



Nearly *Wild*

Strengthening the nature-based business economy in Powys

STRENGTHENING THE NATURE-BASED BUSINESS ECONOMY IN POWYS

End of project report for
Arwain

March 2021



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1 CONTENTS

2	Introduction	3
3	Project Purpose	4
4	Activities undertaken	5
4.1.1	The impact of the Covid 19 pandemic	6
5	Learning.....	7
5.1	Our Methodology – what works	7
5.2	Defining Nature-Based Business – terminology that works	9
5.3	Characteristics of a Business that Benefits Nature	11
5.4	Supply chains, markets and Powys	11
5.5	Support to strengthen the sector	12
6	Appendices.....	14



2 INTRODUCTION

Nearly Wild Trading Ltd. received funding from Arwain, the LEADER programme in Powys, between November 2019 and March 2021 towards the project “Strengthening the nature-based business economy in Powys.

The project was delivered by a project manager and a research/support administrator, with additional input from volunteers.

The timeline and activities of the project were significantly affected by the Covid 19 pandemic and associated restrictions (which were in place for most of the project delivery period); these are described in more detail in Section 4 below.

However, the project was successful in terms of enabling considerable learning through this pilot project; learning resources based on this are now available via the Nearly Wild website, and key messages are presented in this report.

The legacy of this project comes in various forms:

- Some of the businesses which have engaged with this project tell us that they have picked up learning which will inform how they move forwards with their own business, e.g. in their approach to marketing.
- A number of regional and national organisations including Welsh Government have shown an interest in what we have been doing and are keen to explore this opportunity further.
- Some projects have asked us to share our learning with them, and sought out our advice, to help their own future development around nature benefiting economics, most notably Cambrian Mountains and Summit to Sea.
- There is a nascent and loosely connected group of nature-friendly businesses in Powys now in existence, and we will continue to try to nurture its development after the end of the funded project.
- As a Powys-based nature-friendly business ourselves, we are now in a position to offer better support to the sector and supporting organisations.
- We have been able to create short videos to be learning resources relevant to other nature-friendly businesses, which will continue to be available after the end of the funded project via the Nearly Wild website.
- The ‘Nature Diamond’ tool, which helps to explain the different dimensions of a nature-friendly business, may have development potential for use by organisations and enterprises which want to assess and improve their procurement policy and practice, and for businesses that benefit nature to consider how they could benefit nature even more.

The learning from this project is also available through a collection of short informal videos hosted on the Resources section of the Nearly Wild website (<https://nearlywild.org/case-studies/arwain/>).



Nearly *Wild*

Strengthening the nature-based business economy in Powys

3 PROJECT PURPOSE

The original objective of the project was described in the application as:

“To pilot a methodology for supporting and developing the supply chains of nature-based business, with the ultimate aim of strengthening the nature-based business economy, and thereby contributing to increasing economic resilience”.

This was broken down into a number of discrete pilot elements:

- To test the proposed technique for mapping nature-based business, including finding and identifying nature-based businesses and commercial activity, and the production of a user-friendly infographic business map.
- To work up a definition of nature-based business that we felt was reliable and meaningful.
- To test out a proposed approach for identifying and explaining the supply chains for the businesses found, and an approach for building new and stronger links between businesses and their buyers.
- To start to create a ‘hive’ of nature-based businesses in Powys, where businesses are more aware of others in this sector, can explore opportunities for collaboration, and where potential buyers can more easily find out about the nature-based products and services that are available in Powys.



4 ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN

FINDING THE BUSINESSES

- Web research
- Personal knowledge
- Suggestions from businesses/word of mouth

UNDERSTANDING THE BUSINESSES

- Phone discussions
- Meetings
- Site visits

LEARNING

- Vox pop videos with business owners
- Learning summary videos

CHARACTERISING NATURE-BASED BUSINESS

- Analysing what we learnt from the businesses
- Identifying different sorts of nature-based business
- Reviewing definitions and terminology
- Creating the 'Nature Diamond' description tool

STRENGTHENING THE SECTOR

- Online get-togethers
- Nature-friendly business online event
- Closed Facebook group for peer-to - peer learning and networking

Figure 1: Project activities



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Strengthening the nature-based business economy in Powys

4.1.1 The impact of the Covid 19 pandemic

The Covid 19 pandemic and associated restrictions had an impact on what activities we could undertake and when. The main adaptations that we had to make were:

- Our research support/administrator had to be more flexible than we had anticipated in her working patterns in order to support her family, in particular home schooling, and we could rarely meet for face-to-face team meetings.
- We could no longer meet businesses face-to-face; these were replaced by phone conversations or Zoom calls.
- We could no longer hold in-person networking events as planned; these were replaced by Zoom-based online get-togethers.
- There were no events being held (e.g. Royal Welsh Agricultural Show, farmers' markets), which meant that our plans to meet and talk to potential buyers of nature-based business products and services could no longer happen. We replaced these with phone or Zoom interviews with Wales-based third sector and public sector environmental bodies and business bodies, and also policy makers, focussing on their procurement policies and practice, and also the wider policy context for green and post-Covid economic development.
- Not meeting people face to face contributed noticeably to the time demands of the basic administration required for Arwain reporting.

These changes meant that whilst we were able to meet our target outputs for Businesses Benefitted (n=20) and Stakeholders Engaged (n=30), we could not meet our target output for Participants (achieving 41 out of a target of 100).



5 LEARNING

5.1 Our Methodology – what works

In the sections immediately below, we describe the approach that we took. There are a few simple learning points:

- An open mind for the Web search, then whittling down with more focus.
- Tapping into the personal knowledge of well-placed and well-networked individuals.
- A spider approach, i.e. seek more leads each time you talk to someone or look at a website.
- Go out to the businesses, don't expect them to come to you.
- Informal conversations with business owners worked far better than a formal survey/questionnaire approach would have. The same set of key topics could be covered in each conversation, but moving with the flow of the conversation.
- Have something to offer the businesses, explain what they might be able to get out of the time they put in.
- Making it clear that we're not 'the establishment', we're a nature-friendly business like them.
- Find the right people, i.e. the 'ecopreneurs'
 - With similar nature-focussed values and aspirations,
 - With energy, drive and aspirations,
 - Who see benefit in and value collaboration,
 - Who are commercially minded,
 - Who are 'do-ers'.
- And when we got the businesses together:
 - Giving them time to learn about one another
 - Not talking at them or bringing in outside 'experts', but placing them at the centre of 'holding the expertise'
 - Creating a sense of collaboration (rather than us leading, they follow)
- Using a simple underlying template for the voxpop videos, i.e. intro, broad-ranging discussion to describe the business and explore one or two particular themes, and then a conclusion.
- Straightforward kit for filming, which was easy to transport and make ready.
- Demystifying the filming process, making it comfortable for the prospective interviewee, and keeping it short.

5.1.1 Finding the businesses

The first step was to compile a list of business categories that we thought might be relevant e.g. leisure and recreation, food and drink, wood products. It has been an on-going exercise to compile this listing, and it now encompasses over 80 different business types where we think it would be possible to find businesses that benefit nature.

With all members of the team being Powys-based, our local knowledge gave us a useful starting point for finding businesses which might be nature-based/nature-friendly.

We then added to this list through an extensive Web search. Again, this exercise has been on-going throughout the pilot. We found that the Web search worked better for some business categories than others, e.g. hedgelayers or coppice workers are unlikely to have their own website, so are not



Nearly *Wild*

Strengthening the nature-based business economy in Powys

immediately visible through a Web search, whilst an outdoor education business typically would have a well promoted website.

We added to our list further through additions suggested by the businesses we spoke to, who knew of others in their own sector as well as individuals or businesses in their own community or nearby.

5.1.2 Understanding the businesses

We used three techniques for learning about the businesses: phone discussions, meetings and site visits. Due to the Covid pandemic, we were forced to do much more work than planned by phone and online meetings, and could manage just one window of outdoor site visits.

We designed a simple topic guide which we used to structure our conversations (whatever the method) which ensured that we covered all the key topics.

Where possible, we made our first approach by phone; for those people whose phone numbers weren't available on the Web, we contacted by email and many of these then got in touch with us. The willingness of people to engage was a real surprise, based on our experience of attempting to contact businesses in Wales and England for other unrelated research previously. Only two people did not want to talk to us, with one person feeling it wasn't relevant and the other because they were suspending business activities for family reasons at the time.

When Covid regulations allowed, we tried to arrange meetings rather than phone calls, as this provides better opportunity for relationship-building.

Some meetings took place on-site and we were able to see more of how the businesses worked. As well as the benefit of the face-to-face relationship building, it gave us more in-depth information about the business.

Both the meetings and the site visits gave us an opportunity to film short voxpop-type video interviews with the business owner, which gave us more insights for our work as well as providing learning resources which are now available for others to benefit from.

5.1.3 Learning

We have been able to draw out learning from all aspects of our information-gathering, i.e. the initial and on-going mapping of businesses, the discussions with businesses, the voxpop videos and the online networking events.

Our analysis was structured around the key questions for the pilot project. There was an ongoing iterative process of review, where we continually analysed the responses we were getting from the businesses, and this then led to us making small adaptations to our work to fit what we were learning. As we neared the end of the project, we carried out a comprehensive full project review. We reviewed all the material, identifying trends in the qualitative data and also interesting outliers, and then questioned the findings in a team workshop to draw out significant learning.



Nearly *Wild*

Strengthening the nature-based business economy in Powys

5.1.4 Characterising nature-based business

An important part of this project for us was to try to understand what nature-based business is, i.e. not a definition (although that might be helpful!) but rather to try to pull together a picture of what nature-based businesses look like, what they do and which of our ‘traditional’ business sectors they might belong to, how they behave, what it is about their business model which means they can be described as nature-based, etc.

We drew on our Web research and our work with businesses themselves, carrying out an analysis exercise of the feedback from our conversations, voxpop videos and online get-togethers.

In the course of our work to try to characterise this approach to business and economy, it became very clear that the terminology itself can be a barrier in terms of understanding these types of business, or it can be misleading. This is explored in more depth in Section 5.2 below.

5.1.5 Strengthening the sector

Whilst our ambitions within a project of this scale can only be limited, we did want to make some steps in the right direction and to try to find out what we could do and what further work would be genuinely useful to strengthen the nature-based/nature-friendly business sector in Powys.

The first step towards this was to hold networking events with the aim of enabling nature-friendly businesses/traders to find out who else is out there, what they’re doing, what ideas everyone has, what next steps they want to take. Due to Covid regulations, we were unable to run any face to face events, but held two informal online get-togethers each attracting 6 – 10 participants, and a larger online event attracting over 35 participants. The positivity towards holding online networking activity directed us towards setting up a larger and longer event, and we were able to use the feedback and ideas from the first two networking get-togethers to feed into the design of that event.

We also set up a closed Facebook group to enable peer-to-peer connections, networking and knowledge-sharing. As expected for this type of approach, sign-up was gradual but reasonably steady, to a total of 121 members by the end of the project, with members beginning to be more pro-active in posting themselves. We chose Facebook as an easy to access platform which most people would be familiar with. We decided to have a closed group for two main reasons: firstly, to have a simple vetting process (through 3 questions and a commitment to group rules) to try to ensure that participants had a genuine interest in the subject of a nature-friendly economy/nature-friendly business; secondly, to encourage open discussion in an online space where people could feel more comfortable to contribute.

A significant amount of time went in to one to one direct contact by phone or email. This was vital to building and keeping trust and engagement. Whilst not delivering a direct output, this part of the work was fundamental to overall success and the time and effort required should not be underestimated.

5.2 Defining Nature-Based Business – terminology that works

Terminology is a tricky issue, both in terms of finding a term that adequately describes the sorts of businesses that we found, and which is clearly understood in a common way by different people. We



Nearly *Wild*

Strengthening the nature-based business economy in Powys

concluded that our preference is to talk about “business, enterprise or commercial activity that primarily depends on and actively benefits nature or promotes nature awareness”, shortened to “**business and enterprise that actively benefits nature**”.

Why not just say “nature-based business”? There are two particularly relevant reasons:

- We did not find a definition of a NBB that encompassed all of the concepts that we believe are relevant. For example, one definition is: *Any commercial activity that can generate economic or social benefits in a way that supports one or more meaningful nature conservation outcomes*. However, whilst this is positive in the way that it includes the social/community element, it does not allow for the indirect – yet very valuable – aspect of promoting people’s awareness or understanding or connection with nature.
- Not everyone is formally established a business, or perceives themselves as a business, and there are organisations which are not businesses yet carry out some form of commercial activity. We wanted to be able to include many different forms of trading and commercial activity.

We wanted to be able to include some concepts that we think are particularly important within the term that we use, namely:

- It is not just about **use** but about **positive benefit to nature**.
- It is about **active / deliberate action to benefit nature**, as part of the business model and its ‘DNA’, not an add-on.
- This **includes third sector/charitable/social enterprise**.

Also, we don’t find it helpful to have a strict definition; rather it’s more of a guide. (Our experience of working with certification and definitions in the past is that it is too filled with nuances, meaning that that huge effort has to go into all the specifics which then become overly cumbersome to work with). It is about as much about ethos, principle and how you do something as it is what you do.

As a result, we have come up with a limited number of basic categories that we have tested through this pilot project, and which we have found to work well across the spectrum of businesses, traders and organisations we have engaged with.

Nature Based Business – direct and intentional benefit to nature

- Directly harvest / manage a resource

Nature Benefitting Business – indirect but intentional benefit to nature

- Use the resource (therefore influence resource management / harvest but don’t actually harvest directly themselves)
- Use the resource to raise awareness and educate about nature
- Support those producing nature-friendly product through deliberate support as part of the supply chain.

[Please see Appendices for the Nearly Wild ‘Nature Diamond’, which further develops this outline guidance]



Nearly *Wild*

Strengthening the nature-based business economy in Powys

5.3 Characteristics of a Business that Benefits Nature

It was clear that there is no single 'one size fits all' picture of a nature-based/nature-friendly business. In fact, it isn't necessarily a business per se; the trading entity might be a limited company, a sole trader, a CIC, a charity with a trading arm etc. However, we have noted a number of salient characteristics:

- It's a values-based approach – valuing the environment, local communities and culture, local history and place, ways of doing business that boost the economy without damage to the environment. Different businesses have different emphases.
- Businesses that we have found are working across a huge spectrum of areas of activity, including but not limited to food, retail, tourism, leisure, ETC, but with a nature-focused orientation in common.
- Many of the ones we have been able to talk to are micro. Deliberately. The benefits that this approach demonstrates: allowing a portfolio livelihood which makes it possible to continue to live where they do (Powys); enabling a business that might not be viable if a full livelihood was required from it; aiming for robust, resilient and long-lasting commercial activity which meets the person's particular aspirations. There is no sense that being a successful business means having to grow in size, or employing many people; in fact, for some people, it was quite the opposite.
- There is tremendous positivity about collaboration with other businesses – which offers potential beyond this project. This goes beyond wanting to overcome a sense of isolation to include aspirations to do more and better business.
- Being nature-based is incidental for some, the whole point for others. The responses were based on different personal criteria, but boiled down to one of three things (in no particular order): principles/ethos, i.e. as an embodiment of their values, they couldn't do business any other way, or it's an integral aim for what the business is trying to achieve; marketing, i.e. it gives a USP in their particular sector; practical i.e. the nature of the raw material.

5.4 Supply chains, markets and Powys

Discussions with the businesses showed that:

- Local sourcing is preferred, wherever possible, on cost and environmental grounds primarily, but also the principle of supporting local and Welsh business.
- Sourcing from outside Powys can be unavoidable, as the required input isn't available in or from Powys, or getting the required quality to meet nature-based/nature-friendly principles can be problematic.
- We found varying levels of environmental awareness and behaviour in relation to sourcing of raw materials, but seemingly always there to some extent. Often, there was a pragmatism around price (and frequently reluctantly), in order to keep their product/service competitive.
- Their markets are looking for:
 - A unique or interesting experience or product, e.g. tree house stay, lavender farm guided tour
 - Something new to them.
 - Accessible to where they start their search, e.g. home or holiday base.
 - Easy to find, particularly when online.
 - A particularly good quality example of what is available in that sector, e.g. hand cream, sauna.



Nearly *Wild*

Strengthening the nature-based business economy in Powys

- The ‘nature-friendly’ element of a business may or may not be a central part of the business’ marketing message, with its usage depending on the business owner’s perception of what its clients are looking for. However, for some businesses, it was evident that they had not previously thought about the potential commercial advantage of promoting their ‘nature-friendliness’, but would now consider including this within their marketing.
- It was interesting to consider the relationship between these businesses and their location in Powys, which demonstrated some differing situations:
 - Some need to bring the market in to the business (in its Powys location), so the service must sufficiently special to be able to persuade customers to travel. The customers probably come because of the business offer, not because it’s Powys.
 - There are businesses which are focussed around being Powys-based, i.e. Powys is essential to their business model; at the other end of the spectrum, being in Powys is barely or not relevant (for various reasons, e.g. internet sales). And in the middle, there are those where Powys offers a suitable resource/base, but it could arguably/potentially be anywhere similarly rural or with similar natural resources.
 - Conurbations within a 2 – 2.5 hours are frequent sources of customers e.g. Bristol, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool. But some businesses regularly attract customers from further afield.
 - Some businesses travel to customers (rather than, or in addition to, their customers coming to them in Powys), e.g. attending events, delivery to individual customers, providing their service in a non-Powys location.

5.5 Support to strengthen the sector

We were keen to understand what might be needed to enable the nature-friendly business sector to be resilient, to flourish and to grow, so this was something we sought to find out about through all stages of the project. It became particularly pertinent in our conversations with the organisations that we spoke to who have an interest through their policy and/or procurement roles and practice.

Also, as circumstances changed from the time of project inception towards its last few months of delivery, the wider public policy environment has changed substantially due to the impacts of the Covid pandemic. Suddenly, a new term ‘green recovery’ came to the fore, and new initiatives such as the National Nature Service began to emerge. There is clearly a potential role for nature-friendly business and enterprise within this space, which we have begun to explore with players such as Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales.

Businesses and others with an interest in the sector noted a number of things that they believe would help to strengthen the nature-friendly business and enterprise sector:

- Networking between businesses, with several potential benefits:
 - To find out what other nature-friendly businesses there are. Not only would this help to overcome feelings of isolation, but could lead to new business relationships and opportunities.
 - To meet and talk to like-minded business owners and workers, who understand the particular challenges and aspirations of a nature-friendly approach to trade and enterprise, and who can share particularly relevant knowledge and learning.
 - To look for potential business opportunities, with like-minded businesses, whose products and services may be particularly complementary to one’s own.
- Procurement practice:



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Strengthening the nature-based business economy in Powys

- Where largescale organisations have policies in place that make it possible to buy in from nature-friendly organisations, in particular those which are local.
- With information for procuring organisations so that it is easy for them to find nature-friendly businesses that might be able to provide the products or services that the organisation wants to buy in.
- Which makes it easy to for an organisation to follow nature-friendly business principles, where they understand the different elements that might make a business nature-friendly, and they can see how to improve their procurement practices.



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6 APPENDICES

Calendar of online events, with agendas

Nature Diamond