



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

RESEARCH

Evaluation of the National Forest Demonstrators (summary)

An evaluation of the Demonstrator projects created to test funding and delivery mechanisms and work towards achieving National Forest programme outcomes.

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Evaluation aims and methodology

This paper reports on the findings of an evaluation of the National Forest Demonstrator projects.

The First Minister's manifesto commits to The National Forest for Wales Programme which aims to create a connected ecosystem spanning the length and breadth of Wales to:

- increase the number of trees planted nationally and locally including street trees, orchards and small woodlands including tiny forests
- enhance biodiversity
- restore ancient woodlands
- engage more people with nature
- bring nature/ green spaces nearer to where people live

The Demonstrator projects were initially funded by £4.5 million in 2020/2021 to start activity on the ground, test funding and delivery mechanisms to inform plans and funding for the future development and delivery of the National Forest Programme. Following the initial allocation of funds, additional money became available to boost funding for the FIRS.

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The projects were delivered through four different schemes:

1. **Forest Industry Recovery Scheme:** total funding £2.34 million
Sought to promote a strong and growing forestry sector to support delivery of National Forest targets through capital funding. It also sought to assist the sector, including nurseries, to recover from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic helping to provide finance to purchase or update equipment, for harvesting and tree surgery purposes, to address Ash dieback, enhance the availability of trees of local provenance, and to access inaccessible spaces for enhancement purposes.
2. **Natural Resources Wales Enhancement scheme:** total funding £2.1 million
Located in Welsh Government this sought the removal of plantation trees on Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) and the removal of Invasive Non-native Species (INNS) with a concurrent focus on improving access to sites.
3. **National Lottery Heritage Fund Community Woodlands scheme:** total funding £1 million Welsh Government funding with additional £610,000 from NHLF in revenue contribution
A two-year capital grant scheme for not-for-profit organisations, funded and administered by the National Lottery in partnership with Welsh Government. Focused upon community involvement grants were able to cover the acquisition of land, support planting and/or enhanced management to the UK Forestry Standard and sought to promote public access.
4. **Keep Wales Tidy (KWT)**
 - Tiny Forests: total funding £140,000
Developing and planting with local communities, small, dense areas of woodland about the size of a tennis court with a range of tree layers in several locations with limited access to woodland with a focus on community-led aftercare.
 - Tree planting scheme: total funding £60,000
Introducing the National Forest programme into Eco-Schools in 22 schools with them planting up to 400 trees on-site or close by.

Wavehill were commissioned in February 2021 to undertake an evaluation of the National Forest for Wales Demonstrators. The evaluation aimed to explore the

following top-level objectives.

- Examine the effectiveness of different funding models and delivery approaches.
- Understand how best to involve diverse communities in creating the National Forest for Wales.
- Determine the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement and identify areas for improvement.

The evaluation involved a mixed method approach with fieldwork between February and June 2021 involving:

- development of the Theory of Change model
- interviews with 11 key scheme managers and delivery staff and 14 project managers and delivery staff from NLHF Community Woodlands scheme (five), KWT: Tiny Forests scheme (six), and NRW: Enhancement scheme (three)
- online survey with FIRS applicants returned by 15 successful, and five unsuccessful respondents; and with attendees (44) of the 3-day stakeholder event National Forest for Wales – Your Views and Voices
- semi-structured interviews with nine Welsh Government Policy Officials and wider industry stakeholders
- nine project evaluation case studies

Main findings

Effectiveness of scheme delivery

National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) Community Woodlands scheme

Project managers were broadly positive about the support received from NLHF. Generally, the successful projects tended to be projects looking for funding, rather than those designed specifically for the Community Woodland fund.

Potentially, more resource should be provided to support emerging new projects.

All project managers interviewed were positive about the delivery of their project, despite pandemic disruptions. The pandemic generally impacted this scheme less than the others due to the two year nature of the timescales. Despite this the pandemic still impacted implementation and delivery, particularly community engagement, volunteer involvement, and communication with those with digital exclusion issues. Despite this, project managers were positive about future engagement.

As of January 2021, it was felt by the programme board that a low number of enquiries had been made with regard to the Community Woodlands scheme. However, it was felt that those projects which had been funded were appropriate for the scheme. It was suggested that this low interest may be due to the complexity involved in restoring and creating woodland, and that the fund criteria may look daunting. This was reflected by the project manager of successful projects, who generally had experience of applying for funds of this nature. Greater support was thought to be required to support community-led projects from diverse areas to be developed and secure funding. However, it should be noted that Llais-y-Goedwig were brought in early in 2021 to provide support to address this issue.

The capital only funding was thought to be restrictive, particularly the inability to fund dedicated project manager/coordinator roles. NLHF's contribution of up to 30% offered a degree of revenue support for those requiring it. It was clearly felt that the approved projects could not have gone ahead without the NLHF revenue element. There was no specific requirement for community involvement, so the projects had differing degrees of this.

Other challenges included difficulties in securing equipment, and a heavy administrative burden.

In terms of achieved objectives, it was felt that due to the early stage of delivery this was difficult to assess. However, there was positivity around the progress made so far. Project managers were pleased by the emerging interest from the community, and projects around engagement with communities and schools were planned for.

Keep Wales Tidy, Tiny Forests and Tree Planting scheme

Potential planting sites tended to be identified by KWT's community officers approaching project managers. Project managers had to sign an agreement to maintain each site after the one-year funding period was completed. This was deemed to represent a risk in terms of ongoing site management and maintenance. The pandemic also resulted in less engagement between KWT and project managers than anticipated.

Generally, there were few issues with identifying planting sites. However there were reports of challenges in getting schools on board, potentially due to pandemic-enforced closures. The set structure and design of the scheme was seen as an advantage by project managers, however some highlighted the demonstrator was not flexible to individual locations.

Challenges in delivery resulting from the pandemic included: restrictions resulting in an artificially shorter year, staff furlough, lack of involvement and schools, greater reliance on contractors instead of volunteers.

It was felt that this scheme had met several core objectives including: creating new areas of woodland to support greater biodiversity; making nature more accessible for people and providing opportunities for learning. Some objectives, however were negatively impacted by the pandemic, such as school engagement with Tiny Forest sites.

In some cases the Tiny Forest Demonstrators, while only recently completed, have already resulted in communities planning more up and coming green infrastructure projects.

Natural Resources Wales (NRW) Enhancement scheme

This scheme comprised two elements: conservation enhancement and access enhancement. Interviews with the scheme and project managers showed that this was a strong concept that was easy to sell to those preparing project proposals.

Evaluation interviews with NRW project leaders suggested that for the NRW scheme, funds did not become available with sufficient notice and in some cases, this led to the projects being carried out not being optimal in terms of overall value, time, budget and staff capacity.

Another issue was the financial management processes. Respondents stated that the process was overly bureaucratic and it was difficult to transfer money between budget headings.

Timing created an issue, both in terms of the timeframes for awarding money creating difficulties due to seasonal impacts, and the demonstrators being designed as short-term projects. The PAWS and INNS projects were recognised as medium to long term efforts.

Delays in delivery occurred due to COVID and adverse weather events. Despite the above factors and the tight timescale, a considerable amount of work was carried out. In terms of delivery against objectives it was deemed too early in the scheme to identify whether the objectives of the scheme has been met.

Forest Industry Recovery scheme

Many of the successful applicants were experienced in working with a range of community interests.

There was some discrepancy around whether the funding was straightforward to apply for, with some applicants stating this was challenging and others stating it was straight forward. Five out of 20 respondents said that they did not receive sufficient feedback on why their proposal did not succeed. However, it was not possible to verify whether these comments were accurate.

The majority of surveyed projects reported that their scheme ran within time despite external factors. In terms of delivery against key objectives it was felt by respondents that the FIRS scheme had contributed to biodiversity and ecosystem outcomes and social and educational outcomes.

Involving diverse communities

The evidence across all the schemes was that there remains more work to do to engage the wider public in the National Forest programme, but that the focus on engaging diverse communities in the Community Woodlands, Tiny Forests, and Tree Planting schemes has encouraged greater focused engagement work. There has been some success in the NRW Enhancement and FIRS, although this has not been an explicit focus of delivery there. Tiny Forests specifically have highlighted examples of community engagement that have brought real benefits to these projects.

Projects reported that there was extensive interest in their work that had been notably increased following the pandemic restrictions which had made local communities even more aware of their local woodlands because these were often the main places where individuals were able to exercise in line with lockdown restrictions. However, the pandemic had curtailed some engagement activity restricting group and face to face working, and the willingness of some members of the community to be engaged in consultation, delivery, and volunteering activities. Moving forward a specific focus on engaging diverse communities should be required of all project activities to continue to extend knowledge and understanding and engagement in the programme in the future.

Effectiveness of stakeholder engagement

The stakeholder events held in March 2021 were widely welcomed, found valuable by participants, and attracted a good diversity of participants. Virtual delivery had enabled some participants to attend when a more traditional 'conference-style' approach at a venue would have made it more difficult for them to attend. Despite this networking activities were facilitated much less by such delivery, and some respondents commented on technological problems affecting the event.

The mix and focus of sessions were welcomed by the majority of responding attendees and there was greater interest in attending similar functions, hearing about other National Forest activities, and recommending the programme and its

activities to others (friends and family members) as a result. These findings suggest that further stakeholder engagement is warranted and would be welcomed and that should focus upon targeting an even more diverse range of communities perhaps through specially targeted events.

Conclusions and recommendations

Programme effectiveness

The evidence suggests that the schemes have the potential to deliver on their outcomes, however, it is too early to say with confidence that the outcomes will be delivered, as the overall programme has a long-term (fifty year) horizon, and several political, environmental, social, and economic factors may serve to underpin or undermine its achievement.

Despite, the striking diversity of approach across the National Forest Demonstrator Schemes as a whole (each scheme is distinctive in what it set out to achieve and how to achieve it, and the administrative and reporting processes entailed) each has been curtailed by lockdowns in response to the COVID pandemic and faced tightened delivery timescales as a result. Yet delivery has continued, achieved success in most projects, and the overall design of schemes has proved robust against these challenges. However, there is value in refining some aspects of process and delivery across schemes including:

- examine the effectiveness of different funding models and delivery approaches
- greater commonality in application, funding (including capital and revenue elements), monitoring and evaluation process and practice, and sustainability planning.
- development of mechanisms to enable joint working between projects across schemes and activities to build a network of expertise to support ongoing and new projects in the future

Involving diverse communities

Community engagement has been curtailed by the COVID-19 pandemic, yet where specific efforts have been made by projects such involvement has had positive effects, particularly across Tiny Forest and Community Woodland schemes. This had enabled local communities to be involved directly in consultation, planning and delivery of these projects, increased volunteering levels and enabled some participation in the sustainability of projects.

There remain needs to ensure a consistent requirement for all schemes and activity to focus on diverse community engagement and for detail to provide examples of what this kind of work should involve, and the outcomes expected of it.

Stakeholder engagement

Specific stakeholder engagement activity has been positively received to date and there remains a strong willingness for those involved to date to be involved further in future. Whilst reaching a relatively diverse audience the evidence shows more work to do and offers encouragement that a ready and willing audience is there for any future activity in this area.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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