



Six Month Evaluation

March-September 2020

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Growing Better Connections Evaluation Overview

March-September 2020

GBC is a practical and far sighted response to the many challenges upon us, with a roadmap to resilience based on **connecting communities and landscape**. The project began in March with the unprecedented situation of the corona virus, **adapting** to restrictions on movement and the huge impact on community engagement and project officer activity. The project team **responded** with a determined focus on putting in place the **groundwork** for future action, strengthening and building relevant **networks** and identifying groups and individuals as potential **stakeholders**.

Responding to the upsurge in public awareness to food growing and appreciation of time in nature, the GBC team quickly adapted **events and activities** to suit the contingencies of the times. This included guided nature walks, a nature blog and plant giveaways in partnership with local community halls. These activities were received well and it's reasonable to be confident they have contributed to **wellbeing and resilience** to people on a personal and community level in a time of crisis.

Site surveys have been designed and trialled; ways to feed into national and regional **ecology databases** identified and **project officers trained** in preparation for bringing citizen science into potential future landscape interventions. **Connections with stakeholders** are being created to benefit GBC aims, including Frenni Fawr Research group; the Frenni Fach Graziers Association; and the WWBIC. Close collaboration with the steering group is underway, linking plans and activities to their networks.

As lockdown eased, GBC were ready to hold a timely and informal event, **Garej y Sgwar Bugs Day**. This built on existing **community connections**, delivering an activity that increased **understanding** of the role and **benefits of nature** and was a good opportunity to road test the GBC team protocols, process and resources.

All activity has been thoroughly **evaluated** by the team itself on many levels to keep track of their impacts, tweak their approach and to feedback into the project aims to keep improving their activities and making sure they are on track.

Plans are underway for **Tegryn** to be planted with trees this Winter; to control balsam in **Boncath**; working with **Coed Dulas** and neighbouring landowners to improve habitat, potentially through citizen science activities. Other planned activities for Autumn 2020, include **apple juicing days** in 4 key villages, with expert advice on hand, and a **Woodland Conference**.

Serious thought is being given to how to sustain **continuity beyond 2023** when the project's funding ends. This includes possible collaboration with other organisations on nature restoration projects which could engage more stakeholders and restore more habitats beyond the existing project boundaries.

The team has also devised comprehensive documents to identify what it wishes to do beyond the bare numbers collected to meet the funding indicators and to apply the principles of Sustainable Management of Natural Resources. These **broader aims** have been carefully thought through, including the **values** driving them, how the aims will be delivered and what further data needs collecting to best serve **resilience** of the land and the communities involved. GBC is well **on track to meeting it's targets for 2020 – 2021** and is consistently showing their ability to **adapt** in challenging times, whilst **working together** with local communities at an **appropriate scale**.

Evaluation of Funding Indicators

Funding Indicators	Mar-Jun 2020	Jul-Sept 2020	Cumulative actual total	2020 total projection
Number of cooperation operations supported	1	n/a	1	1
Number of jobs created	2	n/a	2	2
Number of jobs safeguarded	1	n/a	1	1
Number of participants in training	3	1	4	10
Number of training days	2	1	3	4
Total public expenditure for training/skills (£)	£500	£50	£550	£2,000
Number of networks established	1	n/a	1	1
Number of stakeholders ¹ engaged	0	261	261	100
Number of actions to utilise resources for health benefit	0	4	4	15
Area of woodland "supported" (ha)	0	0	0	1

- ~ Numbers of stakeholders more than double the projection for 2020.
- ~ Area of woodland "supported" is an expected outcome of the next 6 month phase.
- ~ All other indicators on target.

Evaluation of Expenditure To Date:

The expenditure to date is proportional to the completed activities and the outcomes achieved. The project is on track for Administration and Management expenditure. As a percentage of spend across the year so far, there has been less spending on the Community Connections activities than anticipated, as to be expected from the impact of the corona virus on events and engagement. The Landscape Connection projected spend pertains to the next half year, as it is largely for Winter activities.

1. A stakeholder is defined as 'organisations and individuals who have benefited from GBC.'

Sustainable Management of Natural Resources (SMNR)

The Welsh Government Environment Act recognises that natural resources are some of Wales' most important assets. It contains policy frameworks to ensure that SMNR is a core consideration in decision making (Section 4 of the Environment Act). The principles of SMNR, listed below, are to help guide and underpin the way SMNR should be interpreted to ensure a consistent approach across Wales.

For the purpose of evaluation, the principles have been given a letter (A – I), and project activity reviewed in relation to them and with reference to GBC's stated intentions in the Sustainable Management Scheme application. The unprecedented challenge of corona restrictions at the start of the project, combined with uncertainty around rural payment schemes in light of Brexit, has implications for applying the principles as originally intended. For example, gathering for events and training is constrained; and signposting landowners to ecosystem services is difficult given the current state of uncertainty.

- A) **Adaptable** – a need to plan, monitor, review and change future work in light of new evidence and understanding.
- B) **Scale** – decisions and actions will need to be taken at national, regional or local levels to deliver the best outcomes.
- C) **Working together** – everyone in Wales is a stakeholder in the natural environment and hence, to ensure best management of natural resources, all views need to be considered.
- D) **Engaging with the public** – ensure that the public has opportunity to give its opinion on how natural resources are managed, at all stages of the decision making process.
- E) **Evidence** – an improved evidence base is needed to understand Wales' natural resources to allow for better management.
- F) **Understanding all of the benefits received from natural resources** – the whole of Wales needs to understand the economic, social, cultural and environmental value of natural resources, including how they can benefit future generations.
- G) **Long term** – impacts of decisions need to be considered not only in the short term but also in the long term.
- H) **Prevention** – take steps to prevent damage to Welsh ecosystems.
- I) **Resilience** – to be able to deal with increased demands and pressures, such as climate change, Welsh ecosystems need to be healthy. Decisions need to be considered in terms of providing long term benefits.

Broader Aims

The GBC team has devised comprehensive documents to identify what to monitor and evaluate, and how to achieve this. These are articulated as broader aims (1- 6) and grouped into the categories below. They provide a blueprint for keeping track of how the SMNR principles are being delivered. GBC project activity is categorised as Project Management, Landscape Connections and Community Connections. Where project activity meets the broader aims the relevant number has been allocated within the report.

1. Knowledge Sharing and Learning Aims:

1.1 All relevant knowledge and evidence is shared at all levels, in order to replicate successes elsewhere, including how challenges have been met and pitfalls to be avoided.

1.2 Know whether engaged people have a 'holistic' understanding of how natural resources can benefit people whilst also being protected.

1.3 Know whether GBC participants understand how their land or community can benefit from ecosystem services.

2. Environmental Aims:

2.1 Know whether activity has improved the resilience and diversity of ecosystems.

2.2 Record ecological data (pre and post intervention), training days and numbers of participants.

2.3 Record uptake and effect of 'signposting' to farms, landowners, and groups regards diversifying land use, increasing biodiversity, benefits of ecosystem services and accessing GBC documentation regarding avoiding ecological damage.

3. Economic Aims:

3.1 Stimulation and / or improvement of economic resilience e.g. sustained, improved or contributed to new business activity and access to markets.

3.2 Signposting landowners and groups to the benefits of ecosystem services.

4. Social, Health and Wellbeing Aims:

4.1 Know whether behaviours have changed. E.g. lifestyle and business choices that increase resource efficiency; use of ecosystem services; and protect nature.

4.2 Participants feel fit; useful; and connected following participation in GBC activity.

4.3 Participants understand more about local heritage and the place they live.

4.4 Participants learnt a new skill or strengthened an existing one.

5. Adaptation and Response -Ability Aims:

5.1 Monitor the risks that might arise to change the direction or delivery methods.

5.2 GBC's ability to adapt when necessary; including suitability of project activities and whether on-site interventions are suitable for the future.

6. Future and Continuity of GBC post 2023

6.1 Identify opportunities to deliver GBC intentions in and beyond our geographical area post 2023.

Project Activity and Outcomes

Project Management

Relevant Activity and Outcomes

A **steering group** was set up in November 2019 prior to the recruitment of project officers, with key local stakeholders representing Pembrokeshire Nature Partnership, Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, Coppicewood College, Keep Wales Tidy, and CARE. The steering group has contributed to consideration of potential sites, relevant stakeholder contacts, appropriate resources and processes and post 2023 continuity. An evaluation procedure and methodology has been developed for all aspects of the project to ensure aims and principles are met.

This activity meets aims 1, 5 and 6 directly and contributes to aims 2 and 3.

Forming the steering group applies the SMNR principles A, B, C, D, E, G and I, as it has the explicit role of contributing to adapting activity, at an appropriate scale, working together with stakeholders and engaging the public through its existing networks. It's expertise is key to assessing evidence from data collected; and has the long term resilience of GBC's ethos as a permanent item on its agenda.

First steps: Adaptation to corona restrictions

Within weeks of the project starting, extraordinary restrictions on movement and meeting in person required a fundamental rethink to the planned approach to landscape and community engagement at the heart of GBC. Focus turned to developing the underpinning values that would guide the project and designing and creating the frameworks, processes and tools, crucial to deliver the project aims, such as pro formas. The activities evaluated below demonstrate considerable adaptability, resilience, creative productivity, and suitability for the demands of the unprecedented uncertainty and constraints imposed. Some setback was incurred by needing to transfer office space to accommodate distancing guidelines.

This activity meets aim 5 directly and contributes to aims 1, 2 and 4, and is ongoing given the uncertainty of the current situation.

This applies the SMNR principles A, B, C and D, of adapting activity, at an appropriate scale, working together with stakeholders and engaging the public.

Networks and Collaboration

All the project activity to date intrinsically involved collaboration with wider networks; notably the steering group; Helping Halls; West Wales Biodiversity Information Centre (WWBIC); Frenni Fawr Research Group and Graziers Association.

GBC also presented the project at the **Ffynnone Community Resilience** for North East Pembrokeshire's People's Assembly in July, attended by over 70 people, on their mutual aims of habitat restoration.

GBC also has been active in sharing funding information and opportunities to influence policy with relevant groups.

GBC has a variety of community events and related plans for the near future. The **Community Woodland Conference**, currently postponed, will bring together a range of networks and stakeholders to explore collaboration in establishing new woodlands and provide opportunities for attendees to understand how woodlands can be used to enhance well-being. Other collaborative plans that link landscape and community connections include: identifying opportunities for **citizen science / schools outreach** and landscape data collection; and working with **NEAG (Newport energy Action Group) & Newport Town Council** to bring the SWEPT (Surveying Waterways for Environmental Pollution Threats) project to The Afon Nyfer.

This activity contributes to aims 1, 2, 3 and 4, and directly supports aims 5 and 6.

This activity is relevant to all the SMNR principles, and explicitly to principles C and D.

Working Document on Future of GBC and continuity post 2023

The project team supplied its working document on this aim for evaluation. The document demonstrates a thorough consideration and commitment to long term continuity of the GBC ethos. The project has contributed to policy consultations, using their role to influence longer term national strategies. They have submitted several proposals at the Welsh Government's request, including how to achieve a **Green Recovery** and for the **Local Area Statement**.

This process contributes to aims 1 -5 and directly to aim 6.

It is relevant to SMNR principles A- F and H, and directly supports G and I by giving long term planning and resilience a dedicated focus within the ongoing project activity.

Staff Training

The original intention was for training to be supplied to residents within the project area. Corona restrictions on meeting and gathering meant this has not viable. However, it has been very useful to train staff so they can improve the reach of the project and deliver training themselves when restrictions ease. GBC note that no 'staff training' was written into the project budget and that to make provision for it is valuable. There is flexibility to accommodate this relatively small cost, and therefore no problematic repercussions.

To date 3 of the project team received habitat identification training; and 4 have undertaken social media training.

The staff training activity contributes to aims 1, 2, 3, and 4 and meets aim 5 directly and is on track for meeting the 2020 training target. The training supports the SMNR principles of A, B, C, D and E, by adapting to circumstances and laying foundations for community led, evidence based interventions and sharing this at all levels in the future.

Landscape Connections

Proposed Activity Targets

This table is an internal project log of the types of Landscape Connection activities proposed for 2020/21, and a record of how many of these have been actioned. To date, September 2020, these have not been met. However, this is the first half year of GBC and the activities in the table require considerable engagement and planning. This essential groundwork is well underway and outlined in more detail below. It is also relevant to understand that much of the Landscape Connection activity takes place in late Autumn and Winter (the second half of this first evaluation year).

Landscape Connection Activity Type	Projected 2020/21	Mar-Aug 2020	Detail
Plant new hedgerow	1.3 km	0	
Manage existing hedgerow	1 km	0	
Plant woodland/orchard	1.6 acre	0	
Manage existing woodland/orchard	3.3 acre	0	
Manage meadowland/field margin	0.8 acre	0	

Relevant Activity and Outcomes

Considerable **groundwork** of developing **proformas** and **desk top study documents** necessary for essential consistent, data collection has taken place. They are flexible to apply to any landscape site, and will capture a holistic baseline understanding of the environmental, social, cultural and economic situation. They are mindful of the individual, organisation or landowner's situation, constraints, aspirations and vision.

Connections have been established with ecologists and county recorders to facilitate any data collected being shared with wider databases, also laying the groundwork for citizen science activities. There is a steady approach to identifying relevant groups and individuals to fulfil the project aims and significant other related work has taken place to strengthen engagement networks, future opportunities and developing/adopting resources, e.g. field guides.

A site visit took place at **Coed Dulas** in April, testing survey documents and methodology. A formal engagement is now in place with the owner of Coed Dulas to increase habitat diversity (planning and sourcing funding for pond) and to **control** the spread of **balsam**. Leading on from the visit at Coed Dulas, contact has been established with a small cluster of neighbouring potential stakeholders around **Boncath** to combat balsam. Activity has included an initial survey of watercourses feeding into Afon Dulas. Next steps intend to extend the survey with landowners' permission and open a conversation about linking the riparian woodland to Frenni Fawr.

GBC have made active links with the **Frenni Fawr Research Group** regards sampling and regeneration of oak woodland habitat and research with Aberystwyth University. GBC aim to contribute data collection via citizen science activities, and also by ensuring local landowners and communities are engaged. For example, the manager of an adjacent coniferous forestry is looking to populate the forestry with native oaks grown from acorns collected through GBC activity. Propagation will be via local people and the tree nursery at Scolton Manor which is a legacy of project partners Keep Wales Tidy's Long Forest project.

Further work on Frenni Fawr includes supporting a neighbouring landowner to plant and fence hedgerow to link the two woodland habitats. GBC is liaising with **graziers of the Frenni Fawr** around further GBC landscape activities, with the intention to eventually link with the common on Frenni Fach, where graziers will be engaged regards potential support for them and other users of the common.

Tegryn Trees is a village wide tree cover project. GBC have gained agreement from relevant community bodies (Hall committee, Welfare committee) and in regard to Pembrokeshire County Council properties, to plant up around public green spaces. The intention is to continue community consultation and phase 1 planting this winter. Phase 2 plans include exploring grafting, planting the football field, and re-establishing and thickening hedges to link into wider habitat network.

A **Community Woodland Conference** is planned for when corona restrictions are lifted (see Project Management, networks and collaboration above). Discussion is underway with **Coed yr Hwrdd** on leasing this Millennium Wood for a community group.

The Landscape connections activities broadly contribute to aims 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 in that they lay essential foundations to meet these objectives. The pro formas and desktop study documents directly contribute to aim 2.

These activities follow the SMNR principles A, B, C, D and H, of being adaptable; at an appropriate scale that observes a place based approach; that demonstrate working together and engaging with the public; and beginning the work of prevention of degradation of natural resources.

The activity contributes strongly to meeting SMNR principles E, F, G and I, by creating the systems to collect evidence; demonstrate the benefits of natural resources; and appropriate early steps towards long term strategies for landscape resilience.

Community Connections

Proposed Activity Targets

This table is an internal project log of the types of activities proposed and a record of how many of have been actioned and numbers of attendees.

Community Connection Activity Type	Projected 2020 / 21	Mar-Aug 2020	Detail	Attendee Numbers (counted as Stakeholders)
Project Launch	1	0		
Exhibitions / Conferences / Heritage Open Days	2	0		
Nature walks/explorations	8	3	Hermon, Boncath & Tegryn Nature Walks	20
Land management skills training	6	0		
Land survey walks / talks	6	2	Ecology training	3
			Garej Bugs Day	25
Food collection/processing training	4	0		
Well-being activities	4	3	Helping Halls Covid Plant Giveaway - Boncath, Tegryn & Hermon	100
Total				148

Relevant Activity and Outcomes

Appropriate community activity was quickly and aptly devised, such as development of **outreach, publicity, and learning materials**, to adapt to corona restrictions that impacted plans for community outreach and events. This activity includes updating the GBC webpage; creating a leaflet to explain the project aims; a newsletter and blogs. A series of accessible, informative **blogs** was posted on the website and social media, linking to later project activity, such as insect habitat, wild plants, balsam and ecosystem services. 14 blog posts were posted between April and July with an average of 48 views, 678 total views, with a post about gorse receiving 146 views. The blogs were also posted on Facebook; one of which reached 1220 people and included details of geocaching which a local person had set up along one of the Nature Walk (see below) routes. There has been

considerable work done to identify relevant groups and individuals for when restrictions are lifted.

Helping Halls Covid Plant Giveaways were held in collaboration with **Helping Halls** in 3 villages to support local volunteers and community facilities to give away garden plants and encourage growing and information sharing in the community. A successful series of events, attended by **approximately 100 people**, with a very positive response. Detailed evaluation by the GBC team was confident the event was well promoted; valuable and timely for community connection and collaboration; and a good way to introduce GBC and add value locally. Organisation and logistics largely worked well, e.g. coordination, volunteer spirit, appropriate resources and a good range of plants available. Challenges, such as social distancing protocols, toilet facilities and lack of shade were noted for future events.

Ambiguity of the relationship of GBC to Helping Halls and relevance of the event to GBC aims came up in the evaluation. This is an important observation, however it is not a major concern given the wider context (coronavirus crisis; first steps for GBC) and the positive effects generated for GBC and community connections. The Helping Halls Covid Plant Giveaways are recorded as wellbeing activities and under the funding indicators as **“actions to utilise resources for health benefit.”**

It is also reasonable to view the blogs, walks, and events as heartening and positive in context of the corona crisis. The informal feedback received by the team regarding these activities, indicates that participants felt happy, relaxed, connected and more informed as a result of them. Formal evaluation of wellbeing benefits as a result of GBC activity is planned for the upcoming Autumn apple juicing events.

Guided Nature Walks / Explorations, from mid July to the end of August, were held to encourage people to explore nature in their local area in compliance with movement restrictions. Signs with maps, cultural and historical information, riddles and information boards about native trees and plants were installed on footpaths. Informal evaluation of the impact of this activity by the GBC team includes very positive feedback from those who did it; that a neglected footpath at Boncath now appears well trodden; and that there was little response to the request for photos or riddle solutions.

As restrictions eased in late August, GBC ran **Garej y Sgwar Bugs Day Hunt**. More than **25 local residents** took part in a range of cooperative activities for all ages introducing insects and habitat creation. The event also multi functioned to diplomatically introduce Cwm Arian ‘Studio for a Community’ project to the village. Detailed SWOC analysis by the GBC team identified what went well e.g. a good atmosphere, good publicity for the project, that an informal approach worked well and the event created opportunities for community network and collaboration. GBC evaluation of what could be done differently to improve some aspects included limited time for preparation; and that insect observation data could not be recorded on the WWBIC phone app.

The Community Connection activities directly meet aims 4 and 5, and contribute to the projects ability to meet 1, 2, 3 and 6.

These activities have directly applied the SMNR principles of A, B, C, D and I, by adapting to be a suitable response to wider events; at an appropriate scale; demonstrating working together; engaging with the public and cultivating resilience. This activity contributes to meeting the principles E, F, G and H, establishing conditions for collecting evidence; promoting understanding of natural resources; and long term vision for prevention and resilience through community connections.

Broader Aims and Relevant Activity Table

Aims → Activity ↓	1. Knowledge Sharing and Learning	2. Environ- mental	3. Economic	4. Social, Health and Wellbeing	5. Adaptation/ Response - Ability	6. Future / Continuity post 2023
Steering Group established	X	x	x		X	X
Adaptation to corona	x	x		x	X	
Networks and Collaboration	x	x	x	x	X	X
Future of GBC post 2023	x	x	x	x	x	X
Staff training	x	x	x	x	X	x
Groundwork (pro formas etc.)	x	X	x	x	x	x
Coed Dulas and Boncath Balsam	x	x	x	x	x	x
Frenni Fawr and Fach	x	x	x	x	x	x
Frenni Fach	x	x	x	x	x	x
Tegryn Trees	x	x		x	x	x
Outreach (Blogs, publicity etc.)	x	x		X	X	
Helping Halls Plant Giveaways	x	x		X	X	x
Nature Walks / Explorations	x	x		X	X	
Garej y Sgwar Bugs Day	x	x		X	X	x

X directly meets an aim; x contributes to an aim

Conclusion and Recommendations

GBC is well on target for meeting both the funding indicators and its broader aims. The project activity is aligned with the principles of SMNR and the SMS' cross-cutting themes. GBC has provided equality of opportunity and been open to anyone who wishes to be involved. The project has been mindful of sustainable development in the planning and execution of all its activity, promoting ecological and community cohesion. Attention has been given to delivering activities with respect to the Welsh language.

At this early stage in the project, environmental and economic outcomes are naturally not yet apparent. Essential groundwork has been laid for every aspect of the GBC aims, especially in relation to establishing networks and developing appropriate processes and frameworks. There are firm plans in place for Landscape Connection work, such as tree planting this Winter (the second half of this evaluation year) and increasingly firm arrangements with stakeholders towards landscape regeneration.

The uncertainty arising as a consequence of corona restrictions continues and may affect the project's ability to meet its objectives in the way originally anticipated. However, to date the team have shown exceptional productivity and creativity in response to the constraints upon them. The Community Connection activities have been timely and productive, strengthening existing relationships and germinating new networks and potential. With a strong likelihood of continued uncertainty, this evaluation is confident in GBC to adapt and respond in a way that is of great benefit to local communities.

Next Steps

- Review the phrasing of the broader aims to check if they accurately reflect GBC activity and value in light of adaptations required to deliver the project.
- Monitor the relevance of potential landscape connection activities to GBC strategic priorities as opportunities increase.
- Create spreadsheet fields for recording free help, time and materials received; organisations collaborated with; number and type of co-hosted actions; and how many people have been provided 'signposting' e.g. to ecosystem services.
- Consider creating a checklist for engagement and collaboration activity to collect and record specific data identified in the broader aims documents.



References

CARE SMS Application form

Progress Report for Funders (June 2020)

Internal documents:

Budget / funding indicator spreadsheets

Future of GBC notes

Events SWOC Analyses x 6

Community Woodland Conference plans and survey

Green Recovery Task Group proposal

Desktop / Field study pro formas x 5

Steering group notes / reports / minutes

Monitoring and evaluation working documents

Publicity and outreach resources:

Website / blogs / Facebook page / newsletter / leaflet