

Blaenau Gwent

Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan 2022-25 Implementation Report



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It's widely documented that we are in a nature crisis, with the [State of Nature for Wales](#) identifying Wales as one of the most nature depleted countries on the planet, providing evidence that 1 in 6 Welsh species are threatened with extinction.

Urgent action is needed to reverse the decline in biodiversity and there are many measures in place to support this action. The Environment (Wales) Act, 2016, has established a Statutory Duty for all public bodies to protect and enhance biodiversity and ecosystem resilience, commonly referred to as the Section 6 Duty.

As required by the Section 6 Duty, Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council must produce a plan that sets out how it will meet this duty, and report on progress every three years.

The Council's **Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan** set out the approach, and actions, that the Council would take, to meet its Section 6 Duty, from 2022 to 2025. A review has been undertaken on implementation of the Plan, findings of which are set out within this report.

An updated Plan will now be produced, informed by the findings of this review, for the next three-year period, 2025 to 2028.



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE SECTION 6 DUTY

All public bodies in Wales have a statutory duty to protect and enhance **biodiversity and ecosystem resilience**¹, commonly referred to as the Section 6 Duty. Introduced by the Environment (Wales) Act, 2016, the duty requires that public authorities must seek to

maintain and enhance biodiversity, so far as consistent with the proper exercise of their functions, and in so doing promote the resilience of ecosystems.

As required by the legislation, Blaenau Gwent Council (the Council) prepared, and published, a plan, setting out how it would meet this duty. The Council's **Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan** (the Plan) sets out the approach, and actions, to be taken by the Council to meet the requirements of the Environment (Wales) Act, for 2022 to 2025.

Implementation of the Plan is intended to meet the following aims, which in themselves, contribute to meeting the Council's corporate and well-being objectives:

1. Reduce overall resource use; reuse where possible and recycle everything recyclable.
2. Increase biodiversity and ecosystems understanding in the council staff and councillors through appropriate channels, including Service Area Environment Champions and the Councillor Climate Mitigation Champion role.
3. Embody the challenge of integrating the Active Travel, Wellbeing of Future Generations, Planning and Environment Acts to encourage sustainability in the ways we live, work and play.
4. Promote responsible use of natural resources in Blaenau Gwent by working in partnership with others to initiate action and behaviour change.
5. Maintain and enhance biodiversity and improve ecosystem resilience on council owned land, particularly with regard to priority species and habitats.
6. Support the Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen Local Nature Partnership.

1.2 REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

The legislation requires that each public authority must publish a report every three years, detailing what they have done to comply with the duty. In order to meet this requirement, the Council commissioned [Catrin Evans Consultancy](#) to carry out an independent review of delivery against the Plan, and the Section 6 Duty, for the period April 2022 to March 2025.

¹ Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience - The capacity for an ecosystem to withstand pressures or demands, whilst still functioning as an ecosystem. Generally influenced by diversity, extent, condition and connectivity.

This report outlines the findings of that review, alongside initial recommendations for a revised Forward Plan.

1.3 GOVERNANCE AND DELIVERY SUPPORT

Compliance with the Section 6 Duty is relevant to all parts of the Council, including Chief Executive and senior managers, individual officers and Elected Members.

The Natural Environment Team has been appointed as lead for reporting, provision of guidance and advice to support implementation of the Section 6 Duty across the Council and its many functions. The Council's Ecologist takes a primary role in provision of the advice and guidance that underpins the Council's delivery of the Plan, with managerial responsibility held by the Natural Environment Team Manager.

1.4 REPORTING AND REVIEW PROCESS

One of the key themes of the Section 6 Duty is the need to embed biodiversity into ways of working across all services being delivered by public bodies. Consequently, the Council's Plan has been structured around individual service areas, each having agreed to set objectives as part of Service Area Action Plans. The majority of these objectives have been embedded into Corporate Plan reporting mechanisms, requiring officers to report progress against their own objectives at quarterly intervals, as part of Business Plan reporting procedures.

In order to support this process, Environment Champions have been nominated for each service area, responsible for Business Plan reporting and also attending regular meetings with the Natural Environment Team.

Review of implementation of the Plan was undertaken by:

- Collation and review of all business plan reports
- Review of annual progress reports (for 22/23 and 23/24) and other supporting material provided by the Natural Environment Team
- Review of corporate documents and supporting evidence provided by Environment Champions or available online
- Interviews and email discussions held with Environment Champions, key officers and members of the Natural Environment Team.

1.5 POLICY LINKS

The Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan makes a valuable contribution towards a range of policies, strategies and objectives, playing a vital role in underpinning health, well-being, food and the economy. Whilst the many links are too extensive to detail here, a selection of most relevant are set out below.

WELL-BEING AND CORPORATE PLANS

The role of biodiversity in underpinning society is recognised in the Well-being of Future Generations Act, which puts in place a sustainable development principle and identifies seven well-being goals, which public bodies must work to achieve. The Resilient Wales Goal is most closely aligned with a healthy and biodiverse natural environment, however biodiversity supports each of the well-being goals, through the multi-functional benefits that it provides.

Blaenau Gwent sits within the Gwent region, and subsequently contributes towards the Gwent Well-being Plan, which sets an ambition to 'create a more climate aware Gwent, where our environment is valued, ensuring our well-being now and for future generations'. Local delivery is achieved through the Blaenau Gwent Local Well-being Partnership, which has identified climate and nature as a local priority.

The Council's Corporate Plan sets out a corporate priority to 'respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities.' The Well-being and Corporate Plans both recognise the urgency of the nature crisis and have embedded nature recovery as core elements. Delivery against the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan will ultimately support delivery of these corporate priorities.

DECARBONISATION PLAN

The natural environment plays an important role in supporting climate action, with vegetation, soil and water all able to store, or sequester, vast quantities of carbon. Crucially, poor management practices, or destruction of habitat, results in carbon being released into the atmosphere. At the same time, climate change is one of the key threats facing biodiversity, highlighting the importance of taking a collaborative approach in addressing both the nature and climate crises.

NATIONAL BIODIVERSITY POLICIES AND AREA STATEMENTS

The Natural Resources Policy provides a policy framework by the Welsh Government, setting out the key challenges and opportunities in Wales in relation to our natural environment. These are transposed into regional priorities, risks and opportunities, through production of the Area Statements. Blaenau Gwent falls within the South-East Area Statement, which highlights the importance of working in collaboration to link landscapes,

engaging people in the natural environment and ensuring climate adaptation and mitigation.

The Nature Recovery Action Plan (NRAP) for Wales sets out the Welsh Government's ambition for reversing the decline in biodiversity, to be achieved through implementation of NRAP Objectives:

Objective 1: Engage and support participation and understanding to embed biodiversity throughout decision making at all levels

Objective 2: Safeguard species and habitats of principal importance and improve their management

Objective 3: Increase the resilience of our natural environment by restoring degraded habitats and habitat creation

Objective 4: Tackle key pressures on species and habitats

Objective 5: Improve our evidence, understanding and monitoring

Objective 6: Put in place a framework of governance and support for delivery

Welsh Government Guidance recommends that reporting on action taken to meet the Section 6 Duty is based on the objectives in the Nature Recovery Action Plan for Wales. Consequently, detail on how Blaenau Gwent's Plan delivers against the NRAP objectives is set out in Section 3 of this report.

2. SERVICE AREA ACTION PLANS

2.1 GOVERNANCE AND PARTNERSHIPS

OBJECTIVE 1: SUPPORT THE INTEGRATION OF FORWARD PLAN OBJECTIVES INTO COUNCIL CORPORATE BUSINESS PLANS AND PROVIDE QUARTERLY REPORTING

The Plan's objectives are largely embedded into Council Corporate Plan reporting mechanisms, which feed into the quarterly reporting schedule undertaken by the respective departments. The exceptions to this are Resources, where objectives have not been set, and elements of Commercial Services.

Review of the business plan reports highlights that there are some gaps in the reporting against the biodiversity objectives. A review of business plan reporting is underway, with consideration being given to developing a balance score card, which will provide a more visual representation of progress against actions.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROVIDE A LINK TO BLAENAU GWENT WELL-BEING PLAN AND PUBLIC SERVICE BOARD

Blaenau Gwent Local Well-being Partnership undertook stakeholder engagement during 2023-4, to identify local priorities, engaging local residents and nature conservation organisations. The emerging four priorities were Travel and Transport, Food, Reducing Inequalities and Climate and Nature. The Climate and Nature theme included:

- Access to land and local green spaces
- Nature and biodiversity loss, a need for awareness raising and making the most of our natural environment
- Local involvement in regional climate programmes.

Partnership working has been focused on developing the links between the local well-being partnership and the regional PSB, with plans underway to increase collaboration in relation to biodiversity. Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen Local Nature Partnership (LNP) are scheduled to attend the BG Local Well-being Partnership in 2025, to share information on the LNP, the Nature Recovery Action Plan, and explore opportunities for collaboration.

OBJECTIVE 3: PROVIDE A LINK TO BLAENAU GWENT DECARBONISATION PLAN

The Decarbonisation Plan demonstrates a commitment to integrating biodiversity conservation into the broader decarbonisation approach. It highlights the importance of managing and identifying land for sequestration and recognises that decarbonisation actions should protect and enhance biodiversity, whilst making reference to the Local Nature Partnership and Action Plan (Nature Recovery Action Plan).

Efforts have been made to align actions, delivery and reporting mechanisms, with further discussions to be held to align actions in the revised Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Plan. A Climate Group has been established to provide strategic overview and support delivery. Whilst the focus of the group is decarbonisation, nature-based initiatives are included as part of meeting discussion where needed.

ADDITIONAL DELIVERY

Support is provided to promote and raise awareness of the Section 6 Duty where needed, helping to facilitate the Council Ecologist's attendance at Senior Management meeting to highlight the role of the Council in delivery of Section 6 Duty requirements.

2.2 RESOURCES

OBJECTIVES

Objectives haven't yet been set for Resources, although identified opportunities highlighted in the 2022 to 2025 Plan identify potential to explore environmental management system accreditation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REVISED PLAN

The summary of functions covered by this service area suggests that additional opportunities to support biodiversity implementation exist, over and above that already highlighted, in relation to financial services and risk management. It's recommended that engagement with this service area is undertaken during the subsequent Plan implementation period, to explore any potential opportunities.

2.3 COMMERCIAL SERVICES AND ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

OBJECTIVE 1: FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF I-TRENT: STREAMLINE PROCESSES AND FURTHER REDUCTION OF PAPER I.E. RECRUITMENT FORMS

Launch of iTrent Recruitment was made in May 2025 (for non-school based staff), resulting in automation of start and pre-employment processes, avoiding need for paper documents. The mail system has been automated, which means it no longer needs to be printed, and paper is systematically being removed from meetings, with papers and committee reports being accessed digitally. As a result of changes already made, a need for fewer photocopiers in the buildings has been reported.

Plans for further addition to the iTrent system include payroll subsistence and expenses forms, which will further reduction in paper usage.

OBJECTIVE 2: NEW AGILE WORKING OPERATING MODEL: FURTHER REDUCTION IN THE USE OF PAPER, LESS COMMUTING AND OVERALL LESS BUSINESS TRAVEL, CLOSURE OF COUNCIL BUILDING

Staff are designated as home, agile or community workers, with 5 buildings originally identified as agile working hubs. As a result of home working, there has been reduced need for office premises, with closure of 2 buildings and 4 buildings now identified as agile working hubs. At the same time, there has been a significant drop-in work-related mileage and commuting to work.

Note that a review of the Agile Working Policy is underway, looking to increase opportunities for teams to physically work together at times.

OBJECTIVE 3: OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH: FULLY REMOTE SERVICE AND FURTHER DIGITALISATION OF THE REMAINING FILING

Occupational health is now a fully remote service with filing all saved electronically. Most appointments are telephone based with a small percentage requiring face to face appointments.

OBJECTIVE 4: DECARBONISATION AGENDA: REVIEW OF MILEAGE AND CAR USER SCHEME. ENCOURAGING STAFF TO SWITCH TO E-VEHICLES

A review is being undertaken of the mileage and car user scheme, however decarbonisation planning and impact of business mileage has been adjusted as a result of capacity and prioritisation.

A cycle to work scheme was rolled out in Summer 2023 and a new employee benefits programme was launched in November 2024, which includes cycle to work and the Tusker lease car scheme, all of which is available year-round.

ADDITIONAL DELIVERY

A revised socially responsible procurement strategy 2023 to 2028 was approved by Cabinet in 2023. The revised strategy includes an objective to promote socially responsible procurement and contribute to the Council's aim to be net zero by 2030.

There is a Volunteering Policy in place, which makes provision of 1 day per year to volunteer in the local community, including on environmental based projects.

2.4 SOCIAL SERVICES

OBJECTIVE 1: NATURAL ENVIRONMENT TEAM (ENVIRONMENT ACT LEADS) TO ATTEND PROVIDER MANAGERS MEETING ANNUALLY

Quarterly management meetings are held by Adult Services, with occasional attendance from the Natural Environment Team. There is regular contact between the teams outside of this, as issues / queries arise.

OBJECTIVE 2: ENCOURAGE NATURE FRIENDLY MANAGEMENT AT OUR PROVIDER SERVICES OUTSIDE SPACES

Biodiversity plans have been developed for 11 Flying Start hubs, with visits and assessments undertaken during 2024. Nature based enhancements have already been delivered at a number of sites (see images below), with further improvements planned for the future. Positive engagement with the new outdoor spaces have been reported, with children and staff alike enjoying experiencing nature as part of play and learning.

Ecological input has been provided in identifying potential environmental projects at Lake View and Bert Denning Adult Day Centres. Flowers, shrubs and vegetable growing has taken place within raised beds. Insect homes, bird, bat and hedgehog boxes have been installed at Lake View.

Flying Start Biodiversity Enhancements



Designs have been developed for Augusta House, Blaenau Gwent's Learning Disability Respite Centre, with plans to implementation during 2025. With support from British Gas (Nest Scheme), improvements to the gardens and seating areas were provided at Cwrt Mytton Residential Care Home.

OBJECTIVE 3: ENGAGE OUR CITIZENS AND STAFF WITH THE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH INVOLVEMENT IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROJECTS WITHIN OUR PROVIDER SERVICES

Children's Services have incorporated the natural environment into play activities, with Wild Tots and Wild Camps proving extremely successful. Wild Camp is a 10-week programme based on Forest School ethos, accessible to children who are receiving support from statutory services. Wild Tots is an outdoor parent and toddler group, providing an opportunity to explore nature and foster a lifelong love of the outdoors. They also run an active Facebook group, [Wild Tots Blaenau Gwent](#), sharing ideas and promoting play and engagement in the natural environment.

WILD CAMPS



Outdoor
Parent & Toddler
Groups

Come along & join in the fun

Wednesdays
Festival Wild Tots
10:30-12:00pm
Augusta Parc Ebbw Vale NP23 8DN
&
Fridays
Wild Tots Bedwelly
10:30-12:00pm
Bedwelly House Tredegar NP22 3NA
(Behind the long shelter)

What to expect

WILD TOTS are outdoors come rain or shine, sessions may include;

- Campfire/cooking
- Woodland games
- Woodland crafts
- Mud kitchen
- Messy play
- Water play
- Exploring nature

Children remain the responsibility of the parent/carer throughout the session.

** Please ensure you & your child are dressed appropriately for the weather

What is Wild Tots?

Wild tots is a toddler group with a difference - in the great outdoors, where your child has the freedom to explore nature, learn new things and foster a lifelong love of the outdoors.

The Wild Tots Ethos

Promoting children and adults to be active outdoors throughout the seasons and embracing all weathers.

Wild Tots believes in building a positive outdoor experience for both children and adults.

'Re-wild the child'

Adult Services are making use of their available outdoor space in delivery of activities for attendees to day centres and residential centres, recognising the opportunity to provide well-being benefits to participants. This includes growing vegetables for food, flowers and shrubs, bird feeding and observing wildlife. A weekly litter picking day is also delivered, in collaboration with McDonalds.

ADDITIONAL DELIVERY

Electric vehicle charge points and solar panels have been installed, and community meals have transitioned to electric vehicles.

2.5 REGENERATION AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

OBJECTIVE 1: WORK TOWARDS THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN (LDP) AIMS, INCLUDING THE PRODUCTION OF GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING GUIDANCE

The Replacement LDP is scheduled for adoption in 2027 and ecological input has been provided in development of policies, to reflect national policies, requirements for enhancement and the DECCA² Framework. Allocation assessments have been carried out, with a review of SINCS³ scheduled for next year.

Delivery against the existing LDP is achieved through a positive working relationship with Development Management, with an active consultation process in place with the Natural Environment Team.

Monitoring of embedding of ecological recommendations into determinations is not carried out, however anecdotal feedback indicates that recommendations are generally followed. Black darter was found at the mitigation ponds for the Rhyd y Blew site, demonstrating a positive outcome to the development.



Black darter

² DECCA Framework for ecological resilience, based on Diversity, Extent, Condition, Connectivity and Adaptability.

³ SINCS – Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation

Access to species data through the Aderyn website has been facilitated, with training provided by the Natural Environment Team.

The current LDP has a Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) for '[Nature Conservation Issues for Small Scale Wind Energy Developments](#)', however there is no SPG for Nature Conservation or Green Infrastructure in general. It is intended to produce a Biodiversity / Green Infrastructure SPG for the replacement LDP. This is scheduled to follow after adoption of the RLDP, to be referenced within the Plan.

OBJECTIVE 2: MAINTAIN AND ENHANCE BIODIVERSITY AND IMPROVE ECOSYSTEM RESILIENCE ON COUNCIL OWNED LAND, PARTICULARLY WITH REGARD TO SECTION 7 PRIORITY SPECIES AND HABITATS IN PARTNERSHIP WITH COMMUNITY GROUPS, GWENT WILDLIFE TRUST AND OTHERS

A grassland review has been undertaken with Neighbourhood services, resulting in agreement to a new approach to verge and grassland management. Where it's determined there will be no impact on residents, verges now only receive an annual cut. Furthermore, designated areas of amenity grassland / green space are now managed as wildlife areas, receiving a meadow cut (see image of meadow below, which receives a hay cut through collaboration with a local farmer).

Although not currently measured, options for mapping and measuring are being looked into.



Green space meadow

A number of project examples have been provided, demonstrating positive management and enhancement of council owned land. The Local Places for Nature Fund has made a significant contribution to this objective, with enhancement activities carried out at 48 different sites between 2023 and 2025, including tree planting, wildflower turf installation, scrub clearance, INNS removal, tree thinning and coppicing.

Project activities included:

- 9 roundabouts, covering a total area of 6365m², were laid with wildflower turf during Spring 2024, with successful germination evident by spring 2025 (see images below)
- Biodiversity enhancement measures were delivered at 5 allotment sites in 23/24, including bird / bat boxes, native bulb planting, hedgehog homes and pollinator homes.
- Barn owl boxes were installed during 2023
- The Council achieved Bee Friendly Status in March 2025, demonstrating a commitment to sustainable management of habitats for pollinators and other wildlife.



Wildflower meadow creation on roundabouts



Case Study

A community orchard project was delivered under the Local Places for Nature Grant scheme, resulting in the creation of 9 new community orchards. The project was delivered in collaboration with Tai Calon Housing Association, with orchards created on both Council and Housing Association land. Other partners included Sirhowy Hill Woodlands CIC, Beaufort Hill Ponds and Woodlands Community Group, Friends of Parc nant Y Waun Community group, Friends of Trevor Rowson Community Group, Pentref Tyleri CIC and Aneurin Leisure Trust.

In order to ensure ongoing management of the orchards, 10 training sessions were delivered across 2 years.

In total, 5 Council staff and 53 volunteers / community group members were trained in maintenance of fruit trees and community orchards.



Project Outputs:

64 Welsh variety
apple trees planted

437m mixed
native hedgerow planted

5000m²
wildflower seeds sown

16
insect towers installed

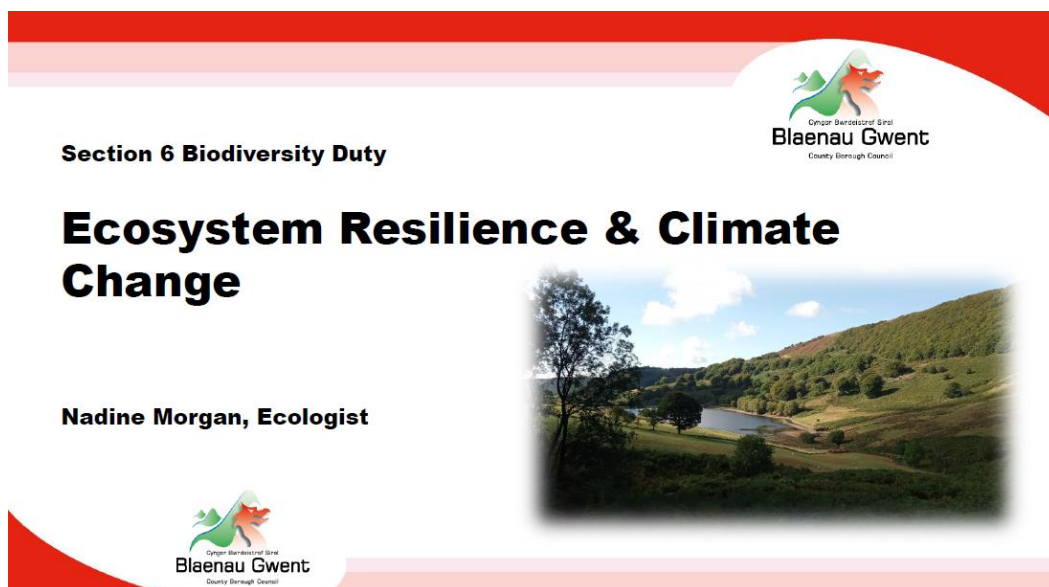
3 hedgehog
homes installed

50 Welsh variety fruit
trees provided to the public

OBJECTIVE 3: ENSURE THAT THE COUNCIL EMBRACES THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT ACROSS THE SERVICE FUNCTIONS AND CONTRIBUTE TO IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS IN RELATION TO BIODIVERSITY

Delivery of the Section 6 Duty contributes directly to the Resilient Wales Goal of the Well-being and Future Generations (WFG) Act. The WFG Goals (including the Resilient Wales Goal) and Sustainable Development Principles are embedded into the Integrated Impact Assessment, undertaken as part of strategic decision making.

Progress is underway to develop a training module on the Section 6 Duty, the nature and climate emergency and its relevance to different departments. Currently in draft format, once complete, it will be rolled out to all members and council staff.



Support and advice are provided to departments across the Council on measures to meet the requirements of the Section 6 Duty, and ultimately the WFG Act. Of particular note is the establishment of the Environment Champions network, with nominated officers providing an active link between the Natural Environment Team and the following teams:

- Governance and Partnerships
- Commercial Services and Organisational Development
- Social Services (Adult and Children)
- Regeneration and Commercial Services (Natural and Built Environment)
- Education

In addition, evidence is provided of Natural Environment Team providing ecological advice to other departments, including Planning Services. In some of areas of work, including Estates, Drainage, Resources, the presence of established processes to ensure compliance with the Section 6 Duty is less clear.

OBJECTIVE 4: SUPPORT THE LOCAL NATURE PARTNERSHIP (LNP) IN ITS WORK AS A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP OF ORGANISATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS DIRECTING AND DELIVERING NATURE CONSERVATION IN BOTH TORFAEN AND BLAENAU GWENT BOROUGHES, AT LOCAL AND WIDER LANDSCAPE SCALES

The Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen LNP was formed in 2017, following a merger of previous county wide Biodiversity Partnerships. Coordination is carried out by Torfaen Council, supported by Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council. A Local Nature Recovery Action Plan (NRAP) has been produced, providing a framework for action for the period 2023 to 2030. The LNP was involved in its development, through participation and community workshops and written feedback.

The NRAP has subsequently been adopted by Blaenau Gwent CBC, providing an opportunity to raise awareness and provide training to elected members as part of the committee approval process.

The work of the LNP is supported through the Local Places for Nature Funding Schemes, which has significantly boosted capacity and resources to deliver against the NRAP. Project activities are outlined against Objective 2 (maintain and enhance biodiversity on council owned land), achieved through the support and involvement of LNP partners, groups and individuals, including 24 schools and 21 community groups and organisations. 64 volunteer events were delivered, providing 205 volunteer hour engagement opportunities.

At a regional level, The Council was involved in Resilient Greater Gwent, a 3-year project funded by Welsh Government's Enabling Natural Resources and Well-being Grant. The programme demonstrated a landscape wide approach to creating and enhancing resilient ecological networks across South East Wales.

A report titled 'The Greater Gwent State of Nature' was produced, providing an assessment of the status of 100 species and species groups across Gwent. Following the report, the Greater Gwent Nature Recovery Action Plan was produced, acting as a strategic guide towards nature recovery at a regional scale across Gwent and informing development of the Local NRAP.

ADDITIONAL DELIVERY

The Council has been successful in an application to the Nature Networks fund, for a project to develop a mapping system that will create plans for resilient ecological networks. The plans will inform how and where to improve habitats, undertake nature recovery actions and outline why environmental wellbeing is important. The project will be delivered during the next Plan delivery period.

2.6 EDUCATION

OBJECTIVE 1: ENGAGE SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS VIA EDUCATIONAL SESSIONS AND ECO-COUNCILS AND EMBED SUSTAINABILITY

CASE STUDY: SCHOOLS SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENT

Schools are continuing to engage positively with environmental activities through a Service level Agreement (SLA) with the Natural Environment Team. 24 schools are currently signed up to the SLA, an increase from 17 in previous years.

The schools are offered a variety of activities related to seasons and events within Nature's Calendar. Examples include Terrific Trees (for National Tree Week), Super Seeds (during Seed Gathering Season), Brilliant Birds (around the time of Big Garden/ Schools Birdwatch and National Nest Box Week), activities relating to hedgehogs and hibernation, bugs and pollination and aquatic invertebrates in a pond dip.

This has provided opportunities for thousands of school children to participate in nature-based activities, with the following (approximate) figures provided:

- 2022: 77 workshop/ activities delivered, with 3,700+ pupils across 21 schools
- 2023: 56 workshop/ activities delivered, with 3,000+ pupils across 23 schools
- 2024: 47 workshops/ activities delivered, with 2,100 pupils across 18 schools



Participation in the SLA provides additional opportunity to contribute to national monitoring programmes and initiatives, with numerous schools taking in the Big Schools Birdwatch and Keep Wales Tidy Eco Schools Initiative. 3 schools qualified as [Hedgehog Friendly Campuses](#); Coed Y Garn attained gold standard and are currently awaiting renewal.

In addition, Ebbw Fawr Secondary Learning Community independently signed up to be a White-tailed Eagle school with the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, following up on details shared of a young people's wildlife conference.

Testimonial

I would never have considered using the pond without Becky suggesting it and I would never have had the confidence to run pond dipping sessions myself without Becky providing the support that she did. I love the fact that I now have someone else that I can ask for help or advice on all thing's nature!. **Ms Bradnock, Ysgol Gymraeg Bro Helyg**

Testimonial

Becky's work with the pupils has enabled them to build on their existing knowledge and understanding of the outdoor environment, to develop their own interest and skills in both caring and sustaining our natural environment for the future. The way in which Becky has supported the school displays the continual enthusiasm and commitment she has to inspire our pupils and indeed our staff. **Mrs Targett - FACE Lead, Blaenycwm School**

The continued involvement with the SLA has increased confidence and capacity for schools to pursue provided additional engagement opportunities. For example:

- St Joseph's have formed strong links with the Sirhowy Woodlands volunteer group, participating in regular visits independently of the SLA
- Ysgol Gymraeg Bro Helyg have taken independent visits to their adjacent Local Nature Reserve
- Blaen Y Cwm and Ysgol Gymraeg Bro Helyg now confidently deliver pond dipping workshops for pupils across the school as a result of staff observing and participating in SLA led sessions.

OBJECTIVE 2: NATURAL ENVIRONMENT TEAM (ENVIRONMENT ACT LEADS) TO ATTEND A HEAD TEACHERS MEETING ANNUALLY

Attendance at the head teachers meeting is continuing annually, providing an opportunity for the Biodiversity Officer to showcase activities that are delivered as part of the SLA, provide examples of nature-based activities that can be carried out with pupils and offer advice on funding and additional support.

OBJECTIVE 3: ENCOURAGE NATURE FRIENDLY MANAGEMENT ON SCHOOL GROUNDS

The SLA has provided an opportunity to support nature friendly management of school grounds.

All schools involved in the SLA were asked in 2023 about grassland management regimes and 14 schools confirmed that they had designated areas that were managed as wildflower areas. Ebbw Fawr Primary Learning Community has made a significant change to their grassland management, with all areas (with exception to the sports field) now left for biodiversity and for children to explore.

The image to the right provides an example of a wildflower area maintained by Coed y Garn Primary School.

Nature and sustainability measures are also being built into new school designs, with Ysgol Gymraeg Tredegar, a new Welsh-medium primary school, meeting net zero targets, in line with Welsh Government requirements.



OBJECTIVE 4: DEVELOP A SCHOOLS BIODIVERSITY POLICY AND SUPPORT WITH INTEGRATION

A Biodiversity and School Grounds Policy was drafted and shared with all schools in Blaenau Gwent in 2023. It highlights the importance of biodiversity, its links with well-being and opportunities to improve school grounds for biodiversity.

OBJECTIVE 5: ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE WITH THE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH THE YOUTH SERVICE

Environmental projects are reported as being part of youth work that is delivered across the County Borough, however no further information is currently available.

ADDITIONAL DELIVERY

All schools have been assessed for suitability for solar panels, with a programme of solar installation well underway, as part of efforts to meet decarbonisation targets.

3. NATURE RECOVERY ACTION PLAN (NRAP) FOR WALES

The preceding section detail how individual Service Action Plans contribute towards delivery of the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan for 2022 to 25. These, in turn, contribute towards Objectives set out in the NRAP for Wales, as set out below.

OBJECTIVE 1: ENGAGE AND SUPPORT PARTICIPATION AND UNDERSTANDING TO EMBED BIODIVERSITY THROUGHOUT DECISION MAKING AT ALL LEVELS

The Council has declared a Nature and Climate Emergency, and nature recovery is a corporate priority within the Corporate Plan. The Corporate Plan for 2022/27 includes a priority of 'respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities'.

There are good links between the nature and climate agendas, with efforts made to align delivery with the Decarbonisation Strategy and support provided by the Climate Working Group.

Training and internal awareness raising has been delivered by the Natural Environment Team to increase understanding of responsibilities in relation to biodiversity delivery, including member training, attendance at senior management and cross-departmental meetings, and inclusion of biodiversity information in internal bulletins. Completion and adoption of the biodiversity training module will make a further contribution to this objective going forward.

The Integrated Impact Assessment includes a requirement to consider the Resilient Wales Goal and Sustainable Development Principles, reflecting the need to consider protection and enhancement of biodiversity. This provides an opportunity to ensure that biodiversity is considered in committee report decision making, although the robustness of the system hasn't been tested as part of this review.

OBJECTIVE 2: SAFEGUARD SPECIES AND HABITATS OF PRINCIPAL IMPORTANCE AND IMPROVE THEIR MANAGEMENT

Project delivery has been undertaken for species and habitats, on council owned land and also through collaboration, with evidence provided of engagement, partnership working and volunteer involvement through the Local Places for Nature Fund.

The pollinator policy and successful award of the Bee Friendly Status both provide strong evidence of adoption of sustainable management practices for the benefit of invertebrates, with wider benefits for biodiversity in general.

The grassland review is anticipated to make a positive contribution to habitat management undertaken on council owned land. Although not measured currently, there is an ambition to measure areas being managed for biodiversity, which will provide a stronger evidence base for contribution to this objective.



There are positive examples of cross-departmental collaboration to achieve management to benefit biodiversity, although not consistent across all departments.

Ongoing management is carried out on Local Nature Reserves, with 11 LNRs listed on the [Council's Countryside webpage](#) (see image above: Six Bells LNR)

OBJECTIVE 3: INCREASE THE RESILIENCE OF OUR NATURAL ENVIRONMENT BY RESTORING DEGRADED HABITATS AND HABITAT CREATION

Project activities and management already detailed includes elements of habitat restoration and habitat creation, with Local Places for Nature project delivery including wildflower meadow creation, tree planting / orchard creation and other enhancement activities. Management works to be undertaken as a result of the grassland review is further anticipated to make a positive contribution to this objective.

The Resilient Greater Gwent provided an important framework to inform landscape wide action for enhanced resilient ecological networks, with the Nature Networks project anticipated to build on this.

OBJECTIVE 4: TACKLE KEY PRESSURES ON SPECIES AND HABITATS

Contribution towards this objective include positive steps in reduction of paper through greater adoption of digital filing, reduction in energy and travel through flexible working practices.

Decarbonisation action to meet the 2030 target is underway, with solar panels having been installed at many schools and council buildings, transitioning to e-vehicles evident and support for other relevant initiatives such as the cycle to work scheme.

A programme of INNS (invasive, non-native species) treatment is undertaken every year. Efforts are being made to reduce pesticide use, with Neighbourhood Services having attended a Welsh Government workshop on alternative measures.

OBJECTIVE 5: IMPROVE OUR EVIDENCE, UNDERSTANDING AND MONITORING

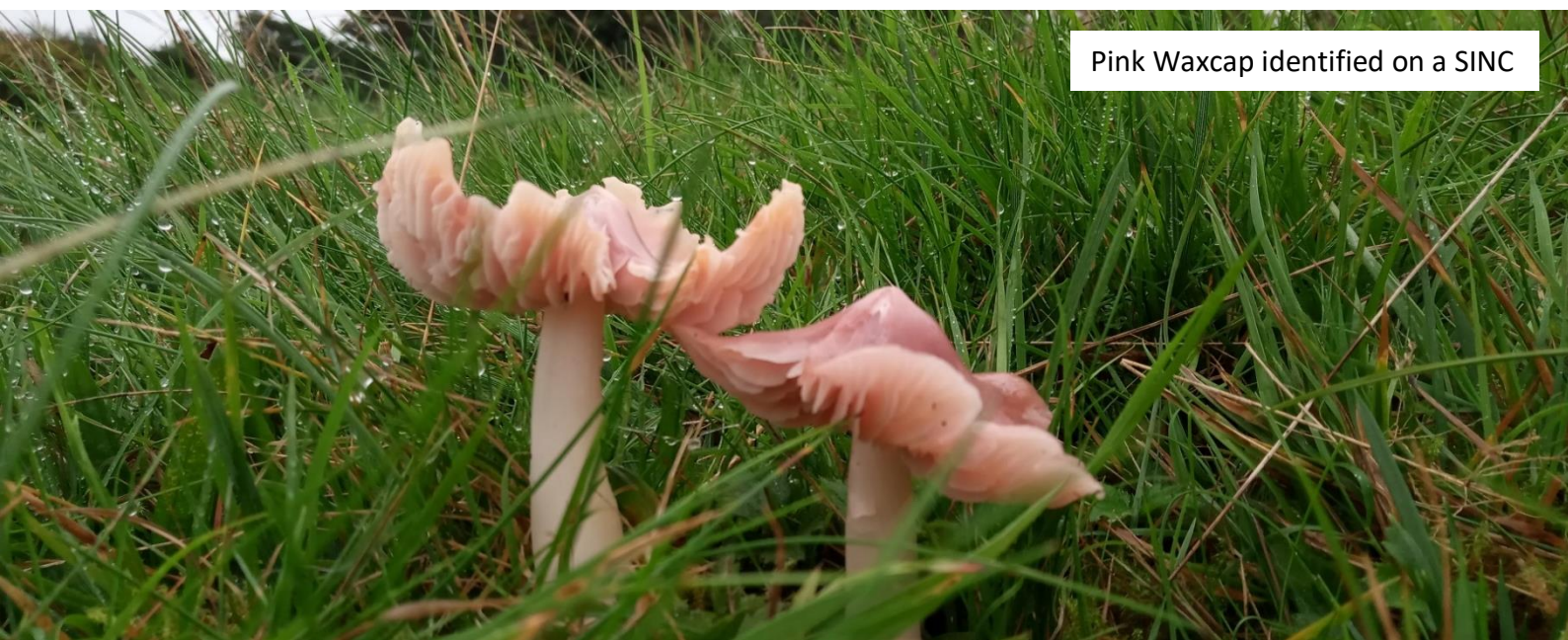
The Greater Gwent State of Nature, Greater Gwent Nature Recovery Action Plan and Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen Nature Recovery Action Plan all provide an important framework to inform action.

A SLA is in place with SEWBRc, ensuring access to data, and training has been provided to the Planning Department in Aderyn.

There is evidence of some survey work having been undertaken, in relation to candidate sites and SINCs (see image below) for the Replacement LDP, and curlew monitoring, however evidence of wider survey or monitoring to improve evidence or understanding, or the impact of project delivery, is more limited. In particular, monitoring of the extent of Council owned land positively managed for biodiversity would make a stronger contribution to this objective.

An audit was undertaken in 2019 on the Council's delivery of 'improving access to, and the quality of open spaces for the benefits of our communities, businesses and visitors', by the Wales Audit Office. The findings were set out as a [Wales Audit Report](#), noting that the Council had designed this step to prevent ecosystem decline and promote the wellbeing of local people, but that more data was needed to measure and monitor progress. Following the recommendation, the Council agreed an action to 'increase areas of managed land (woodlands / grassland / habitats)', however without appropriate monitoring, it isn't possible to assess whether this has been achieved.

Activities to improve understanding of the importance of biodiversity is undertaken, through member training, the emerging biodiversity training module and in particular within the school environment, with the Schools SLA making an impactful contribution to this objective.



Pink Waxcap identified on a SINC

OBJECTIVE 6: PUT IN PLACE A FRAMEWORK OF GOVERNANCE AND SUPPORT FOR DELIVERY

The inclusion of Biodiversity Plan Objectives in Corporate Plan reporting systems makes a positive contribution to this objective, supported by the nomination of Environment Champions, most of whom are actively participating in the Environment Champions meetings. There are some gaps here, including those who were originally nominated but not active, and those not yet engaged in the process. Furthermore, whilst there is an established process in place for monitoring and reporting against the Section 6 Duty, the level of engagement and detail provided was inconsistent.

The nomination of elected members as Climate Mitigation Champion and Natural Environment portfolio members provides an opportunity for increased support for biodiversity delivery, with interview with a previous portfolio holder indicating good knowledge and support for biodiversity initiatives.

It's evident that opportunities have been taken by the Council's ecologist to provide ecological input at strategic and senior management meetings, and to participate in team / departmental meetings from other service areas. Of note however, evidence suggests that this role is largely taken by one officer, who is responsible for a number of functions within the team, which does present an element of risk in meeting the Council's duties in relation to the Section 6 Duty.

Support for delivery by the Local Nature Partnership is in place through a shared arrangement with Torfaen County Borough Council, who employ the LNP Coordinator. Local delivery through partnership working and engagement with community groups and members of the public is undertaken by the Natural Environment Team, currently supported by the Local Places for Nature Grant.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The review has identified many highlights and positive working practices that demonstrate compliance with the Section 6 Duty and positive contribution towards efforts to tackle the nature crisis. At the same time, some observations have been provided within this report, which should inform development of the updated Plan.

There is a good framework for delivery through the Environment Champion network and embedding of Section 6 Duty objectives into the Business Plan. As highlighted, there are some gaps in reporting, engagement and in detail provided through this process, which will need to be considered in development of objectives for the updated Plan. At the same time, an increased focus on adoption of objectives (or actions) which are measurable would support scrutiny of Plan implementation.

During the review period, it's understood that a restructure has very recently taken place, which may present an opportunity (and need) to review the structure of the Service Area Action Plans and associated Environment Champions, with consideration to be given to involvement of Planning and Estates.

The schools SLA, and nature-based activities being delivered by Children's Services, provide excellent opportunities for young people to engage with the natural environment, providing benefits for well-being as well as fostering an appreciation for nature that will hopefully transpose into future action for nature recovery.

The Local Places for Nature funding stream has provided a welcome boost to resources and capacity to deliver and facilitate projects throughout Blaenau Gwent. Delivery is supporting ecosystem resilience, building collaboration and partnership working and providing benefits to communities and individuals.

Positive measures have been put in place to build ecosystem resilience through management of land under Council ownership or control, which would benefit from development of a system to measure and monitor impact of these actions.

The findings of this report will inform development of the revised Blaenau Gwent Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan. Further engagement with key officers and departments will be undertaken to agree inclusion of objectives for implementation from 2025 to 2028.