

Promoting Access to Bannau Brycheiniog National Park

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Summary report

Why we did this audit

Our audit duties

- 1 Bannau Brycheiniog National Park Authority (the Authority) has to put in place arrangements to get value for money for the resources it uses, and the Auditor General has to be satisfied that it has done this.
- 2 We undertook this audit to help discharge the Auditor General's duties under section 17 of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004. It may also inform a study for improving value for money under section 41 of the 2004 Act, and/or an examination undertaken by the Auditor General under section 15 of the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015.

Our objectives for this audit

- 3 To provide assurance that the Authority has proper arrangements to secure value for money in its use of resources to promote access to the National Park (the Park).
- 4 To explain the importance of people from all walks of life exploring and visiting national landscapes and outline Welsh Ministers' priorities for National Park Authorities (NPAs).
- 5 To assure people that the Authority encourages a wide range of diverse visitors, is collaborating effectively with key partners, and to determine how well it is delivering statutory responsibilities.

Why promoting access is important

- 6 A range of organisations across the public, third, and charity sectors have publicised the benefits of accessing nature. The Office for National Statistics calculates that the health benefits from outdoor recreation in 2021 had a value of £22.7 billion in Wales¹. This is through improving both physical and mental health from activity. Promoting access can benefit public health and wellbeing, and in turn deliver economic benefits through a healthier population.
- 7 Promoting access also helps the Authority to act within its legal framework. One of the Authority's two statutory purposes² is to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the Park by the public. To achieve this, the Authority needs to ensure activity is aimed at the whole population to maximise participation.

¹ ONS, [Health benefits from recreation, natural capital, UK: 2022](#)

² Environment Act 1995

- 8 Promoting access also helps the Authority meet national policy and priorities. In 2022, the Welsh Government asked Welsh NPAs to ‘increase engagement in opportunities for people in vulnerable or disadvantaged groups and under-represented communities to benefit from the landscapes you manage’.³ The Welsh Government supported this by funding also included the provision of a national lead officer for promoting Inclusion, Diversity and Governance Excellence ‘to drive up diversity and equality’ within National Parks. The lead officer also aimed to support National Parks to help them meet the socio-economic duty, introduced in March 2021.
- 9 UK Government research⁴ found that most visits to English National Parks are repeat visits made by people who were relatively better off and not representative of society. It also found that other communities visited the parks less often. These include older and younger people, people from the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic community, and people from more deprived communities.



What we looked at and what does good look like⁵

- 10 We have taken a broad definition of access, including both physical access constraints and broader barriers to enjoying the Park, such as cultural or socio-economic barriers.
- 11 We have limited our review to reflect the Auditor General's duty to satisfy himself of the arrangements the Authority has in place to secure economy, efficiency, and effectiveness (commonly known as value for money). As a result, we have not evaluated the projects delivered by the Authority to promote access. Therefore, we make no judgement on the sufficiency or nature of the actions to promote access within the Park. Our focus was on the arrangements the Authority has put in place to meet its objectives including how it planned, resourced and monitors them. We recognise, however, the considerable work that the Authority has undertaken to promote access to the Park.
- 12 The audit sought to answer the overall question – **Is the Authority doing all it can to encourage and improve access to the National Park from underrepresented groups?** To do this we looked to answer the following questions:
- Does the Authority have a comprehensive understanding of who uses the National Park and who does not?

³ Welsh Government, [Term of Government Remit Letter](#), May 2022

⁴ DEFRA, [Landscapes Review](#), September 2019

⁵ Defined as ‘what should be’ according to laws or regulations, ‘what is expected’ according to best practice, or ‘what could be’, given better conditions.

- Does the Authority have a clear vision of what it needs to achieve to improve access from underrepresented groups and communities?
 - Is the Authority working effectively with the right people and partners to address the barriers facing groups or communities that are underrepresented visitors to the National Park?
 - Has the Authority invested sufficient resources so it can deliver long-term and preventative benefits?
 - Is the Authority monitoring, evaluating and reviewing progress?
- 13 Our audit criteria are set out in **Appendix 1**. They were developed using our cumulative knowledge and the National Parks Wales 2021 policy statement 'Landscapes for Everyone'.



Our audit methods and when we undertook the audit

- 14 Our findings are based on document reviews and interviews with officers and representatives of groups involved in projects within the National Park. We also visited the National Park. Our findings are limited to these sources. We undertook this work during August and September 2024.



What we found

- 15 Overall, we found that **the Authority is delivering several projects to promote access to the National Park in collaboration with partners but lacks key arrangements for securing value for money**. We set out below why we reached this conclusion.

Does the Authority have a comprehensive understanding of users?

- 16 The Authority does not have a comprehensive understanding of which groups do and do not access the National Park. It also does not make the best use of information it already has.
- 17 The Authority's understanding of who currently uses the National Park is informed in part through its involvement in various outreach projects. These enable it to improve its understanding of who uses the National Park. But it does not routinely collect detailed demographic data as part of these projects nor as part of its ongoing visitor survey. Making better use of knowledge the Authority already holds in one mechanism may enable the Authority to make interventions that make greater impact.
- 18 The Authority has identified a range of barriers that limit access to the National Park. Although, the Authority cannot assure itself that the barriers identified are

those faced by underrepresented visitors. For example, the Authority received a total of 72 responses to its 2021 'Barriers to Access' survey which identified various barriers to accessing the Park. But the Authority does not ask respondents to the survey to provide demographic or similar data and so it does not know which communities or groups are represented in the responses.

- 19 Involving the full diversity of the population is also important to help meet the expectations set out by Welsh Ministers above. We acknowledge that it is not practical for the Authority to collect data for all visitors to the park, in particular visitors who do not engage directly with the Authority. But the absence of a comprehensive approach makes it difficult for the Authority to effectively target its activity and therefore achieve value for money.
- 20 The Authority has a thorough understanding of the socio-economic profile of the Park area. This is reflected in the Authority's new Management Plan, Dyfodol y Bannau, and was demonstrated consistently by officers during our review. The Authority also has a high-level understanding of long-term socio-economic factors and their potential impact on the Authority. However, the Authority does not have a thorough understanding of how these long-term factors may specifically impact on access opportunities for underrepresented groups. This reduces its ability to target actions that will increase access and secure value over the longer term.

Does the Authority have a clear vision for improving access?

- 21 The Authority has a clear vision for promoting access to the National Park in its corporate plans. This includes its high-level Management Plan, Dyfodol y Bannau. The Authority made a concerted attempt to involve a range of groups and communities to shape its strategic approach. However, as it did not collect demographic information, it is unclear whether the Authority captured views from the full of diversity of the population. By not engaging the full diversity of the population, the Authority could risk designing approaches that do not meet their needs, and therefore do not secure value for money
- 22 Despite having a clear vision to promote access, the Authority's projects to achieve this are delivered on an ad hoc basis. Project delivery and timescales are mainly driven by the availability of external grant funding and the criteria attached to it. Consequently, the Authority does not have a long-term plan to deliver its vision to improve access. By not planning over a longer-term timescale, the Authority risks short-term interventions that may provide less value for money over the longer term.
- 23 In developing its strategic approach to improving access, the Authority has not considered its potential impact on the well-being objectives of other public sector bodies. By not aligning with other bodies' well-being objectives, the Authority risks missing opportunities to identify multiple benefits that can be delivered, and also risks duplicating work.

Is the Authority working effectively in partnership to promote access?

- 24 The Authority collaborates with a range of partners from the third sector and community groups to encourage access to the National Park. Delivery partners either reach out to the Authority themselves or are identified through the informal networks of Authority staff. Delivery partners are also confident in the Authority's leadership to involve them in the design and delivery of projects. The Authority also involved a range of targeted fora in developing Dyfodol y Bannau. However, the Authority has not systematically mapped out all potential partners that it could work with to improve access. Consequently, the Authority risks missing potential opportunities to improve access and value for money through, for example, sharing expertise and resources.
- 25 The Authority does not systematically collect feedback or learn lessons from how it works with others. Whilst general project-based feedback from partners is broadly positive, it is collected on an ad hoc basis. Where the Authority learns lessons from how it works with others, this is anecdotal and not recorded. By not having a systematic process to capture feedback and share lessons learned on its collaborative activity, the Authority may be missing opportunities to improve value for money.

Has the Authority strategically resourced its activity to promote access?

- 26 We recognise the challenging financial context that the public sector operates within and the consequences for individual bodies, like the Authority. However, the Authority has not costed or resourced the delivery of Dyfodol y Bannau. The lack of detailed financial planning to match aspirations of Dyfodol y Bannau indicates that resource allocation is not fully considered strategically. It may also mean that the contribution required by partners may not be clear. By not identifying the resources needed to deliver its plans, the Authority increases the risk of them being undeliverable. It also reduces the Authority's ability to take a longer-term view of resourcing to help it balance both short and long-term needs, including through preventative activity.
- 27 There are examples of the Authority targeting resources to deliver longer-term benefits. For example, where possible, the Authority allocates resources to enable communities and groups to address barriers to access themselves. This potentially reduces reliance on the Authority over the long term and could therefore secure better value for money.
- 28 The Authority has not conducted demographic modelling to assure itself that resources are targeted at underrepresented groups. Resources are, however, sometimes distributed using other metrics related to deprivation. For example, funding given to schools to help with travel costs is based on numbers of pupils in receipt of free school meals. The absence of comprehensive demographic data

means the Authority is not always able to assure itself that its resources are targeted in the most cost-effective way.

Is the Authority monitoring, evaluating and reviewing progress?

- 29 The Authority does not have arrangements for regular monitoring or evaluation of all its work to promote access to the Park. Measuring the impact of some initiatives is clearly extremely challenging. Not all interventions lead to easily collected and reported performance measures, which we accept and note. However, measuring and understanding outcomes is critical to understanding if initiatives are effective and, therefore, their value for money.
- 30 The Authority does not systematically record, or report publicly to its members, qualitative or quantitative information concerning the impact of its work to promote access to the Park. Members are informally updated on some activity, however. The Authority is required to provide reports to external funders for grant-funded projects, but these are not designed to provide the Authority with assurance that projects are providing value for money. Aside from this, the authority collects anecdotal feedback from visitors which it uses to monitor the impact of its work, but this is not a comprehensive mechanism.
- 31 By not considering strategically which projects are the most cost-effective, it is difficult for the Authority to assure itself that it is securing value for money through its actions to increase access to the Park. It also makes it more difficult for the Authority to learn from experience and identify future opportunities to improve value for money.
- 32 Performance relating to promoting access is also not routinely publicly reported to Authority members. This weakens the ability of the Authority to maintain effective oversight of the Authority's actions to encourage and improve the Park's accessibility, and their value for money.



Our recommendations for the Authority

Exhibit 1: our recommendations for the Authority

Recommendations

- R1 The Authority does not have a long-term plan to deliver its vision to improve access, which increases the risk of short-term interventions that may provide less value for money over the longer term. To address this, the Authority should:
- 1.1 Clarify and then cost its proposed actions to deliver its vision.
 - 1.2 Ensure that its ambitions are aligned with available resources.
- R2 We identified weaknesses in the Authority's arrangements to collect and analyse visitor data consistently. To maximise the use of data it gets from interactions with visitors and programme participants, the Authority should establish a more consistent arrangement to collate and analyse demographic information, activity data, and feedback.
- R3 The Authority has not mapped out all potential partners that it could work with to improve access to the Park, and has not considered the impact of its plans on other public sector bodies. To address this, the Authority should:
- 3.1 Map out all potential partners that it could work with to identify if there are opportunities to improve value for money.
 - 3.2 Review the well-being objectives of its public sector partners or potential partners to identify opportunities to secure multiple benefits and/or avoid duplication.
- R4 The Authority does not have arrangements for regular monitoring or evaluation of its work to promote access to the Park. To address this, the Authority should:
- 4.1 Set out how it will assess and monitor the value for money of individual projects and its overall strategic approach to promote access.
 - 4.2 Provide Members with regular reports on the progress and value for money of its work to promote access to the Park.

Appendix 1

Audit questions and criteria

Overall question: Is the Authority doing all it can to encourage and improve access to the National Park from underrepresented groups?

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
<p>2.1 Does the Authority have a comprehensive understanding of who uses the National Park and who does not?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2.2.1 Has the Authority recently analysed who visits the National Park?• 2.1.2 Has the Authority recently identified which groups or communities do not visit the National Park?• 2.1.3 Does the Authority have a thorough understanding of its socio-economic profile?• 2.1.4 Has the Authority identified barriers facing groups or communities that are underrepresented visitors to the National Park?• 2.1.5 Does the Authority have a thorough understanding of the long-term factors that may impact on access opportunities for underrepresented groups?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Authority knows which groups and communities visit the National Park.• The Authority knows which groups and communities do not visit the National Park.• The Authority has a thorough understanding of its socio-economic profile.• The Authority understands and knows the barriers facing groups and communities that are underrepresented visitors to the National Park.• The Authority has a thorough understanding of the long-term factors that reduce access opportunities for underrepresented groups.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
<p>2.2 Does the Authority have a clear vision of what it needs to achieve to improve access from underrepresented groups and communities?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2.2.1 Does the Authority have a comprehensive plan to address barriers facing underrepresented groups and communities? • 2.2.2 Has the Authority involved relevant groups or communities in shaping its approach? • 2.2.3 Is the Authority taking an integrated approach? • 2.2.4 Is the Authority planning over an appropriate timescale? • 2.2.5 Is the Authority's approach driven by clear and effective leadership? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Authority has a comprehensive plan to address barriers facing underrepresented groups and communities. • The Authority fully involves relevant groups and communities in helping to shape its approach. • The Authority is taking an integrated approach and considers issues across all services and all key partners. • The Authority has a strong track record of engaging stakeholders with inclusive opportunities to access and use the National Park. • The Authority actively promotes its work and this is resulting in positive impacts on addressing social exclusion, improving health and wellbeing and alleviating the impact of poverty. • The Authority has set a range of targets for delivery over an appropriate timescale. • The Authority has good track record of delivering actions and plans and taking remedial action where necessary. • The Authority has clear and effective leadership and increasing access to the National Park is promoted consistently and clearly at the highest levels. • The Authority has good evidence to draw showing the value of National Parks for health and wellbeing and their role to help reduce social exclusion and alleviation of the barriers posed by poverty.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
<p>2.3 Is the Authority working effectively with the right people and partners to address the barriers facing groups or communities that are underrepresented visitors to the National Park?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2.3.1 Has the Authority identified who it needs to involve in designing and delivering its work? • 2.3.2 Is the Authority effectively involving the full diversity of the population? • 2.3.3 Is the Authority working with the right partners? • 2.3.4 Is the body collaborating effectively? • 2.3.5 Is the Authority learning lessons from how it works with others? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Authority demonstrates the value of National Parks for health and wellbeing and their role to help reduce social exclusion and alleviation of the barriers posed by poverty by contributing towards evidence-based policy and practice. • The Authority tailors opportunities for all people in Wales to benefit from the natural environment and landscape features of National Parks. • The Authority works with the right people, organisations and communities to design inclusive services that encourage access for all. • The Authority effectively involves the full diversity of the population in developing its programmes of work to ensure everyone is provided with an equal opportunity to access and use the National Park. • The Authority is open to challenge and learning to ensure its services are fit for purpose and delivering what is intended.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
<p>2.4 Has the Authority invested sufficient resources so it can deliver long-term and preventative benefits?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2.4.1 Has the Authority set aside sufficient resources to encourage access and use of the national park by underrepresented people and communities? • 2.4.2 Does the Authority understand the long-term resource implications? • 2.4.3 Is the Authority allocating resources to deliver better outcomes over the long term? • 2.4.4 Has the Authority conducted demographic modelling to ensure resources are appropriately targeted to attract underrepresented groups in the future? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Authority has set aside sufficient resources to improve access and encourage people to access and use the National Park. • The Authority reviews its use of resources to ensure that it is able to target future allocations on underrepresented visitor groups and communities. • The Authority has conducted demographic modelling to ensure resources are appropriately targeted to attract underrepresented groups in the future.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
<p>2.5 Is the Authority monitoring, evaluating and reviewing progress?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2.5.1 Is the Authority drawing on qualitative and quantitative information to measure the impact of its work? • 2.5.2 Do Authority members effectively scrutinise performance? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailoring opportunities for all people in Wales to benefit from the natural environment and landscape features of National Parks. • The Authority has developed a suite of appropriate and relevant performance measures/metrics that enable it to judge how it is improving access and use of the national park by underrepresented groups and communities. • The data the Authority uses allows it to demonstrate the positive impact of people accessing the National Park on people's wellbeing and social outcomes; impact on poverty; and impact on health. • The Authority monitors and evaluates performance on a regular basis and takes corrective actions as a result of its review work.



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