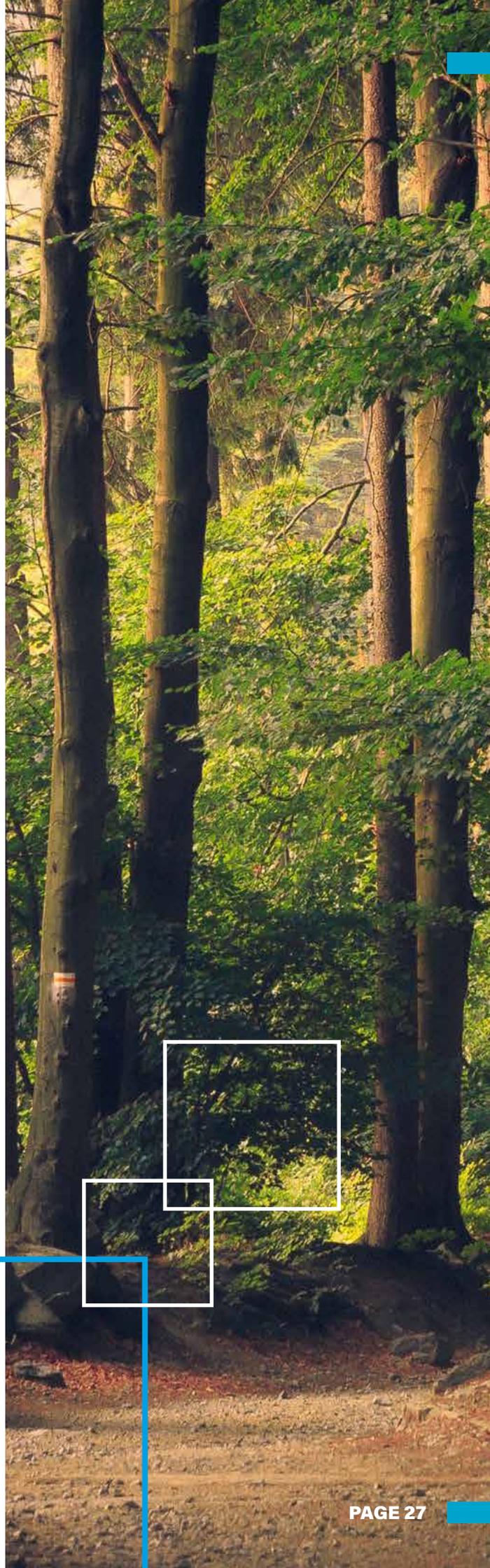
## CONCLUSIONS

A review of the socio economic and strategic context for LEADER suggests a need to review priorities to reflect the anti poverty and climate change agendas, both of which have increased in significance in the past five years. This does not mean a wholesale review, but there is a case for rebalancing activities within the overall portfolio. To date, these issues have been treated as cross-cutting themes and this has downplayed their significance as a strategic objective of the programme.

With poverty rising up the local and national agenda and reflecting the feedback from LAG members there are opportunities to more directly address issues of resilience in the rural communities which we recommend prioritising. Our key recommendation is that future activity should move from the economic growth agenda and focus more on the wellbeing agenda. With two thirds of those in poverty of working age living in working households, a focus on employability, ie those out of work, ignores how poverty affects the wider population - children, young people, pensioners, those in work and the communities in which they live. We have identified that there are other programmes, stakeholders and funds which focus on tackling employment-related issues. The likelihood of poverty increasing in severity needs action to build resilience and well-being across all age groups not just those of working age. From a strategic point of view there is clearly scope to support the wellbeing and climate change agendas. Further, the policy emphasis of the Swansea Bay Regional Strategy on empowering the **community and voluntary sector to take a role in the development, delivery and testing of new approaches to public service** delivery provides a potential resource which LEADER can support.

On the other hand, there has been a rapidly improving situation in terms of broadband coverage coupled with a commitment for Next Generation Broadband to be rolled out in the rural areas and significant underspend in the Digital Theme (Theme 5) In this light, it is recommended that in any future bids to this theme focus on enabling people to use digital to benefit them and their community, rather than on projects which relate to investment in infrastructure.

In line with the approach of the PSB, we would also suggest that there is scope to adopt more of a strategic approach which integrates the actions of different departments and policies, a way forward that supports partnership working and explores opportunities for place based projects that respond to community and strategic need, for example, how can biodiversity projects that improve access to nature also improve health and wellbeing outcomes?





## **EFFICIENCY : THE DELIVERY MODEL**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter of the evaluation considers the process and administration that influence how the LEADER programme is delivered in Neath Port Talbot. It explores how these processes impact on who applies for funding and the decision making processes made by the LAG.

### **PROCESS AND ADMINISTRATION**

#### **THE APPLICATION PROCESS**

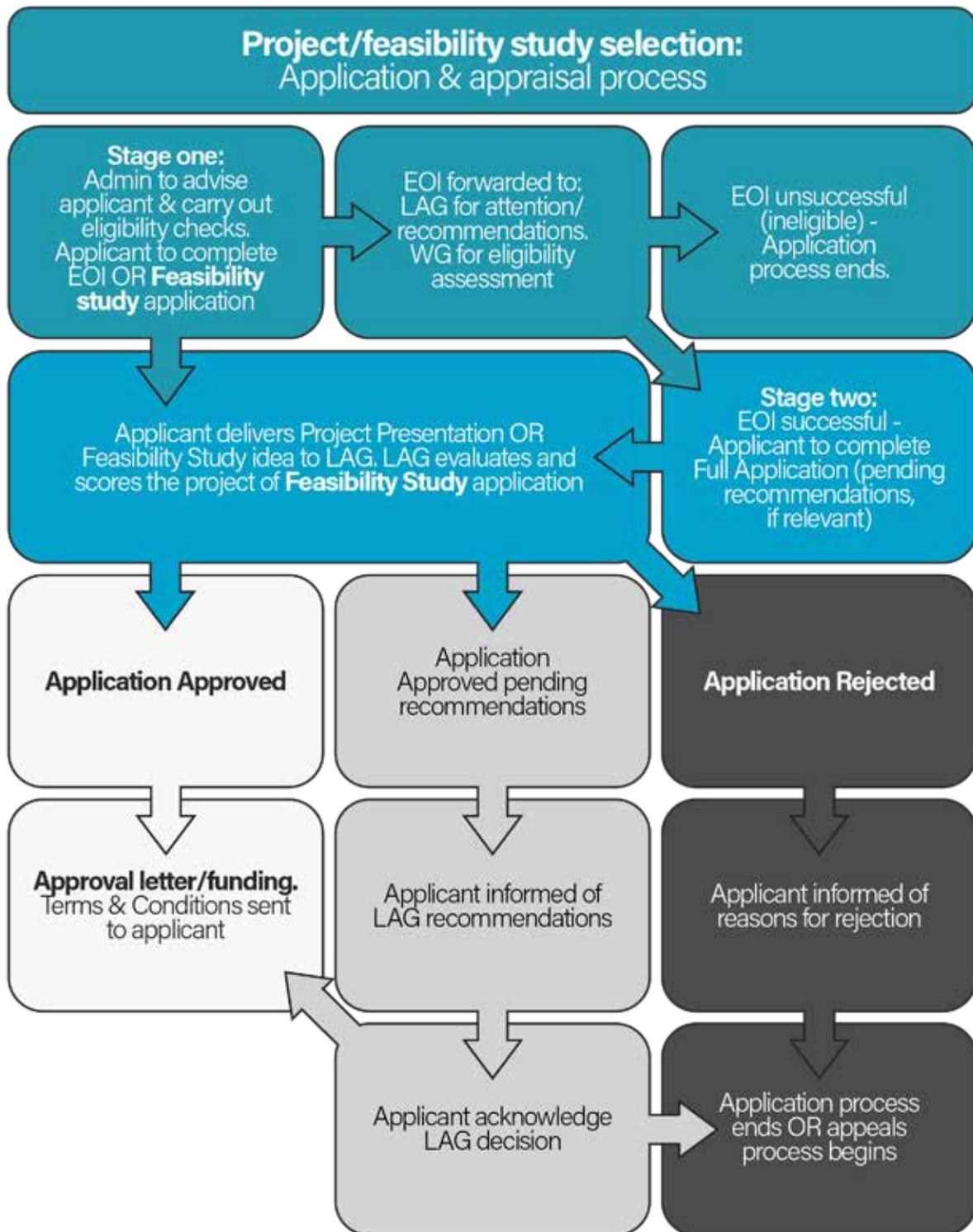
The application process has evolved since the programme was launched as the RDP Team have built on their learning and introduced new streamlined processes to make the system simpler. As a result, LAG members were united in their view that the whole process has improved for the benefit of the programme and applicants. This view is given added weight from the survey of past and present project leads. Those who considered the process to be 'very poor' had applied under the original system whereas the remainder considered the ease of the process to be generally satisfactory.

The current process involves five elements and is illustrated in the figure 9.

1. Informal contact with the RDP Team to discuss initial ideas
2. Expression of interest application
3. Application form
4. Presentation to LAG
5. Decision

**FIGURE 9:**

*Project Application and Appraisal Process*



As shown by the achievement of performance indicators to date, we consider that the management of the programme has been successful, notwithstanding issues of state aid, payment terms and the capacity of local communities. The RDP Team administering the process is highly professional and experienced. In the online survey the majority of project leads (83%) cited the support as 'very good,' with 50% of the LAG members describing it as 'excellent.' At the launch workshop some of the main strengths identified revolved around (1) the improvements made under new RDP Team leadership with the processes having been streamlined and (2) the excellent support and guidance given by the team.

Over the life of the programme, there have been very positive changes to its management, with the application process made more straightforward, the introduction of a new members guide, and collective project scoring. The process is more inclusive and gradually LAG members are being empowered to make decisions rather than just rubber stamping applications.

The in-depth interviews elaborate on these comments:

In terms of providing leadership and direction:

*"The team is brilliant now."*

*"The team work hard to make it work."*

*"We were very reliant on support from the staff and without it I don't believe we would have been successful."*

Of course, relative to other funding pots such as the Awards for All Lottery programme, the application forms are quite daunting to people with no prior expertise in applying and there were some comments about how confusing the whole process was:

*"The third sector is fire-fighting at the moment and the focus is on the short term 'just keeping going' as opposed to strategic thinking. There are not enough hours in the day for complicated funding application processes."*

This complexity is a feature of European programmes and much of the paperwork follows standard RDPE guidelines so there is little scope for change the process. It is evident that to simplify matters, the team go the extra mile in supporting applicants with their bids.

Despite these positive improvements a number of concerns were raised:

Several project leads stated that the performance indicators were not made clear and more needs to be done at the outset to explain what is expected. The issue has now been addressed by the RDP Team.

- A number of projects expressed frustration at monitoring "goal posts" being changed during the lifetime of the project.
- There is little difference in the information sought at the EOI stage and the full application stage. Comparisons with other EOI forms in Wales show that in Conwy and Powys for example, detailed outputs in relation to performance indicators are not sought at this EOI stage.
- Presenting to the LAG was said to be challenging but useful in terms of experience.

It was instructive to find that several LAG members who also have a role in the voluntary sector would not consider applying to the LEADER programme because of the complexity of the process and difficulties associated with it.

## THE LAG

When the LAG was initially set up several years ago, it was essentially used to approve applications under the direction of the administrative team. In this guise too much responsibility for the programme rested with the RDP Team. Recent years have seen a welcome change in approach with a move to support the LAG to take ownership of the programme rather than simply adopt a listening role. Our perception is that this transformation is still in progress and there is further to go to shift the balance of responsibility from the RDP Team to the LAG.

Discussions with LAG members suggested that they see their role essentially as scoring proposals, which is the main purpose of the meetings. However, the terms of reference set out by the EU emphasise a broader role for the LAG including understanding the needs of their communities and building that into the LDS; monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the LDS through the projects it approves; and publishing calls for proposals. These tasks require a drive and impetus steered by LAG members to effect change. During the evaluation there was little evidence of individual members seeking to initiate projects in their communities or bring forward issues to prioritise. This may well reflect members' awareness of the difficulties associated with LEADER funding since it was clear that LAG members did understand local needs, for instance in relation to growing levels of poverty, but have not used the opportunities of the LEADER funds to explore how the fund could be used to help communities become more resilient. At present, meetings are not well attended and at times it is difficult for meetings to be quorate. There was some concern about limited private sector involvement. A new approach which fully embraces the LEADER agenda to call for, shape and develop proposals in line with perceived needs may well help re-invigorate the membership of the LAG.

One way of strengthening the autonomy of the LAG is the use of umbrella projects or schemes. These are projects where the Managing Authority, in this case NPT Council, allocates a block of funding to the LAG (or to a local organisation), with which they then set up and deliver a targeted programme of support e.g. a small-scale grant scheme or programme targeting a specific priority theme, target group or area. When the umbrella scheme is set up by the Managing Authority, it is normally delivered by the LAG, which takes responsibility for the total grant, even though individual activities are implemented by a number of local players. With this approach, the LAG receives applications to deliver and manage umbrella schemes from public sector organisations, or representative bodies. In all cases, umbrella schemes involve a degree of devolved delivery of support by an intermediary – which is formally the project holder (scheme manager) – to the target group (the ultimate or scheme beneficiaries).

Such schemes provide a useful means of directly engaging small scale community organisations or businesses in the work of the LAG and of coordinating their actions towards strategic objectives. It enables more simplified application and delivery mechanisms, with more direct targeting and tailoring to the specific characteristics of the target group or area. The use of schemes is common in business support actions e.g. a small-scale tourism quality improvement initiative, a wide range of training activities, supporting the introduction of new technologies to improve efficiency or in green business initiatives e.g. supporting measures

to reduce waste. They are a useful means of grouping and managing large numbers of small scale applications efficiently and reducing the administrative burden on applicants, the LAG and its staff.

The recommendations of this evaluation include consideration of this approach. This, together with the potential for an extension to the programme for a further 2 years could provide a new impetus for the LAG to lead, supported by the RDP Team. For the LAG to take a stronger lead a number of changes are recommended:

- Over the years, the difficulties in implementing LEADER – particularly in relation to payment in arrears – has come to dominate members’ understanding of the programme. If the programme is extended it is recommended that a workshop is held for the LAG to collectively explore the opportunities the funding provides and the creative and flexible ways in which other LAGs have tackled these common issues.
- The LAG need to urgently review the LDS to ensure that it accurately reflects current priorities and policies. In our view, there are opportunities to up-weight the focus on anti poverty work and climate emergency without fundamental change to the priorities of the LDS.
- New members do not feel well integrated into the LAG – not knowing who other members are, nor whom they represent. It is recommended that the LAG considers whether a ‘buddy’ or mentorship scheme would be valuable.
- Members do not have feedback on how projects have been implemented or what the funding has achieved. Recommendations to address this are contained later in this chapter.
- Problems with the programme in its early years, including eligibility rules, lack of clarity about funding in arrears, changes to performance monitoring have understandably coloured the perceptions of voluntary and community groups who may have been expected to bid for funds. This has impacted on trust and relationships. If the LAG accepts the recommendations of this evaluation to push for simpler processes for smaller funds and for the Council to tackle the payment in arrears for smaller projects/adopt an umbrella scheme then there is a clear need for a relaunch of the fund so that relevant bodies are made fully aware of the opportunities it offers and the ways in which former processes have been streamlined.

As the data in Chapter 4 shows and as LAG members are well aware, the rural parts of NPT continue to face real challenges. LEADER provides funding that if used creatively can work with other funds to help address those issues.

## **MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION**

With a small administrative team and limited budget, NPT have had to be creative in the way in which they promote the LEADER programme. The original plan outlined in the LDS was to use:

- Social media
- Newsletters
- A launch event
- Website
- Brochure
- Drop in events

- Relationships with key partners

The full range of these methods has been used and from the online survey of project leads and most members said that the programme had been promoted ‘quite well or very well.’

However, a review of the materials and the one to one feedback suggests that this is an area for improvement in the future. In particular it was felt that:

- There is a need for stronger community engagement on the ground with potential project sponsors, linking them to existing projects.
- There is a need for a relaunch amongst community groups – so much has changed in the processes and eligibility that there is an opportunity to ‘sell’ it to potential partners, using better promotion of case studies to enthuse prospective bidders.
- Trust has been damaged by applicants’ initial experience of the fund as it operated in its original incarnation. There is a need to build relationships with the voluntary sector to support LEADER.
- Social media is not used to the full – it needs better links with the CVS and the Council’s own social media outlets
- The programme needs to be promoted in terms that make sense to those who are applying for funds. The term ‘rural’ is off-putting since many communities in NPT do not think of themselves in this way. People associate it with farming not with projects to build digital skills, support tourism or develop feasibility studies. Although rural is an official term for the programme, an explanation that more than half the wards in the county are eligible and the use of the term ‘valleys’ would be more readily understood. There is a need to breakdown the jargon and use case studies to showcase what is eligible. Consideration should be given to ‘themed’ bidding rounds selected by the LAG and targeted to respond to identified needs.
- Members felt strongly that they did not hear about projects once they had been approved, there is no feedback to the LAG – success is not celebrated. The latter would do much to enthuse members as to the value of the work they undertake and the time they commit to the programme. Groups could be encouraged to do videos or podcasts to demonstrate what they have achieved as a result of the funding. This could also be used to promote the fund and illustrates its impact to the wider community.

Of course, LAG members also have a role in pro-actively promoting the programme and in the online survey a significant minority were unable to answer how they promoted LEADER. It is probably the case that enthusiasm for its potential has waned with the passing of time, given the difficulties applicants have faced. The remainder said they took a variety of actions to promote it to their members through personal contact, social media and awareness raising with organisations they are involved with.

We are aware that work is in hand to update the website. Currently it is not up to date – no newsletters have been uploaded since 2016, there is a message from a former chair who is no longer on the LAG and no events have been listed since 2017. In the development of a new website consideration needs to be given to make it more user

friendly and a website such as that used in Powys <https://www.arwain.wales/> illustrates the potential of websites to inform and encourage potential applicants with the use of case studies, easy to understand language, an advert on each page for new LAG members, twitter feeds etc.

In terms of communications, LAG members felt somewhat overwhelmed by the volume of emails they receive from the RDP Team and find it hard to discriminate between what is necessary and what is not. This was echoed by project leads who reported difficulties with 'over-communication.'

## **BARRIERS TO APPLICATIONS**

Despite some concerns around marketing, interviewees were clear that there are some more fundamental barriers which have affected the take-up of the programme. The main issue is the payment in arrears. This is an insuperable issue for smaller community groups with limited cashflow. It is a feature of the programme that has long been criticised and whilst the scope to address this design flaw is not possible under current funding rules it is a key issue which needs addressing in any successor funding programmes.

Match funding is less of an issue but was still highlighted in discussions. It was felt that not enough is made of linking in with other Council funds and projects where LEADER can add value.

Neath Port Talbot has a limited number of suitable organisations in the area with the capacity and skills to apply for funds. Those that do exist believe they cannot afford the time, money or staff resource to support an application. The cost of the application process is perceived to exceed the benefit of securing funding.

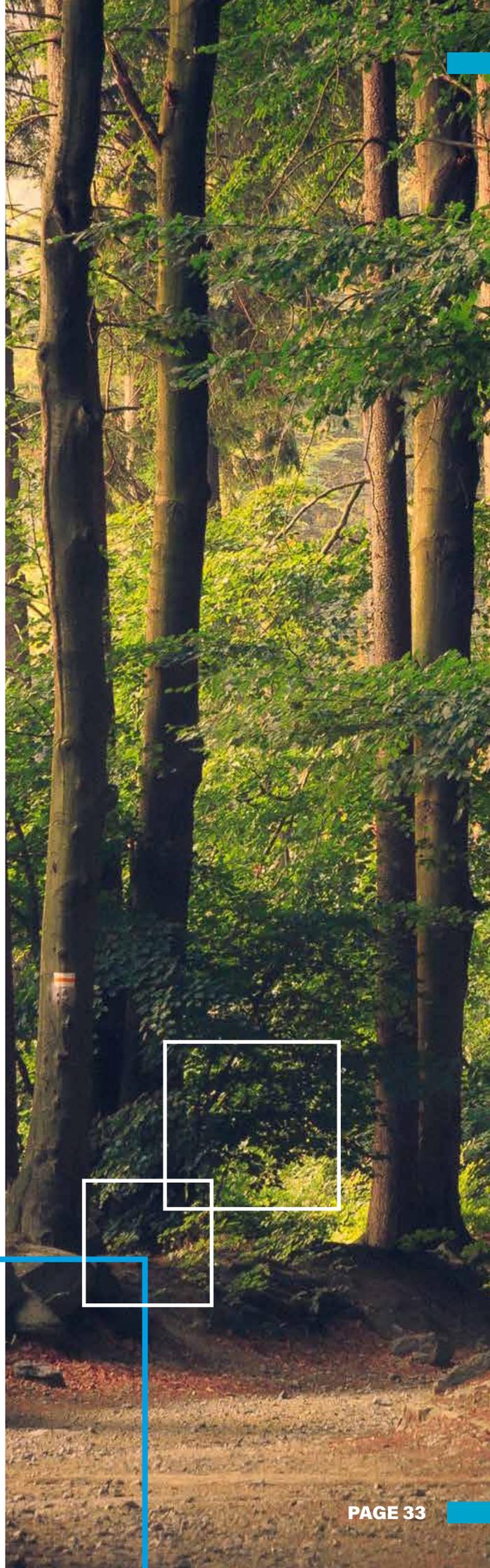
The Welsh Government interpretation of State Aid rules is believed to be more restrictive than in other parts of the EU. Changes to the rules on eligibility have caused confusion and led to applications being turned down, when a year later they would have been acceptable.

The lack of discrimination in the processes for bidding for £10k and £100k is unhelpful and interviewees felt strongly that future funding should have a separate tiers of funding for bids of up to £10k with a much more streamlined application and approval procedure. It needs to be simple and inclusive.

In short, a range of potential applicants believe there are better funds available to meet their needs.

## **HOW WELL ARE THE KEY PRINCIPLES OF THE LEADER APPROACH IMPLEMENTED?**

Figure 10 sets out our assessment of delivery against the key principles.



## FIGURE 10:

The following table sets out our assessment of delivery against the key principles

Key principles	Assessment
<b>A bottom-up approach</b>	The development of the LDS fully embodied a 'bottom up' approach through extensive consultation in the communities. This consultation has to be set against the fact that the themes from the EU are 'top down' which frames the responses given, rather than truly reflecting what the rural communities might suggest is needed without the LEADER framework. However, the very nature of the programme with payment in arrears limits the potential for community groups to apply for funds. As noted elsewhere, NPT has one of the lowest ratios of third sector organisations per resident in Wales. Feedback suggests that there is limited capacity within these organisations to bid for funds, which in turn has limited the number of applications from communities. Nevertheless, 3 in 4 projects have been developed by local organisations, successfully embodying the 'bottom up' principle.
<b>An area-based approach</b>	The community audit which preceded the LDS enabled the local partnership to work together to identify and address local strengths, challenges and opportunities, and build on the area's potential and resources. A particular issue in NPT is the use of the term 'rural' and a policy which is essentially focused on the needs of remote rural communities rather than – as in NPT – areas of urban fringe. It is felt that this has limited involvement from agricultural enterprises, which in other areas might drive entrepreneurial activity. There is some frustration at the exclusion of other areas of deprivation within NPT, but the focus on the valleys has allowed for investment in areas which face specific problems due to the demise of heavy industry.
<b>An emphasis on local partnership</b>	In terms of partnership it is clear that there has been the development of mutual support and trust between the LAG, the RDP Team ushered in with the change in leadership of the RDP Team. New LAG members have been recruited and there is strong representation of the third sector. There is an opportunity to now build effective partnerships with the third sector following any relaunch of the fund.
<b>Multi-sectoral integration</b>	The LAG would welcome the opportunity for the Welsh Government to attend their meetings. With the advent of the PSB in Neath Port Talbot there is scope for closer working within the council and amongst partners to join up services by theme rather than geography. The fund feels isolated from the wider work of the council, not helped by the position of the team within Education. There are linkages between LAG members and the Public Service Board (PSB), for example Neath Port Talbot Council, Tai Tarian and the CVS sit on both the LAG and PSB. However, it is not clear if this link should be considered as formal. The LDS has not been kept as a living document so is no longer as useful in the changing strategic context for action and there is scope for greater integration with the Wellbeing agenda and the regional agenda set by Swansea Bay City Region.
<b>Networking</b>	LEADER funding offers the opportunity to support knowledge transfer, networking and learning through collaboration and co-operation with others to achieve a greater outcome. There has been one cross-boundary project (Baytrans) but otherwise work across LAGs has been limited. Although the RDP Team does network with other LAG areas the LAG members would welcome some networking with other LAGs. At present there is little sharing of best practice, case studies, lessons learnt between LAGs at board level. Given the difficulty in securing a quorum it is unlikely that joint meetings would be well attended but there may be opportunities for representatives to attend each others meetings on an ad hoc basis. Clearly there are opportunities to work more closely with LAGs across the Swansea Bay City region.
<b>Innovation</b>	The need for innovation is seen as a challenge which limits applications and there have been fewer pilot studies than might have been expected. It was said that the need to innovate inhibits applicants from building on success and their knowledge of 'what works.' 50% of project leads who responded to the online survey reported that the requirement for innovation had impacted on the ability of the programme to meet local needs. However, several feasibility studies have been successfully undertaken which have explored new approaches to long-standing issues.
<b>Inter-territorial and international cooperation</b>	No action in this respect.

## MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The RDP Team has developed rigorous processes for monitoring on a monthly or quarterly basis to ensure any emerging problems or risks are identified and mitigated as early as possible. Site visits are undertaken in the form of visits during the life of the project. Where any issues are identified appropriate action is taken which may be in the form of a change to the project, or as a last resort, withdrawal or reduction of the funding.

The Claims and Monitoring Officer, is responsible for monitoring progress of the programme and individual project progress. A monitoring form details action points, under or overspend and the associated reasons, progress against PIs, hard evidence available, any reasons for under performance and concerns to highlight to the LAG. Financial and monitoring information is reported to the LAG at every meeting.

During 2020 the monitoring form and remedial action forms have been revised to make them more fit for purpose.

A review of two randomly chosen projects showed the detailed and comprehensive evidence required to support claims. These included a list of members of networks, meeting dates, agendas and minutes; written records such as attendance at events. Evidence available against each PI target is recorded and publicity information is reviewed. Each project has a mandatory requirement to complete a project closure report which provides an evaluation of performance and achievements in relation to the LDS, sustainability and cross cutting themes.

The online survey of project leads showed a split in opinion on the monitoring requirements – one third thought it was excellent, one third considered it 'OK' and the final third thought it 'poor or very poor.' It should be noted that, of course, there is an obligation to ensure that publicly funded projects are well spent and comply with PIs that they have agreed. The LAG should be aware of any projects where reasonable requests for information are being opposed.

In interviews and at the launch workshop there was some frustration that the focus of monitoring and evaluation as required by the Welsh Government is on outputs and not outcomes. The vast majority of project leads said that the benefits of the programme had not been captured by the PIs. For their own purposes, projects often collect case studies and stories to tell a narrative of their project but these are not part of the monitoring of the project. As designed by the EU, it is felt that evidence is too focused on the short term and does not capture impact nor legacy. During the workshop it was felt that evaluation should be embedded into the life of the project and not left to the end, enabling positive change during the lifetime of the project to achieve better outcomes.

Interestingly, the level of support in monitoring from the RDP Team was viewed as 'excellent' by some and 'over involved' by others, this perceived 'over involvement' was felt in some cases to have an impact on project delivery. Outcomes should be the key issue but the programme is *"output driven, with the wrong focus."*

*"It felt like the project was more audited than evaluated."*

*"The monitoring process made me think twice during the application."*

*"Let the projects get on with it – sometimes the team is too involved!"*

The difference in opinion seemed to be between the smaller community organisations that appreciate support and the more 'professional' applicants with a clear track record and expertise in running European funded programmes.

Perhaps a more significant issue to consider in relation to monitoring is the intervention logic. The **intervention logic** is an integral part of the LDS and provides a framework for linking individual actions with outputs, with consideration of the baseline, objectives, outputs and results to be achieved with a focus on 'why?' an action was required and 'how?' it will achieve the objective.

In the LDS, the four local objectives (green/accessible/vibrant and enterprising) were accompanied by an Intervention Logic Table (ILT), which we have assessed in terms of its suitability for future activity. Our assessment has identified a number of issues which limit its use as a planning tool. These are set out below.

**1. Unclear linkages with the evidence:** Some of the opportunities and objectives do not flow clearly from the community audit and hence the evidence of needs. For example, one of the opportunities is the, 'Improvement of skill levels amongst rural residents.' The background research (Think Links) identified the following 'wish list' amongst residents which included a mixture of personal development and work-related activities. In our view it is unlikely that many of these subjects would generate sufficient demand to enable delivery in a rural community setting:

- Enterprise
- DIY
- IT
- Business skills
- Health and hygiene
- Plumbing
- Childcare
- Welsh language
- First Aid
- Administration
- CV skills
- Basic skills
- Cookery

It should also be noted that in relation to skills development *'lack of training/qualifications was identified as the lowest barrier to employment after 'lack of transport' and 'lack of jobs'*; although amongst younger residents skills was more of an issue. Notwithstanding this evidence, the Intervention Logic identifies actions to focus on employment; young people and skills related to film production:

- Conduct research into the key employment opportunities in NPT
- Produce an action plan detailing the specific skills required of employees and how best to administer training
- Specifically target young people most at risk of underachievement
- Capitalise on growth of local film production by setting up workshops for young people to increase skills.

These actions do not take into account the benefits of skills development for personal development and wellbeing, nor how employability-related training would add value to rather than cross-cut and duplicate other initiatives run by Job Centre plus, Communities For Work, Communities For Work +, The Youth Service, Workways or the local college. In terms of impact, the actions detail who will be targeted (young people) but not what success looks like, thereby providing a weak basis to determine successful outcomes.

**2. What is being measured in relation to the ILT is not internally consistent with the LDS objectives.** A further consideration is that several of the specific objectives identified within the four themes, e.g. 'To explore alternative sources of fuel for community transport' (Accessible theme) or 'to encourage and support local farmers to develop non-agricultural business opportunities' (Enterprising theme) have not been incorporated into the Intervention Logic Table. In fact, new objectives have been introduced into the Intervention Logic such as, 'to maximise the cultural assets of Neath Port Talbot.'

Since some of the LDS objectives do not appear in the ILT no monitoring is taking place as to whether they are being achieved, for example, there is no data on whether the following has happened: 'to encourage and support local farmers to develop non-agricultural business opportunities.' Going forward as well as reviewing the focus of the programme there is clearly an opportunity to address the intervention logic.

#### **IMPACT TO DATE**

The impact of the programme will be fully considered in the final evaluation but LAG members were asked which themes/projects had most impact to date. Of course, many of the projects are still being delivered and are continuing to be developed so it was difficult to answer, but the majority felt that the green energy projects had been very effective, because of the knowledge and experience of the people involved. Other projects mentioned related to tourism, the environment and community transport.

However, as noted above, the impact on people's lives from environmental improvements for instance in terms of their health and well-being are simply not required to be captured. As a consequence, LAG members struggled to identify the change the programme had made. To address this they would particularly welcome feedback on completed projects, other than numbers and spend:

***"I cannot say that LEADER has been a success as I haven't seen any evidence one way or another"***

***"We don't hear about final outcomes I would like to know what has been the success one year on or two years on."***

Overall, members nevertheless considered that the programme had proved to be a valuable resource:

***"It's a valuable funding programme which has benefited local communities. It has the potential to have greater take up by community groups that would really benefit from this kind of funding if the payment in arrears issue could be resolved!"***





## CONCLUSIONS

It is important to have flexibility to respond to different opportunities. In our view, a relaunch of the programme for a further 2 years provides an opportunity to revisit the community audit and intervention logic, not just for the short-term future but also to position Neath Port Talbot to fully understand the needs of its rural communities as a springboard for bidding for funding post-Brexit and to enable the programme to support wider local priorities in rural communities including the anti-poverty agenda and climate change.

The extent of austerity in the intervening years since 2014 has impacted not only on communities but on the capacity of the public and voluntary sectors to support them and this is becoming a further constraint. There is therefore an opportunity not just to consult communities but to additionally map the capacity of organisations to lead on projects and assess where additional funding can add value to existing activity, for example in relation to the forthcoming local poverty strategy. Collaborative commissioning could be piloted in particular communities to genuinely involve people in a meaningful way as to how services are delivered, which in turn will build the capacity of the community to engage in new ways of service delivery. It is imperative that projects come forward which have sufficient scale and impact.

In addition, the Council could explore mechanisms for supporting small community organisations with the payment in arrears issue, whether through channelling members' community funds or using S106 payments. According to the Welsh Government there is no objection to this approach.

Stakeholder engagement has shown that payment in arrears is considered to be the fundamental barrier, which prevents the programme from delivering on its aspirations for community based change. In order to attract a wider, more diverse range of applications that reflect the desired "bottom up" approach, the potential for changing the payment system needs to be explored.

## INTRODUCTION

The National Wellbeing Indicators for Wales are seven key outcomes against which the impact of the Future Generations Wellbeing Act is being measured. LEADER seeks to support rural communities and has a clear role to play in delivering against these key outcomes. This chapter of the evaluation sets out the link between the Wellbeing Indicators and LEADER in Neath Port Talbot, and how these links could be strengthened and developed in the second phase of the programme.

## NATIONAL WELLBEING INDICATORS

One of the main changes to the operating context of the LEADER fund is the introduction of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act and its associated goals. It is critical that looking ahead, that any future activity is closely integrated with the objectives of this legislation and with the associated NPT Well-being Plan and other forthcoming strategies such as the Anti Poverty strategy currently in preparation.

Taking the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act as a starting point, that frames the activities of the NPT Well-being Plan. To fit better with that Plan and reflecting on the findings of this mid-term evaluation we recommend that for any extension of the programme, the current four objectives are revised to encompass the wellbeing and climate change agendas and to tackle the rising issue of poverty in its widest sense, not just in relation to being out of work. This will bring the anti-poverty and social exclusion cross-cutting theme of LEADER to the fore, which to date has been underplayed.

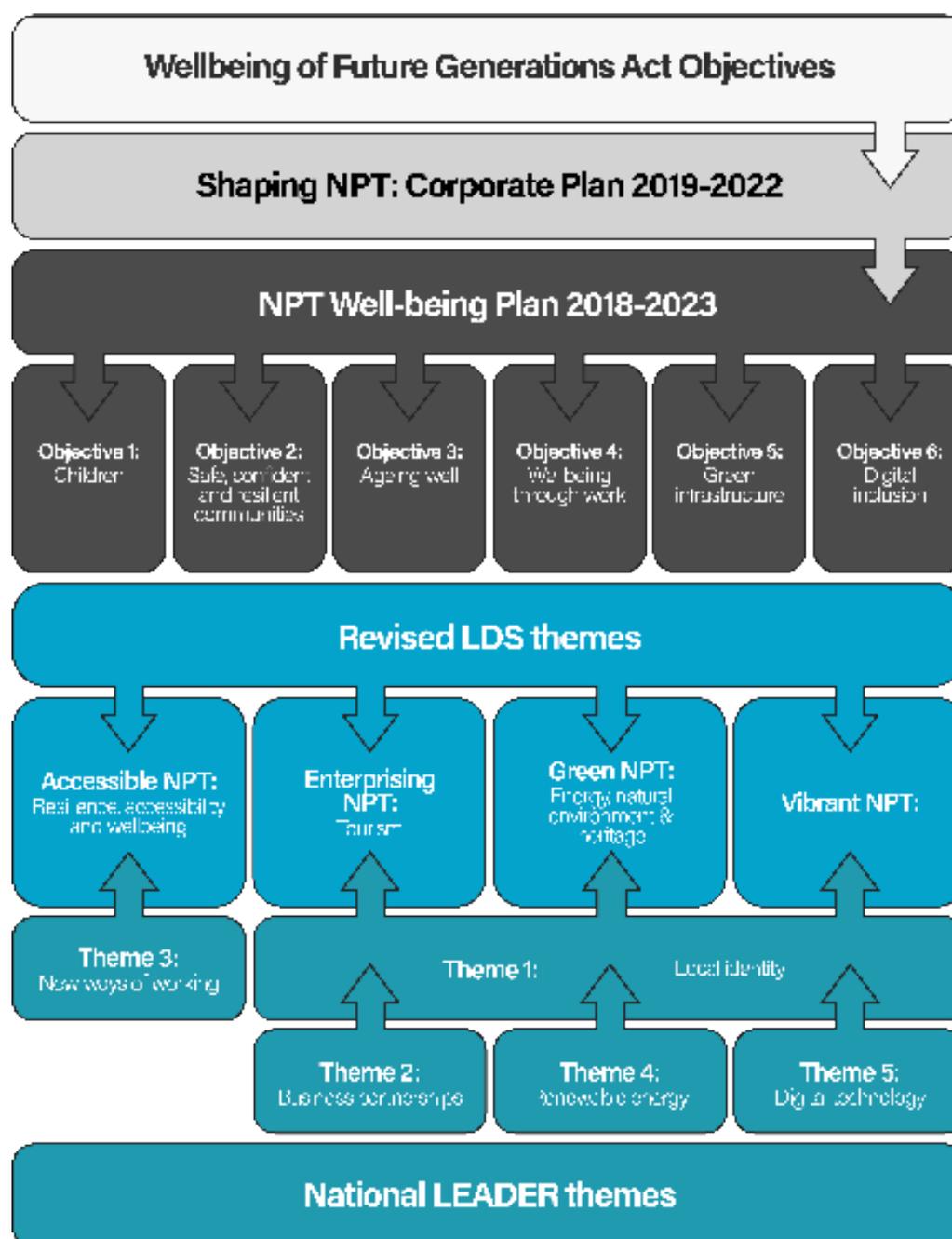
It is recommended that the four themes are therefore adapted to encompass activities in relation to resilience, accessibility and well-being within the existing themes as follows (changes in italics):

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

**Enterprising NPT:** (No change)

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

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



Associated with these revised objectives we would recommend that the team introduce, to their performance indicators, relevant impact indicators from the Corporate Plan such as:

- Percentage of schools reporting that children are better prepared to engage in play and learning.
- Number of people supported into voluntary work, employment or training.
- Number of visitors to attractions.
- Number of biodiversity rich areas protected or enhanced.

The monitoring of these indicators could be done by identifying the LEADER area within the monitoring process of the Corporate Plan so that outputs could be monitored for both the whole of NPT and within that, the rural area. This would simply require, for example, the identification of the schools in the LEADER area, the visitor attractions and the postcodes of people supported. In turn, there could be targets associated with the national well-being indicators, for example, an increase in people who volunteer; a reduction in loneliness; percentage of historic assets that are in stable or improved conditions; and numbers of healthy ecosystems. These would help identify the outcomes of projects rather than outputs. We would envisage these replacing the LAG's supplementary indicators rather than adding to them.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 7.0

It must be acknowledged that the nature of the LEADER programme is limiting, and therefore this process has focused on elements that the Managing Authority, RDP Team and LAG members can change.

In response to the research, engagement and evaluation process the following recommendations are proposed:

**A. Update the Local Development Strategy to ensure the programme is based on a strong foundation.**

The Local Development Strategy shapes what the LEADER programme is seeking to achieve across Neath Port Talbot, but has not been updated in the duration of the project. During this time there have been significant changes which could impact on what success looks like in the context of the programme. For example the LDS does not reference the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act which is the key platform for social, cultural, economic and environment wellbeing across Wales, core themes that align with LEADER.

The LDS strategy needs to understand what other support is being delivered across rural communities, to avoid duplication and focus on identified gaps in provision. In the time since the previous LDS, programmes such as Communities First have come to an end, with other programmes such as Communities for Work and Communities for Work Plus commencing.

Updating the LDS will also ensure that changes in need are understood and reflected, enabling the programme to respond to local and regional context, and prepare for the impact of Brexit.

**B. Work in partnership to explore and establish new strategic themes which align with the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act and the need identified in the updated Local Development Strategy.**

Based on this mid-term evaluation process the potential for rebalancing the current four themes have been identified to give more weight to action to address climate change, tackle poverty and social exclusion and improve the wellbeing of people of all ages.

These strategic themes have been shaped by stakeholder engagement and research and have been selected to reflect the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act and local strategic priorities such as tackling poverty and climate change. Engagement has highlighted the need to ensure the strategic themes are targeted enough to focus the mind of applicants and enable them to understand the aspirations of the programme, yet also broad enough to encourage a diverse range of projects.

**C. Pilot a commissioning based approach that reflects the aspirations of the LEADER programme and supports the key principle of a 'bottom up' approach.**

In theory LEADER funding should be enabling communities to help themselves to respond to the need/s they have identified through a "bottom up approach." In practise this is not the case. The evaluation has shown this is the result of a range of issues including limited community capacity and the payment of funding in arrears being a barrier to community groups. In response to this the RDP Team should consider taking a proactive approach to commissioning services from organisations or council departments with sufficient capacity/cashflow to meet identified community needs. This will require more of a community engagement role for staff and a greater lead from the LAG to provide impetus to applications.

A move to a commissioning based approach is a fundamental shift in how the programme is delivered, and a pilot would enable exploration and evaluation of this approach to see if it delivers improvements in relation to applications and impact.

**D. Tackle the issue around funding in arrears by considering a two tier system**

Funding in arrears was consistently raised as a barrier to funding, specifically for small and community based organisations. Consideration could be given to two tiers of funding, with a smaller pot focused on community based "bottom up" projects. For this lower tier the Council could explore mechanisms for supporting small community organisations with the payment in arrears issue, whether through channelling members' community funds or using S106 payments. According to the Welsh Government there is no objection to this approach.

**E. Realign the role of the project team to work in and with the community.**

The evaluation process has identified a number of barriers that limit and prevent the programme from taking a true "bottom up" approach. For example the number of voluntary organisations per 1,000 residents in Neath Port Talbot is the 4th lowest in Wales 1.5 per 1,000 people compared with, for instance, 6 per 1,000 in Powys. Furthermore, Neath Port Talbot is one of the few authorities to have seen a decline in the number of third sector organisations between 2014 and 2016.

For LEADER to be true to its aspirations in Neath Port Talbot there is a need to build and develop community capacity. This requires resource and in the remaining funding period it would be beneficial to consider reviewing and realigning the role of the RDP Team, to give the team a more defined community outreach and engagement role. Through the evaluation process the team have been praised for how they work with applicants, projects and the LAG. This recommendation seeks to build on this good work and refocus it to support communities to develop projects. These projects could be delivered by communities themselves or commissioned and delivered by partners such as the Local Authority, CVS and wider third sector.

**F. Continue to hone, develop and enhance the application and project processes.**

It should be acknowledged that the application process has been updated and streamlined for the benefit of applicants and the programme. This work should continue, and it is recommended that the cross cutting themes are embedded in all elements of the application process to reinforce their importance and ensure they are considered throughout the application process and project lifetime through to monitoring and evaluation.

Engagement with project leads suggests that the majority view monitoring and evaluation as a chore rather than a benefit. There is also concern that the focus is on outputs rather than outcomes. It would be beneficial to consider transitioning the evaluation process towards a focus on outcomes.

Evaluation should be part of monitoring, embedded in the monitoring and enabling projects to respond and change their delivery mechanisms if they believe it will result in successful outcomes and the achievement of their key performance indicators. Ultimately the LEADER programme is public money, and projects need to understand why it is needed and what it will look like as soon as they express an interest in applying for funding. The need for monitoring and evaluation and what this should look like needs to be explained during the application process and the parameters agreed when projects are successful.

## **G. Reshape the role of the LAG**

The current make up of the LAG is compliant with Welsh Government guidance. However, engagement with stakeholders has suggested there is a need to re-evaluate and reshape the role of the LAG. At the moment their core role is focused around evaluating applications against established criteria. Moving forward consideration should be given to the LAG taking on more responsibility for driving the programme, using the updated LDS, and their knowledge, as a basis to put out calls for specific projects/programmes to address targeted need, this could be in specific areas or across the entire rural community.

The LAG should take a more active role in championing the LEADER programme, using their networks to raise awareness and encourage diverse and innovative applications. In engagement a number of members expressed an interest in continuing professional development (CPD) type training. The development of a LAG CPD programme should be considered with any extension of the funds particularly around the objectives of the programme and the role of LAG members.

## **H. Develop a targeted promotion and marketing strategy.**

A number of stakeholders expressed a belief that the project has a bad reputation, stemming from its previous iteration which was based around a challenging and complicated application process. At the time of this evaluation, work is being undertaken to refresh the NPT Regenerate website and improve the social media presence. A promotion and marketing strategy should be developed with a focus on four key audiences; the Public Service Board, the Local Authority, the third sector and communities. Each audience needs a specific approach and key messages, this should be embedded in the role of the project team and LAG members.

