

Section 7.1a

Title: Landscape & Nature

1. Overview

This sub section will seek to describe the local environment, the landscape and nature, within the Blaenau Gwent. It will look at its assets, challenges and how opportunities can utilise this space in ways which further enhance the wellbeing of the people in the area. This section has been developed collaboratively with partners and the public and is presented as a draft for consultation purposes.

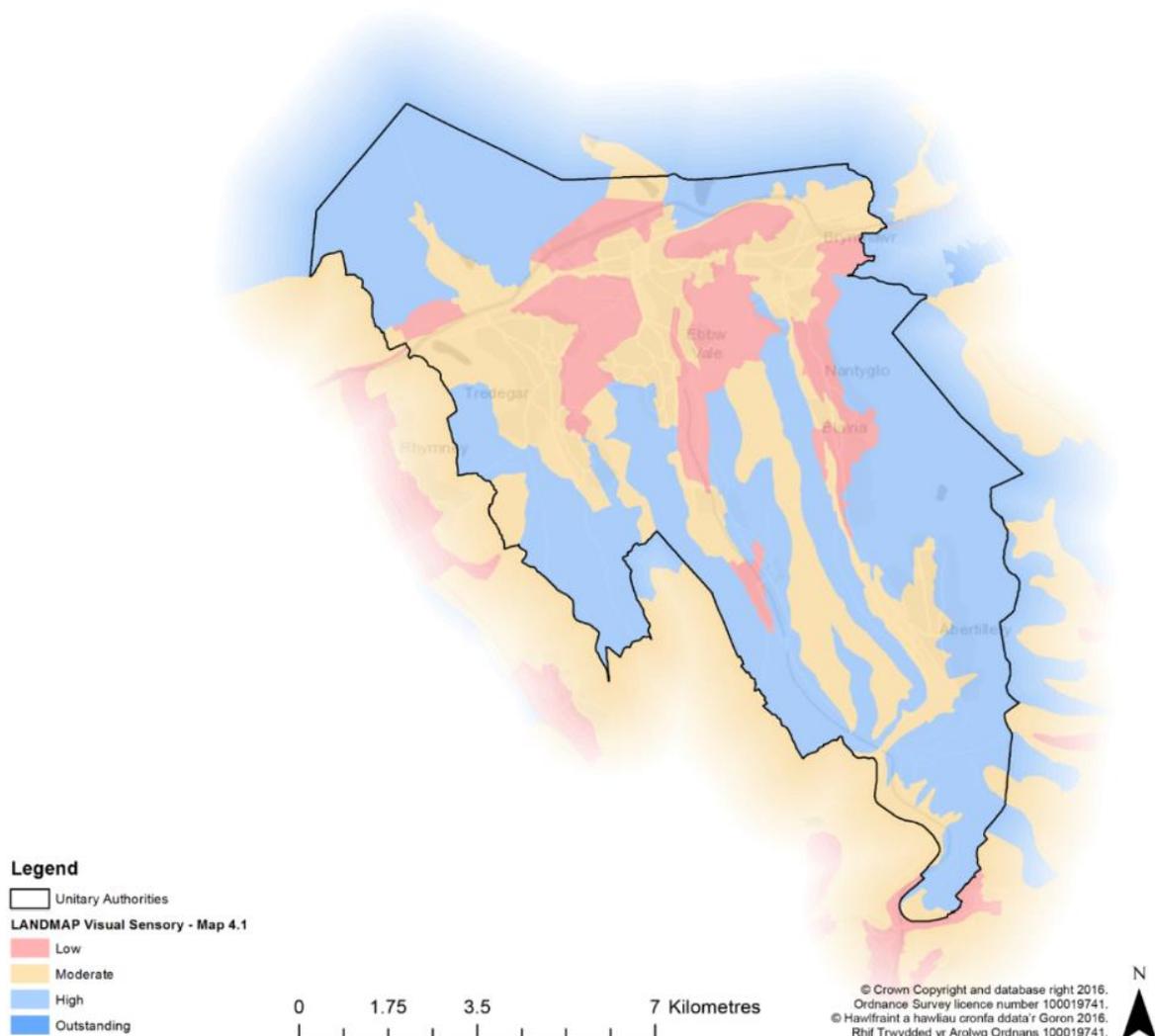
The environment provides places and opportunities for access and enjoyment. This entices healthy lifestyles and reduces stress. There is also an economic value as destinations for visitors as well and place for communities to make a living. Each year the landscapes of Wales are worth £2,870 million from tourism, £385 Million from agriculture and nearly £500 million from forest-based industries, as well as storing 410 million tonnes of carbon. (Natural Resources Wales (NRW) 2016).

2. Story Behind the Data and Related Research

Landscape

People relate landscapes as place to live work and enjoy recreationally. They contribute to our sense of place identity, well-being and quality of life.

Landscapes reflect the complex diversity, nature and state of range of natural resources, human influences, and land use decisions. It is a useful lens within which to explore interactions between people, environment and economic activity (NRW 2016b).



Map 1. Perceived quality of the landscape using the LANDMAP Visual Sensory tool.

Our experience and interaction with the landscape can have a positive effect on our health and mental well-being. Attractive landscapes, cultural heritage, natural beauty, and tranquil settings all provide opportunities and benefits for the well-being of communities, recreation, tourism and other economic activities.

Much of the landscape of Blaenau Gwent is made up of a series of valleys with high, open, rounded ridges, including Mynydd Bedwellte, Cefn Manmoel and Mynydd Carn-y-Cefn. These define and separate the main north-south valleys of the Sirhowy, Ebbw Fach and Ebbw Fawr rivers. The uplands are open moorland with stone walling, remnants of quarrying and criss-crossed with footpaths. They are wild and remote with attractive, panoramic views.

The main valleys are narrow and steep sided with conifer forest, areas of ancient semi-natural woodlands and historic industrial settlements. The smaller side valleys are often tranquil and a mixture of farmland and conifer forests. The gentle plateau and slopes of the lower valleys are attractive and tranquil with small pasture field and distinctive hedges and good local footpath network.

The valleys broaden their heads and include accessible cycleway and parks, such as The Garden Festival Park, woodland and nature reserves. These are often on reclaimed industrial land. The shallow basin at the heads of the valleys includes the towns of Tredegar and Brynmawr. The land rises to the exposed moorland slopes of Mynydd Llangynidr and Llangatwg. The moors are open access land with views of the Brecon Beacons. They are peaceful being away from the A465 main road corridor.

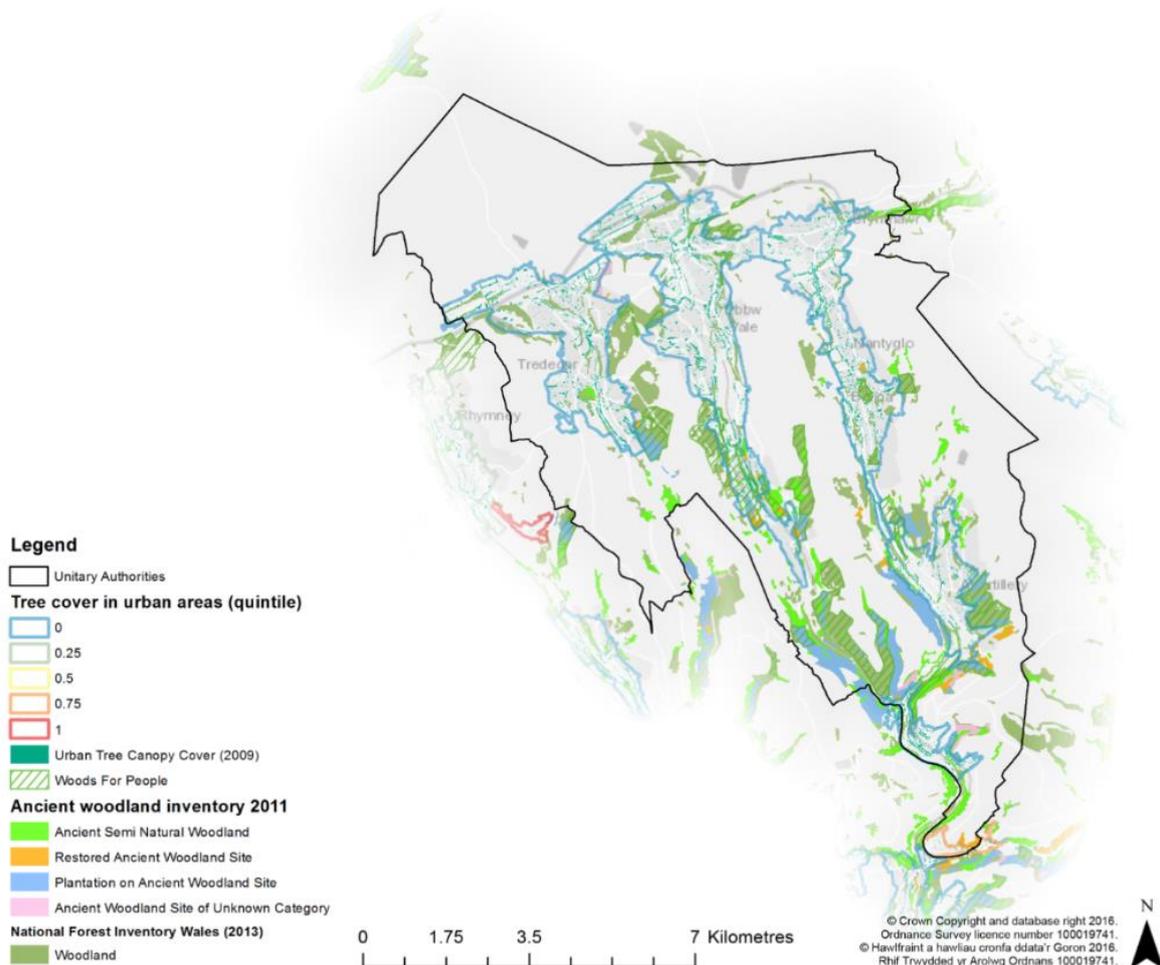
The upland pastoral valleys of the Nant Trefil includes a working quarry, reservoir and historic industrial features and attractive views across the upland landscape.

Many of Blaenau Gwent's landscape characteristics are unique and could be valued more. It can provide an important link to our sense of pride, culture and identity. The future trend for the landscape is that is

can be considered to be under threat from development. Landscape should be developed in a way that does not diminish its value to well-being and where possible changes should enhance it.

Forest and woods

Wales is one of the least wooded countries in Europe - 14% coverage compared to EU average of 37% (Woodland Trust 2011). However, Blaenau Gwent is one of the most wooded countries in Wales, accounting for 22.5% of land use. This includes small areas of broadleaf woodland and upland conifer woodlands which are both close to communities.



Map 2. Extent of woodland cover in Blaenau Gwent including ancient woodlands, which are the most important for biodiversity, plantations and urban trees. (NRW 2016b)

Woodlands and trees provide a variety of benefits to well-being. They help regulate our climate provide income and jobs from timber and other activities, store carbon, contribute to reducing flooding. They help produce, protect and enrich soils. Trees improve air quality, and regulate pest and diseases. They play a major role in pollination, soil formation, and nutrient cycling and oxygen production. All of these ecosystem services are vital in supporting well-being.

Trees also contribute to our health. Mind (2013) have shown that there are significant positive associations between mental and physical well-being and increased trees and access to greenspace in urban areas.

In the Area, 590 hectares of the Welsh Government's Woodland Estate (WGWE) is managed by Natural Resources Wales. This is approximately 5% of the land area. These publically owned forests present opportunities to improve the community's health and wellbeing, along with opportunities for increased tourism, better biodiversity and water and flood management. However, much of the woodland suffers from anti-social behaviour including fly-tipping, illegal use by off-road motorcyclists, and arson.

It is also needs to be noted that Blaenau Gwent is currently within the Control Disease Zone (CDZ) for *Phytophthora Ramorum*, a disease affecting larch trees. Larch trees form a high proportion of woodlands in the area and its removal is having an effect on the landscape.

While forest industries are worth nearly £500 million, we still import of our softwood and hardwood timbers. Forecast of future timber production in Wales shows a drop in availability from current levels unless we bring more areas into production and increase our woodland cover.

Agriculture

Agriculture also significantly shapes the landscape of Blaenau Gwent. There are approximately 300 farming businesses within the area, of which hill farming is the predominant type. Sheep are mainly grazed on the uplands on commons. Where cattle are grazed they usually comprise less than one third of the livestock units and are raised as beef herds. Smaller commons tend to have a mix of farm types with more part-time operations, while the larger commons tend to support larger permanent farms. A variety of land management tasks are carried out on the commons, with widespread participation in the Welsh Government's Glastir Commons scheme.

Urban

Landscape does not just mean expansive views of the countryside. It can also mean the urban landscape. In fact the urban landscape and how it is perceived can have a significant affect well-being.

The quality parks and green space can particularly impact on well-being. This was mentioned many times during engagement with the public. Bedwellty Park, Bryn Bach Park and Festival Park are well liked as they were mentioned in a positive light a number of times. Unfortunately, people did identify issues such as lack of access to urban green space and poor maintenance of the space there is, in particular Eugene Cross Park. Better playgrounds and improved disabled access were also requested.

At present 65% of the population in Blaenau Gwent live within 400m of their nearest accessible green space. The Local Development Plan (LDP) proposes that this should increase to 80% by 2021. This is to be achieved by creating new, accessible green spaces, enhancing existing green space for biodiversity and removing barriers that prevent current access to natural Green Space. (Blaenau Gwent LDP)

There are numerous research papers that demonstrate the value of green infrastructure to a population's general health and wellbeing.

Sheffield Hallam University produced a comprehensive in depth report regarding 'Green Infrastructure and its contribution to economic growth', produced for DEFRA and Natural England in July 2013.

Trees are essential element of our urban environment. They deliver a wide range of benefits to help sustain wildlife promote well-being and support economic benefits (e.g. creating more attractive places to live and work). We see them all around us on public and private land along streets roads and rivers. Table 1 shows the urban tree cover. We see them in civic, residential, retail and business areas, in parks, cemeteries, schools and also in private gardens.

Urban Area	Tree cover (Percentage)
Aberbeeg & Llanhilleth	28.8%
Abertillery	26.8%
Brynmawr, Nantyglo, Blaina	20.6%
Ebbw Vale & Cwm	22.1%
Swffryd	11.1%
Tredegar	20.9%

Table 1. Urban tree cover in Blaenau Gwent. (NRW 2014)

They are among the most versatile and cost-effective natural assets that planners, policy makers, businesses and communities can use to raise the quality of Welsh towns and cities.

Urban trees can also impact mental well-being (Mind 2013) and the physical health of communities. Lovasi et al (2008) showed that children living in areas with more street trees have a lower prevalence of asthma.

It is clear that antisocial behaviour is of concern to residents. Litter and fly tipping are issues that have been regularly raised by members of the public during engagement. These issues are also highlighted by figure shown in Table 2. These are recorded complaint about issue that have an impact on the environment and the well-being of local communities.

The table shows reductions in some environmental impacts e.g. dog fouling. Unfortunately, during 2015/16 incidents of illicit fly tipping have

increased by 12% in 2015/16 and abandoned vehicle incidents have increased dramatically from 81 incidents to 222, an increase of 174%.

Complaint category	2014/2015	2015/2016	Diff	%Change
Illicit Tipping	557	621	64	11.5%
Straying dogs	378	308	-70	-18.5%
Noise domestic	300	256	-44	-14.7%
Abandoned Vehicle	81	222	141	174.1%
Dog fouling Enforcement	162	131	-31	-19.1%
Noise dog	135	112	-23	-17.0%
Litter	33	31	-2	-6.1%
Noise Vehicles	23	17	-6	-26.1%
Uncontrolled animals (Straying animals)	2	7	5	250.0%
Noise other animals	13	4	-9	-69.2%
Noise Car alarm	0	2	2	200.0%
Noise road works (Construction/Demolition Sites)	6	1	-5	-83.3%
Noise Industrial	10	1	-9	-90.0%
Total ASB	1700	1713	13	0.8%

Table 2. Complaints of antisocial behaviour.
(Source: Gwent Police Strategic Assessment 2016, using BGCBC data).

Nature

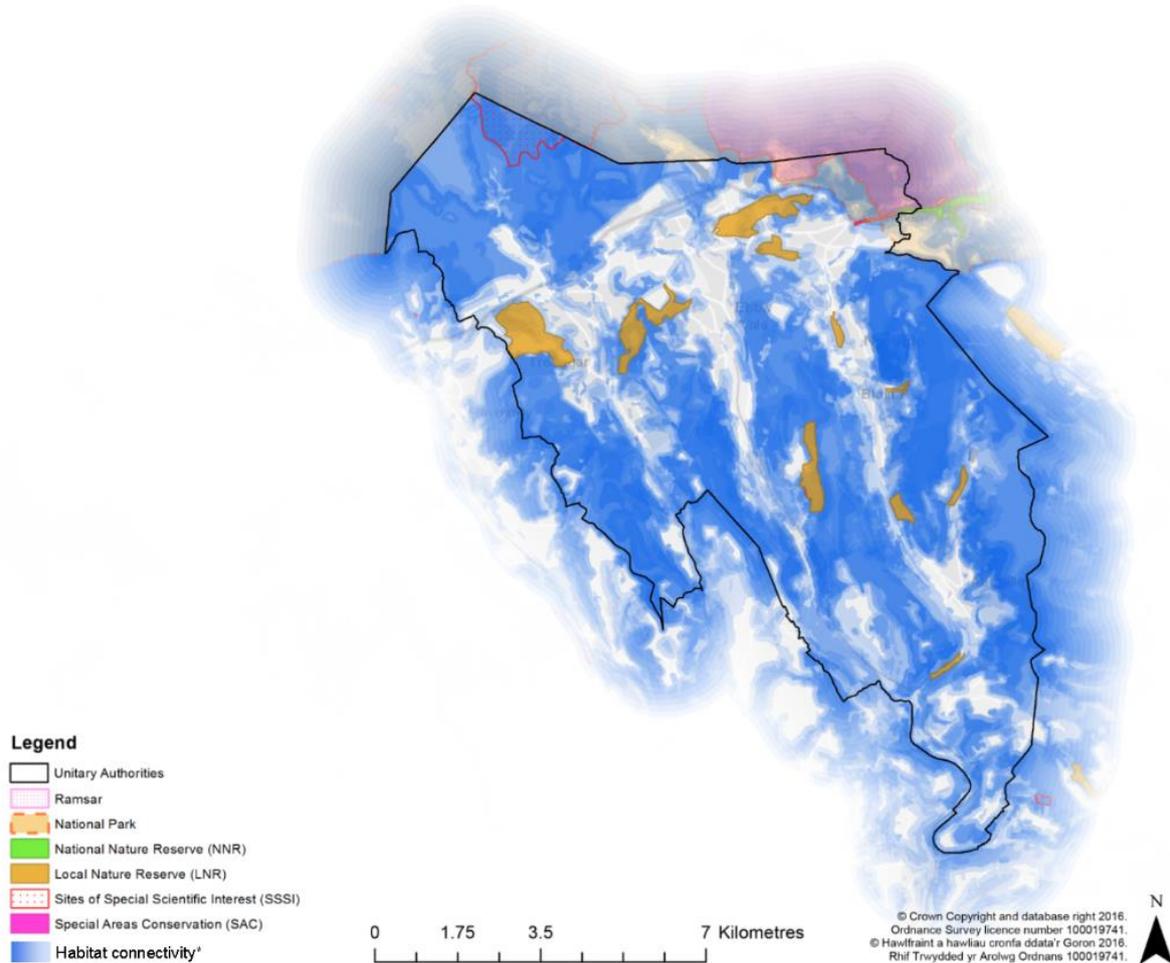
Nature, the animals, plants and other organisms and the habitats they live in - provide a wide range of functional roles. This includes many of the benefits that society relies on, such as productive soils, clean water, and pollination.

Nature reserves were highlighted numerous times during the public engagement. There is an appreciation for them as outdoor areas for enjoyment and relaxation. It was also recognised that more needs to be done to protect and enhance them. This includes looking at replacing larch plantations with broadleaf trees. Unfortunately it was also recognised that they are places of antisocial behaviour, such as fly tipping.

Nature sites, particularly those on common land or open access land, are a community environmental asset provide access and recreation opportunities. They provide a connection between people and their environment. This contributes to physical and mental wellbeing. (Mind 2013). They can also be a fundamental part of the local landscape and its cultural heritage.

There is a wide range of habitats in Blaenau Gwent. The more significant habitats include four Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), seven Local Nature Reserves, 137 Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC), one Special Area of Conservation, and two historic landscapes. In most cases, designated sites are privately owned and have a multi-functional land use, such as livestock grazing. There are currently no plans to designate more sites in Blaenau Gwent.

It has been estimated that protected nature site contribute £128 million annually to the Welsh economy (DEFRA 2011). Protected nature sites also make a vital contribution to our economic prosperity and are places for scientific research.



Map 3. Designated wildlife sites and habitat connectivity in Blaenau Gwent. (NRW 2016b)

There are several types of designations – local, national and international. Many of these overlap but the basic, fundamental building blocks of designated sites under UK law is the Site of Special Scientific Interest. Special Area of Conservation is an international designation.

The southernmost slopes of Mynydd Llangyndr and Mynydd Llangatwg SSSIs extend into the north of Blaenau Gwent and are within the Brecon Beacons National Park.

Mynydd Llangatwg is a mixture of upland habitats including wet heath, bog, and limestone and geological features including caves. The mountain hosts important populations of rare plants such as Whitebeam and Hawks weed. The site is also part of the Usk Bat Special Area of Conservation (SAC) with important winter hibernacula.

Mynydd Llangyndr is noted for geology – Karstic geomorphology – but also has a similar range of habitats and species as Mynydd Llangatwg including wet heath, bog, and limestone.

Cwm Merddog Woodlands SSSI (known locally as Silent Valley Woods) is a beech forest at the north-western limit of its European range and at a relatively high altitude.

The Brynmawr Sections is a Geological SSSI for its visible coal measure strata.

Connectivity is important for ecosystems. This is the degree to which wildlife can move in the landscape. This is important if species are to survive and adapt to change. Map 3 shows where connectivity is present. The darker the shading the higher the connectivity for a range of wildlife. This reflects the extent and the diversity of wildlife habitats within the landscapes. A range of habitats in Blaenau Gwent rely on connectivity along the valley sides and rivers. The area is also important for upland wetland and heathland habitats connectivity.

An ecosystem's resilience is also important. This means how well an ecosystem can deal with disturbances, either by resisting them or

adapting to them. Resilient ecosystems are able to carry on delivering ecosystem services and benefits despite these disturbances.

Resilience is considered in terms of diversity of species and habitats, their extent, their condition, their connectivity to other similar sites and their ability to adapt to changes, such as climate change. However, many habitats in Wales and Blaenau Gwent are in decline (NRW 2016) and we could lose these eco-services. In Blaenau Gwent, some ecosystems have problems with one or more of these criteria that contribute to resilience. This means that their capacity to provide ecosystems services and benefits may be at risk.

3. What Do We Know from Engagement?



During the Blaenau Gwent We Want Engagement exercise, the partnership undertook and attended numerous engagement activities and events throughout the borough to gather people's views.

Residents also took part via the Blaenau Gwent We Want Facebook page and partnership websites. Links to an online questionnaire were also distributed to many residents known to the partnership, such as members of the Blaenau Gwent Citizen Panel.

Residents were encouraged via the methods above to answer a range of questions that sought to capture:

- Citizen values, aspirations and priorities;
- Citizen needs – insight into the needs they and their communities encounter within daily life and what the best solutions may be and
- Citizen assets – what people can and already contribute themselves such as self-care, citizen and community action and volunteering.

Q1. What do you think is special about BG?

Q2. What things are important to you to live well and enjoy life?

Q3. What would make BG a better place?

Q4. What can you do to help make BG a better place?

Approximately 1,000 residents were engaged with (across all groups) during the engagement phase.

Environment was identified as being one of the things participants recognised through public engagement as being an asset or special about Blaenau Gwent. It was raised in 21% of comments received from the 1,000 resident (across all groups) that took part.

During the public consultation it became clear there is an appreciation of the landscape, especially for the walking opportunities it provides. However, issues were identified - accessibility and path maintenance, signage and information boards, and antisocial behaviour, including fly tipping and motorbikes.

During the engagement with residents, a number of people said there should be space given to community to look after and the formation of community allotments to help alleviate food poverty. These could give a local community a sense of pride and also reduce food miles.

For 9% of residents, the top priority for making Blaenau Gwent a better place is tidy and clean streets. However, it is also worth noting that helping to tackle this issue was one of the top five areas respondents felt they had a role to play in improving the situation. Other community-related requests included an increase in police presence (4% of respondents), hanging baskets schemes to improve the look of neighbourhoods and more seating in public areas.

4. What Does This Tell Us About Well Being in Blaenau Gwent?

We are fortunate that throughout Blaenau Gwent there are a number of groups that taken genuine interest and an active role in managing local green space. These act either independently on specific site or collectively over a much wider area, as is the case with the Ebbw Fach Trail and its partners. This consists of thirteen individual community

groups that individually help to manage sites such as Beaufort Ponds and Woodlands, Parc Nanty Waun, Trevor Rowson site, Roseheyworth Community Woodland, Cwmcelyn Pond, Cwmtillery Lake, West side T&R group, Grannys Wood etc.

Such groups have a strong track record of protecting and managing green spaces within the Ebbw Fach Valley, working with Blaenau Gwent and a range of other organisations, such as Gwent Wildlife Trust, Groundwork Wales and Keep Wales Tidy. This successful approach to managing green space has been rewarded through the successful accreditation of a number of Green Flags.

For the future, it is essential that this successful working relationship continues to receive support, help and advice from all PSB partners.

In addition there are numerous other groups that tend to operate with a more isolated focus. Ideally the Ebbw Fach Approach could be adopted within the Ebbw Fawr and Sirhowy Valleys in a more collaborative Borough wide approach.

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