

How can place-based working contribute to a well-being economy and environmental goals in Wales?

Caitlin Hafferty, Charlotte Boddy, Mark Hirons,
John Lynch, and Rosie Gearey

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1. Who this report is for

This research report is written to highlight the opportunities presented by place-based governance, and how it can contribute to achieving social and environmental goals. It reflects the commitments of the national Well-being Goals and Well-being Economy governments alliance in terms of social and ecological justice, environmental responsibility, sustainable food and farming, and the transition to a well-being economy.

While focused on Wales, with particular reference Welsh legislation, governance structures and case-studies, the report also highlights relevant ‘lessons learned’ across the UK and beyond. It is intended for policymakers, political advisers and decision-makers across public, private and third sectors who are seeking credible, evidence-based ways to deliver integrated outcomes in practice while connecting national and local ambitions.

The report has been developed as part of an Agile Initiative Sprint project (June 2025-July 2026), ‘*How can we deliver effective, equitable and place-based environmental governance*’, led by researchers at the University of Oxford and Scotland’s Rural College. Invaluable input and feedback came from project partners working in Welsh Government, but the final report has been prepared by academic researchers in an independent capacity, and any views expressed are those of the authors alone, and any errors or omissions the sole responsibility of the authors. The authors do not represent any political party, and the views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of any political organisation.



2. Executive summary: key messages

I. Wales has world-leading ambition – but delivery happens in place

Wales has some of the strongest legislative foundations globally for a well-being economy, through the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, the Environment (Wales) Act, the Planning (Wales) Act, and the Agriculture (Wales) Act. These frameworks recognise that social justice, biodiversity, climate, sustainable food systems, and long-term economic resilience are fundamentally interlinked.

The challenge is not only to articulate ambitious political goals, but to translate them into support for the meaningful, on-the-ground work already underway – strengthening and scaling the everyday socio-environmental transformations that are already actively emerging in place.

Standing still is not an option, as ‘business-as-usual’ will see continued decline and failure to meet Wales’ legislative requirements. Fully realising the opportunities presented by these unique frameworks would lead to national action that matches the ambition.

II. Place-based working can deliver joined-up outcomes across food, nature and the economy

Evidence from Wales and beyond shows that place-based approaches can simultaneously support sustainable food and farming, biodiversity recovery, climate resilience, public health, resilient local economies, community well-being and empowerment.

These approaches work effectively because they treat land, food, the environment, biodiversity, livelihoods, health, economy, and communities as interconnected systems, and because they connect national sustainability goals to locally situated knowledge, relationships, and capacity, rather than only imposing one-size-fits-all solutions. These approaches have a lot of potential to balance top-down with bottom-up approaches in innovative, experimental, and multi-faceted ways.

III. Government’s role is to enable what already works, and Wales already has the tools to drive progress

Across Wales, local authorities, farmers, land managers, communities, charities, businesses and public bodies are, in many places, already delivering integrated, place-based solutions. These efforts are often overlooked, under-resourced, short-term, or fragmented by funding and governance arrangements.

Policy should therefore prioritise long-term support, policy coherence, and governance reform that strengthens this existing ecosystem – rather than only creating new strategies that sit alongside it.

Wales already has appropriate statutory mechanisms to build integrated, place-based governance, from the Environment Act’s Area Statements, to Public Services Boards and Corporate Joint Committees. Speaking to stakeholders in national and local government reveals enthusiasm for place-based working, but also a recognition that the mechanisms available are not being translated to action on the ground. The tools exist for Wales to lead the way in place-based working, but implementation requires concerted effort to activate and strengthen these mechanisms.

3. Why place-based working matters now

Wales faces intersecting crises: biodiversity loss, climate change, food insecurity, rising inequality, and pressure on public services. These challenges are experienced by people and communities in integrated ways, not as separate ‘policy arenas’. As highlighted in the UK’s first National Emergency Briefing on the climate and nature crisis¹, nature – and the communities working to recover it in place – is not a ‘nice to have’ but critical, cross-sectoral national infrastructure for resilience and long-term prosperity.

However, governance systems continue to treat these issues separately. Food, farming, environment, health, housing and economic development are typically managed through distinct government strategies, funding streams, and accountability structures, even though they shape the same places and lives². This disconnect between national goals and lived experience limits the ability of policy to adapt to complex challenges and respond effectively.

Place-based working refers to spatially targeted interventions delivered at a local or regional level that aim to address concentrated disadvantage by engaging communities (and other stakeholders) of place and interest³. It is relevant across Wales' diverse geographies – from dense urban neighbourhoods and post-industrial towns to rural catchments and agricultural landscapes – recognising that social, economic, and environmental pressures are experienced differently in different settings but require similarly integrated responses^{4,5,6,7}. Place-based approaches understand place as comprising location, local social and material context, sense of place and place-based identity, and combines resource targeting with collaborative, community-informed approaches to improve social, cultural, environmental, economic, and well-being outcomes^{8,9}. In public policy and services, it is an approach that starts with the needs, assets, and relationships of a specific place – aligning organisations around shared outcomes for local people, rather than delivering siloed services to meet national targets¹⁰. It offers a way to reconnect policy ambition with lived experience – turning long-term goals into practical action that reflects how risk, opportunity, and change are actually experienced on-the-ground.

4. Wales' legislative foundations – ambition without delivery?

Wales is not starting from scratch. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act¹¹, the Environment (Wales) Act¹², the Planning (Wales) Act¹³, the Agriculture (Wales) Act¹⁴, and the Sustainable Farming Scheme¹⁵ embed long-term well-being, ecological resilience, sustainable food production and global responsibility in law. Together, they provide a statutory foundation for integrated, place-based governance — requiring national ambition to be translated into locally grounded delivery.

Recent national assessments reinforce both the strength of this framework and the scale of the challenge. The State of Natural Resources Report (SoNaRR) concludes that Wales remains on a degrading trajectory for nature and calls for system-level, place-sensitive action across energy, food, transport and the built environment¹⁶. The issue is therefore not a lack of legislative vision, but supporting and enhancing existing architecture.

Wales already has a statutory planning system capable of supporting this integration^{17, 18, 19, 13}. Through the Planning (Wales) Act 2015, a three-tier, plan-led framework — Future Wales, Strategic Development Plans and Local Development Plans — was designed to integrate climate action, biodiversity, housing, infrastructure and economic development at place scale¹³. Planning Policy Wales (Edition 12)²⁰ further strengthens this through sustainable placemaking, biodiversity net benefit and Green Infrastructure Statements. Alongside planning, Area Statements²¹ and Public Services Boards (PSBs)²² were created to connect national priorities with local evidence, relationships and decision-making. Wales has also embedded the UN Sustainable Development Goals in domestic legislation²³ reinforcing the expectation that social, environmental and economic goals should be pursued together.



However, multiple reviews indicate that this architecture is not yet being used consistently in practice^{24,25,26}. SoNaRR 2025 notes that Area Statements have not been fully embedded in planning and investment processes¹⁶:

‘In our evidence, there is limited demonstration of the effective use of Area Statements to address environmental, social, cultural and economic challenges. This is likely due to **lack of systematic implementation approaches** and no accepted methodology for evaluating place-based activities. This area of future opportunity may also include addressing the limitation and challenge of cost-benefit ratios which typically drive local decision making.’

(Natural Resources Wales, 2025, p.545)

Enthusiasm for place-based working, but recognition of a pronounced implementation gap was also reflected in a survey undertaken as part of the work underpinning this report. We gathered views from 49 respondents drawn mainly from national government or public bodies (51%), NGOs or charities (20%), and local government (14%), reflecting the views of organisations already active in formal policy, planning, and delivery settings. Within this group, 67.3% had been involved in Public Services Boards and 65.3% in Area Statements, while 68.8% of respondents to the recency question said they were currently involved in place-based initiatives. Area Statements were ranked as the most relevant place-based approach on average, narrowly ahead of Public Services Boards, and 67% of respondents said their work reflected all key ways of working and SMNR principles, with collaboration the most widely reported principle at 96%.

Among respondents with knowledge of Area Statements, 82% regarded them as relevant to their work, 56% said they provided useful information for planning or decision-making, and 62% believed they addressed the main environmental priorities in their area, yet only 36% found them clearly communicated and only 13% thought they led to real action on the ground. Respondents also identified the main conditions for stronger participation as dedicated funding or resources (75.5%), stronger leadership or policy support (73.5%), and evidence that engagement will influence decisions (63.3%). The findings further suggest an imbalance between relevance and power: local community groups were rated highly relevant by 59% of respondents but highly influential by only 12%, whereas national public bodies such as NRW were rated highly influential by 27% and highly relevant by 29%.

Alongside the legislative frameworks reported above, Natural Resources Wales also holds statutory powers to implement experimental schemes under Section 23 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016²⁷. These enable locally designed regulatory innovation, yet they have not been systematically aligned with Area Statements or PSB-led delivery. Addressing the aspiration-implementation gap therefore requires supporting and enhancing existing institutional efforts, not adding on new layers of legislative authority, setting new administrative boundaries, or adopting different governance frameworks such as catchment-based approaches.

Food production and farming illustrate this coordination challenge particularly clearly. Despite Future Wales¹⁹ including rural land-use policies, planning and agricultural policy remain only partially aligned². The Well-being Commissioner has called for²:

‘an integrated land and marine use framework that balances commitments to restore nature, support food production, improve climate resilience and deliver new housing and infrastructure.’

(Future Generations Report 2025, p.45)



The statutory tools exist. The task is to use them coherently at the level of place. The central question therefore becomes: **how can national policy better enable planning, Area Statements and PSBs to function as strategic drivers — empowering local actors to respond to climate, food and economic pressures as they are experienced in place, rather than reinforcing fragmented, sector-by-sector delivery?**

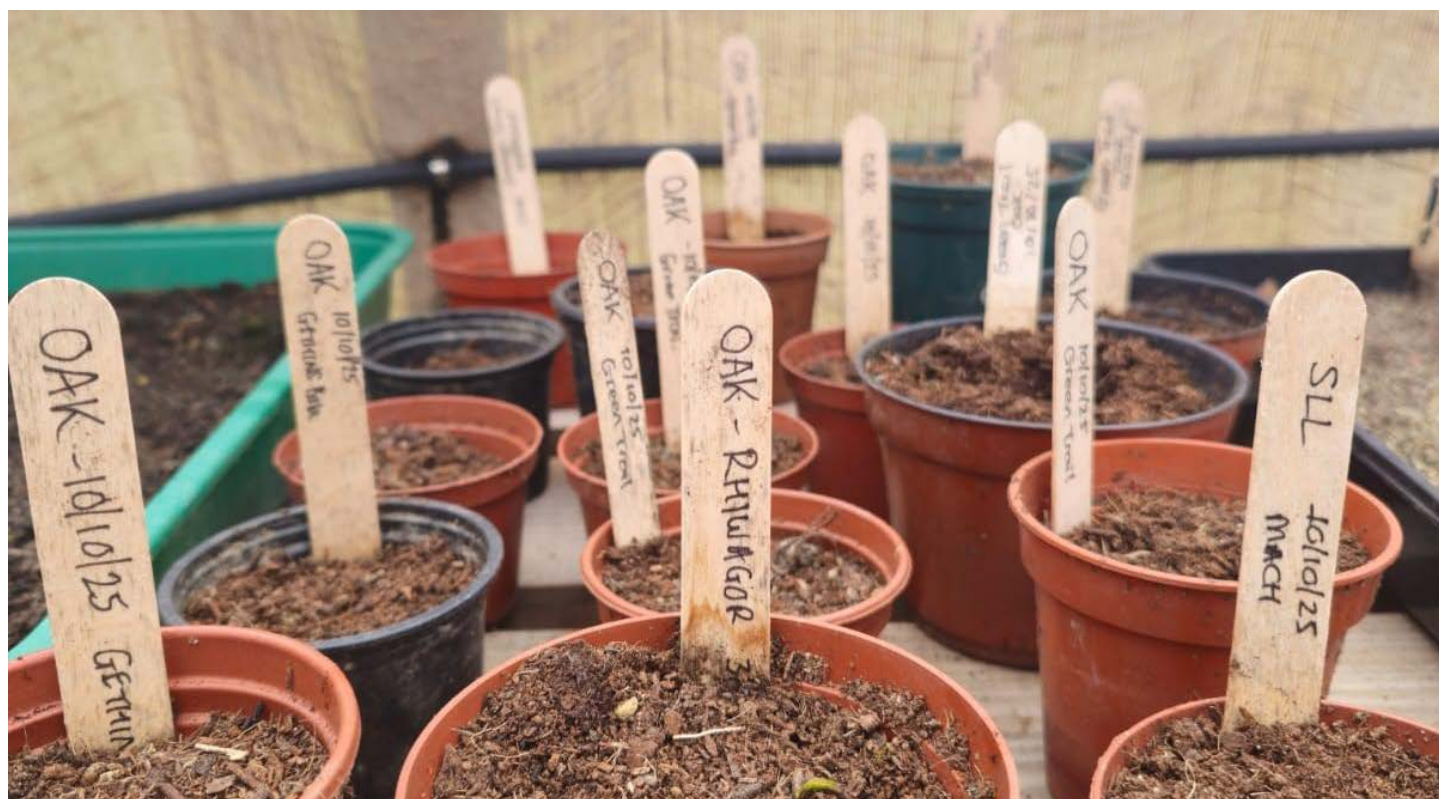


Wales' national Well-being goals, putting the UN Sustainable Development Goals into law.

(source: <https://www.gov.wales/well-being-of-future-generations-wales>).

5. Transformative change and the limits of sectoral policy

Transformative change involves deep shifts in the values, cultures, institutions, and power relations that shape how society organises the economy, manages the environment, and distributes resources²⁸. Rather than relying solely on incremental policy adjustment, it addresses the underlying drivers of environmental degradation and inequality — including unsustainable consumption, concentration of wealth and decision-making power, and entrenched patterns of exclusion. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) Transformative Change Assessment (2024) emphasises that such change requires systemic shifts in governance and incentives, alongside incremental reforms that cumulatively open pathways towards more just and sustainable futures^{30, 31, 32}.



This integration challenge is particularly visible in food and farming (Box 1). Agricultural decisions shape biodiversity, soil health, water quality, climate emissions, rural livelihoods, and local economies simultaneously. **With over 90% of Wales' land used for farming – and a further 15% covered by forestry¹⁶ – land management is central to achieving national sustainability objectives.**

Landscape- and catchment-scale governance provides a coordinating approach for navigating these interdependencies. By bringing farmers, land managers, public bodies, and communities together within 'place', food production, habitat recovery, water regulation, and rural resilience can be managed as interconnected functions rather than isolated interventions⁴³. This reframes farming as critical infrastructure for well-being economy². Healthy soils, functioning catchments, and viable farm businesses generate long-term public value – including flood regulation, carbon storage, nature recovery, and food security. Supporting collaborative, landscape-scale partnerships is therefore essential (see Box 1), alongside investing time and resources to enable farmers to co-design policy options and build trust⁴⁴.

Place-based integration is equally important in urban and peri-urban settings (Box 4)^{5,45,6,7}. In towns and cities, nature-based and environmental systems function as vital civic infrastructure: rivers shape flood risk and housing; green space influences health; transport affects air quality, access to work, and emissions^{1,46}. Urban governance therefore faces similar coordination challenges to rural land management – aligning housing, transport, water, biodiversity, and local economic development within shared places. Catchment-scale collaboration in highly urbanised contexts, such as the River Taff (see Box 9, Case Study 5), demonstrates how nature recovery, public accountability, and community participation can be integrated within a city-region. Across rural and urban Wales alike, integration becomes possible when governance is organised around place rather than sector.

Place also shapes economic governance. Decisions about procurement, asset ownership, regeneration, and infrastructure influence both environmental outcomes and social resilience⁴⁷. Community Wealth Building (CWB) shows how retaining economic value locally can reinforce environmental and social objectives (see Boxes 3 and 5). By devolving investment decisions, reforming procurement, and strengthening local enterprises, CWB aligns economic flows with place-based priorities^{36,47}.

Across these contexts, one of the core challenges is aligning social foundations (health, housing, livelihoods, equity) with ecological resilience (climate, biodiversity, land, water). Doughnut Economics⁴⁸ offers one way of framing this, defining a 'safe and just space' between social need and environmental ceilings (see Box 2). It complements the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act and has already been referenced within SoNaRR's *Bridges to the Future* chapter³³, offering a shared lens for integrating economic, social, and environmental governance in diverse places.



Box 1. Farmer-led approaches to nature recovery and rural resilience

Farmer-led approaches place land managers at the centre of governance, design and delivery of landscape-scale environmental action. Rather than treating farmers as passive recipients of regulation, these models position them as co-designers of integrated solutions linking food production, biodiversity, water management and rural livelihoods with farm business realities^{43,49}.

Evidence from across the UK and Ireland demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach:

- The West Lakeland Farmer-Led Nature Recovery CIC in England coordinates collective planning across 25,000 acres rooted in common grazing traditions and long-term landscape management⁵⁰.
- The Hen Harrier Project EIP in Ireland (2017–2023), a €23.6 million results-based scheme, engaged 1,600 farmers across 46,000 hectares and paid over €20 million directly for measurable habitat outcomes³⁹.
- In Wales, Tir Canol brings together a landscape-scale, co-produced land–sea partnership across the Dyfi and Rheidol catchments⁵¹.

Across these cases, three consistent features emerge: governance is locally legitimate and farmer-led; incentives reward ecological results rather than prescribed actions; and coordination occurs at landscape or catchment scale. The central lesson is that farmer-led governance can strengthen ecological outcomes, participation and long-term trust — particularly when supported by landscape-scale coordination and stable institutional backing.



Box 2. Doughnut Economics and place-based policy in Wales

Doughnut Economics, developed by Kate Raworth, offers a framework for meeting human needs while respecting environmental limits⁴⁸. It defines a “safe and just space” for humanity: above a social foundation (including health, housing, livelihoods and equity) and below an ecological ceiling (including climate, biodiversity, land, water and pollution). Rather than prioritising economic growth alone, it focuses on enabling societies to thrive within these boundaries, providing a practical way to connect social justice and environmental sustainability.

This framing aligns closely with Wales’ legislative architecture. The Well-being of Future Generations Act establishes social goals, while the Environment (Wales) Act defines ecological limits. Doughnut thinking provides an organising lens for bringing these commitments together at the level of place — through Area Statements, Public Services Boards and community-led initiatives — in ways that are flexible and locally adaptable rather than imposed as a single model.

In practice, this could mean:

- using local data, lived experience and community knowledge to define priorities;
- embedding Doughnut principles within Area Statements, Well-being Plans and local development strategies;
- shifting from narrow growth metrics towards measures of well-being, resilience and ecological recovery; and,
- enabling experimentation and adaptive learning through long-term institutional support.

Doughnut Economics does not require new structures, but offers a shared framework to align existing place-based practice with Wales’ statutory goals for social justice and environmental sustainability.



Box 3. Community Wealth Building in Scotland

Community Wealth Building (CWB) is a place-based economic strategy that seeks to embed well-being-oriented reform by devolving power and investment, retaining wealth locally, and strengthening democratic participation^{52,53,54}. Rather than treating economic development as externally driven growth, it focuses on building resilient local economies through anchor institutions, procurement reform, community ownership and long-term local investment.

Evidence from Scotland shows that CWB is most effective when it builds on existing community-led capacity rather than imposing new top-down structures. Across the country, trusted local organisations are already restoring services, regenerating land, and developing energy, food and cultural economies. These networks form a durable ecosystem of locally rooted institutions capable of delivering inclusive, place-based development. The lesson is that government's role is investment and alignment, not reinvention.

Successful CWB approaches:

- treat community organisations as partners rather than consultees;
- devolve decision-making and funding to the local level;
- provide long-term, flexible resources rather than short-term grants;
- and align procurement, land use, transport, health, climate and economic development policy around shared place-based objectives^{52,53,54}.

For Wales and England, the Scottish experience highlights both opportunity and risk. Place-based reform can unlock meaningful economic and social transformation, but only if it strengthens existing local capacity and democratic leadership. Wales is well positioned in this respect, with a strong civil society and a tradition of community-led innovation⁵⁵. The policy implication is clear: transformative place-based reform depends on retaining wealth locally, aligning institutions around community priorities, and enabling local actors to lead long-term economic change.



Box 4. Urban place-based governance

Urban environmental research shows that delivering nature recovery, climate resilience, food security and social justice in towns and cities depends on coordination — not isolated projects. Urban nature is fragmented across parks, brownfield sites, railway verges, gardens, allotments, rooftops and river corridors^{6,46,7}. Unlike large rural estates, no single actor governs these landscapes. Ecological connectivity and community benefit emerge through many small, coordinated adjustments across public, private and community-owned land⁴⁵.

Effective urban delivery therefore requires governance that can:

- Coordinate planning, transport, housing, public health and environmental policy.
- Align local authorities, developers, NGOs, community groups and residents.
- Enable incremental, adaptive improvements across multiple small sites.
- Sustain informal stewardship networks and long-term relationships.

In dense urban and peri-urban areas, well-being outcomes are often achieved through networks of micro-interventions — greening schoolyards, restoring brownfield habitats, improving river corridors, installing green roofs, and enhancing active travel routes⁴⁶. These rely on shared local evidence, participatory mapping and institutions capable of aligning fragmented ownership around common goals.

Urban and rural systems are interconnected through catchments, food supply chains, water infrastructure and biodiversity networks. The River Taff catchment partnership (see Box 9, Case Study 5) demonstrates how collaboration across Cardiff and surrounding Valleys communities can integrate food resilience, public health, biodiversity and civic infrastructure within a single place-based framework.

In cities, collaboration is particularly important and necessary. Strong, inclusive and adaptable place-based governance⁷ provides the institutional infrastructure needed to coordinate fragmented land uses, align sectors, and deliver integrated environmental and social outcomes in towns and cities across Wales.

Prosperous

An innovative, productive and low carbon society which recognises the limits of the global environment and therefore uses resources efficiently and proportionately (including acting on climate change); and which develops a skilled and well-educated population in an economy which generates wealth and provides employment opportunities, allowing people to take advantage of the wealth generated through securing fair work.

Resilient

A nation which maintains and enhances a biodiverse natural environment with healthy functioning ecosystems that support social, economic and ecological resilience and the capacity to adapt to change (for example climate change).



**LLESANT
CENEDLAETHAU'R DYFODOL
WELL-BEING OF
FUTURE GENERATIONS**

Healthier

A society in which people's physical and mental well-being is maximised and in which choices and behaviours that benefit future health are understood.

More Equal

A society that enables people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstances (including their socio economic background and circumstances).

Globally Responsible

A nation which, when doing anything to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales, takes account of whether doing such a thing may make a positive contribution to global well-being.

Vibrant Culture and Thriving Welsh Language

A society that promotes and protects culture, heritage and the Welsh language, and which encourages people to participate in the arts, and sports and recreation.

Cohesive Communities

Attractive, viable, safe and well-connected communities.

7. Rethinking place-based governance

Place-based approaches are widely used across policy because they draw on local knowledge, integrate social and ecological objectives, and align action around shared outcomes^{4,5,56,57}. However, in practice, ‘place’ is often treated as a fixed, bounded administrative unit rather than as a complex web of relationships between land, institutions, livelihoods, and communities⁵⁸.

Changing boundaries along – for example, shifting from local authority areas to catchments – will likely not improve outcomes if governance continues to operate through static territorial logics without recognition of broader institutional systems that span multiple sectors and sustainability challenges^{24,38}. Empirical research on the implementation of the Well-being of Future Generations Act demonstrates that while the legislation embodies a spatial justice logic in theory, its transformative potential depends on alignment, resources, and guidance across scales and institutions²⁴. Governance must therefore move beyond boundary adjustment to actively support, connect, and grow the relational and experimental practices already emerging across Wales – from neighbourhood initiatives to landscape-scale collaboration.

Wales already has statutory mechanisms intended to operate relationally – particularly Area Statements and Public Services Boards (PSBs). Their potential lies in functioning as platforms for joint-agenda setting, shared evidence, and coordinated investment. At present, however, these mechanisms operate in parallel to planning, funding, and regulatory systems rather than shaping them (see section 4). Area Statements can become descriptive evidence documents rather than strategic drivers of action; PSBs can function as coordination forums rather than active stewards of place. Strengthening place-based governance therefore depends less on creating new institutions and more on embedding existing ones within decision-making processes – linking Area Statements to planning, investment and land-use decisions, and enabling PSBs to align partners around shared, place-specific priorities.

Research shows that institutional transformation often depends on boundary-spanning individuals who translate between financial, ecological, and community priorities^{32,39}. Investing in relational and facilitative capacity – not just technical expertise – is therefore central to place-based governance.

Across Wales and beyond, examples already exist where collaborative, place-based working delivers integrated outcomes (see Boxes 5-8). What distinguishes these examples is not new legislation or formal strategies, but the combination of:

- Sharing evidence, values, and learning
- Integrating local and technical knowledge
- Building long-term, trusting relationships
- Clear accountability and transparency
- Flexibility to adapt over time
- A commitment to socio-ecological justice
- Embracing experimentation, open-endedness, and complexity

The case studies that follow illustrate how these principles operate in practice — in landscapes, towns, catchments and communities — and how place-based partnerships translate national ambition into locally grounded action.



8. Case studies

The following case studies show how investing in natural systems, shared evidence and community capability can reduce risk, prevent future costs and translate national well-being goals into practical action on the ground.

Box 5. Case study 1: Lake Vyrnwy – integrated land, water, farming and community stewardship

Context: Established in 1891 to supply drinking water to Liverpool, Lake Vyrnwy is a 5,000-hectare working upland landscape in mid-Wales⁵⁹. Today it balances critical national water infrastructure with farming livelihoods, nature recovery and local economic activity.

The approach: Working in partnership with landowner Hafren Dyfrdwy, the RSPB manages around half of the estate⁵⁹. The reservoir, moorland, woodland, farmland and villages are treated as a single socio-ecological system.

Management focuses on restoring and connecting habitats, including one of the largest areas of blanket bog in Wales, upland oak woodlands, new woodland creation and species-rich hay meadows⁶⁰. Food production remains central: the estate hosts the largest organic farm in England and Wales, combining conservation grazing with productive agriculture⁶¹. This supports species such as Red Grouse, Skylark and Wheatear while maintaining farm viability⁶².

Community and economy: Lake Vyrnwy is a lived-in landscape. Tourism, employment and volunteering contribute to the local economy, while land management safeguards water quality and long-term ecosystem health⁴².

The Vibrant Vyrnwy programme, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, links environmental stewardship with social well-being⁶². It tackles rural isolation, builds skills and supports young farmers through training in nature-friendly farming. Initiatives such as the Lake Vyrnwy Tree Nursery connect restoration with education and community empowerment⁵⁹.

Policy lesson: Lake Vyrnwy demonstrates how integrated, place-based stewardship can deliver water security, food production, biodiversity recovery and community well-being together⁵⁹. Land and water function as shared infrastructure for a resilient rural economy — moving beyond sector-by-sector approaches towards long-term, collaborative governance.



Box 6. Case study 2: Cwmni Bro Ffestiniog - Community wealth-building in a remote, post-industrial Welsh town

Context: Blaenau Ffestiniog, once the slate capital of north Wales, saw its population fall from around 13,000 to 5,500 following industrial decline⁶³. Today it remains one of the lowest-wage areas in the UK⁶⁴. Rather than waiting for external investment, local organisations built a networked, community-owned economy⁶⁴.

The approach: Cwmni Bro Ffestiniog brings together 12 social enterprises across Blaenau and surrounding villages (c.8,000 people)⁶³. Members include Antur Stiniog, Dref Werdd, CellB and Pengwern Cymunedol. Together they span tourism, care, culture, energy efficiency, youth work and hospitality.

Impact:

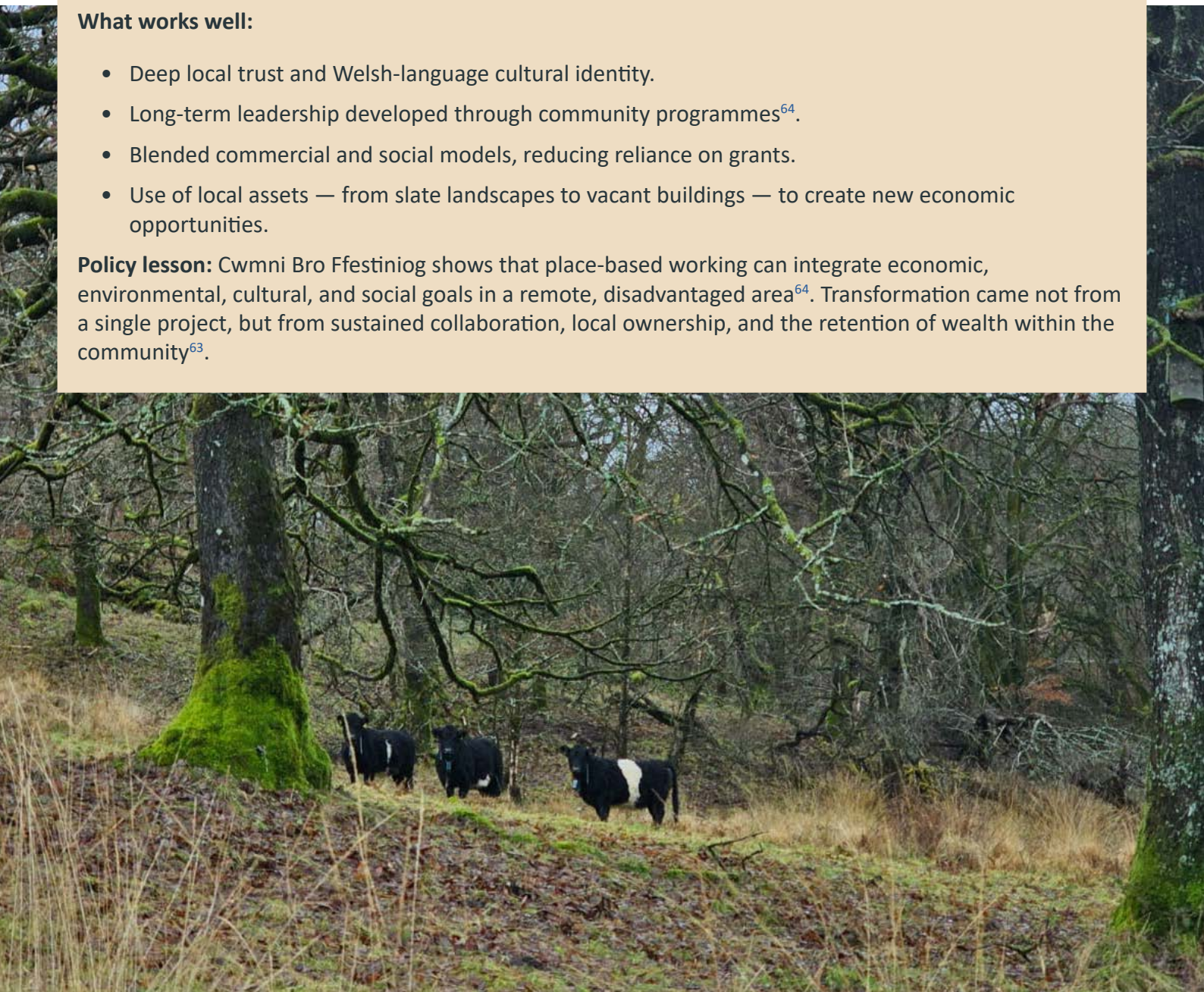
- Around 150 local jobs created⁶³.
- For every £1 received in grants or loans, **98p is spent locally**, mainly on wages⁶³.
- Of £1.5m in wages, **53% remains in the immediate area**⁶³.

This generates a strong local multiplier effect, with revenue reinvested rather than extracted.

What works well:

- Deep local trust and Welsh-language cultural identity.
- Long-term leadership developed through community programmes⁶⁴.
- Blended commercial and social models, reducing reliance on grants.
- Use of local assets — from slate landscapes to vacant buildings — to create new economic opportunities.

Policy lesson: Cwmni Bro Ffestiniog shows that place-based working can integrate economic, environmental, cultural, and social goals in a remote, disadvantaged area⁶⁴. Transformation came not from a single project, but from sustained collaboration, local ownership, and the retention of wealth within the community⁶³.



Box 7. Case study 3: The Living Levels Project, Gwent Levels – Landscape level management for Welsh culture and nature

Context: The Living Levels programme treats the Gwent Levels as a living cultural and ecological landscape shaped by historic community management^{65,66}. It brings together nature restoration, biodiversity protection and carbon storage with sustainable farming, flood risk management and public access within a single place-based framework^{66,67}.

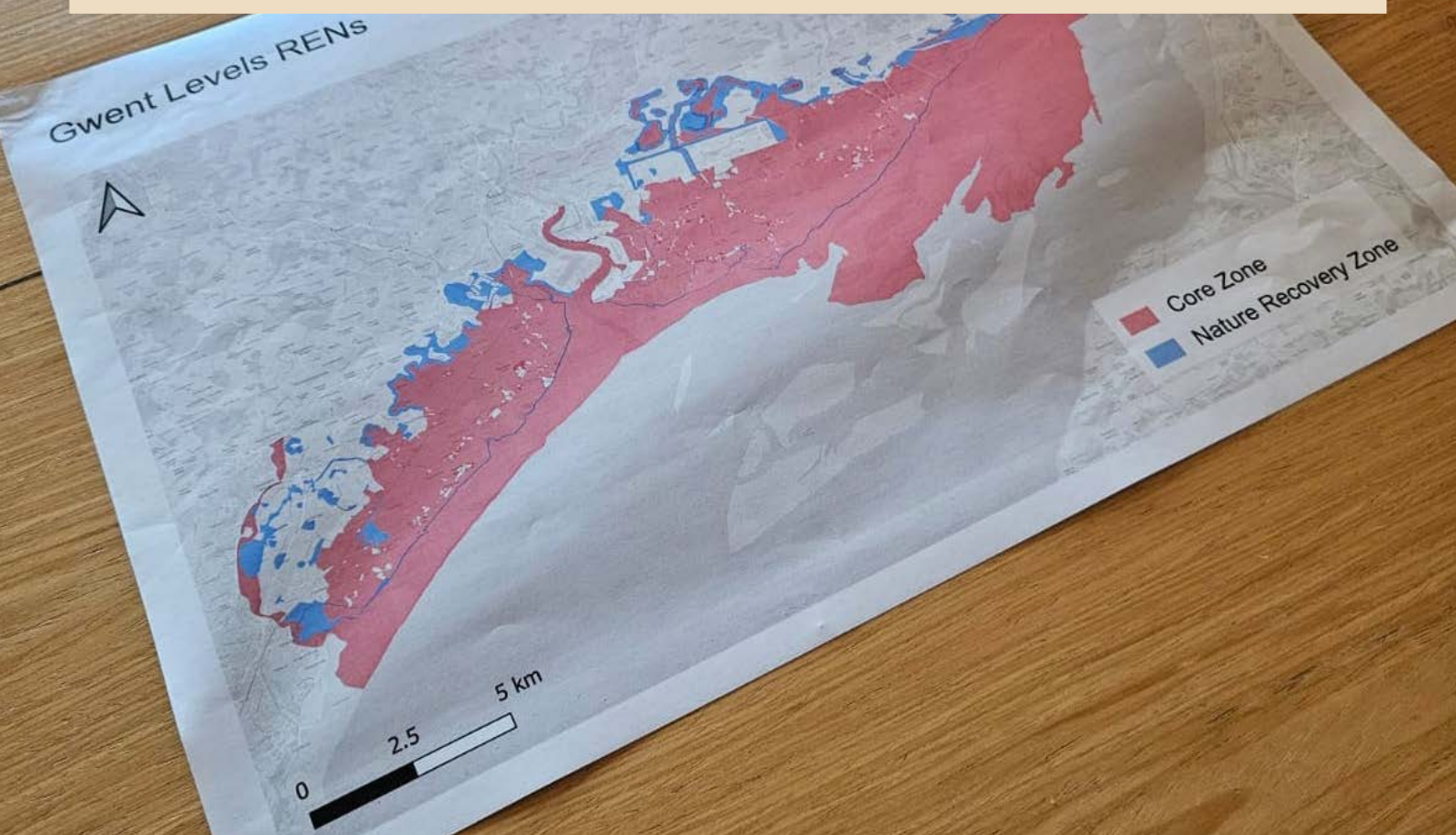
The approach: Over the programme's lifetime, 26 km of reens and field ditches were restored in collaboration with Natural Resources Wales, improving water flow and quality and supporting rare aquatic plant communities⁶⁸. More active, locally tailored ditch management showed that shorter cycles (7–10 years rather than 20–30) can significantly enhance biodiversity while maintaining drainage and flood resilience.

This is vital in a landscape where 14,014 homes are at risk from tidal flooding and 12,539 from river flooding^{69,70}.

Community and access: Environmental improvements were matched by social benefits: 8 new walking routes, 4 cycling routes, upgrades to public rights of way, support for 17 community hubs, 239 events attended by over 16,000 people, and 52 oral histories documenting local connections to place⁶⁷.

The programme also functioned as a learning partnership, embedding NRW staff in delivery to integrate regulatory and ecological expertise with on-the-ground practice. Community engagement surfaced governance challenges such as fly-tipping, leading to over 30 investigations, 10 prosecutions and targeted surveillance⁶⁷.

Policy lesson: The Living Levels demonstrates how managing land, water and communities as a connected system can deliver climate resilience, ecological recovery and social well-being together. Its planned transition beyond initial grant funding — including a legacy phase and a Gwent Levels working group — shows how time-limited programmes can evolve into longer-term place-based governance⁶⁶.



Box 8. Case study 4: Cwmsefin Farm, Penpont Estate – intergenerational place-based farming

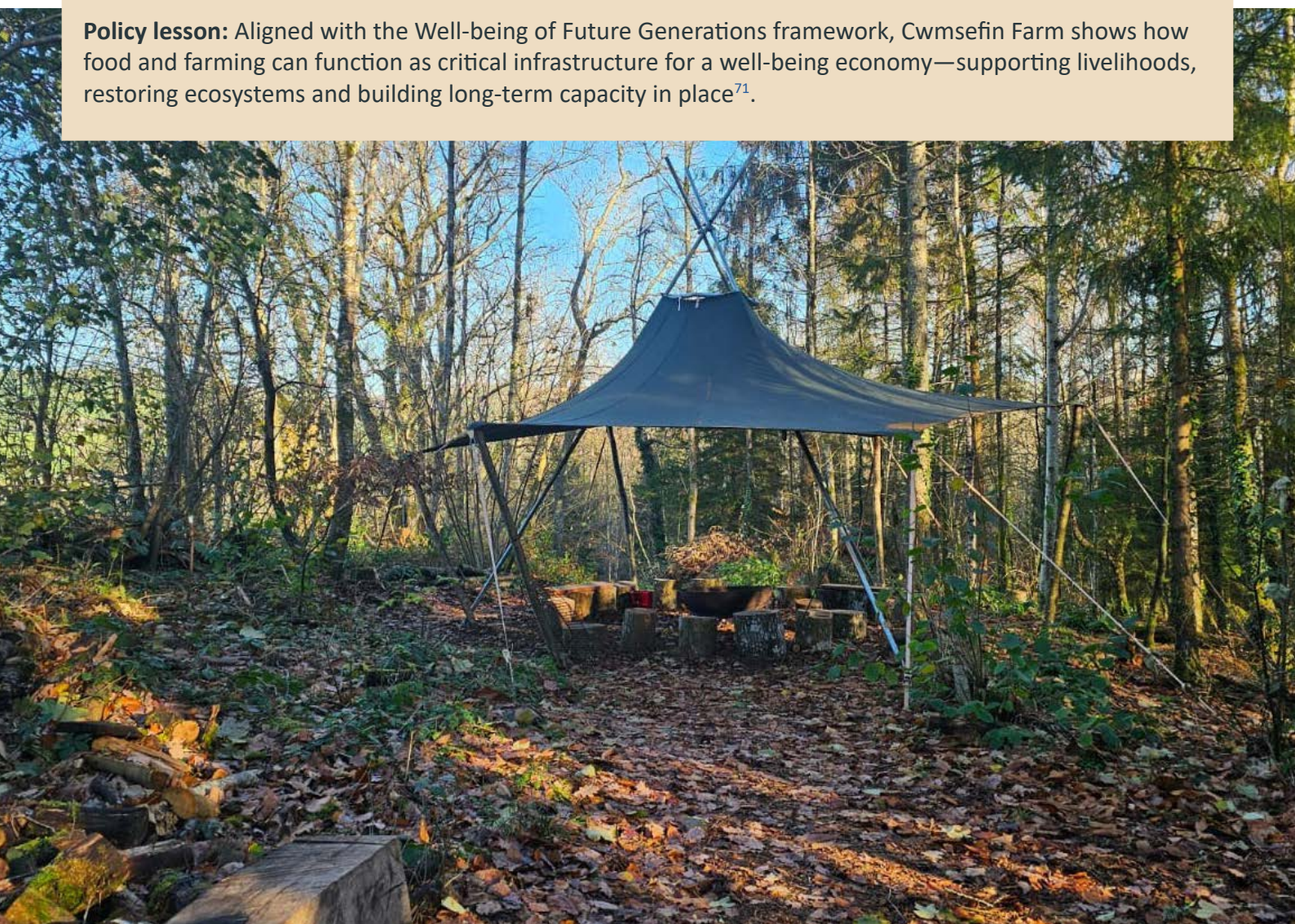
Context: Cwmsefin Farm is a 110-acre holding on the Penpont Estate in mid-Wales⁷¹. Developed in partnership with Action for Conservation, it operates as a living laboratory for farming with natural processes—aligning food production, soil regeneration and biodiversity recovery within a single place-based approach⁷¹.

The approach: Management is evidence-led and adaptive, informed by baseline surveys of soils, plants and wildlife⁷¹. Rare and hardy breeds—Longhorn and Welsh Black cattle, and Shropshire sheep—are used as ‘ecosystem engineers’, regenerating soils, managing vegetation and supporting biodiversity while sustaining viable meat production <https://www.penpont.com/farmshop>^{71,72}. This demonstrates how livestock systems, tailored to local ecological conditions, can enhance productivity, ecosystem function and climate resilience simultaneously⁷¹.

Restoration and participation: Cwmsefin is also a hub for landscape restoration and community engagement. Thousands of trees have been planted with schools and volunteers; hay meadows are being restored; and orchard systems are planned to integrate habitat creation with food production. Farm buildings are being restored to secure long-term viability within the wider estate.

Governance and learning: A distinctive feature is its intergenerational governance model. The Penpont Project brings together young people, farmers, ecologists and community members to co-design a nature recovery plan^{71, 73, 74}. Young activists work alongside practitioners, gaining skills and contributing directly to decision-making^{73, 74}.

Policy lesson: Aligned with the Well-being of Future Generations framework, Cwmsefin Farm shows how food and farming can function as critical infrastructure for a well-being economy—supporting livelihoods, restoring ecosystems and building long-term capacity in place⁷¹.



Box 9. Case study 5: The River Taff – catchment-scale collaboration

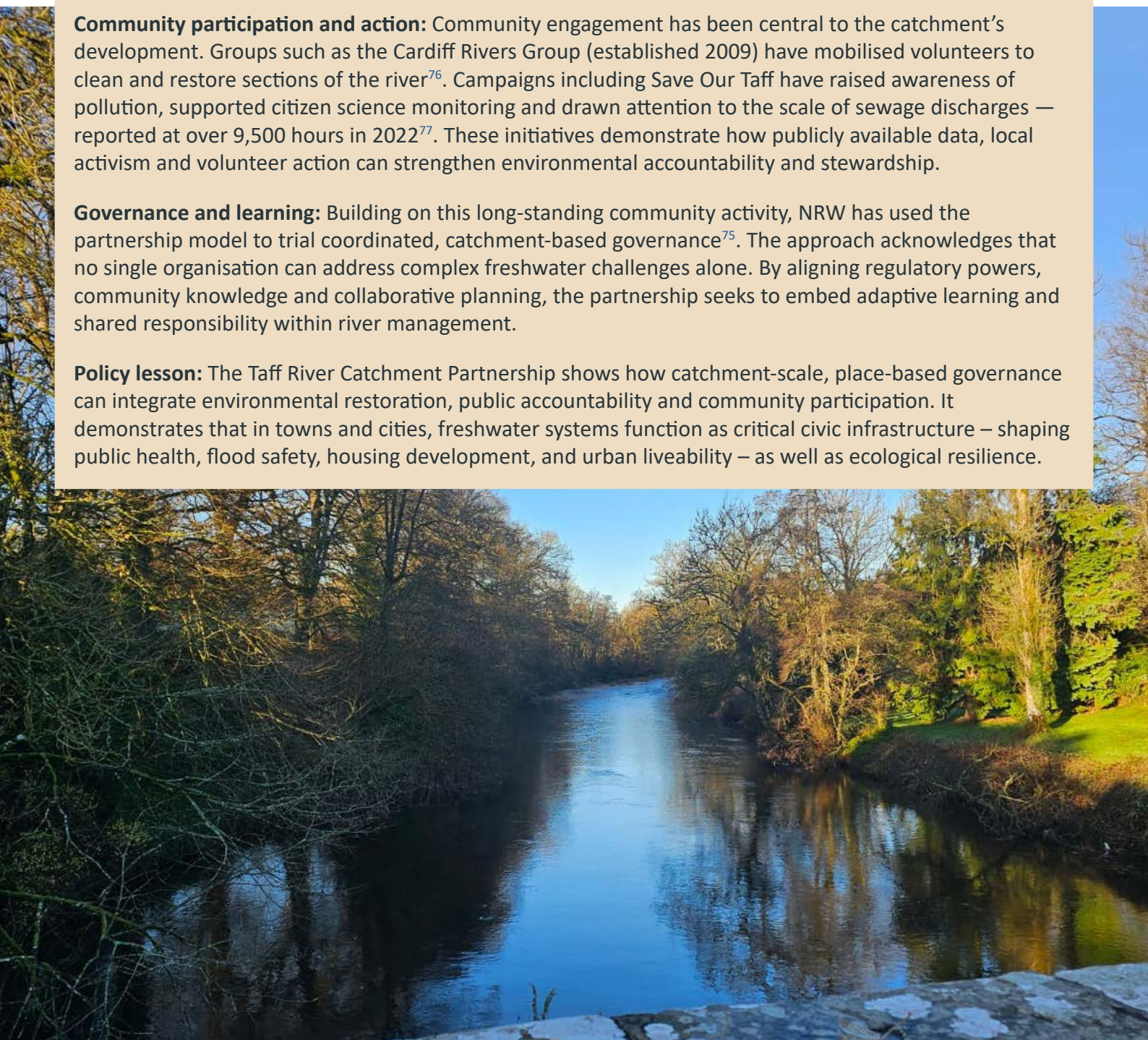
Context: The Taff River Catchment Partnership, facilitated by Natural Resources Wales' South Central Place Team, brings together public bodies, third-sector organisations, and community groups to manage the River Taff as a connected socio-ecological system rather than a single environmental asset⁷⁵. The catchment runs through Wales' capital city and surrounding peri-urban Valleys communities, making it one of the country's most densely populated and infrastructure-intensive river systems. It shapes the well-being of communities across Cardiff and the South Wales Valleys, while while facing significant pressures from pollution, flood risk, and urban development^{75,76}.

The approach: The partnership adopts a place-based, integrated catchment approach suited to a highly urbanised river corridor. It recognises that water quality, biodiversity, flood resilience, and community well-being are interconnected and cannot be addressed through isolated interventions^{75,77}. Rather than relying on a single authority, it coordinates action across regulators, local authorities, voluntary organisations and residents^{75,76}. This approach enables nature-based solutions, improved river management and joint planning at catchment scale.

Community participation and action: Community engagement has been central to the catchment's development. Groups such as the Cardiff Rivers Group (established 2009) have mobilised volunteers to clean and restore sections of the river⁷⁶. Campaigns including Save Our Taff have raised awareness of pollution, supported citizen science monitoring and drawn attention to the scale of sewage discharges — reported at over 9,500 hours in 2022⁷⁷. These initiatives demonstrate how publicly available data, local activism and volunteer action can strengthen environmental accountability and stewardship.

Governance and learning: Building on this long-standing community activity, NRW has used the partnership model to trial coordinated, catchment-based governance⁷⁵. The approach acknowledges that no single organisation can address complex freshwater challenges alone. By aligning regulatory powers, community knowledge and collaborative planning, the partnership seeks to embed adaptive learning and shared responsibility within river management.

Policy lesson: The Taff River Catchment Partnership shows how catchment-scale, place-based governance can integrate environmental restoration, public accountability and community participation. It demonstrates that in towns and cities, freshwater systems function as critical civic infrastructure — shaping public health, flood safety, housing development, and urban liveability — as well as ecological resilience.



Box 10. Case study 6: Ynys Môn: Public Map Platform – community-led evidence for planning

Context: The Public Map Platform (PMP) is a collaborative initiative developing inclusive, community-centred mapping tools to inform planning and local decision-making on the Isle of Anglesey (Ynys Môn)⁷⁸. Anglesey was selected as a rural pilot area with ambitions under the Well-being of Future Generations Act, including objectives related to children, poverty reduction and net-zero carbon⁷⁸.

Co-produced spatial evidence: Rather than relying solely on conventional datasets, PMP co-produces layered spatial evidence with local people—particularly children and young people—through workshops, school activities, citizen science and cultural mapping with artists and bards⁷⁹. The resulting open digital map integrates social, cultural, economic and environmental insights with administrative data, revealing lived experiences, values and inequalities often overlooked in traditional planning⁷⁸.

Participation and governance: Public Map demonstrates how community-generated spatial evidence can strengthen participation, fairness and environmental stewardship in everyday decision-making. Its unique potential lies in its functioning not only as a visual tool but as a practical evidence base to inform decisions, monitor progress against well-being outcomes and support more transparent, equitable governance rooted in what matters to people where they live⁷⁸.



9. The role of private finance in place-based approaches

Debates about private finance are increasingly central to place-based delivery², particularly as governments seek additional capital for long-term climate, nature, and well-being goals. Evidence shows, however, that private finance contributes positively only where strong public leadership sets clear rules, standards, and long-term objectives^{47,80}. Poorly designed public-private models can entrench short-term value extraction, weaken accountability, and undermine community outcomes^{36,47}. The Future Generations Report (2025) reinforces the need to shift from short-termism towards prevention and long-term public value². Private finance therefore cannot substitute for public action; it must operate within a clearly defined public-interest framework.

Crucially, place-based investment must strengthen community leadership and local wealth retention. As illustrated by Box 6 (Cwmni Bro Ffestiniog) and Box 2 on Community Wealth Building, durable outcomes arise when local organisations are partners in governance, value is retained locally, and investment builds on existing community capacity rather than displacing it.

For place-based approaches, the priority is not simply mobilising capital, but embedding long-term investment horizons, robust public standards, and clear accountability within public-private-community partnerships³⁶. Investment frameworks should align with Area Statements and local well-being plans, support community-owned and cooperative models, and ensure fair benefit-sharing. The key message is that finance must be deliberately directed towards publicly defined well-being and community wealth-building objectives, not treated as a neutral delivery mechanism detached from place.

10. Appraisal, evaluation, and learning: enabling better place-based decisions

Delivering a well-being economy through place-based working requires reforming how public investment is appraised and evaluated. Current systems often fail to capture the long-term, cross-sector, and preventative value of integrated interventions^{2,26,81,82} – particularly in areas such as food and farming, where soil health, water regulation, and ecosystem resilience underpin both productivity and public benefit⁸².

National reviews point in the same direction. The Green Book Review (2025) calls for greater use of place-based business cases, less reliance on headline Benefit-Cost Ratios (BCRs), improved transparency and stronger appraisal capability⁸¹. In Wales, Audit Wales (2025) and the Future Generations Report (2025) highlight persistent underinvestment in prevention and weak outcome measurement, calling for long-term, place-sensitive decision-making aligned with the Well-being of Future Generations Act^{2,25,26}.

Strengthening appraisal for place-based delivery therefore involves^{2,26}: piloting portfolio-style business cases that bundle related investments within defined places; building evaluation capacity within PSBs, planning authorities and Natural Resources Wales; publishing ex-ante and ex-post assessments to support transparency and learning; ring-fencing 1-3% of programme budgets for monitoring and adaptive learning in line with the Green Book guidance and the Well-being of Future Generations Act^{2,81}; and requiring PSBs to report annually on prevention and place-based outcomes.



Taken together, then, these reforms shift appraisal from narrow compliance towards learning-oriented governance, helping to close the gap between Wales' long-term legislative ambitions and short-term funding practices.

Investment in appraisal as suggested above would ultimately help Government utilize resources more efficiently, identifying and sharing successful approaches, and learning from where interventions didn't work as well. Integrated and consistent reporting mechanisms would also resolve ongoing challenges in demonstrating progress towards targets such as the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) targets and the well-being goals of the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

II. National policy suggestions

1. Explicitly support further experimentation and collective transformation for people, climate, and food

(Responds to all sections of this report, especially Section 5: Transformative change and the limits of sectoral policy)

Commit to enabling locally led innovation and collaborative governance as core tools for achieving national well-being and environmental goals.

This could include:

- Explicitly recognising that place-based experimentation is already happening in various forms, particularly at the local and regional levels.
- Legitimising, resourcing, and connecting small-scale, locally driven experimentation across rural, urban, and peri-urban areas.
- Protecting and strengthening existing adaptive, relational, bottom-up governance processes rather than only imposing additional top-down structures.
- Creating protected institutional space for experimentation, learning, and adaptation within public and partnership bodies.
- Expanding the use of experimental powers to pilot collaborative land-use and natural resource governance models.
- Allowing funding, metrics, and delivery mechanisms to be flexibly applied in support of place-based outcomes, rather than rigid performance frameworks.
- Supporting cross-sector learning networks and alliance-building so locally grounded innovations can travel, and scale where appropriate.

2. Support and enhance Wales' existing statutory architecture for place-based delivery.

(Responds to Sections 3 and 7: Legislative foundations; rethinking place-based governance)

Commit to fully operationalising Wales' existing legal and institutional framework as the foundation for integrated, place-based action.



This could include:

- Refreshing Area Statements as live, delivery-focused and experimental frameworks rather than static evidence documents.
- Systematically deploying NRW's Section 23 experimental scheme powers to pilot locally designed regulatory and land-use innovation.
- Investing in PSB leadership, analytical capacity, and coordination capability so they function as active place stewards rather than advisory forums.
- Clarifying, where appropriate, that PSBs must use Area Statements as the strategic foundation for well-being plans, investment, and partnership decisions.

3. Embed integrated land-use, biodiversity, and food system governance

(Responds to Section 6 and Box 3: Why place matters for farming; Farmer-led approaches)

Commit to aligning land use, biodiversity recovery, food systems, and development across rural, peri-urban, and urban areas – coordinating at landscape, catchment, and city-region to deliver long-term public value.

This could include:

- Aligning the Sustainable Farming Scheme, planning policy, and Area Statements at landscape and catchment scale.
- Supporting farmer-led, results-based, and landscape-scale models, building on evidence from existing examples of lessons learned across the UK.
- Treating farming and farmers as critical for shaping a well-being economy, rewarding soil health, water regulation, biodiversity, and rural resilience.
- Using experimental scheme powers to pilot locally co-designed, outcome-based delivery models.

4. Make community wealth building a core economic strategy

(Responds to Box 6: Case Study 2 and Box 2: Community wealth building)

Commit to embedding community wealth building at the heart of economic development and place-based reform.

This could include:

- Legislating for a Welsh Community Wealth Building framework across regional economic development and planning.
- Providing long-term, flexible funding to support place-based partnerships.
- Reforming procurement and asset transfer to prioritise local and social enterprises.
- Aligning land use, regeneration, climate and transport policy around local wealth retention.



5. Mobilise private finance through public–private–community partnerships

(Responds to the section on Private Finance and Box 6: Case Study 2)

Commit to mobilising private investment in ways that strengthen public good and community benefit.

This could include:

- Embedding community leadership and fair benefit sharing within nature, climate, and planning investment governance.
- Aligning investment frameworks with Area Statements and well-being plans.
- Supporting blended finance and community-owned models that keep value rooted in place.
- Setting clear public standards and long-term investment horizons to prevent short-term extraction.

6. Reform appraisal, evaluation and learning to enable long-term place-based value

(Responds to Section on Appraisal, Audit Wales, Green Book Review 2025)

Commit to reshaping appraisal and evaluation so they reflect prevention, integration, and long-term public value.

This includes:

- Piloting place-based portfolio business cases, bundling housing, transport, farming, flood risk and nature-based solutions.
- Reducing reliance on headline BCRs in line with the Green Book Review (2025).
- Ring-fencing 1–3% of programme budgets for monitoring, evaluation and adaptive learning.
- Publishing ex-ante and ex-post evaluations to strengthen transparency and institutional learning.
- Requiring PSBs to report annually on prevention and place-based outcomes.



12. UK-wide and international relevance

Although rooted in the Welsh context, these lessons are widely applicable. Governments across the UK and internationally face similar challenges in translating ambitious policy goals into meaningful local delivery^{83,84,85}. Wales demonstrates how integrated, place-based governance can deliver environmental, social and economic goals together, offering a transferable model for other nations seeking to connect national ambition with action on the ground.

This experience is particularly relevant in light of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) Transformative Change Assessment³⁰, which calls for systemic shifts in governance, power relations, incentives, and values to address the underlying drivers of biodiversity loss and social inequality. Wales provides a 'live' example of how such shifts can be operationalised within, and alongside, statutory systems. By translating high-level transformative ambitions into landscape-scale coordination, adaptive learning and locally rooted economic reform, the Welsh case offers an experimental, adaptive pathway through which the IPBES findings can travel beyond global diagnosis into national, local, and hyper-local practice.



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Photos

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Page 2: Dolwen Field, owned by the Llanwrtyd Town Council and managed by the Dolwen Field Volunteer Committee. The park has a range of facilities including a wildflower meadow, a food grow-and-share area, a playpark, outdoor games, events spaces, walking and cycling tracks. (Source: authors' own with permission)

Page 7: Community-led tree planting as part of the Vibrant Vyrnwy project.

Page 9: Dolwen Field, owned by the Llanwrtyd Town Council and managed by the Dolwen Field Volunteer Committee. The park has a range of facilities including a wildflower meadow, a food grow-and-share area, a playpark, outdoor games, events spaces, walking and cycling tracks. (Source: authors' own with permission)

Page 10: Paper maps co-created with children and young people in Anglesey. Part of the Public Map Platform (PMP) project. (Source: authors' own with permission)

Page 11: Part of the River Irfon Catchment project led by the Freshwater Habitats Trust in mid-Wales. The Trust are working with local communities and landowners to protect one of the best remaining freshwater landscapes in Britain. (Source: authors' own with permission)

Page 12: Wales' national wellbeing goals on the wall of the Public Map Platform team's office in Anglesey. The well-being goals can provide guiding ambitions to benefit people and nature, and can help individual community-led projects feel like they're contributing to broader goals in Wales. (Source: authors' own with permission)

Page 14: The Vibrant Vyrnwy project which supports both nature and people by developing volunteering, community, and upskilling opportunities for local people, visitors, and schoolchildren. Regular community events are held at this site including tree planting sessions, crafts, drum circles, women's groups, education classes, walks, talks, skill sharing, and citizen science. (Source: authors' own with permission)

Page 15: Cows roaming in trees, guided by electric collars, at the Wildlife Trust Wales Vicarage Meadows, mid-Wales. (Source: authors' own with permission)

Page 16: Gwent Levels Nature Recovery zone. (Source: authors' own with permission)

Page 17: Forest school education at Penpont Estate, where children from local areas and across the UK come to learn about nature, wellbeing, and the food system. (Source: authors' own with permission)

Page 18: The River Usk flows through the Penpont Estate, mid-Wales. The Penpont Project (Y Prosiect Penpont) is a flagship Intergenerational Nature Restoration Project restoring biodiversity, community, and climate resilience across the 2,000-acre estate. (Source: authors' own with permission)

Page 19: Arts-based map of Anglesey created by bards, representing sense of place through storytelling, art, and folklore. Part of the Public Map Platform (PMP) project. (Source: authors' own with permission)

Page 23: An example of 'Ffridd' tree planting on the RSPB Lake Vyrnwy estate, made up of a collection of diverse habitats including scattered trees, bracken, heather, and bilberry heath, wet and dry unimproved grassland, bog, scree and rock. It is an incredibly diverse habitat that supports a range of habitat. (Source: authors' own with permission)

About the authors

Caitlin Hafferty is a researcher at the Environmental Change Institute, Leverhulme Centre for Nature Recovery and the Agile Initiative, School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford.

Charlotte Boddy is a Research Assistant at the Environmental Change Institute and the Agile Initiative, School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford.

Mark Hiron is a Senior Researcher at the Environmental Change Institute, Leverhulme Centre for Nature Recovery and the Agile Initiative, School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford.

John Lynch is a Senior Researcher at the Oxford Martin School, University of Oxford.

Rosie Gearey is a researcher in School of Rural Economy, Environment and Society at Scotland's Rural College (SRUC), Edinburgh.

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agile@oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk
caitlin.hafferty@ouce.ox.ac.uk



<https://www.agile-initiative.ox.ac.uk/sprints/how-can-we-deliver-effective-equitable-and-place-based-environmental-governance/>



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