



Area based trial

Working with our partners to better manage our natural resources

Version: June 2015

Introduction

The Welsh Government's Environment Bill will give Natural Resources Wales (NRW) a duty to manage natural resources sustainably in Wales. To prepare for this, NRW is undertaking three exploratory area based trials in the Rhondda, Tawe and Dyfi catchments.

The main purpose of the trials is to explore how to embed an integrated approach to managing natural resources within specific geographical areas, help inform NRW's programme to embed natural resource management within Wales, and to capture learning along the way. Each trial is developing its own process but some of the key elements of this approach are: to be area based; involve stakeholder engagement throughout; be evidence based; plan for the long term; and be people focussed.

As part of the new approach, the Environment Bill requires NRW to produce Area Statements setting out the vision, priorities and opportunities and evidence for a place incorporating the environment, society and the economy. Area statements will advise on what the strategic priorities are in the context of local needs, and will inform the Needs Assessment and Wellbeing Plans as set out in the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. The statements will inform other plans for the place such as local development plans. Opportunities for incorporation into other planning processes, will also need to be considered.

The Rhondda

The Rhondda is blessed with an outstanding natural environment and is renowned for its industrial heritage and strong, tightly knit communities. However, the Rhondda also shares the typical range of environmental, social and economic challenges that can be found across the South Wales Valleys.

The Rhondda has two main valleys: the larger Rhondda Fawr and the smaller Rhondda Fach. These are generally steep-sided with narrow and developed / urban valley floors, valley-side ffridd, forest plantations, native woodlands, improved grassland, scrub and flushes. The Welsh Government Woodland Estate (WGWE) managed by NRW accounts for approximately 40% of the catchment.



Initial engagement

Since early 2014, we've met with a wide range of partners and stakeholders in the Rhondda to help identify the key challenges, priorities and opportunities in the area.

This included meeting and working with organisations, community groups, local businesses, volunteers and residents of the Rhondda. The local authority (Rhondda Cynon Taf) are a key partner and we outlined our approach at their Local Service Board. To avoid duplication and ensure we have clear links with local communities, we have also worked closely with Cynefin's place based coordinator (Gabi Torkington) in Rhondda Cynon Taf.

From the beginning, we've engaged in discussions with partners, groups and individuals without a set agenda. This has encouraged open discussions, knowledge sharing and creative ideas that are more in tune with the area, and enabled us to build our knowledge and evidence base.

Some of the key themes for the Rhondda that emerged from our initial discussions included:

- Health and wellbeing
- Access to green spaces
- Resilience and safety
- Prosperity and equality
- Improved / appropriate management of the public land

The area based approach continues to meet with great energy and enthusiasm from our partners and stakeholders who are keen to be involved and work with us.



Working with partners

In 2015, we began formalising the approach with a series of workshops to help develop a vision for the Rhondda, where we will ultimately seek to prepare and produce an Area Statement.

So far, we've hosted two formal stakeholder workshops in the Rhondda (24th March and 4th June 2015). The purpose of these events was to bring a wide range of partners, community groups and residents together, and begin identifying the main challenges, priorities and opportunities for managing the area's natural resources in a more integrated way.



From the workshops, 7 main themes have emerged for the Rhondda:

1. Management of public land and Nature Recovery
2. Collecting what works and sharing the learning (i.e. ideas, models, case studies relating to asset based, integrated nature and community development)
3. Creating 'capable guardians': involving local people in the places around them
4. Better links to health and outdoor recreation (building an evidence base)
5. A Restored Hydrology in the Rhondda
6. Improved Access to the Countryside
7. Changing Perceptions of the Rhondda (economic regeneration, tourism)

The published report of the first event (English / Welsh) can be requested from rhondda@cyfoethnaturiolcymru.gov.uk

Projects

Funding from Welsh Government was allocated to the three trial areas for activities / projects that deliver the widest possible benefits, and which help develop our understanding of the practical and operational aspects of natural resource management.

Working with our partners in the Rhondda we are delivering several projects including:

- Working with partners to help prevent wildfires caused by arson and enhance biodiversity (further info below);
- Working with natural processes to help reduce flood risk to Cwmparc and bring benefits to wildlife;
- Improvements at Llanwonno woodland for access, environmental education, health and wellbeing benefits;
- Training community groups to manage invasive species and enhance their local environment;
- Feasibility study recommending ways to enhance the management of public land for pollinators and help address the issue of widespread decline across the UK;
- Running outdoor education 'Bio-blitz' events with local communities to record and collect species information and data.

The ideas for the projects above came from talking and listening to our partners, and our approach is to achieve learning through active delivery on the ground. The principles of the ecosystem approach are embedded into the planning and delivery of these projects.



These and other projects are currently underway and will be in place and / or completed by September 2015.

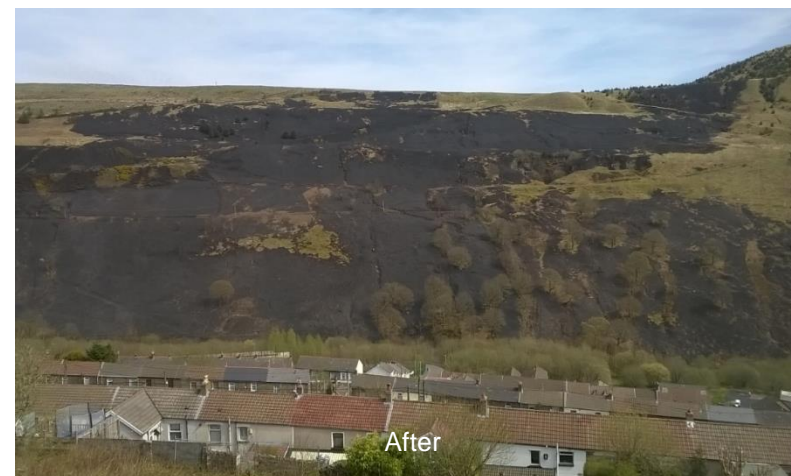
Case study: A more in-depth look at our work with partners to help prevent wildfires and enhance biodiversity

The Rhondda has some of Wales' key priority grassland and hillside habitats along its valley sides. However, the area is continually at risk from fires caused deliberately by arson. The South Wales Valleys are particularly susceptible to wildfires as the characteristic habitat is the ffridd / coed cae habitat – this is the margin between the valley bottom and uplands. In many parts of the South Wales valleys, the ffridd habitat has become a monoculture of bracken and/or gorse, whilst rhos pasture (wetter marshy grassland and wet heath communities) can become completely dominated by purple moor grass (Molinia). In the early spring when the dead bracken and purple moor-grass of the previous year's growth has dried out (and before the green shoots of the new growth emerge) there is a ready available source of combustible dead plant material.

In spring 2015, a combination of the dry, warm weather conditions, large fuel load on the hillsides (bracken and Purple Moor-grass/Molinia) resulted in over 800 fires in the South Wales Valleys, with the majority occurring in the Rhondda Valley. Sadly, this was not an exception and continues to be a constant blight to the environment, economy, and local communities.

As part of our work in the Rhondda, one of the key issues we identified with partners from the beginning is inappropriate land management (on both public and privately owned land) in the Rhondda. One obvious consequence of this is the risk of wildfires, which as well being a risk to people and property, results in significant negative impacts on the environment including: biodiversity loss, increased diffuse pollution, soil erosion, loss of heritage sites, impacts on environmental health and the visual impacts. The fires also disrupt access to recreation sites and reinforce negative perceptions of the South Wales Valleys.

The extensive damage caused by deliberate wildfires is shown in the images below taken in Tylorstown, Rhondda in spring 2015.



Rhondda trial: working together to deliver a potential solution

Given the devastating effects of wildfires in the Rhondda, we formed a steering group with our partners to develop a strategy and long term sustainable project for better land management in the Rhondda. The principle aim is to help reduce the severity and incidents of wildfires, but also seek biodiversity gains and improved access to the hillsides for people to enjoy. As part of this initiative, we're working with Rhondda Cynon Taf, Merthyr Tydfil Council, Caerphilly Council, Wildlife Trusts, PONT, Butterfly Conservation and the South Wales Fire & Rescue Service.

All parties agree that more sustainable management of land on the local authority estate, Welsh Government Woodland Estate, and sites within private ownership is critical. And whilst the South Wales Fire & Rescue Service must continue with education and awareness raising, we're undertaking on the ground pro-active measures to prevent small, deliberately started fires from spreading across whole hillsides. The steering group proposes the following key actions to help minimise the fuel load on the land and restore the biodiversity value: cutting fire breaks, long term grazing by Highland Cattle agreements, and controlled burns.

Essential to achieving this is having a dedicated resource, i.e. a local officer based in the area who can liaise with the organisations and graziers involved. The group have worked together and an officer is anticipated to be in place by Summer 2015. This will enable us to assess the wide range of issues which contribute to the cause of deliberate wildfires, but also plan and deliver action on the ground to help prevent and/or minimise the numerous impacts of wildfires. This integrated approach will support the rural economy, local skills training and education, and help protect the Rhondda's hillsides and wildlife (including designated sites and European protected species).



Controlled burn at Tonypandy, Rhondda



Low density / pulse grazing by Highland Cattle

Crime and anti-social behaviour

Since we began the trial in early 2014, a constant topic of discussion with partners and residents is crime and anti-social behaviour. In particular, how it undermines the safety and wellbeing of residents, impacts the local economy and environment, damages the area's prosperity, and reinforces negative perceptions of the Rhondda and wider South Wales Valleys.

Unfortunately, crime and anti-social behaviour on the Welsh Government Woodland Estate estate is a constant issue. Some of the typical illegal / anti-social activities that take place on the estate include: metal theft, off-road trespassing, vandalism, fly-tipping, dog fouling, joy riding, fires, poaching and wildlife crime. The impacts are economic, environmental and social.

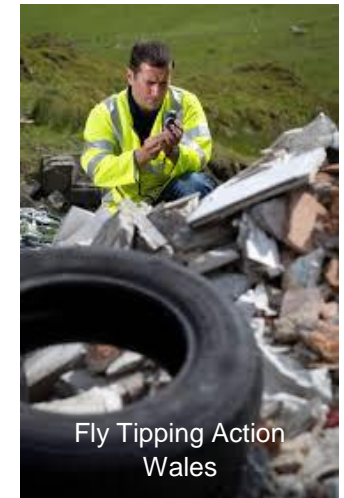
To start addressing this, we're working with our Communities and Regeneration team who ran a 'Tackling crime and anti-social behaviour on the NRW estate' workshop in April 2015 with relevant partners and colleagues. Attendees included: NRW, South Wales Fire & Rescue Service, South Wales Police, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Fly Tipping Action Wales and other advisors / officers.

The purpose of the workshop was to:

- Identify some of the underlying causes of crime and anti-social behaviour
- Assess the financial and resource implications of crime and anti-social behaviour on the Welsh Government Woodland Estate
- Clarify the role of the Local Authority in relation to the Anti-social behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 and NRW's legal duties with regards to crime and anti-social behaviour on the estate
- Identify the key challenges and opportunities

The final report of the event can be requested from rhondda@cyfoethnaturiolcymru.gov.uk

A number of actions emerged from the workshop and there is support to move this work forward. There is a clear need to not only coordinate an NRW approach to the issues raised, but also effective communication and coordination at a strategic level between NRW and its partners. This could pre-empt the role of Public Service Boards as part of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, and provide learning for organisations in working better together and developing a multi-agency approach.



Rhondda trial: next steps

- Rhondda workshops: Following our stakeholder workshops in March and June '15, we're running a series of pop-ups at local events with communities in the Rhondda in the summer, in partnership with Cynefin / RCT.
- Area Statement: The Environment Bill requires NRW to produce Area Statements setting out the vision, priorities and opportunities and evidence for a place incorporating the environment, society and the economy. Building on our work with partners at our stakeholder events, the intention is to begin preparing a draft Area Statement in Autumn 2015 with a statement produced in early 2016.
- Project delivery: Our projects are underway and key milestones will be in place and / or completed by September 2015. The longer term aims and deliverables of the projects will input into our learning to inform our approach and the Area Statement.
- Trials learning: Continue to feed back to NRW and Welsh Government about how we practically deliver and embed integrated natural resource management.

Further information

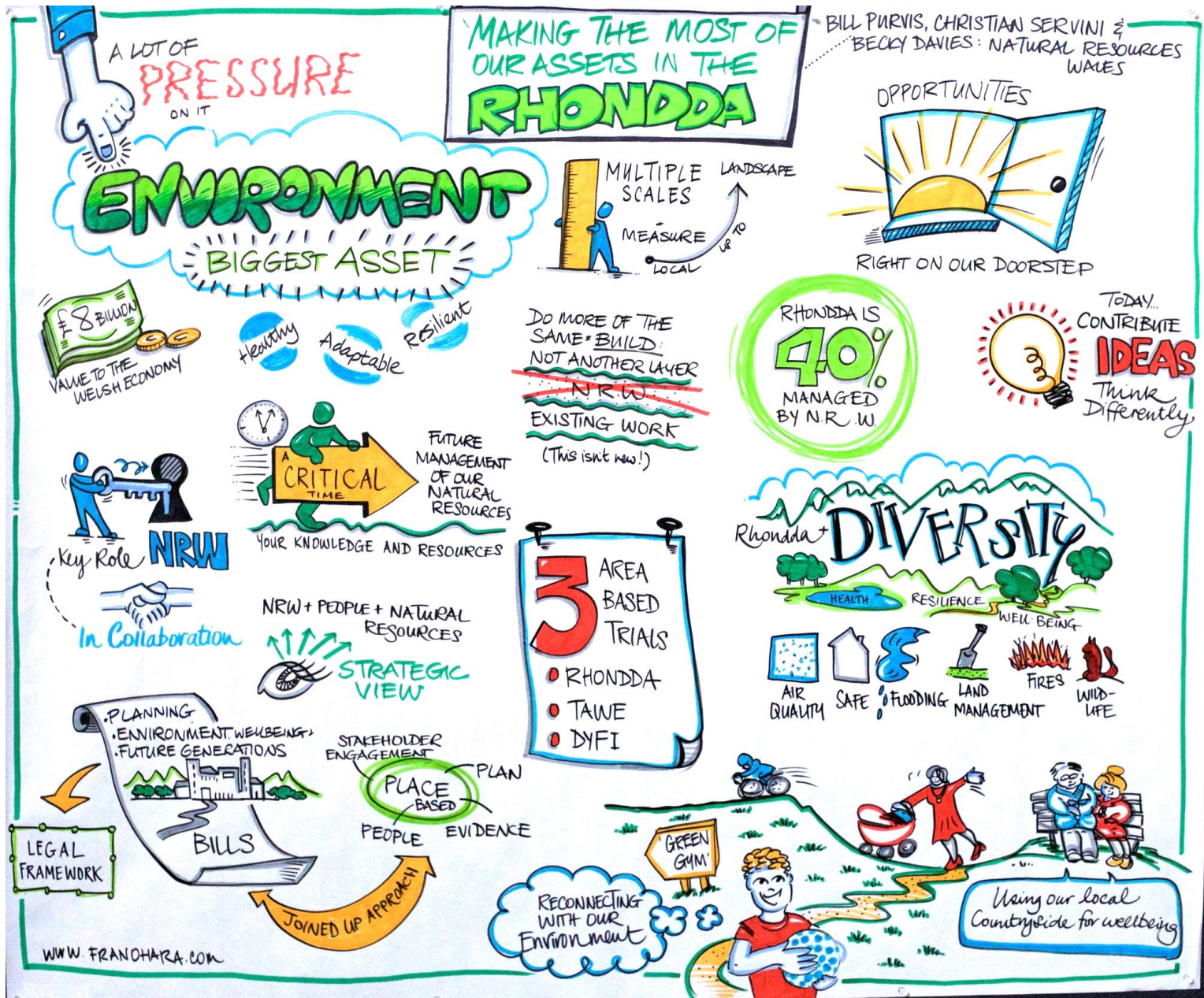
Please contact Christian or Becky at rhondda@cyfoethnaturiolcymru.gov.uk if you'd like to find out more about the area-based trial in the Rhondda.

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t Customer Care Centre 0300 065 3000 (Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm)



Making the most of our assets in the Rhondda
 Infographic created at the Rhondda Stakeholder Workshop, 24th March 2015.