

Committee: **Executive Committee**

Date of meeting: **13th January 2021**

Report Subject: **South East Wales Resilient Uplands – Wales Rural Development Programme Sustainable Management Scheme**

Portfolio Holder: **Cllr J. Wilkins, Executive Member Environment**

Report Submitted by: **Head of Community Services
Clive Rogers**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
11/11/20	19.11.12	17.12.20			7/12/2020	13.01.20		

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to inform members of the ongoing regional South East Wales Resilient Uplands (SEWRU) project and provide an update on how the Council is supporting the delivery of the 3-year (2018-2021) project
- 1.2 The South East Wales Resilient Uplands (SEWRU) is a collaborative project arrangement, involving Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen Councils, Natural Resources Wales, Police, Fire and Rescue Services, Gwent Wildlife Trust and the Brecon Beacons National Park. Torfaen County Borough Council are the project Lead for the collaboration.
- 1.3 SEWRU's focus is delivering priority actions from the Landscape Institute award winning Natural Resource Management Plan for South-east Wales Uplands (NRMP) which was produced in 2015.

The original NRMP can be found via this link:

<http://www.visitblaenavon.co.uk/en/WorldHeritageSite/LookingAfterBlaenavon/ForgottenLandscapes/Upland-Heath-and-Wildlife.aspx>

2. Scope and Background

- 2.1 The SEWRU project covers an area of some 200sq km, on land which is over 200m in altitude within Torfaen, Caerphilly and Blaenau Gwent (as per the attached Appendix 1). This £399,000 capital and revenue project is funded over 3 years by the Welsh Government's Rural Communities–Rural Development Programme and the European Union's European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

- 2.2 Within the context of the Well Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, the NRMP identifies a range of ecosystem service opportunities that support upland farm enterprises, citizens and visitors, creating more resilient communities and habitats, and priorities within RDP Local Development Strategies.
- 2.3 The NRMP also identifies solutions to many challenges that our uplands face, such as declining farm incomes, loss of habitat and key species, and landscape crime such as illegal use of off-road vehicles, fly-tipping and arson.
- 2.4 The SEWRU project aims to:
- Deliver land management to improve soils, water quality and regulation, grazing, biodiversity, and carbon storage
 - Strengthen relationships between stakeholders and commoners to support upland communities
 - Build capacity through volunteering, training and community engagement
 - Increase farm competitiveness and viability through diversification and development of innovative business opportunities
 - Tackle the underlying causes of upland degradation caused by poor land management and anti-social problems such as fly-tipping, arson and illegal off-roading
 - Provide opportunities for quiet recreation and enhance the area's tourism offer

3. **Summary of Progress to Date**

- 3.1 Delivery is being coordinated by a full time project manager with the support of a part time finance officer, both of whom are employed by Torfaen Council.
- 3.2 The Detailed delivery plans are attached in appendix 2. under the following headings:
- a) Natural Resource Management Plan (NRMP) Update
 - b) Landscape Crime
 - c) Regional Development of Sustainable Tourism
 - d) Heather Management
 - e) Peat Creation and Restoration
 - f) Scrapes and Pools
 - g) Boundary Repairs
 - h) Volunteer Development and Training
 - i) Regional Wildfire Plan

j) Hill Farming Training Scheme

3.3 To date the project has identified and completed several peatland restoration projects, produced common land management plans (including a detailed management plan for Mynydd Llanhilleth), restored many kilometres of commons boundary stock fencing, installed physical barriers to reduce landscape crime on commons and managed important upland heathland to reduce fire risk and facilitate conservation grazing. SEWRU is currently working with Gwent Police and other partners to update the NRMP and produce upland-focussed landscape crime management plans for each common within the project.

Performance Indicator	Summary of SEWRU activities Outcomes	Impacts within Blaenau Gwent
Cooperation operations supported	All Wales SEWRU / RDP / European Forum for Nature Conservation project: http://www.efncp.org/download/Walesprojectofficera dvert.pdf	Support ongoing activities within Blaenau Gwent Upland areas.
	Tread lightly / SEWRU all Wales illegal off-roading leaflet under development	Helping to reduce illegal off-roading within all upland areas of Blaenau Gwent
Pilot activities / training	Hill Farming Training Scheme development including SEWRU / GWT habitat management leaflets (completed)	Developing skills within the farming community across Blaenau Gwent uplands for better management of land and animal husbandry.
	SEWRU / GWT Blaenau Gwent-based Recreation and Training Project (see: https://www.gwentwildlife.org/South-East-Wales-Resilient-Uplands-Project)	Gwent Wildlife Trust based at The Environmental Resource Centre, Waun Lwyd, Ebbw Vale.
	Mynydd Maen Commons Innovation Plan implementation	
	Update of the NRMP including regional wildfire plans, landscape crime: management plans, landscape crime communication strategy and new landscape crime	Supporting protection against upland crime across Blaenau Gwent's Upland areas.

	app development. Police body / vehicle cams, remote camera traps and signage loaned to vulnerable commoners	Commoners in Cwmcelyn have been provided with body cams
	Mynydd Llanhilleth management plan	Area strategy that will lead to Improved management of Mynydd Llanhilleth common. This has significant benefits for the Communities of Blaenau Gwent in the lower Ebbw Fach.
Area of peatland rewetted	2 sites rewetted on Mynydd Maen – 6ha total	Activity in this area will increase climate change resilience reducing runoff rates into the Ebbw Fach.
	Waunafon Bog study (completed, practical measures not yet implemented)	Activity in this area will increase climate change resilience reducing runoff rates into the Ebbw Fach.
	New site identification (all areas): underway as part of NRMP update	
	Mynydd Garnlochdy peat bog study (completed, practical measures not yet implemented)	Activity in this area will increase climate change resilience reducing runoff rates into the Ebbw Fach.
Action to utilise natural resources for health benefit / feasibility studies	Commons boundary restoration including c.3 kilometres in Blaenau Gwent	The renewal of 3km fencing within the ward of Cwmtillery and Roseheyworth has helped to reduce incidents of animals straying from the common onto the public highway. Land owners have also installed new fencing at Cwmcelyn
	Heather management (all areas) including firebreaks (ongoing, area to be calculated)	Heather cutting has taken place across the upland heath from Cefn Coch to Mynydd Coity providing natural fire breaks and enhancing habitats for ground nesting birds such as Red Grouse.
	Bracken management (all areas, ongoing)	Localise rolling and cutting to reduce tinder that increase potential for wildfires and enhance biodiversity potential.

	Mynydd Maen pond creation / restoration and feral tree removal	
	Practical measures to reduce landscape crime including new gates, barriers, boulders and bunds (ongoing, all areas)	Specific local actions have taken place at Silent Valley Garden City and Cwmcelyn

4. Options Appraisal

- 4.1
- **Option 1: Preferred option:** Members to Note the activity taking place within the South East Wales Resilient Uplands Project and continue to support the collaborative working approach as programmed.
- 4.2
- **Option 2:** Members to consider the report and make suggestions or modifications with regard to future delivery of the South East Wales Resilient Uplands project.

5. Evidence of how does this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan

5.1 Corporate Plan Priority:

The project has benefits for our upland landscape areas and successful outcomes will make positive contributions to the following step of the Councils Corporate Plan:

Protect and enhance our environment and infrastructure to benefit our communities

- To improve the access to and quality of open spaces for the benefit of our communities, businesses and visitors.

5.3 Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan

The project makes a positive contribution to the Council's Wellbeing Plan under the following themes;

- Safe and friendly communities
- To look after and protect the environment
- To forge new pathways to prosperity
- To encourage and enable people to make healthy lifestyle choices in the places that they live, learn, work and play

5.4 Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

The NRMP identifies a range of ecosystem service opportunities that support upland farm enterprises, citizens and visitors, creating more resilient communities and habitats, and priorities within RDP Local Development Strategies.

5.5 **Forward Environment Plan, Biodiversity**

The NRMP directly helps to improve the resilience of our upland heath habitats and biodiversity value through project delivery and improved management techniques

5.6 **Flood Risk Management Plan (FRMP)**

The NRMP contributes to the aims of the FRMP through enhancing natural flood defence mechanisms. The creation of ponds and rewetting upland areas increases water retention capacity and increases the lag phase of water run-off. This has the dual benefit of water retention at times of drought and helping to protect against wild fires.

5.7 **Carbon reduction Strategy**

Our Upland Heath and Bogs are an excellent Carbon Sink. Enhancing these habitats will improve their performance in terms of carbon sequestration, making a positive contribution to the carbon reduction strategy.

6. **Implications Against Each Option**

6.1 ***Impact on Budget***

The collaborative project arrangements demonstrate the value of working at a landscape scale and has delivered positive environmental and economic actions and outcomes across the upland region of South East Wales via securing external RDP funding. Continuing to support the project has a positive financial impact for the Authority. Modifying the agreed approach to the project may have cost implications that go beyond the existing current budget limitations.

6.2 ***Risk***

Changing the scope of the project may build in delays that have a negative impact on the existing programme.

6.3 ***Legal***

The projects help not only to support the Authorities statutory duties under Section 6 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 and the Water Framework Directive but also uphold land owner's liability in regard to straying animals etc, changes to the existing programme may have negative legal implications.

6.4 ***Human Resources***

The current arrangement draws on limited resources across the region, alterations to the agreed plan may result in failure to achieve the identified outcomes.

7. **Supporting Evidence**

7.1 ***Performance Information and Data***

Welsh Government-agreed Performance Indicators (PIs) for this project are:

Cooperation operations supported (target: 2)
Number of pilot activities undertaken / supported (target: 7)
Area of peatland rewetted (target: 10ha)
Number of action to utilise natural resources for health benefit (target: 5)
Number of feasibility studies (target: 5)
Number of training days (target: 40)
Number of new networks (target: 2)

Formal reporting against PIs is to Welsh Government in the form of a report with quarterly claims, and informally to the SWERU Partnership. (The complete schedule is attached as appendix 3).

7.2 ***Expected outcome for the public***

The uplands are a valuable asset in terms of Biodiversity and Flood Management helping to underpin the health and resilience of all of our ecosystems and decrease water runoff rates at times of exceptional rainfall. This means that taking positive action through the SEWRU will enhance the natural resources the public utilise such as clean water, air and food production including pollination services.

7.3 ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***

The project is currently being reviewed and extensive consultation is being undertaken with partners, land owners and managers, public and third sector organisations and the general public.

7.4 ***Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)***

The Plan covers the 2018-21 due to current funding availability, but ensuring the sustainable management of the uplands has much longer terms benefits particularly in regard to Climate change impacts

7.5 ***Preventative focus***

Contributing to the maintenance and enhancement of our uplands and improving ecosystem resilience will help to mitigate and adapt to climate change and provide positive opportunities to maintain and build mental and physical health and well-being.

7.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***

The project is a collaborative arrangement due to the scale and diverse nature of the subject matter.

7.7 ***Integration (across service areas)***

Access to a healthy natural environment has many benefits to all service areas. Integration will be driven by.

8. **Monitoring Arrangements**

8.1 The identified delivery mechanisms will continue to be monitored quarterly by the Governance and Natural Environment teams in the 2020/21 Financial Year.

- 8.2 A report will be submitted to the Community Services Scrutiny committee in the first quarter of the 2021/22 Financial Year summarising progress of progress made, action planned for 2021/22 and any updates on the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan 2019-2022.
- 8.3 The Forward Plan should be revised and approved by March 2022 for the next agreed period.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

Appendix 1 – Uplands Location Plan

Appendix 2 – Core Delivery Plans

Appendix 3 – Performance Information Monitoring SEWRU

<http://www.visitblaenavon.co.uk/en/WorldHeritageSite/LookingAfterBlaenavon/ForgottenLandscapes/Upland-Heath-and-Wildlife.aspx>

Glossary

Biodiversity - means 'biological diversity' which refers to all the variety of life on Earth (plants, animals, fungi and micro-organisms) as well as to the communities that they form and the habitats in which they live.

Ecosystem - dynamic network of plant, animal and micro-organism communities and their non-living environment interacting as a functional unit.

Ecosystem Resilience - is the ability of an ecosystem to maintain its normal patterns of nutrient cycling and biomass production after being subjected to damage caused by an ecological disturbance, for example extreme weather events caused by climate change, outbreak of disease or human exploitation.