Summary for Eastern Valleys Landscape Profile

The Eastern Valleys Landscape Panel (EVLP) was formed by a partnership of local stakeholders (working group) to begin to help NRW pull together a place-based narrative around 4 key questions that will feed into the wider South East Area statement:

1. Ecosystems & Natural Resources: What have we got, and what is special and significant about them in the landscape?
2. How priority habitats connect across South East Area landscapes and the importance of this for resilience?
3. What is driving the current management of each ecosystem and its component natural resources? Are the drivers of current management also enabling the provision of ecosystem services and supporting wellbeing in this landscape?
4. Where we want to build resilience within each ecosystem and why?

This summary should be read in accompaniment with the content of the web based ESRI storymap, particularly the spreadsheet of partner responses. This documents the process, evidence-base, and conclusions of the panel in developing this profile.

However, at this stage we would like to caveat this document with an acknowledgement that this must be considered as the start of the process, and is by no means all encompassing, nor have all the relevant stakeholders yet had chance to fully input. Nevertheless, it does represent a fair sample of the views and themes of a broad discussion centred around a concept of building "Ecological Resilience in the Eastern Valleys".

Initial partner consultation yielded a desire to explore three key themes in more detail as it was felt these would leverage the greatest gain for Ecosystem Resilience.

1) How to influence CAP/post CAP support and central government funding
2) How to influence the planning process through LDPs
3) How to influence PSB Wellbeing priorities and LA green infrastructure assessments.

A huge variety of environmental datasets and specialist national supporting materials were provided by NRW to support the local process, and were considered during this piece of work (see Maps & Evidence). The panel members recognise that a lot of weight has been given to the concept of habitat connectivity mapping. This is not without its limitations particularly with regards to lack of urban land coverage and limited data on quality and trends. However, as a panel we felt this provided the best way of conveying and discussing the topic Ecosystem Resilience and provides a useful framework to highlight opportunities and priorities. It allows both development of specific projects in specific locations but also aids the influence of changes in behaviour, policy or funding, that allow larger scale changes and associated improvements to Ecosystem Resilience to occur. 0020

What is presented by the panel here is not complete; the panel acknowledges certain sectors have not yet been well represented at panel meetings or through other communications. This includes forestry, agricultural and angling sectors. The challenge of enabling input from national or regional

NGOs has also been raised – resources are not sufficient for many organisations (e.g. SEWBReC, Llais y Goedwig) to attend multiple AS meetings or indeed multiple landscape panels. As a result, there are likely to be gaps and missing links, and inevitably the wider consultation becomes, the longer the process will take but the richer the conversations will be.

It is important to recognise the level of existing knowledge and expertise amongst the partners and the successful work that has already happened/is happening on the ground. There are many existing examples of collaborative good practice, tools and successful partnerships centred around improving Ecosystem Resilience across the Valleys e.g. Natural Resource Management Plan for SE Wales Uplands, Green Infrastructure Action Plan for Pollinators in South-east Wales, the Valleys Regional Park and Local Nature Partnerships and Biodiversity Plans and finally the Nature Recovery Plan

This profile looks to build on and highlight the importance of this work, not repeat it. It is essential that the future South East Area statement reflects these approaches and priorities.

Theme 1: CAP/Post CAP support and central government funding.

Although heavily populated in places, much of this landscape area is rural. Many examples of reduced Ecosystem Resilience given by this panel relate to both under-grazing and land abandonment, and conversely over-grazing, particularly by sheep. Brexit and future changes in agricultural policies have potential to have huge implications for much of the landscape and provides both many risks and opportunities.

Undoubtedly not unique to the Eastern Valleys, many of the Area Statements outcomes could be met through incentivised funding and resources to farmers, commoners and other landowners. This landscape panel highlights the need for the skills, resources, funding and expertise to enable this work and to develop the opportunities in a truly collaborative and partnership manner.

Many of the opportunities and priorities highlighted by this panel will require long-term connected funding streams across government departments, agencies, NGO's and the private sector. It is recognised that given the current level of uncertainty, it is essential longer-term objectives and resource agreements transcend political timescales.

Theme 2: Influence the planning process through LDP's (Local Development Plans)

Land use planning decisions have been identified as one of the primary factors affecting Ecosystem Resilience in the Eastern Valleys. To achieve the sustainable management of natural resources, it is essential that land use decisions are no longer evaluated just based on measures of economic progress or provision of housing quotas, but fully reflect the benefits of the ecosystem and wellbeing approach.

The panel identified several questions in relation to this, including:

- How will we be able to use the Area Statement to highlight natural environment priorities and influence planning decisions?
- How will we be able to use the Habitat Connectivity Mapping, and other NRW data like SCANN, Wellbeing mapping, etc to inform development & have weight in decision making?
- Can these evidence sources be used more strategically? And how can we strengthen the importance given to areas identified as key connections?

Another key issue of concern is the level of support given to the series of SINCs within the landscape area. The boundaries of many of the SINCs that lie within the Eastern Valleys incorporate key areas of ecological connectivity and form core parts of the ecological networks e.g. for woodland and grassland, but they are often forgotten about. These secondary tier sites, are some of the area's most vital habitat connections and opportunities for building resilience. Recognition of their importance and protection from loss through planning development is essential. Support of Local Authority Ecologists by NRW through planning consultation is crucial in this process.

Theme 3: Influence Public Service Board, Wellbeing plan priorities & LA GI Assessments

To maximise the social, economic and environmental potential of the Eastern Valleys' natural and cultural heritage assets it is important to fully engage its residents, businesses and visitors. Area Statements must be fully integrated into local Wellbeing planning. If this concept of giving local autonomy to landscape panels is to work, what is the mechanism for our views and input to shape and feature in the discussions and objective setting of the three PSB areas this spatial profile covers?

Nowhere else in Wales do as many deprived communities back on to as much publicly managed or leased land e.g. Welsh Government woodland estate, open access land, LA's, local greenspace etc.

The panel identified huge opportunities to better manage and use the natural assets of the region to help improve health and wellbeing through not only better access to countryside e.g. walking, recreation etc, but also health protection and improvement e.g. water quality, pollution mitigation, flooding, waste, environmental crime, climate mitigation etc.

During the production of the Story Map the panel relied heavily on outputs from the local wellbeing plans, and the wider evidence based produced for the Valleys Regional Park to highlight priorities.

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The Valleys communities have some of the highest levels of accessible natural greenspace on their doorsteps, yet also suffer with some of the worst socio-economic and health statistics in western Europe in terms of deprivation, and things like childhood obesity and adult mental health. The panel highlighted opportunities to better connect walking trails, cycle networks, outdoor recreation, access to community woodlands, skill development and active travel.

It was noted however that there can often be conflict between managing the pressures and needs of urbanisation and deciding where and how to begin building Ecological Resilience in the landscape.

Landscape profile narrative:

One of the obvious features shown by the connectivity mapping is how incredibly well connected the Eastern Valleys contrast with the rest of the SE area. These maps show just how extensive the areas of various types of semi-natural habitat are, but they do not provide any information around the quality or trend of management. Anecdotally, it was felt by all that many that we are just currently managing decline with significant cuts to staff resources and funding over recent years.

Nevertheless, there remains a huge opportunity in the Eastern Valleys for us to use these maps to consider why these breaks in connectivity exist and how they can be re-connected providing benefits for both people and nature.

Habitat quality influences the ability of ecosystems to provide resilience and to provision the associated ecosystem services, including carbon storage, water storage, flood management and

mitigation, and health & wellbeing. An understanding of the quality of our semi-natural habitats and practical action to improve condition are crucial to building Ecosystem Resilience in this landscape area.

The SE Upland Wales Natural Resource Management Plan identifies numerous reasons for why habitat quality is poor in the uplands and provides useful toolkits and case studies. Land abandonment and planning development pressures are amongst the primary impacts on habitat condition in the lowlands.

There are of course some obvious 'hotspots' of high quality habitat with in the Eastern Valleys, and the panel identified and discussed many of these e.g. Aberbargoed Grasslands (the only urban National Nature Reserve in the whole of Wales), Cwm Merddog SSSI, Waunafon Bog, Blaenavon World Heritage Site and many more.

However, there are also some less obvious examples such as the brownfield Colliery spoil habitats, and their rich diverse flora and fauna. The fantastic work done by the Colliery Spoil Biodiversity Initiative must be commended for raising the profile of these vital habitats of the South Wales Valleys.

As a panel we need NRW/WG to provide a central steer on the use and quality assurance of the evidence base utilised in the production of the Area Statements. Given the need to influence things like LDP's and post CAP central government funding it is imperative that this is methodologically sound, accessible by all partners and of sufficient quality to make the statements/arguments required, particularly with regards to the planning process. As a panel we recognised the balance between national, top down evidence (usually from government agencies, research institutes etc) and that gained from extensive consultation with grassroots partners and stakeholders.

The panel has identified the need for Ecosystem Resilience improvement at two scales; firstly local, discrete projects to improve connections or quality at specific locations; secondly landscape scale projects which either cover larger geographic areas or are not specifically tied to a geographic area and could be implemented across different parts of the landscape.

The panel has collated many suggestions, ideas and comments at both scales. These are captured in the under-pinning spreadsheet, and mapping work. However, there has not be a prioritisation of these, but we have tried to group them under the ONS habitat typology and the Gwent key themes.

We as a panel, would welcome further discussion with NRW/WG on how this could be achieved, or indeed if it needs doing before progression of the next stage of the wider South East Area Statement?

In this next section we've provided examples of where Ecosystem Resilience could be improved.

Examples of specific actions to improve Ecosystem Resilience in the Eastern Valleys

The SE Wales Upland Natural Resource Management Plan captures in detail ways in which Ecosystem Resilience (and links to health and wellbeing) can be improved in the upland areas of the valleys and is a key document and approach endorsed by this landscape panel.

The Eastern Valleys Landscape area supports probably the largest percentage of SE Wales' semi-natural habitat. This is clearly shown on the Habitat Connectivity maps and is made up of a mix of semi-natural grassland, heathland and woodland, with smaller amounts of bog and fen. Semi-natural grasslands – typically acid grassland is the most common grassland type, and whilst this can be of good quality and of interest (for example it can be species-rich, and can support species of interest, such as diverse waxcap assemblages), extensive areas of species-poor acid grassland are indicative of over-grazing and mismanagement.

Solution: Many areas of acid grassland are better considered as potential areas of heath, scrub or even woodland; ecological improvement of grassland condition, and/or reversion to other broad habitat types would contribute to reducing flood risk, reduced soil erosion and compaction, to Carbon storage and climate breakdown mitigation, have benefits for pollinators, and would make an important contribution to WG targets for increased tree cover across Wales.

Across the SE landscape, not just in the uplands, an overall re-balance of grazing is required both to reduce over-grazing, particularly by sheep, and to prevent under-grazing and abandonment in the lowlands which is currently resulting in some of the best grassland sites (many Phase II grassland sites) scrubbing over. Incentives to encourage low intensity cattle grazing and other suitable management interventions to prevent abandonment and to retain and enhance good quality grassland habitat are essential and considered areas of opportunity.

Common land: is a large and important component of the Eastern Valleys. Future management of our commons is key to ensuring Ecosystem Resilience across this landscape area. This should include:

- Provision of incentives for appropriate management,
- WG taking responsibility for licensing work on common land,
- Increased liaison with commoners and landowners
- Mechanisms to address anti-social behaviour and crime, particularly aspects that prevent positive management being undertaken.

Hedgerows: As well as providing useful connections for species such as dormice, bats, hedgehogs, birds etc., these habitats, together with un-ploughed margins also provide a refuge for things like earthworms, soil fungi and other soil improvers, as well as assisting in pest control and providing nectaring opportunities for bees, butterflies, hoverflies and other pollinators. Allowing the development, maintenance and improvement of hedgerows (reducing frequency and timing of flailing etc) would improve quality and connectivity in many places through the lowlands of the Eastern Valleys. This would help build resilience for farming and production, as well as biodiversity.

Post-industrial sites: Appreciation of the value of brownfield, post-industrial sites across the landscape area is key. Colliery spoil and other post-industrial landscapes are often important for their biological diversity and for the range of habitats they support, particularly open ground habitats and the range of specialist fauna and flora associated with them. Brownfield sites are often subject to planning development or reclamation. Even schemes intended for ecological gain, such as tree planting, can have negative impacts on these sites. A full assessment of the importance of these habitats, to provide a good evidence base for decision making is required**.**

Beech woodlands: The Eastern Valleys supports the greatest extent of native beech woodland in Wales and represents the extreme edges of its UK and European native distribution. The beech woodlands in both the southern (around Caerphilly) and northern (around Cwm Merddog SSSI/Silent Valley LNR) sections of the Eastern Valleys landscape are also key areas of woodland connectivity in the region. They contribute to connections to other landscape areas within SE, and to other Area Statement areas. For example, important woodland connections link the Caerphilly woodlands to Cardiff Beech Woods SAC. Maintenance of these woodland connections and improvements of condition of the woodlands themselves, along with conversion of plantation to semi-natural broadleaf woodland in this area would increase Ecosystem Resilience.

There are important west-east woodland connections at the southern extreme of the Eastern Valleys Landscape Area, from Caerphilly Mountain, across Wern Ddu and Draethen. Increased conversion from conifer to broadleaf (e.g. Coed-parc-y-van and of coniferous woodland south of Cwm Merddog

SSSI) would improve the condition of the connections and build Ecosystem Resilience. This would have benefits for many species such as Dormice, Greater Horseshoe Bats, Hawfinch, & even Great Crested Newts.

Further discussion on increasing woodland cover and the mechanisms for how we achieve this are required. Representation from the forestry sector on this panel was limited due to tight timescales and staff resources but should these panels continue it will be essential to involve a wider stakeholder group. Whilst expansion of woodland cover is generally seen as a positive contribution for resilience and provision of many ecosystem services, further consideration should be given to the following principles:

- Where possible encouragement of conversion from conifer to broadleaf woodland,
- Natural establishment of woodland through reduced grazing pressure
- No planting on areas of identified Biodiversity Action Plan habitat
- Alternative woodland establishment e.g. natural regeneration as opposed to planting.

River corridors: The river corridors of the valley bottoms provide key north south connections through this landscape area. Maintenance of WFD 'good' status, or where necessary improvement to 'good' is important to provide suitable ecological conditions for fish, invertebrates, birds and otters. Appropriate management of riverine habitats and their surroundings, along with sensitive and appropriate development are key to enabling provision of flood mitigation and associated water storage. Currently many rivers and streams are heavily modified with limited access to old floodplains. Fly-tipping and littering is common, as are misconnections of the drainage systems which lead to pollution events.

Site-specific locations where Ecosystem Resilience can be improved:

Waunafon Bog is a wetland site that occupies the northern end of the Afon Lwyd valley. It is the largest peatland in the Gwent Area of Search and is 'an area of upland-edge blanket' or perhaps 'intermediate bog that has developed on a watershed'. It supports several communities that are considered 'rare' within the region. The peat deposits that have built up on the bog over centuries are a unique repository of the environmental history of the Blaenavon area and are considered to be a nationally significant palaeoecological resource.

This large, upland-edge peatland is of extremely high conservation value. Much of the vegetation is in desperate need of grazing and is therefore in suboptimal condition because of the general dominance of *Molinia* and *Juncus effusus*. Appropriate management and better overall habitat condition would improve the biodiversity value and improve capacity for water storage to mitigate flooding and Carbon sequestration. The palaeoecological records add to the cultural and historical interest of this site. The panel highlighted this area as a key opportunity, priority and indeed a risk should we fail to protect and enhance it for the future generations. A variety of solutions have been proposed ranging from some form of protected site designation, to various models of partnership and collaboration with the stakeholders. What is needed to progress further is a detailed discussion with senior NRW and WG decision makers about the best way forward, not just for Waunafon but the wider surrounding Blaenavon World Heritage site which supports a wide range of important habitats and species.

Aberbargoed Grasslands SAC/SSSI/NNR is one of the most important areas of semi-natural grassland in SE Area. This site acts as a feeder source from which species can re-colonise habitat in the wider landscape. It supports the most eastern most population of Marsh Fritillary Butterflies in South Wales. It is essential that this site is restored to favourable condition and that it is better connected to

surrounding areas of marshy grassland /Marsh Fritillary habitat to improve strategic grassland Ecosystem Resilience in the Eastern Valleys.

Opportunities for improved connectivity exist due south (towards Maes-y-cwmmer/Nant-y-twyn and Heol Ddu nr Wyllie) and to the north west (to Parc Cwm Darran, where there are historic records, and even over the Heads of the Valleys to link up with populations around Merthyr/Hirwaun). Better condition of the land within Penllwyn Grasslands SSSI (there is a current example of partnership working between the Fire Service and NRW to improve management of the grassland here and reduce fire risk) and Memorial Park Meadows SSSI is also important. Improved connectivity not only benefits the Marsh Fritillary but also other associated marshy grassland flora and fauna including other notable species such as White Spotted Sable Moth, Tree Pipits, Woodcock and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary.

Silent Valley: This wonderful nature reserve, and the jewel in the crown of Blaenau Gwent comprises two main areas, one owned by Gwent Wildlife Trust, and the other by BGCBC, with GWT managing the whole reserve. It comprises mature woodland with dramatic veteran trees, bracken-covered slopes above, and areas of damp grassland. The Nant Merddog stream, a tributary of the River Ebbw, runs through the woodland. The woodland is the highest beech wood in Britain, and virtually at the western extremity of the natural range of the beech tree, which extends just into Glamorgan, near Merthyr Tydfil. There are huge opportunities for improved habitat connectivity both east to west across the Valleys and indeed north into the Brecon Beacons and the southern urban areas e.g. Carn y Cefn and Cefn yr Arail hill ranges

Conclusions:

All the comments provided by this landscape panel have been collated in the attached spreadsheet. They are grouped around various classifications that allow the data to be broken down and interrogated, and are best read in conjunction with the story map. For example, each panel comment is classified as a 'piece of evidence', an 'opportunity', a 'priority' or a 'risk'. Each comment has been linked to one of the eight ONS habitat types, which enables an ecosystem-based review of the landscape panels comments, and additionally it has been further classified against the 4 questions posed to each panel. Finally, each comment is linked to one of the following Gwent themes, 'Climate Ready Gwent', 'Gwent Green Grid', 'Working Collaboratively' or 'Health and Wellbeing'. However as yet no satisfactory methodology has been developed to aid prioritisation or ranking of these inputs.

Overall the process has thrown up some interesting ideas and proposals and uncovered the need for further collaboration and partnership working to create any momentum. However, this comes with a cost both in terms of staff time, funding and good will of partners, many of whom have contributed to this document in an unpaid and voluntary fashion. For those smaller national NGOs the resource requirements to attend all Area Statement meetings across Wales are simply unworkable.

If the South East Area Statement continues with these landscape panels as an approach, we as the Eastern Valleys would formally request a detailed planning session with senior NRW decision makers around how best to make use of local staff and financial resources to develop these opportunities.

There exists a strong history and legacy of collaborative working to deliver environmental gain among many of the Eastern Valleys partners. Through effective collaboration this panel feels the Eastern Valleys landscape area could become NRW's national exemplar for the implementation for the Welsh Government's flagship Natural Resource Policy and the ethos of SMNR embodied in the new Environment Act.