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Evaluation of the Valleys Regional Park Guardians Scheme

Final Evaluation Report

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Glossary

Acronym	Definition
BBB	Big Bocs Bwyd
DGs	Discovery Gateways
INNS	Invasive, non-native species
KPIs	Key Performance Indicators
NNS	National Nature Service
NRW	Natural Resources Wales
ToC	Theory of Change
USP	Unique Selling Point/Proposition
VRP	Valleys Regional Park
VTF	Valleys Taskforce
RDP	Rural Development Plan
SMNR	Sustainable Management of Natural Resources
SSSI	Site of Specific Scientific Interest
WEMWBS	Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale
WG	Welsh Government

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

1.4 The objectives of the evaluation were to:

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

1.5 The evaluation involved three key stages:

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

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

1.6 This final evaluation report is presented in six chapters as follows:

- chapter one: this introduction to the report
- chapter two: outlines the study methodology
- chapter three: provides an overview of the VRP Guardians scheme and presents key findings in relation to its delivery, management, and implementation
- chapter four: reviews the key achievements of the Guardians scheme including performance against targets and the difference made to beneficiaries
- chapter five: presents our conclusions and offers recommendations for future similar schemes.

2. Methodology

2.1 This chapter sets out the method adopted for undertaking the study and the profile of contributors.

Method

2.2 The final evaluation phase was undertaken between January and March 2023, and involved the following elements of work:

- an inception stage, which included attending an inception meeting with Groundwork Wales
- a desk-based review of Guardians delivery documents, setting out progress and outputs achieved up to March 2023, quarterly reports, and self-evaluation evidence such as case studies and Outcomes Star¹/Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale² survey data gathered by the Guardians scheme team
- preparing qualitative discussion guides for interviewing delivery staff and beneficiaries
- receiving a database of Guardians beneficiaries and cleaning it for those with both contact numbers and email addresses provided. The aim of this approach was to try and gather more longitudinal evidence from beneficiaries that had left the scheme. A total of 70 beneficiaries were contacted with a target of 18 interviews to be achieved. However, only six responses were achieved from the beneficiary database
- arranging visits to two Guardians sessions to interview additional beneficiaries face-to-face. The sites were selected based on good attendance at their Guardian sessions over the previous couple of weeks. A total of 12 further beneficiaries were interviewed at the two Discovery Gateway sites
- agreeing upon a sample of stakeholder contributors to approach for interview and interviewing a total of six individuals including:

¹ Outcomes Star is an evidence-based tool designed to measure improved wellbeing and positive change.

² The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales is a tool to enable the measuring of mental wellbeing in the evaluation of projects.

- three staff members from Groundwork Wales and three members of the Valleys Regional Park team
- synthesising the findings of the fieldwork and desk-review and drafting this final evaluation report.

Methodological considerations

- 2.3 As was the case for the mid-term report, the evaluation draws heavily upon beneficiary self-evaluation data and evidence gathered and provided to us by the Guardians team. Due to gaps in the data collection, the data does not all add up to the same total.
- 2.4 At this final stage of the evaluation, we anticipated adopting a longitudinal approach to the fieldwork. We originally anticipated contacting beneficiaries who had left the scheme to track what happened next, and to explore whether any positive wellbeing, health or employment outcomes had been sustained. The database used for contacting beneficiaries was cleaned so that only those with a listed email and telephone number were contacted. This resulted in information on 70 beneficiaries. Whilst all 70 were contacted by email and a follow-up phone call, only six resulted in interview. As such, the remaining 12 beneficiaries were interviewed on site at the Discovery Gateways and are existing group members.
- 2.5 A detailed mid-term report was prepared for the Guardians evaluation as its timing was important in contributing to discussions taking place at the time about future funding possibilities. A high number of both stakeholders and beneficiaries were interviewed at that stage. This final report was prepared just six months later. As such stakeholder interviews have been undertaken only with those directly involved in the funding and delivery of the scheme. This final evaluation updates on progress or changes since the previous report but should be considered in conjunction with the key findings outlined in the mid-term report.
- 2.6 Finally, this final evaluation report was required for completion by end March 2023. As such we have not been able to reflect upon the final quarterly report. Similarly, we are reporting on data captured up until end December 2022 rather than end March.

3. Implementation of the Guardians scheme

3.1 This chapter provides an overview of the VRP Guardians scheme and what it expected to achieve within the current funding period, illustrated via a Theory of Change model for the intervention. It draws on a desk review of documentation and interviews with Groundwork Wales and VRP staff.

Background

3.2 The VRP secured funding via the European Social Fund (ESF) from 2021-23, and it also submitted a successful bid for Rural Development Programme (RDP) funding under Measure 16 which was designed to encourage and support co-operation, and Measure 16.2 specifically to support the delivery of pilot projects in this area. This funding was secured to deliver the Guardians scheme and Groundwork Wales was appointed to deliver the scheme following a competitive tender process.

3.3 The Guardians scheme received £884,308.83 of funding to deliver a two-year project which commenced in April 2021. The funding was allocated per annum as follows:

Table 3.1 Allocation of Guardians scheme project costs

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Guardians Scheme	£176,982.83	£311,500.00	£395,826.00
Overall Total	£884,308.83		

3.4 The VRP Guardians scheme for 2021-23 was envisioned with the aim to enhance community involvement and connectivity with the valleys natural and cultural heritage assets, through the provision of a community connectors scheme. It operated within the Valleys Regional Park (VRP) area of 570 square miles (917 square kilometres), stretching from the western fringes of Monmouthshire to Carmarthenshire.

3.5 The RDP funding bid described how the Guardians scheme's objective during this funding period was to 'better connect communities with their natural and cultural heritage assets, through educational, skills and wellbeing activities.' It aimed to work primarily on collaborative projects mainly within the network of Discovery Gateways, but also in communities themselves. It was developed and part-funded

by the VRP and was expected to add value to local skills and physical assets, aligning these to the VRP sense of place and experience.

- 3.6 To achieve the long-term sustainable management of the natural and cultural heritage resources across the VRP, the Guardians scheme was required to adopt and trial new ways of working and embed the principles of Sustainable Management of Natural Resources (SMNR) in its design and its delivery. It was also tasked with trialling innovative ways to engage people, businesses, and organisations to encourage bottom-up collaborative mechanisms so that projects and work packages link coherently and deliver the strategic objectives of the VRP.
- 3.7 The evaluation specification for this study set out seven aims for data collection in relation to the VRP Guardians scheme:

Figure 3.2 VRP Guardians scheme aims set out in the original specification

Aim 1	Increasing valleys residents' involvement in activities (landscape based, not just visiting) in and around the Discovery Gateways (helping Discovery Gateways become recognised as hubs for health and wellbeing).
Aim 2	Promoting an increased feeling of ownership of and pride in the valleys' natural assets.
Aim 3	Ensuring sustained involvement in those activities (or other environment-based activities) - i.e., that the residents don't simply take part in a short-term project and then leave without trace.
Aim 4	Helping valleys residents to have an increased feeling of wellbeing as a result of being involved in outdoors, nature/landscape-based activities.
Aim 5	Helping engage new volunteers and beneficiaries who will provide sustained support in the maintenance/improvement of the landscapes in and/or around the Discovery Gateway sites.
Aim 6	Enabling residents to take on other projects in their communities – even if just a newfound interest in growing in their own gardens.

- 3.8 A Theory of Change model was developed at the outset of this evaluation, in collaboration with Groundwork Wales staff, which was intended to reflect the delivery of the scheme. It set out the activities undertaken, and the outputs and outcomes expected from the intervention:

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

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Programme Outcomes	Long-term outcomes
£884k of funding over two years Delivery plan involving 'tried and tested' intervention A team of up to seven Guardians with a wide range of skills and experience 10 Discovery Gateway sites Referrals from partner organisations Aged Qualifications	Promote opportunities via social media, communication materials and other networking opportunities Engage with community groups and partners to establish referral routes to recruit volunteers Establish volunteer groups to work at Discovery Gateways Identify opportunities for activities at each Discovery Gateway Organise and deliver environmental improvement activities with groups, schools, and individuals within a DG locality Organise and deliver heritage-based activities with groups, schools, and individuals within a DG locality Organise and deliver health and wellbeing activities (e.g., walking groups and outdoor activities linked to social prescribing sessions) Signpost volunteers/beneficiaries to further opportunities and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. of social media posts and communication materials produced No. of community groups/partners engaged Areas of land maintained/improved Areas of waste removed/recycled No. of Big Bocs Bwyd initiatives delivered No. of beneficiaries involved No. of beneficiary volunteer hours secured No. of DG sites delivering activities Hours of training delivered No. of accreditations/qualifications gained No. of physical activity/wellbeing sessions delivered No. of beneficiaries progressing into employment, volunteering, and training opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local people aware of the work of VRP Guardians and Discovery Gateways Local people engaging in the design and delivery of improvements to landscape Local people feel connected to their local natural assets and heritage Beneficiaries gaining new skills Beneficiaries gaining qualifications/accreditation Beneficiaries progressing into employment Beneficiaries reporting wellbeing/physical health benefits Beneficiaries continuing to contribute to improvements in local area 	The Valleys is recognised and celebrated for its green landscape There is greater use of Valleys landscapes for exercise, work, education and access to nature and heritage The Valleys landscape underpins a resilient local economy

Update on delivery and management of the scheme

3.9 The implementation of the Guardians scheme in its final six months has remained broadly the same as was reported previously in the mid-term review. The focus in the final six months has been on environmental conservation with health and wellbeing always integrated into activities. The well-established links with mental health practitioners have continued to direct people to the Guardians – described by one contributor as a type of 'informal social prescribing'. Referrals have continued from partners such as ARC Bridgend, job centres and other community groups. In the last six months of delivery, new links have been forged with college student groups from Coleg y Cymoedd and Bridgend College, who have attended sessions at three Discovery Gateway locations (Ynys Angharad Park, Parc Bryn Bach and Bryngarw). This is because of proactive contact made by Groundwork Wales to recruit new groups. Most of the students have mild learning disabilities and volunteering or engaging with the environment fits well with a module on their course.

3.10 There were fewer activities arranged and lower turnout during the winter, as expected, particularly during the cold weather. Staff described how the post-Covid

surge had levelled out but had picked up again in the last month or two. The scheme has been taking fewer new beneficiaries on board recently too, as it is not deemed to be appropriate to recruit additional members when they cannot be supported post March.

- 3.11 The Guardians continue to work in the same places, with focus remaining on Discovery Gateways. It remains the case that Bryngarw, Dare Valley and Cwmcarn have been the most successful Discovery Gateways for Guardian scheme activities.
- 3.12 During the last six months, three sessions per week have been held at Bryngarw with a range of work being undertaken from path clearing, balsam bashing, a river kick survey, construction of a bug hotel and clearance of a small quarry within the park to create an area for the park rangers to collect compostable material removed from other areas of the park. There have also been nature walks, tree and bird identification, woodland craft activities and team challenges for the college group.
- 3.13 At Cwmcarn, a small group of committed, regular volunteers has constructed gates, fences, steps, and pathways making a significant contribution to the maintenance and improvement of the infrastructure in the park. Dare Valley Country Park has had a strong group of volunteers since the beginning of the Guardians scheme. Groundwork Wales has an excellent relationship with the park ranger who values the contribution of the group to the maintenance of the park. Over the last six months they have developed an area of scrub-woodland into a community woodland area, installed bins and benches and made a footbridge spanning a ditch.
- 3.14 Sessions have continued at Cyfarthfa Park, with the small, but well-engaged group working with Merthyr Naturalist Society to construct a new site for additional beehives. At Parc Penallta, path clearance, litter picking, and brush clearing has continued, with the rangers appreciative of the work being undertaken. The delivery of activities at Parc Penallta ceased from January 2023 onwards due to lack of engagement. At Parc Bryn Bach work started with a group of students, in addition to the more established group towards the end of 2022. All the students are working towards a Wildlife in the Community Agored Cymru unit. Similarly, a new Coleg y Cymoedd group at Ynysangharad park has been working within an

identified, fenced-off wildlife zone, clearing out invasive species and installing bird, bat, and hedgehog boxes. There has been no interest at Parc Slip over the last six months and the Guardians have struggled to attract volunteers despite contacting all local groups and contacts in the area. There has not been any activity at other sites where numbers were already low prior to the last six months of delivery.

- 3.15 Staff identify some critical success factors to enable successful engagement – the sites themselves are easily accessible to the local community; they have good transport links and have the necessary infrastructure in place at the locations to support Guardians activity (including supportive rangers or wardens). In this respect, country parks such as Bryngarw or Dare Valley have been easier places for the Guardians scheme to work in as there are plenty of opportunities to clear paths and improve walkways, whilst other parks such as Parc Slip or Llyn Llech Owain are more challenging due to SSSI designations or lack of facilities, such as in Parc Penallta.
- 3.16 Over recent months, the Guardians scheme has continued to focus on providing participants with activities that improve their eco-literacy, through demonstrating best practice in ecology, conservation, and environmental sustainability. This is included in activities to ensure that participants understand the benefits of biodiversity and to inspire them to take up a more active role in conserving and protecting local green spaces. The Guardians have also been using a suite of carbon literacy resources during sessions at the Discovery Gateways in recent months, to provide information about sources of carbon, importance of reducing food waste, recycling materials, and the role of maintaining a healthy natural environment.
- 3.17 Groundwork Wales and VRP staff who contributed to the final evaluation acknowledged that there have been natural changes to the Guardians team over time both at management and delivery level. Three of the Guardians have been there from the beginning of the scheme. This was not deemed to be surprising due to the short term, fixed nature of the funding. Interviewed contributors were keen to highlight the fantastic work of the Guardians through the challenges of Covid, and the way the approach had been adapted to changing circumstances. Contributors also felt that the Guardians consistently went above and beyond to deliver engaging sessions for beneficiaries. It was reported that the knowledge

and the skills of the Guardians had progressed over time and that this merited acknowledgement at this final stage.

‘The Guardians team are engaging, approachable, dedicated...and made the effort to better get to know the sites they were operating from. As a result, their knowledge and ability to engage only increased over time.’

‘The whole team...delivering the Guardians...have been extremely dedicated to making it work.’

- 3.18 The Guardians relationship with rangers and Discovery Gateway staff have evolved and improved and their contribution to the improvements at the sites was highly valued by rangers. Feedback in relation to Bryngarw and Dare Valley in particular suggested that the extra capacity provided by the volunteer programme was supporting the Discovery Gateways, and that the additional mid-week volunteer sessions were attracting a different audience to the Discovery Gateways than those who attended in house volunteer programmes delivered at weekends.
- 3.19 The Big Bocs Bwyd element of the Guardians has continued to develop since the mid-term reporting stage. During the first phase, five schools were engaged with. A further eight schools have been supported over the last six months although it has been challenging to ensure that schools have sufficient volunteers and a robust enough plan to support the scheme after the involvement of the Guardians comes to an end, so that the growing areas can remain sustainable. More recently, Groundwork Wales has been successful in obtaining a small National Grid grant which will fund planting of fruit tree orchards at four of the schools supported through the Big Bocs Bwyd element of the Guardians scheme. This is through an existing long-standing sponsorship relationship, which Groundwork Wales has programme bent in to support the schools.
- 3.20 Whilst the training and provision of Agored accreditation is still underway within the Guardians scheme, there has been less focus on this during the final few months. Staff reported a mixed response to this aspect of the scheme based on anecdotal information they had received from beneficiaries. Further education students and lecturers involved with the Guardians seem to value it, as the accreditation feeds into their courses and helps provide a focus. It was felt that retired scheme volunteers tended to undertake the accreditation primarily because they were asked to do it rather than because they had any strong desire to do so.

- 3.21 Contributors to this evaluation mentioned how there has been an increasing focus on seeking ways of maintaining and sustaining volunteer groups from the Guardians scheme over recent months. However, it remains the case that most Discovery Gateways simply do not have the capacity to manage a volunteer group, and without an intermediary, professional organisation, the management and insurance requirements and ecological expertise required are unable to be fulfilled. In general, the groups themselves were not deemed to be solid enough to be able to continue unaided. Without a funding stream, the activities will not be able to continue. This is further exacerbated by redundancies or restructures currently taking place at several Discovery Gateway management or at local authority level: ‘you have to accept that this type of work cannot be self-sustaining’.
- 3.22 The only example offered of activity that will be sustained in part in the future is at Bryngarw. One of the rangers has become quite involved with the group, and the group itself has become close knit – keeping in contact via texts outside of the group activities. As such, Bryngarw have now agreed to the group continuing with their mid-week session, with light touch support from one of their rangers.
- 3.23 Finally in terms of branding and promotion, contributors to the evaluation described how a better understanding of how to promote the scheme had also evolved over time, including the importance of branding the activities with VRP ‘more front and centre’. Whilst it was recognised that it is not important to the beneficiaries as to where the funding is coming from, it is nonetheless key that there is strong identity and ownership of any branding, and that it is clearly associated with the funding.

4. Achievements and difference made

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

Progress against targets

4.2 At the time of preparing the mid-term report the Guardians scheme had already comfortably over-achieved on all its contracted targets. Achievement against these KPIs have progressed further over the past six months, as Table 4.1 demonstrates. All contracted targets have been comfortably exceeded. Indeed, the number of beneficiary session hours delivered is twice the contracted target, and the number of registered beneficiaries is 70% higher than anticipated.

Table 4.1 Cumulative achievements of the Guardians scheme
(up to December 2022)³

Key Performance Indicator	Target	Achieved to date	% Achieved against target
Contracted targets			
No. of registered beneficiaries	550	940	171%
Hours of beneficiary sessions delivered	4,400	9,053	205%
Marketing social media posts published	50	94	188%
No. of Discovery Gateways supported	10	10	100%
No. Stakeholders engaged	600	674	112%
Wider, non-contracted targets			
Areas of land improved (m2)	n/a	611,958	n/a

³ The KPIs that are required to be reported upon to the VRP have an associated target. Groundwork Wales also provide data on several additional KPIs, that do not have specific agreed targets, but provide useful output data.

Areas of land maintained/managed (m2)	n/a	219,646	n/a
Beneficiary attended sessions	n/a	916	n/a
No. of Big Bocs Bwyd initiatives delivered	n/a	22	n/a
Registrations for Agored qualification units	n/a	67	n/a
No. of accreditations gained	n/a	41	n/a
No. of beneficiaries progressing into employment, volunteering, or training	n/a	74 ⁴	n/a

4.3 The Guardians scheme has also collected data in relation to several additional KPIs over the course of the funding, as seen at Table 4.1, which also provides some impressive results in terms of what has been achieved. Huge quantifiable improvements and maintenance of land has been achieved by the volunteers across 900+ sessions.

4.4 The data in relation to registration for and accreditation of Agored qualification units suggests that the interest in gaining such accreditations through the scheme has been relatively low, with less than 10% of registered beneficiaries choosing to register for Agored qualification units, and around 5% achieving such accreditations. These have been mainly of interest to college groups, with some suggestion during interviews with beneficiaries, that others had agreed to sign up to accreditations without having much need for or interest in achieving them. The figures above suggest that around 8% of beneficiaries have progressed into some form of employment, volunteering or training, but there is little information as to what these are, and tracking beneficiaries once they leave the scheme has proven to be challenging. As such, it is not possible to know how many beneficiaries have maintained that progression and whether these outcomes can be attributed to the project.

⁴ This is the number of progression forms completed. Not all beneficiaries fill in a progression form when they left the scheme. This updated, corrected figure is lower than the 89 reported in the mid-term report.

4.5 Table 4.2 below shows how some of the Guardians scheme key targets have progressed or been maintained over time. The number of sessions provided has remained reasonably consistent over time, with a small drop in Q2 of 2022/23 that can be attributed to some very challenging weather conditions that resulted in cancelled sessions. The number of beneficiaries attending individual sessions has been consistently strong, particularly during the warmer summer months, and has not tailed off dramatically towards the end of the funding period. The scheme has also delivered a consistent number of hours, with again some peaks during warmer delivery months.

Table 4.2 Progression of Guardian scheme targets (up to end Dec 2022)

Source: *Groundwork Wales*

	Q2 2021/22	Q3 2021/22	Q4 2021/22	Q1 2022/23	Q2 2022/23
Area of land improved or maintained (m2)	22,633	51,976	164,737	170,325	166,681
Number of sessions	148	106	98	100	79
Number of participants attended	170	313	207	408	390
Number of Discovery Gateway sites supported	8	6	8	9	8
Number of hours delivered	2,025	1,277	1,277	1,739	1,245

4.6 Contributors to the final evaluation were agreed that the Guardians scheme had performed strongly against its KPIs, and therefore felt frustrated that, as a consequence of short-term funding, the success of the scheme could not be replicated or continued thereafter, as the delivery period was not long enough to establish new volunteering groups or to enable an approach that might have been more self-sustaining thereafter.

4.7 Throughout the funding period, the Guardians scheme has consistently been able to report equal participation by gender, as seen in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 Gender (sex) of all registered Guardians scheme beneficiaries

Source: Groundwork Wales

Gender	Total	Percentage
Female	386	50%
Male	353	45%
Prefer not to say	8	1%
Information not provided	32	4%
All	779⁵	100%

4.8 In terms of ethnicity, 81% of all beneficiaries describe themselves as being of white and 2% as non-white, mixed ethnic background, or other ethnic origin, as seen in Table 4.4. However, the ethnicity of almost one in five are not known. Based on the information provided, it suggests that the Guardians scheme has been able to reach some of these harder-to-reach groups within the localities, and is in line with ONS data on ethnicity for the South East Wales local authorities where the Guardians scheme operated⁶.

Table 4.4 Ethnic background of all registered Guardians scheme beneficiaries

Source: Groundwork Wales

Ethnic background	Total	Percentage
White British	341	81%
White English	33	
White Welsh	204	
White Scottish	1	
White Irish	2	
Other White	18	
White & Black Caribbean	5	2%
White & Black African	1	
White & Asian	0	
Mixed Other	1	
Asian/Asian British	5	
Black/Black British	0	
Other Ethnic Origin	4	16%
Unknown	121	
Prefer not to say	7	
All	743	100%

⁶ [Ethnicity by area and ethnic group \(gov.wales\)](https://www.ethnicity.gov.uk/Ethnicity-by-area-and-ethnic-group)

4.9 The Guardians scheme has attracted participation from a range of people in terms of their employment status, but it has been particularly successful in recruiting those who are unemployed, with almost a third from this category. The focus on college groups during the recent stages has also enabled the scheme to work with a high number of under 16s. Those who are currently in training or education would be captured under 'Other' too, therefore the number of under 25s are likely to be even higher than reported. It is also encouraging to note that the proportion of retired beneficiaries is only around one in twelve of all beneficiaries, as these types of schemes usually attract this cohort in greater numbers, again suggesting that the Guardians scheme has been successful in reaching harder-to-reach groups.

Table 4.5 Employment status of all beneficiaries to the Guardians scheme

Source: Groundwork Wales

Employment Status	Total	Percentage
Full-Time	103	15%
Part-Time	63	9%
Self-Employed	22	3%
Retired	52	8%
Unemployed	202	30%
Other	146	21%
Under 16	93	14%
All	681	100%

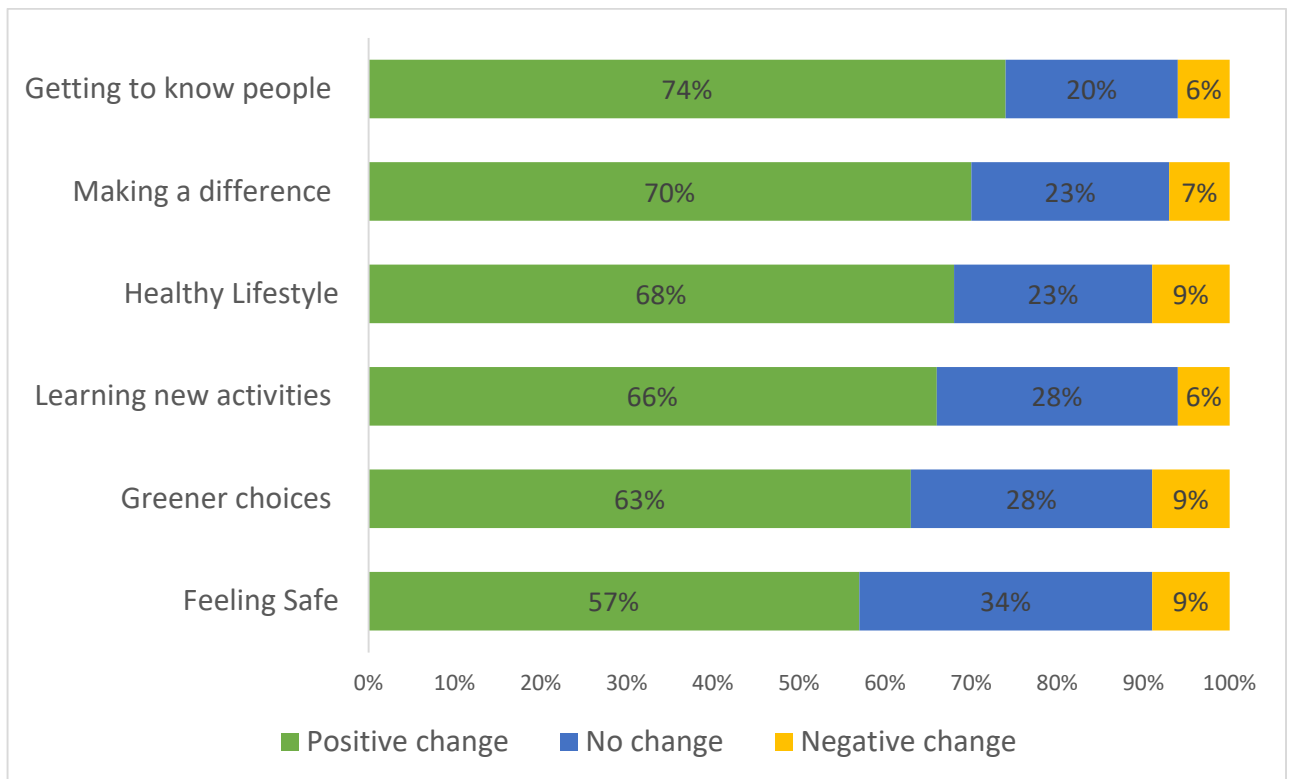
4.10 The Guardians scheme has also been highly successful in recruiting those with a self-reported disability to take part, with one in five (158 or 21%) having a disability compared with 403 (53%) who stated that they did not have a disability. The status of all other beneficiaries is unknown, or they preferred not to say.

4.11 In terms of Welsh language, only 31 (or 4%) of beneficiaries' state that they are able to speak Welsh, with 392 (or 51%) stating that they do not. However, the linguistic skillset of over a third of beneficiaries is not known (329 or 44%), therefore it is not possible to say whether the make-up of the volunteers has been broadly in line with the population as a whole in the delivery area or not.

Difference made to beneficiaries

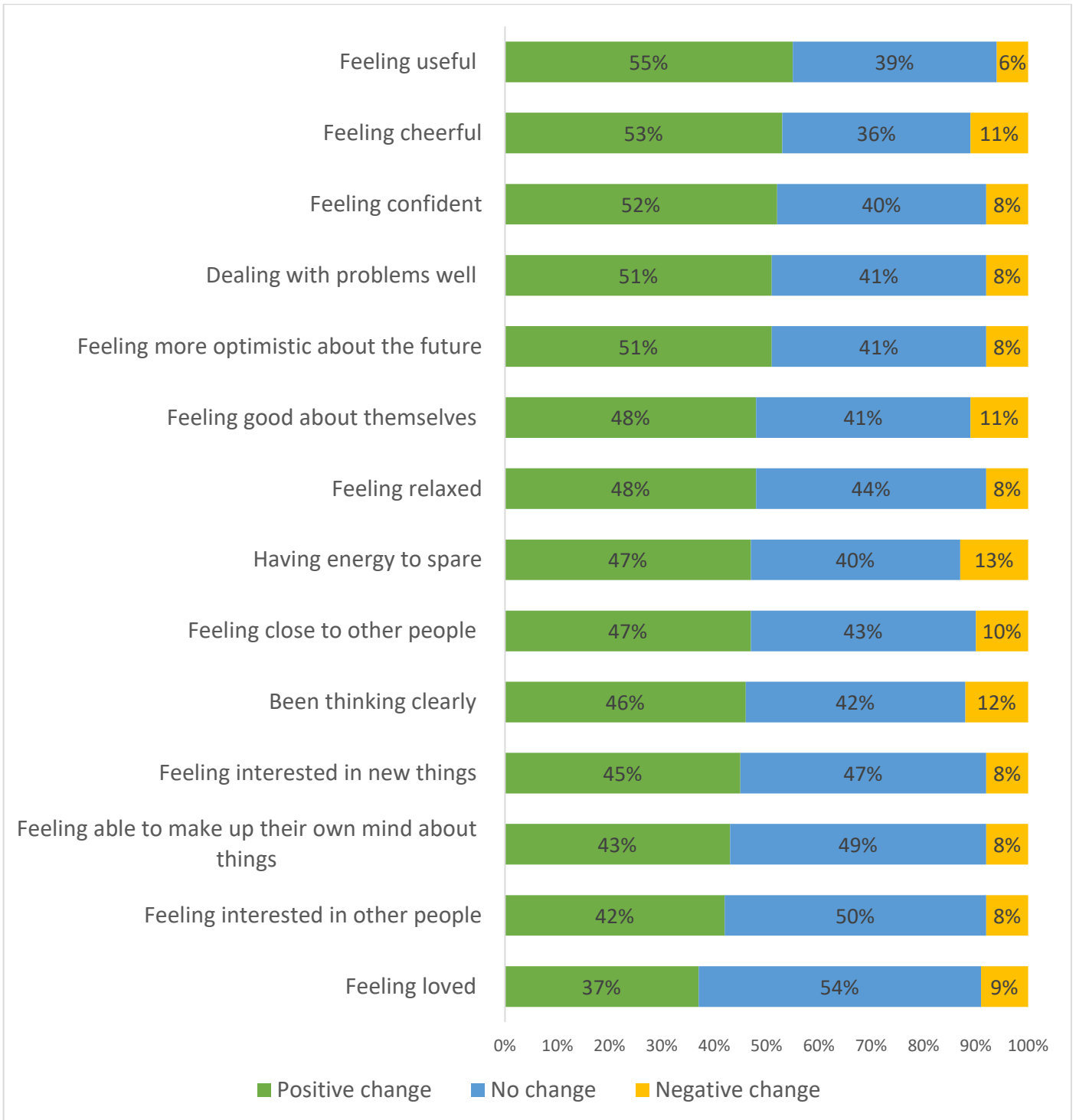
- 4.12 In this section we consider the evidence of outcomes achieved and impact upon the beneficiaries of the Guardians scheme. Contributors to the final evaluation were in agreement that the wellbeing impact on beneficiaries has been the key outcome for the individuals concerned, but it is the most difficult to quantify. Staff members have noticed both physical and mental health improvements within their groups, and case study evidence provided by Groundwork Wales and gathered by the evaluation team also supports this.
- 4.13 Beneficiaries consistently mentioned how they feel better, are more motivated, have more confidence and are more engaged in their community. Beneficiaries valued the social interaction that the Guardians scheme provides them, particularly coming out of a difficult time over the pandemic, and having the opportunity to do something outside, and in nature also has a positive impact on many.
- 4.14 The Guardians team have gathered Outcome Community STAR and Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Survey (WEMWBS) data which strongly evidences this positive impact on beneficiaries' health and wellbeing.
- 4.15 Outcome Community STAR data for 146 individuals has been collected by the team during 2021 and 2022 with full datasets available for 118 beneficiaries. Across the duration of the Guardian programme, 71% of beneficiaries report feeling better than when they started the scheme on the Community Star, 16% feel worse and 13% report no change.
- 4.16 A positive difference is reported across each sub-heading of the star as follows. Almost three quarters of beneficiaries report positive improvements in relation to statements in the Community Star relating to getting to know people (87 or 74%). Two thirds or more beneficiaries also report a positive difference to statements related to learning new activities (78 or 66%), living a healthier lifestyle (80 or 68%) and making a difference (83 or 70%):

Figure 4.1 Community Star Outcomes – Difference made to Beneficiaries per sub-heading



4.17 Full WEMWBS data has been collected for 132 beneficiaries at pre-project and post project stage. Across the duration of the Guardians scheme, 95% of beneficiaries who completed WEMWBS surveys reported feeling better than when they completed the form at the start of their involvement. A positive response is recorded by around half of all beneficiaries across the range of statements as shown in Figure 4.2 below:

Figure 4.2 Outcomes for beneficiaries reported via WEMWBS survey data



- 4.18 It is interesting to look at the results per location. For example, almost all those attending courses in Bryngarw reported either an increase or feeling the same across all Community STAR headings and WEMWBS statements. Improvements or increases are also overwhelmingly reported in WEMWBS and Outcome STAR results for beneficiaries at Cyfarthfa, Dare Valley, Llyn Llech Owain and Parc Bryn Bach.
- 4.19 In Cwmcarn, a much more negative set of results is recorded in their Wellbeing 2 group alone. The results mainly show a decrease across the statements which suggests that the methodology might have been misunderstood by that one particular group as there are no specific circumstances to otherwise explain this anomaly.
- 4.20 Some of the quotes provided by beneficiaries on their Outcomes STAR responses also evidence how the scheme improved their mental health and wellbeing:
- *'I like coming to these [sessions]. My mental health has been bad, but I'm doing a lot more now, and this is good for it'*
 - *'Things in my life...are much better since I started this project. It has helped my mental health tremendously by giving me purpose, friendship, accountability, structure, and fresh air'*
 - *'I simply feel more balanced now'*
 - *'It's made a difference to people – it's all down to relationships and the power the Guardians have to link people together.'*
- 4.21 Scheme monitoring data suggests that a small percentage of beneficiaries (41 in all) succeeded in gaining Agored Level 1 or 2 qualifications. Contributors to the final evaluation suggest that more qualifications could have been produced had the scheme placed more emphasis on this as an outcome from the start, although others questioned whether there was much real demand for them.
- 'We've pushed the qualifications – but people don't realise there is demand for these types of skills'*

- 4.22 There is less evidence that beneficiaries have moved on to jobs as a direct result of their involvement in the Guardians scheme, although there are one or two examples drawn out in case studies of individuals who have achieved this.
- 4.23 However, there is some evidence that the experiences through the Guardians scheme have opened beneficiaries' eyes to the natural world on their doorstep. There is clear evidence across the case studies collected by Groundwork Wales and by us, as independent evaluators, that beneficiaries have gained a vast amount of knowledge and understanding about nature and biodiversity and acquired the skills to support nature sites.
- 4.24 There is some evidence that beneficiaries are now more open to opportunities for green jobs and skills development in the future, and it is possible that this impact will be seen on some beneficiaries in years to come:
- *'I'd love to do something like this full time'*
 - *'Parc Slip is an amazing site. To me it's a haven for nature and a place where I can learn a wealth of knowledge about the natural world...in future I would like to manage a reserve like this one'*
- 4.25 The evaluation team spoke with eighteen beneficiaries as part of the final evaluation fieldwork stage. Eight of these are provided as example case studies below, and demonstrate the positive impacts on the mental health, wellbeing and future plans of individuals who have been involved in the Guardians scheme. The case studies also testify that beneficiaries are sad to see the scheme coming to an end and are unsure what they can do in future to replace it.

Case study 1

Tanya*

Tanya is in her 30s and has been attending the Guardians and realised that she needed to make some changes to her lifestyle.

She was referred to the Guardians group by one of the organisations providing her with mental health support and hasn't looked back.

Tanya is very enthusiastic about the work they have done. She particularly enjoys the physical work - clearing brambles, making dormouse boxes, and even just collecting rubbish. She is constantly learning new skills such as using tools or building and lighting a fire. She loves going home at the end of a session feeling tired and satisfied that she has done something to make a difference.

Before she volunteered with the Guardians, she hadn't appreciated that volunteering would have such a positive effect on her. She has always loved being in nature, but getting the opportunity to get outside every week has made a big difference to her personal wellbeing. She loves hearing the birds and seeing the new buds coming through - it has a calming effect on her. Whilst she understands that she will always need to take her medication, she feels getting out in nature is just as important to retaining balance in her life as it makes her feel happier and satisfied, which is something she doesn't always feel when she is in an urban environment.

Tanya also loves the social aspect of the group. She has made some good friends and likes to do something that is just for her for a change. The sociable aspect has had a big impact on her too. She is a mother of four and has been diagnosed as bipolar since her teenage years. In the last few years, she has increasingly been hospitalised due to her illness, now attends a walking group on a Wednesday with a couple of the other volunteers. She is sad that the Guardians is coming to an end but is determined to carry on with the walking group.

Case study 2

Tom*

Tom is in his twenties and moved to Wales around two years ago. He didn't know anyone but had an interest in green volunteering. He was unemployed at the time.

To make friends and find something to do he approached the warden at the Discovery Gateway park to see if there were any opportunities for volunteering. This led to Tom taking part in the Guardians scheme.

Tom has attended sessions for most of the last two years. During that time he has undertaken a wide range of tasks such as path maintenance, drainage, removing dangerous trees, tree planting and habitat creation.

He has learnt a lot of new skills during this time including how to maintain tools and undertake work safely adhering to the required health and safety rules and processes. He has also made a lot of new friends and contacts.

Attending the sessions has benefited Tom in several ways. He feels a lot healthier and is far more motivated: 'it gives you a huge sense of satisfaction to clear an area and see what a group of people can achieve in a day.'

Attending the sessions twice a week led to Tom getting a job in the country park café. He still managed to take part in some of the sessions whilst working here. This was a temporary job for nine months, until he was made redundant.

'The Guardian scheme gave me a routine and a purpose to get up every morning, and this certainly helped me get the job. Being in the outdoors and having fresh air is important and this has made a massive difference to me.'

Tom is now looking for longer-term and more permanent employment, but there are very few options locally. He has managed to secure a job in a pub in west Wales, which will run from April to the end of October. In the meantime, he is going to continue to attend the Guardians sessions for as long as he can.

Case study 3

Carol*

Carol is a single mother of two, with elderly parents to look after. She is currently unemployed having been made redundant from a long-standing role in the hospitality sector during the pandemic. One of her friends told her about the Guardians scheme after seeing a poster and thinking it would be something Carol would enjoy. Carol started with the group during 2021 and has been going on a Tuesday ever since.

She has undertaken many different tasks during her time with the Guardians - building fences, new pathways, and bug hotels; clearing ponds, habitat creation, scrub clearance, and developed a tree nursery, to name just a few things. She loves seeing the difference they make and revisiting tasks to help with the ongoing management of the park.

Carol has done some qualifications, including a woodworking certificate, however she appreciates the informal learning more - the sharing of knowledge about trees, birds, and bugs. She thinks that the Guardians themselves are excellent at teaching them about the things around them as they work.

Carol is adamant that the group has helped her mental health. Her Guardians group is now a tight knit community of friends, who all support each other. She looks forward to attending each week and hates to miss a session. She is much happier now than before she joined the group, and it has taught her that being outside is important to her and she is reluctant to get another office-based job.

She has also taken some of the skills back to her own family. Having told her children about the campfires they have every week; they built a fire and toasted marshmallows on it and really enjoyed the experience.

Carol had been successful in getting a job at a nursery which she enjoyed, and she felt that the volunteering work with the Guardians had been key to her getting the job. Unfortunately, due to family commitments she felt she couldn't remain in the job and had recently, reluctantly handed in her notice.

She is sad to see the scheme coming to an end. The Guardians scheme has been a great experience for her. She knows there are other possible volunteering opportunities out there, but this group has had such a positive impact nothing else will live up to it.

Case Study 4

Lee*

Lee suffered a lot from depression when he was in his late teens, and this led to long term unemployment and mental health problems. During this time, he did try and find a job that suited him, but this was a challenge.

Lee was on Universal Credit, and this led to his Job Coach referring him to Interlink regarding a volunteering role, who in turn put him in touch with the Guardians scheme.

He has been attending sessions twice a week for 18 months now. He tries to attend all sessions despite the weather and has been involved in planting trees, coppicing, cutting back gorse and installing drainage. He has also been taught how to maintain tools and undertake work in a safe manner.

The numbers attending his group varies, partly due to the weather. Last week they had a large group of over 12 and this made a huge difference as they were able to do a huge amount of clearing in a short time.

Lee commented that the Guardian was a good person to be around - very skilled and patient. He added: '[They] have been brilliant for me. I'm always late and they put up with that and get the best out of me.'

For Lee, attending the sessions at the Discovery Gateway park have made a huge contribution to his mental and physical wellbeing: 'Being out in the woods, in the fresh air with like-minded people and looking after a beautiful park is just brilliant for me. I feel so much better after each session.'

Lee is now able to look for employment and ideally would like an outdoor job which makes use of the skills he's learnt under the Guardian scheme. He recently had an interview with an apprenticeship scheme run by the government and has been accepted, so the next step is to find a suitable local contractor who is willing to employ him as an apprentice. 'I was thinking about being cheeky and asking them if I could have Tuesdays and Thursdays off so that I could continue to attend the sessions at Dare Valley, but that might be a big ask!'

Case study 5

Jack*

Jack is in his early twenties and not currently in education or employment. He had been drinking a lot for a few years, but managed to stop and had contacted Careers Wales for advice and was signposted to the Guardians scheme at Cyfarthfa Park. He was also doing some gardening work at the time, and they thought it would be a good fit for him, giving him some additional experience in the outdoors.

Jack attended the scheme for about six months in 2022. He enjoyed it at the start but withdrew as time went on – but blamed himself – and his sleeping patterns for this, rather than the project itself.

He recalled that he had been involved in a variety of activities during his time with the Guardians scheme including going for walks and clearing riverbanks. He did remember doing a qualification but couldn't recall what it was. He couldn't remember if any other advice or services were offered to him whilst he was there.

He recalled learning about the local environment, particularly about the different trees and animals in the park and had made some good friends on the scheme.

When he first started there were several people attending, but numbers went down, but he and some of the other attendees got the word out locally about the Guardians, and their enjoyment of it, and more people started attending.

Jack thought that the Guardian who led the sessions was good and engaging. He blamed his own motivation for not sticking with it. If it was on offer again, he would consider going back.

He now has a two-month-old son and is actively looking for work (under 16 hours so as not to impact his benefits) and could do with some support with this.

Case study 6

Neil*

Neil, a young man in his thirties, has been attending the Guardians group for a couple of months now. He left his last place of employment just before lockdown started due to stress and found himself very isolated with no support network. He spent more and more time on YouTube and online and put on a lot of weight over the lockdown period.

When things started to get back to normal, he found it difficult to get back into society. His doctor advised him to become more active to help him lose weight and he joined a walking group. At this group he met someone who attended the Guardians group who suggested that Neil came along with him. He has been attending regularly ever since.

He enjoys everything they do. He hasn't done any specific training but has gained skills from the activities - making bug hotels, a hibernaculum, coppicing hazel and clearing ditches. There is nothing he doesn't want to get involved with.

However, the best thing for him is the social aspect of the group. All the members of the group have been very welcoming, and they all get on well. Every week as part of their session they build a fire and have a hot drink and toast marshmallows. They all have a chat about the work they have been doing that day and the Guardians answer their questions or teach them about identifying trees, flowers, and bees.

Neil thinks attending the group has had a big impact on him. He is now getting out more and spends less time online. He's more active and it is helping with his weight loss. Whilst he was never a big socialiser at work, he has enjoyed meeting the group and being so welcomed by them that he feels it has brought him out of himself a bit more.

He's not looking to get back into full time employment but would like to be able to work for himself at some point. The Guardians' scheme has given him the courage to start thinking about this possibility. It has kept him busy and helped reduce his stress levels. Once the group ends, he would like to continue doing something similar as he has seen the difference being out in nature has made to him and his wellbeing. He will miss the social interaction with the group and hopes that they keep in contact.

Case study 7

Harry* and Terri*

Harry is retired and has been diagnosed with early stages of dementia. He has always enjoyed working outside and has some skills in terms of gardening and landscaping works. He no longer drives, his doctor with the support of his wife, decided that he was no longer safe to do so. He is therefore dependent on lifts to get to the site. He has some mobility issues but at the moment he is still reasonably fit.

Harry started coming to the Guardians sessions about a month ago. His neighbour, Terri, encouraged him to come along and she takes him there. She wanted to give something back to her community and work as part of a team, so she was drawn to the Guardians scheme. It was also an opportunity to take Harry along and she's really pleased that she's done this: 'it's been a really useful respite for Harry's wife, and he's benefited enormously, even within such a short time.'

Since he has been coming Harry has thoroughly enjoyed the variety of tasks they have been given, such as erecting a park bench restoring a path and improving access on higher ground within the country park.

Even within the four weeks he has been attending, Harry has really enjoyed the sessions: 'they keep me going - having a laugh with the lads really cheers me up.'

His neighbour Terri, has noticed a real difference in Harry's outlook and the pride he has taken in showing the younger participants how to do some of the tasks: 'It's given him a real sense of purpose.'

Harry is not sure what will happen when the Guardian scheme finishes, and he will be dependent on Terri to help him find something else to do.

Case Study 8

Harvey*

Harvey is a young man probably in his twenties with some learning difficulties. He was very enthusiastic about the Guardians scheme at Cwmcarn. Until recently he had a part time job working 3 days a week, but with Covid this had come to an end.

Harvey's social worker had suggested he volunteer at Cwmcarn, and this was about a month ago. Since then, he's been attending weekly.

As part of a small team, they have been doing quite a variety of tasks including clearing paths and repairing the banks of the lake.

The biggest difference to Harvey has been the socialising aspect. When he's not at the Guardians he is at home playing computer games. This has affected Harvey's ability to communicate face to face. He also enjoys being outside and doing physical work and thinks this has already improved his fitness.

Harvey will have to rely on his social worker to find if there is something similar that he can do in the locality when the Guardians scheme ends.

Wider outcomes and impacts achieved

- 4.26 Groundwork Wales and VRP staff noted that the Guardians scheme has created more opportunities for people to access local green landscapes. Improvements to sections of paths, signage, construction of fences and viewing platforms has added value to the Discovery Gateways and made a difference to the environment as a local asset. The parks are more accessible as a direct result of the work undertaken by the Guardians.
- 4.27 Beneficiaries have also learnt more about their local environment and heritage. The expertise and knowledge of the Guardians has enabled them to learn that they are often standing on what were working mines, or on slag heaps, especially in Cyfarthfa or Dare Valley parks. Volunteers from Cyfarthfa Park also worked on the garden at Joseph Parry's cottage and learnt about his legacy.
- *'I learnt a lot about wildlife in my garden, and about my local community during this session'.*
- 4.28 Feedback from the Discovery Gateways reported upon in quarterly reports has also been positive about the value of conservation work taking place across key sites. Gateway managers have consistently stated that the Guardians scheme has contributed to work that would not have otherwise been achieved. This is particularly the case in Dare Valley and Bryngarw.
- *'If you could bottle it and put a price tag on it, it would be very valuable. There is a cultural depression in these areas. The work of the Guardians has made the Discovery Gateways more accessible and made them engage more with the community'*
 - *'The Guardians has made a really big contribution towards two of the VRPs pillars – the environment and health and wellbeing'.*

Contribution to EU cross cutting themes

- 4.29 As previously reported at paragraph 4.7, there has been a good beneficiary gender balance throughout, making a strong contribution to the **gender mainstreaming** cross cutting theme. Although there has not been a specific focus on achieving this, some contributors felt that the strong and equal mix of female and male postholders in the Guardians roles has probably helped achieve this, with promotion by a female Guardian possibly attracting more female beneficiaries to feel comfortable or that it is a scheme for them.
- 4.30 Equally, contributors to the evaluation felt that the Guardians scheme had done some good work on working with local colleges in providing bespoke opportunities for students with additional learning needs. The percentage of self-declaring beneficiaries with a disability is also much higher than ONS statistics for the area. In being accepting and inclusive, contributors felt that the Guardians themselves as individuals had played an important part in ensuring the scheme could engage with a range of beneficiaries in the local community. Some contributors to the evaluation feel that whilst it had been hard to recruit from some BAME groups, there had not been a purposeful attempt either to reach out to these communities to attract participation. It is also appreciated that the scheme did not have much time or resources to allow them to do this.
- 4.31 In terms of **sustainable development**, Guardians scheme activities are deemed to have helped the Discovery Gateway parks develop and become more self-sustaining. The Guardians scheme has also helped to raise awareness of the parks, and possibly opened up the Discovery Gateways to a wider range of visitors.
- 4.32 **Tackling poverty and social exclusion** has been a central pillar of the activities of the Guardians scheme. Many of the Discovery Gateways are in areas of high deprivation, and the Guardians scheme recruited beneficiaries from a number of local organisations to support and build confidence of those who are currently unable to work. There has never been any cost for participation for any beneficiary in any Guardians activity.

Contribution to RDP cross cutting objectives

- 4.33 The Guardians described how there was **innovation** in the range of activities offered at sessions. The focus was on providing a range of enjoyable, informal and social activities. These were developed and adapted throughout. However, contributors also felt that the approach was tried-and-tested and that there was no need to innovate, simply for the sake of it.
- 4.34 The second RDP cross-cutting objective is the **environment**. It is evident from the outputs recorded for the Guardian scheme that it has delivered significant improvement to the environment. Contributors noted that wildlife areas are not untouched areas, rather they are carefully managed. The Guardians scheme has been responsible for clearing pathways into areas and fencing off other areas for protection. Invasive, non-native species (INNS) have also been cut out in several Discovery Gateways. All of this helps support the environment for animal species. The building of bug hotels, and the planting of shrubs and trees also support invertebrates and heritage species of plants.
- 4.35 The Guardians scheme has also supported the third RDP cross cutting objective – **climate change adaptation or mitigation**. The scheme has made several adaptations to minimise the impact on the climate – and the litter picking sessions have ensured that there is significantly less rubbish in the environment of the Discovery Gateways. This was a big issue for many of the Discovery Gateways. They have also cleared and cleaned waterways - ponds and streams. In total, the Guardians estimate that around 5-6,000 native trees have been planted which is of benefit to carbon capture in the future. The eco-literacy sessions, and more lately the carbon literacy sessions held with beneficiaries have also helped to ensure that positive action to sustain ecosystems and take environmental action will continue after their involvement in the Guardians scheme.

4.36 To demonstrate this impact more clearly in future, some contributors to the evaluation suggested that looking at ways to measure carbon capture or reduction alongside the collection of data on percentage of square meters of land improved could be useful. With the climate emergency a pertinent issue, being able to demonstrate the value achieved by opening up a certain amount of woodland or planting trees in terms of carbon captured might be a powerful tool to demonstrate the difference made.

Contribution to Welsh language strategy Cymraeg 2050

4.37 Staff have been supportive of the Welsh language and all materials have been produced bilingually. Very few participants declared themselves to be Welsh speakers and no provision could be offered in Welsh or bilingually. As such, contributors did not feel that this had been a specific feature of the provision and the Welsh language had not been particularly embedded in the Guardians way of working.

Lessons learned

4.38 Similar to the comments raised during the mid-term evaluation, there continues to be a strongly held view by some contributors that the model adopted for the Guardians, with a focus solely on the Discovery Gateways was not the right approach:

- *‘We’ve gone down the wrong rabbit hole. We needed to make more links in the local community and progress to the Gateways rather than it being the destination from the start’*
- *‘We’ve missed a trick in not getting them involved in projects in community centres, and schools and then bringing them into bigger projects through the Gateways. This is a project in a huge geographical area, but we’ve only focused on five or six points. There could be more done in more localities to demonstrate more value to those locations.’*

4.39 One contributor suggested that a different model could have been to work intensely in one area at a time, for example six months in Aberdare, then six months in Merthyr. This approach would have a greater impact on the environment but would not lead to a sustainable approach in providing ongoing benefits to the beneficiaries themselves.

- 4.40 There is consensus that the short-term nature of the funding for the Guardians has made it near impossible for the model adopted to become sustainable. Contributors mentioned how funding of this nature makes it challenging to work with local partners who are after similar funding budgets. Similarly, it is argued that specialist skills are required to deliver the types of activities undertaken by the Guardians, and that a non-specialist volunteer coordinator at a Discovery Gateway cannot continue with the same approach.
- 4.41 The current financial climate has also made it more difficult to sustain this type of provision, simply because the organisations that could take on the role, such as local authorities, are currently dealing with their own funding cuts and staff redundancies. There is not sufficient demand for the provision for schools, colleges, or individuals to pay for the provision privately.
- 4.42 In terms of any future funding opportunities, the National Nature Service (NNS) continued to be the one option that was still being explored. Contributors expressed disappointment that the Guardians scheme had not been included in the business case for the VRP in future, but others felt that it was a better fit for the NNS, if it could demonstrate how funding from the skills and training agenda could fund Guardian activities.

5. Concluding remarks

- 5.1 This section provides our concluding remarks on the success of the VRP funded Guardians scheme and seeks to draw out key lessons for any future funding of this type of provision.
- 5.2 In preparing our conclusions, we return to the initial aims set out in the original specification for the VRP Guardians scheme. If we were to measure the success of the scheme against those six aims, we would conclude that the Guardians scheme achieved four of these objectives which focus on direct beneficiaries. However, we are of the view that two of those aims could not realistically be expected of a scheme funded for two years, delivered only via Discovery Gateway locations.
- 5.3 To a certain extent, the scheme has supported valleys residents to become more involved in landscape-based activities in the Discovery Gateways (Aim 1). The beneficiaries have been highly involved, some over a long period of time. It is clear from the evidence gathered from case studies that beneficiaries are proud of their achievements and have a sense of ownership over the tangible difference they have made to their respective Discovery Gateways (Aim 2). Aim 4 has also been achieved – there is strong evidence through the WEWMBS and Outcomes STAR data, and through case studies, that beneficiaries have improved their wellbeing as a direct result of spending time outdoors. The skills and knowledge gained over the volunteering periods, and the securing of Agored qualifications will have enabled beneficiaries to take their newfound interest into other schemes or projects (Aim 6). However, at this stage of the evaluation, it is not clear whether opportunities within the localities to join other similar projects will materialise.
- 5.4 All the aims above have been achieved to a certain extent if they are measured in the context of the benefits acquired by direct beneficiaries themselves. However, the wording suggests that these aims were to be achieved more broadly by valleys residents' and there is little evidence to suggest that the Guardians scheme has achieved this – simply because it was not designed to do so from the outset.

- 5.5 The original Aim 3 required the Guardians scheme to ensure that the activities themselves were sustainable so that ‘residents don’t simply take part in a short-term project and then leave without a trace’. Similarly, Aim 5 required volunteers and beneficiaries to provide sustained support in the maintenance and improvement of landscapes in Discovery Gateway sites. A clear and undisputed finding from this evaluation, is that beneficiaries wish to continue with their Guardians activities, but without on-going funding, and specialist support, this cannot happen. Again, it is not feasible or realistic to expect the Guardians scheme to have achieved this.
- 5.6 A Theory of Change logic model was co-produced during the early stages of the Guardians scheme, with Groundwork Wales staff and the evaluators, which looked to establish a set of realistic outputs and short-term scheme outcomes that the Guardians scheme could deliver based on its available inputs and funded activities. (See Figure 3.3 in this report for a copy of the logic model) These were then seen to contribute to the longer-term outcomes of the VRP. We feel that this provides a more appropriate framework by which to measure the extent to which the Guardians has successfully achieved its objectives.
- 5.7 From the evidence made available to us over the mid-term and final evaluation periods, Groundwork Wales has delivered the inputs as set out in the Theory Change. It has also delivered most activities. Whilst the Guardians has organised and delivered environmental improvements and health and wellbeing activities, there has been less evidence of heritage-based activities being embedded in the approach. We have not seen much evidence of beneficiaries signposted to further opportunities and support, and feedback captured over the course of the evaluation strongly suggests that beneficiaries simply want to stay with the Guardians scheme – they enjoy the volunteering work and want to continue with it, rather than see it as a stepping stone to something else. The Guardians scheme was not viewed as a temporary activity by beneficiaries, and it is challenging to manage their expectations when short-term funding draws provision from under their feet.

- 5.8 In terms of its outputs, the Guardians scheme has performed strongly. A substantial area of land has been maintained or improved at Discovery Gateway sites, and plenty of Big Bocs Bwyd initiatives delivered at local schools have the necessary resources and infrastructure to allow delivery.
- 5.9 The Guardians scheme has also supported twice as many beneficiaries as originally envisaged and has managed to deliver activities across all key Discovery Gateway sites that allowed opportunities for this to happen. Some beneficiaries have also gained accreditations and qualifications, and all have been involved in physical activity and wellbeing activities.
- 5.10 The scheme has also performed strongly in the delivery of its Theory of Change logic model outcomes. The work undertaken by the Guardians at the Discovery Gateways has opened up the sites for local people, and the improvement to paths, fences, planted trees and shrubs and litter picking will be a strong and tangible legacy for the scheme. In making the Discovery Gateways more accessible and improving the environment, local people will have the opportunity to connect and engage with the local natural assets on their doorstep.
- 5.11 As mentioned above, there is strong and powerful evidence that beneficiaries gained improved mental health and wellbeing, acquired new skills and accreditations and are likely to continue to seek opportunities to engage in improvements to their local area due to the passion and knowledge gained from their involvement with the Guardians scheme. There is only a handful of examples where beneficiaries have progressed into employment as a result of participating in the Guardians scheme.
- 5.12 There is a clear lesson from the Guardians scheme to future funders of such landscape-based activities. Beneficiaries demonstrate clear emotional and mental wellbeing benefits from participation in such activities, and learn useful skills and knowledge that will continue to benefit them and their local community in future. However, such activity will never realistically become self-sustaining due to the ongoing need to recruit, manage, and train volunteer input and because the Discovery Gateways do not have the resources, expertise, or capacity to take on this role. Until a funding mechanism can be developed that provides modest but continuous funding to support such activity, the stop-start cycle of providing such an offer will continue.

- 5.13 There is some value to the Guardians brand, but the evidence suggests that it is the activities provided rather than the name, that interests beneficiaries. Whilst the brand is a VRP owned model, if there is no plan to continue funding such provision directly going forward, then it would be worth the VRP discussing with Groundwork Wales should they wish to continue with its use.
- 5.14 The Guardians scheme has several USPs – the range of skills and expertise effectively shared between the Guardians has been one key factor which has contributed to its success, and that conduit role has also proved to be an important point of contact for referrals. Similarly, there is clear evidence that the coordinator role to drive beneficiary activity is crucial. The key question for the VRP to consider is whether the model has worked well enough and is sufficiently distinctive in its provision to warrant being packaged as a demonstrator project that can and should be disseminated to other areas.
- 5.15 The current funding climate and policy priorities for Welsh Government and other key funders in Wales suggests that the Guardians scheme, should it wish to continue, would need to evolve further, and focus on a specific avenue which enables the offer to be specific and differentiated from other similar schemes. It is unlikely that current policy priorities can be delivered in a meaningful way by a single scheme, and thus the Guardians will need to choose the most appropriate path.
- 5.16 The Guardians has demonstrated how it can deliver substantial environmental benefits. In aligning more clearly to the climate change agenda and demonstrating the adaptations and mitigations that it can deliver, there could be some opportunities to seek funding, e.g., via the National Lottery Community Fund, to deliver a climate change programme for young people or other under-represented groups in the locality.
- 5.17 The social prescribing route initially explored for the Guardians scheme could be another option, but this would require overcoming the challenges of collaborating with (and achieving funding from) the health sector and providing more tailored support to beneficiaries with health-related issues. Being in a position to provide the necessary specialist support that would take considerable staffing resources, which cannot be provided with no guarantee of funding from health sources.

- 5.18 The final option is to consider aligning the Guardians to the National Nature Service. The profile of Guardians' current beneficiaries, in that a high proportion are out of work/unemployed when joining, would suggest that the Guardians is well positioned to recruit potential participants but perhaps there is a need to place greater consideration on beneficiary motivations when joining, in that recruitment should focus on those who wish to find/return to work and are interested in seeking green job opportunities
- 5.19 To enable this to be a credible option, there would also need to be considerable adaptations to the Guardians offer with a greater focus on training, higher level qualifications than the current Agored accreditations offered, clear career pathways and specialist support into employment.

Annex A – Topic guide: VRP Guardians Delivery Staff

A: Background

1. What is your current role?
2. In what way (if at all) has your role changed since we last spoke?

B: Delivery Arrangements

3. **[staff only]** How (if at all) has the delivery structure for the Guardians scheme changed since we last spoke? Probe re:
 - staffing capacity and expertise
 - management of the scheme
 - communication and recruitment methods
 - relationship between Groundwork Wales and funding body
4. **[stakeholders only]** How well has Groundwork Wales managed and delivered the programme?
5. **[staff only]** How has the Guardians programme been delivered on the ground during the final stages? Probe re:
 - locations at which activities have taken place
 - approach taken at different Discovery Gateway sites
 - activities at Big Bocs Bwyd schools
6. What has been the nature of the activities delivered by the Guardians in the final stages? Probe around:
 - environmental conservation activities
 - wellbeing, nature, and walking activities
 - social prescribing activities
 - training and development opportunities such as the Agored accreditation
7. In what way has the Guardian scheme enabled sustainability so that opportunities for participants can continue post funding?
(e.g. by providing appropriate signposting for participants; building links with rangers at Discovery Gateways or integrating activities with existing volunteer groups on site)
8. What has worked well in the way that Guardians is being delivered?
9. What, if anything, could have been improved about the way the Guardians is being delivered?

D: Benefits and difference made

10. What would you say are the scheme's main achievements to date?

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

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

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

What evidence do you have of these differences?

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

- How are participants supported after engaging with the scheme?
- How well are they being supported?
- How could this be improved?
- What evidence do you have that individuals have continued to benefit from their experience on the Guardians programme?

13. How has the Guardians scheme made a difference to the wider community/economy? (e.g., improved footpaths, food growing projects)?

14. In what way has the Guardians scheme contributed to the VRP's vision?

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

E: Cross-cutting Themes

[With the following questions, researchers should try and draw out 1-2 good practice examples, highlight any barriers to their delivery and what support could have been made available to help overcome these barriers]

15. In what way has the Guardians scheme contributed to the Welsh Government's cross cutting themes (CCTs)? For example, has the scheme:

- achieved Equality of Opportunity (Prompt: for example, gender or ethnic minority make-up of participants)
- ensured Sustainable Development⁷
- helped tackle poverty and social exclusion? (Prompt: e.g. by working in an area of low deprivation)

16. In what way has the Guardians scheme addressed the specific cross cutting objectives of the Rural Development Plan? For example, has the scheme:

- delivered innovative approaches?
- made improvements to the environment?
- made adaptations to minimise impact on the climate (e.g. reduced waste or water use, used recycled projects)?

17. In what way has the funded scheme contributed to the Welsh Government's Welsh language strategy, Cymraeg 2050?

- In what way has the provided used the Welsh language in its marketing and other resources?
- What opportunities has the scheme provided for people to use the Welsh language?

F: Lessons learned

18. To what extent do you think the Guardians programme has achieved its aims and objectives (or will have by March 2023)?

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

- Have any further funding opportunities for the Guardians scheme (or key elements of it) been identified?
- What good practice could be adopted or replicated in future?

⁷ Sustainable development is an organising principle for meeting human development goals while also sustaining the ability of natural systems to provide the natural resources and ecosystem services on which the economy and society depend upon

Thank and close

Annex B – Participants Case Study Template

Background and introduction

Tell me about

- yourself (education, work, interests, family)

B: Getting involved with the Guardians scheme

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

C: Services accessed

In what way were you involved with the Guardians scheme?

- Where did you become involved? [check which Discovery Gateway]
- When were you involved and for how long?
- What was the nature of any activities/volunteering you participated in?
- What type of support and advice did you access (if any)?
- What was the nature of any training accessed (if any)?
- Ask about duration, who delivered it, what equipment was used etc

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

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

D. Difference made

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

Ask about any difference made in terms of:

- skills or knowledge which are relevant to your work and life:
 - What new skills or knowledge did you learn?
 - Did you gain any qualifications?
- your health and wellbeing:

- In what way did your involvement with the scheme helped to improve your physical health and/or mental wellbeing?
- To what extent have you continued to implement these improvements [if at all]?
- your understanding of the local environment:
 - In what way did your involvement with scheme helped to increase your appreciation of the local area and its environment?
 - To what extent have you continued to be involved in activities that improve your local area?

What other benefits have you experienced because of your involvement with the Guardians scheme? *[probe around softer outcomes e.g., meeting new people, getting out of the house, spending more time outdoors, gaining confidence etc]*

E. The future

What have you been doing since you left the Guardians scheme?

- Were you signposted to any further support or advice?
- Did you progress into employment, training, or volunteering work?
- If so, how important was the Guardians scheme in helping you progress into this opportunity?
- How are you applying any skills or knowledge gained from the Guardians scheme in your work and everyday life [if at all]?
- *[if relevant]* How helpful have any qualifications gained been to date?
- To what extent have you continued to see any improvements in your health and wellbeing?
- To what extent can you attribute any continued improvements to your experience with the Guardians scheme?
- To what extent have you continued to be involved in activities that improve your local area?
- To what extent can you attribute any continued involvement in outdoor activities to your experience with the Guardians scheme?
- What further support/training would you like to receive? In what way would that support, or training help you in the future?