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Social and economic research
Ymchwil cymdeithasol ac economaidd

Evaluation of the delivery and impact of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund in North Wales

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Acknowledgements

List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full term
C&P	Communities and Place
CCR	Cardiff Capital Region
CJCs	Corporate Joint Committees
CRF	UK Community Renewal Fund
CVS	Community and Voluntary Support
EC	European Community
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds
GFA	Grant Funding Agreement
ITT	Invitation to Tender
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
MI	Management Information
NEET	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
NWEAB	North Wales Economic Ambition Board
P&S	People and Skills
RET	Regional Engagement Team
RIP	Regional Investment Plan
SRO	Senior Responsible Officer
SETs	Strategic Engagement Teams
SLB	Supporting Local Business
TAPI / TAPI 2	Team Around the Young Person
UKSPF	UK Shared Prosperity Fund
VCSE	Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise
WEFO	Welsh European Funding Office
WEST	Wales Essential Skills Toolkit
WIMD	Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation
EW	East Wales

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Wavehill were commissioned in April 2025 to undertake an evaluation of the delivery and impact of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) in North Wales.

A total allocation of £126m was provided by UK government to the North Wales region (which constitutes the six local authorities of Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd, and Wrexham) to implement UKSPF programme delivery in the area for the period April 2022 to March 2025. Each of the six local authorities in North Wales managed its own UKSPF allocation and made local decisions on how to use the funding, but with Cyngor Gwynedd nominated to be the lead authority on behalf of the region.

Local decision-makers worked with their local communities and partners to deliver interventions under three investment priorities:

1) **Communities and Place (C&P):** to enable places to invest to restore their community spaces and relationships and create the foundations for economic development at the neighbourhood-level, to help strengthen the social fabric of communities, supporting in building pride in place.
2) **Supporting Local Business (SLB):** enabling places to fund interventions that support local businesses to thrive, innovate and grow.
3) **People and Skills (P&S):** funding to help reduce the barriers some people face to employment and support them to move towards employment and education. Places could also target funding into skills for local areas to support employment and local growth.

Those three investment priorities comprise the 'core' UKSPF activities. Local authorities were also required to deliver a set of activities under Multiply, which focused on supporting adult numeracy initiatives.

A further £42.4m was allocated to North Wales to implement UKSPF over the 2025/26 transition year. This document is an initial evaluation report which examines the implementation of the Fund in the 2022/23 to 2024/25 period and will be followed by a final report which considers activities in 2025/26 in the Spring of 2026.

Summary of the key findings

The evaluation indicates that the UKSPF programme in North Wales has delivered a wide range of activities and outputs within a challenging context. Overall, the programme achieved a high level of financial performance, with 98% of the allocation spent, although there were variations between investment priorities. Communities and Place interventions accounted for the largest share of expenditure and outputs, while Multiply underperformed relative to its allocation due to limited demand and delivery challenges.

Performance against KPI targets was generally positive, with most indicators met or exceeded. However, the extent of overachievement for some indicators suggests that targets may not always have been set at an appropriate level, and caution is needed in interpreting these results as evidence of impact. Some important outcome indicators, such as job creation and Multiply qualifications, were not fully achieved.

The open call approach enabled local tailoring and strong engagement with established delivery partners, supported by the introduction of Key Funds which widened access for smaller organisations. However, this approach also created administrative pressures and limited opportunities for more strategic, region-wide interventions. The hybrid governance model combining regional coordination with local delivery was perceived to be broadly effective, but capacity constraints and short timescales created bottlenecks in approvals, contracting, and change requests.

Compared to previous EU funding models, UKSPF offered greater flexibility and local autonomy but lacked the long-term certainty and strategic coherence that supported transformational projects under earlier programmes. The compressed delivery window was a recurring challenge, affecting recruitment, procurement, and the ability to plan for sustainability.

Anticipated longer-term effects

It is too early to make definitive statements about long-term impacts, but the evidence reviewed suggests several areas where benefits may continue to emerge:

- **Community assets and pride in place:** Investments in public spaces, cultural facilities, and local amenities have delivered visible improvements in many communities. These changes are likely to contribute to enhanced perceptions of place and increased community engagement, although the durability of these effects will depend on ongoing maintenance and complementary activity.
- **Third-sector capacity:** The programme has enabled some voluntary and community organisations to expand their reach and strengthen their operational capacity. This may improve their resilience and ability to deliver services in the future, though this will require sustained funding and support.
- **Employability and skills:** Many People and Skills interventions targeted individuals furthest from the labour market, including young people at risk of becoming NEET. These projects have provided training and confidence-building activities that could support progression into employment or further learning. However, the short delivery window and reliance on short-term contracts may limit the sustainability of these outcomes without follow-on provision.
- **Business development and decarbonisation:** Support for local businesses, including advice on innovation and decarbonisation, has the potential to contribute to longer-term competitiveness and environmental goals. The scale of this impact is likely to be modest given the relatively small proportion of funding allocated to this priority and the short timeframe for delivery.

Overall, while the programme has laid some positive foundations, the extent to which these translate into lasting change will depend on future investment and policy continuity.

Key lessons learned

The evaluation highlights several lessons that should inform the design of future programmes:

- **Balancing flexibility with strategic focus:** Local autonomy was widely valued and enabled interventions to reflect local priorities. However, the absence of strong regional mechanisms limited opportunities for cross-boundary projects and strategic alignment. Future programmes may benefit from a mixed approach that combines local flexibility with regional coordination.

- **Importance of realistic timescales:** The compressed delivery window was the single most significant challenge identified across all sources of evidence. It affected recruitment, procurement, and the ability to plan for sustainability. Multi-year certainty is essential for achieving meaningful outcomes and retaining skilled staff.

- **Clarity and proportionality in monitoring:** While the lighter-touch approach to monitoring was welcomed, the lack of clear guidance created uncertainty and inconsistency. At the same time, the large number of KPIs placed a burden on smaller organisations and nullified their usefulness in assessing performance. Future programmes should aim for clearer definitions and a streamlined set of indicators aligned with the theory of change.

- **Targeting specialist interventions:** The Multiply experience illustrates the risks of applying uniform funding formulas without considering local demand or delivery capacity. It shows the weakness of nationally-determined programmes when they lack appropriate local input. Future programmes should allow for greater flexibility in allocating resources to specialist interventions.

- **Capacity and capability:** Both local authorities and delivery partners faced capacity constraints, particularly in programme management and compliance. Adequate resourcing for these functions is critical to ensure effective delivery.

Recommendations

1) **Adopt a mixed delivery model:** Combine open calls for community-led projects with strategic commissioning for regional priorities such as employability, business support, and decarbonisation. This would allow for both local responsiveness and targeted investment in areas of greatest need.

2) **Strengthen regional coordination:** Introduce formal mechanisms for joint planning and pooled resources to avoid duplication and enable cross-boundary projects where these add value. This could include a regional investment panel or a shared pipeline of strategic projects, included within the initial stages of the programme design.

3) **Provide longer-term funding certainty:** We recognise that this is beyond the control of the programme in North Wales. However, it is important to recommend that there should be a move away from short-term allocations to multi-year settlements aligned with regional strategies. This would enable better planning, reduce delivery risk, and improve staff retention.

4) **Simplify monitoring and evaluation:** Reduce the number of KPIs and focus on a smaller set of meaningful indicators linked to the theory of change. Provide clear guidance at the outset and ensure consistency across local authorities.

5) **Maintain and enhance Key Funds:** Continue to provide mechanisms for smaller organisations to access funding but streamline application and reporting processes and offer technical assistance to build capacity in the voluntary and community sector.

6) **Align with devolved governance structures:** Ensure future UK and Welsh Government programmes complement each other and avoid fragmentation. This includes aligning priorities with Regional Economic Frameworks and Corporate Joint Committees.

7) **Invest in capacity and skills:** Allocate sufficient administrative funding to local authorities and delivery partners. Consider providing shared resources or regional support teams to reduce duplication and address capacity gaps.

8) **Plan for sustainability:** Encourage projects to build exit strategies and explore opportunities for continuation funding or integration with mainstream services to maximise the legacy of UKSPF investments.

9) **Greater standardisation of evaluation reporting:** The requirement for each project to be evaluated has generated a wealth of data to inform this report. While this has been highly valuable, variations in robustness and content have limited the extent to which findings could be aggregated. For future programmes, greater standardisation of evaluation requirements would help ensure comparability and facilitate the aggregation of results.

1. Introduction

Wavehill were commissioned in April 2025 to undertake an evaluation of the delivery and impact of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) in North Wales. This is an initial evaluation report which examines the implementation of the Fund in the 2022/23 to 2024/25 and will be followed by a final report which considers activities in 2025/26 in the Spring of 2026.

1.1   The Fund

The UKSPF was launched by the UK Government in March 2022. It provided £2.6 billion of funding for local investment by March 2025, with an additional £900 million available for 2025-26.

Local decision-makers work with their local communities and partners to deliver interventions under three investment priorities:

4) **Communities and Place (C&P):** to enable places to invest to restore their community spaces and relationships and create the foundations for economic development at the neighbourhood-level, to help strengthen the social fabric of communities, supporting in building pride in place.
5) **Supporting Local Business (SLB):** enabling places to fund interventions that support local businesses to thrive, innovate and grow.
6) **People and Skills (P&S):** funding to help reduce the barriers some people face to employment and support them to move towards employment and education. Places can also target funding into skills for local areas to support employment and local growth.

The programme was designed with a view to 'empowering places' to identify and build on their own strengths and needs at a local level, with a focus on enhancing community pride and improving life chances. The UKSPF is broader in scope than previous European funds it replaces, but with a considerably reduced like-for-like budget. The funding cannot be used to replace statutory provision.

Wales received a total allocation of £585 million from the UKSPF for the period April 2022 to March 2025, comprising £484 million for 'core' SPF activities (allocated to the three investment priorities) and £101 million for the Multiply adult numeracy programme which focuses on supporting adult numeracy initiatives.

Funding was allocated using a formula comprising 40% distributed on a per capita basis, 30% based on the needs-based index from the UK Community Renewal Fund[1], and 30% using the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD). Wales received an additional £210 million for 2025/26 through an updated formula methodology[2].

The Fund supports delivery across four regional strategic geographies in Wales: North Wales, Mid Wales, South-East Wales, and South-West Wales.

1.2   Implementation in North Wales

North Wales comprises the six local authorities of Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd, and Wrexham.

Figure 1.1: Map showing the local authority areas within the North Wales region

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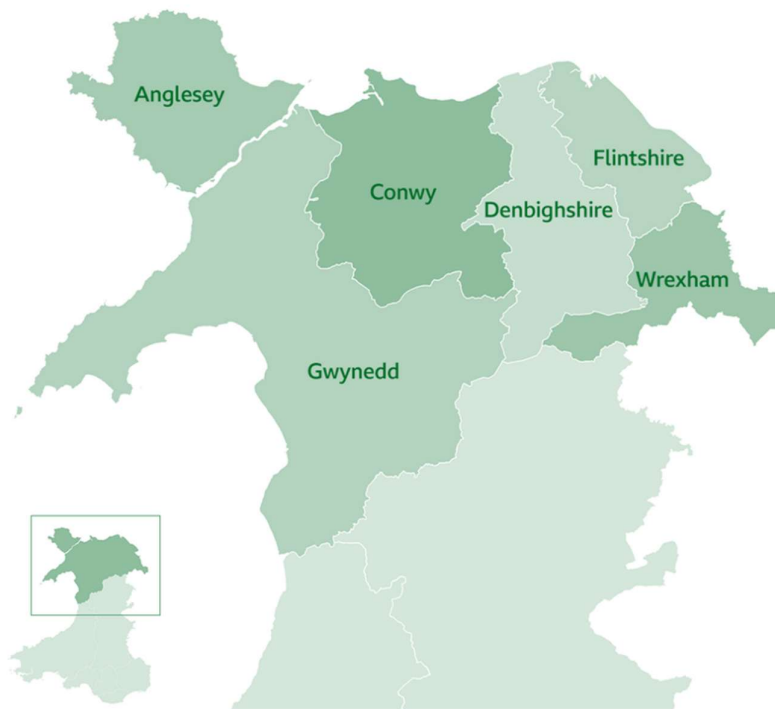
[1] The UK Community Renewal Fund (UKCRF) was a government initiative launched for the financial year 2021/22. It aimed to support local communities across the UK by piloting innovative programs and approaches to prepare for the introduction of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which replaced European Union structural funding. The needs-based index used for the Fund was designed to identify 100 "priority places" across Great Britain. These places were selected based on their economic resilience, with the aim of ensuring the fund targeted areas most in need of support.
[2] For the additional year of funding in 2025/26, this approach changed. Instead of applying the same formula, the UK Government based allocations on each local authority's previous UKSPF share, while introducing adjustments to protect areas from sharp reductions and to direct more revenue funding towards places with higher levels of deprivation. This meant the extension year was more focused on stability and targeting need rather than strictly following the original weighted formula. Source: **UKSPF 2025-26 allocations: Methodology note - GOV.UK**

Cyngor Gwynedd was nominated as the lead authority for the North Wales region. As the lead local authority, it receives the region's allocation and holds overall accountability for the funding.

Local government was given responsibility for developing a Regional Investment Plan (RIP) for the UKSPF, for approval by the UK Government and subsequent delivery of the Fund. The plan was developed collaboratively by the six local authorities and identified key regional priorities for UKSPF investment, principally including:

- Enhancing the role of the third sector
- Increasing the attractiveness and safety of the public realm
- Reducing long-term barriers to unemployment
- Boosting skills
- Reducing carbon emissions of local businesses

A list of UKSPF projects in North Wales is presented in Annex A.

Each of the six local authorities in North Wales managed its own UKSPF allocation and made local decisions on how to use the funding. This reflected the way the programme was structured: the regional total was made up of individual local authority allocations, rather than being provided as a single pot for the region.

The total allocation for the region was £126m for the period April 2022 to March 2025, which was made up of 'core' funding and the Multiply programme. The allocation for each of the local authorities across the region is listed below.

- Anglesey - £13.3m (core) and £2.8m (Multiply) totalling **£16.1m**
- Conwy - £20.3m (core) and £4.2m (Multiply) totalling **£24.5m**
- Denbighshire - £21.2m (core) and £4.4m (Multiply) totalling **£25.7m**
- Flintshire - £10.8m (core) and £2.3m (Multiply) totalling **£13.1m**
- Gwynedd - £20.2m (core) and £4.2m (Multiply) totalling **£24.2m**
- Wrexham - £18.8m (core) and £3.9m (Multiply) totalling **£22.7m**

A further £42.4m was allocated to North Wales for the 2025/26 transition year.

The 'Regional team' at Cyngor Gwynedd acts as the centralised point of contact for programme-level reporting, financial oversight, and compliance. Grant recipients sent their claims and progress reports directly to the Regional Team. The six local authorities oversaw activities for their area: project application appraisal and approval, project change management, and ongoing project support. The hybrid model of delivery balanced regional coordination with local ownership.

1.3 Evaluation approach

There are three phases to the evaluation as follows:

- Phase 1: Scoping and Framework - the purpose of this phase was to clarify the evaluation objectives, review the programme's Theory of Change, and establish a methodology which has been presented in the form of an Evaluation Framework.
- Phase 2: Initial Evaluation Report - to review the lessons learnt and anticipated impact of the 2022/23 to 2024/25 funding tranche.
- Phase 3 - Final Evaluation Report: to provide an updated assessment of lessons learnt and impacts, including information from the 2025/26 funding tranche.

This report follows the simultaneous delivery of Phases 1 and 2, completed between April and July 2025. The Final Evaluation Report (Phase 3) is scheduled for completion by Spring 2026.

1.3.1 Evaluation aims

The evaluation aims to assess the effectiveness of UKSPF programme delivery in North Wales, identify short-term impacts achieved, and anticipate longer-term outcomes. It also seeks to capture lessons learned, review programme management, and provide evidence-based recommendations to inform future regional development policy.

Beyond these broad evaluation aims, there are two particularly important focus areas for the evaluation:

First, to inform ongoing UK and Welsh Government planning and design for future regional development interventions. The UKSPF delivery model differs significantly from its EU predecessor, particularly in decision-making structures, the role of different levels of government, and the value and focus of funding. Accordingly, a key focus of this first evaluation phase has been to assess the merits of both approaches.

Second, to align with other evaluation activity. A wealth of evaluation work has been undertaken in North Wales, ranging from project-level assessments to a UK-wide MHCLG commission examining programme impacts in selected areas, including North Wales as a case study. Extensive consultations with stakeholders and beneficiaries have already taken place through these evaluations. To avoid duplication, Phase 2 of this evaluation has focused on secondary research, including a meta-review of all project-level evaluation reports.

The UK-wide evaluation is conducting a deep-dive impact review under three themes:

- Empowering communities and enhancing the voluntary and community sector
- Decarbonising North Wales
- Improving basic, digital, and 'soft' skills

To complement the in-depth impact review already undertaken in accordance with those specific themes, the role of this evaluation is to undertake a higher-level review of impacts from all project activities.

1.3.2 Methodology

The Evaluation Framework underpinning this report and the final phase is outlined in Annex B and includes the following tasks:

- Task 2.1: Detailed desk review – a review of Key Performance Indicator (KPI) and spend data, drawing on the latest available data from the programme's Power BI Dashboard (exported in September 2025[3]), and a desk review to compare differences in the delivery model for UKSPF relative to preceding regional development funding models.
- Task 2.2: Meta review of project level evaluations – this included a review of 122 evaluation reports covering 169 projects funded under the 2022/23 to 2024/25 period. It is important to note that that there were significant limitations to this review, not least that the evaluation reports varied considerably in their robustness from full independent reports to brief internal summaries. They also varied in terms of content. **For this reason, most of the meta review analyses presented in this report draw on a much lower sample than the 122 evaluation reports noted above.**
- Task 2.3: Drawing on evidence gathered through national evaluations – utilising evidence from the MHCLG-commissioned evaluation of delivery and impact in North Wales to avoid duplication. This included stakeholder consultations (30 interviews with local authority staff and external delivery providers) and a project lead survey (a survey of 59 from 148 individual project leads (40%)) which we reference throughout this report. This task also drew on evaluation evidence from other UK case study areas to draw out good practice.
- Task 2.4: Consultations with Local Authority Leads – seven interviews were undertaken to complement the secondary research activity described above.
- Task 3.1: An updated desk review to draw on key programme data covering the 2025/26 financial year
- Task 3.2: An updated meta review of any completed evaluation reports for projects delivered under the 2025/26 funding tranche.
- Task 3.3: Stakeholder consultations – to consult with delivery leads for projects funded under the 2025/26 funding tranche alongside interviews with strategic stakeholders.

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[3] These figures may vary slightly from the data presented in the 2025 End of year report submitted to UK Government due to the ongoing outcome verification and collation process whereby local authorities can continue to report some outcomes that materialize in 2025/26 as a result of 2022-25 funding. Figures will continue to fluctuate slightly until the end of the 2025/26 financial year.

Tasks 2.1 to 2.4 have already been undertaken and relate to Phase 2 of the evaluation, which is presented in this report. Tasks 3.1 to 3.3 will be undertaken towards the end of 2025/early 2026 and will inform the Final Evaluation Report.

The table below sets out the evaluation questions for the e North Wales UKSPF programme. Each question is matched with the relevant evaluation tasks used to inform our assessment.

Evaluation question	Tasks to address question
a) Delivery and Process Evaluation	
1. How effectively has the programme been managed and administered in North Wales?	2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.2
2. What are the common themes, lessons learned and key messages in relation to the delivery of UKSPF in North Wales and in each individual local authority?	2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.2, 3.3
3. How does the delivery of UKSPF in North Wales compare with other areas in Wales and beyond?	2.3
4. Which aspects of UKSPF delivery in North Wales should help to inform the regional development needs and priorities for the area going forward?	2.1, 2.2, 2.4
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the UKSPF approach relative to previous regional development funding models (specifically Objective 1 and ESIF funding approaches)?	2.1, 2.2, 2.4
6. In what way is the UKSPF model conducive to delivering effectively against key regional and national priorities?	2.1, 2.2, 2.4
b) Financial and KPI Performance	
7. What progress did the programme make towards the achievement of its financial, output, and outcome targets across North Wales and in each local authority?	2.1, 3.1
8. How did this performance vary by investment priority??	2.1, 3.1
9. What factors explain variations, including under- or over-performance?	2.2, 2.4, 3.2, 3.3
c) Impact Evaluation	
10. What are the short-term impacts of the interventions?	2.1, 2.2, 2.4, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3

Evaluation question	Tasks to address question
11. What are the longer-term impacts on North Wales as a whole and in individual local authority areas?	2.2, 2.4, 3.2, 3.3
12. How has the programme provided opportunities for local and community based economic development?	2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.2, 3.3
13. To what extent have the interventions met the needs of communities, local authority areas and North Wales as a whole?	2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.2, 3.3
14. What unexpected or unintended outcomes or impacts (positive or negative) have occurred?	2.2, 2.4, 3.2, 3.3

1.3.3 Report Structure

The report has been structured in as follows:

- Chapter 2 provides the strategic context for the report, including a discussion on the theory of change for the region.
- Chapter 3 reviews performance against the programme's financial and KPI targets.
- Chapter 4 reveals key findings from our delivery and process review
- Chapter 5 discusses the main impacts generated by the programme.
- Chapter 6 outlines findings from our comparative analysis of North Wales UKSPF delivery with other regions and previous programme delivery in North Wales.
- Chapter 7 concludes the report with a series of recommendations.

Several annexes are also included in this document:

- Annex A provides a full list of the projects funded by the programme.
- Annex B presents the Evaluation Framework underpinning this and future reports.
- Annex C gives a historic overview of regional development funding in North Wales.
- Annex D shows a full set of output and outcome targets and achievement.

2. Strategic Context and Theory of Change

This chapter provides the overall context for the evaluation by providing an overview of the region and its key priorities, a historical context for regional development investment, and a brief outline of the UKSPF model in North Wales.

2.1 Key characteristics of the North Wales region

Home to around 687,000 people[4], North Wales represents a significant part of the Welsh economy, combining urban centres like Wrexham and coastal towns such as Llandudno with rural and island communities. North Wales boasts a rich industrial heritage and is a leading area for advanced manufacturing and aerospace, while its proximity to Liverpool and Manchester also supports strong cross-border economic ties.

The region holds a range of natural assets, including Eryri National Park, the Llŷn Peninsula, and Clwydian Range and Dee Valley AONB areas of outstanding natural beauty. It is also a hub for renewable energy, particularly in wind and tidal power, providing key opportunities for sustainable growth. With its diverse economy, North Wales is well-positioned to contribute to the UK's transition towards a green economy, capitalising on its marine energy potential, rich tourism industry, and the development of new technologies.

The geographic diversity of North Wales presents both significant strengths and challenges for the region, as set out in key regional papers such as the North Wales RIP UKSPF document and Regional Economic Framework. The key challenges for North Wales outlined in these documents are described below.

Declining town centres and retail spaces: Like other parts of the UK, North Wales is facing the challenge of declining high streets, exacerbated by the shift towards online and out-of-town retail. Coastal towns such as Rhyl and Colwyn Bay have seen an increase in vacant premises and reduced footfall, issues worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic[5]. Although there have been signs of recovery, footfall in town centres remains below pre-pandemic levels. Additionally, the availability of modern, fit-for-purpose commercial and retail spaces is limited, particularly so in rural areas, limiting the growth of micro and small businesses in the region.[6]

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[4] ONS, 2021 Census Data

[5] Conwy County Borough Council (2023). Topic Paper 3: Retail and Town Centres. Replacement Local Development Plan – Stage 4: Development of Evidence Base. Available here: Topic Paper 3 - Retail and Town Centres

[6] Isle of Anglesey County Council (n.d.). *Town Centre Regeneration*. Available at: Anglesey County Council, and Denbighshire County Council (2023). Town Centres Assessment: Final Report. Local Development Plan – Evidence, Monitoring and Information. Available here: Denbighshire County Council

Transport and infrastructure connectivity: Transport remains an important part of North Wales's economic development, with road and rail connectivity needing improvement to boost economic activity. North Wales's more rural areas face poor connectivity, limiting both the movement of goods and access to employment opportunities. While there have been recent upgrades, such as the plans for the North Wales Metro and improvements to the A55, further investment in transport and digital infrastructure is necessary for the region's long term economic competitiveness.[7]

Skills shortages and workforce development: The skills gap is a pressing issue in North Wales, particularly in key growth sectors such as advanced manufacturing, green energy, and healthcare. Many areas, particularly rural ones, experience a shortage of workers with higher level qualifications, limiting the region's ability to fully capitalise on emerging opportunities like engineering, IT, and renewable energy.[8] Addressing skills shortages through training and education, particularly in STEM fields, remains a priority for long term economic resilience according to the North Wales Skills and Employment Plan[9].

Access to services: Data from the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation shows that access to services remains a key challenge for the region, particularly in rural and remote areas. This includes regions in Gwynedd, Anglesey, and Conwy, where geographic isolation limits residents' access to essential services like healthcare, education, and transportation infrastructure.[10] In Gwynedd, many small communities fall within the most deprived 10% in Wales when it comes to accessing services.[11] In addition, Gwynedd, Anglesey, and Conwy have low broadband connectivity compared with the Welsh and UK averages. For example, in Anglesey an average of 35.4% of postcodes have gigabit availability, compared with the UK average of 78.5%[12]. One of the region's local authorities leads further highlighted that mobile phone connectivity is very inconsistent across the region and is far below the UK average quality in many places. Ambition North Wales recognise the need to tackle connectivity challenges as one of the priorities for the region, set out in the Digital Connectivity Programme.

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[7] Welsh Government. (2023). North Wales Transport Commission: Final Report. Cardiff: Welsh Government. Available at: North Wales Transport Commission (2023)
[8] Ambition North Wales. (2023). North Wales Skills and Employment Plan 2023–2025. Gwynedd: North Wales Economic Ambition Board. Available at: Skills and Employment Plan
[9] **North Wales Regional Skills Partnership.** (2023). North Wales Skills and Employment Plan 2023–2025: Overview. Llandudno Junction: Ambition North Wales. Available at: North Wales Skills and Employment Plan
[10] Welsh Government. (2019). Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) 2019: Results Report. Cardiff: Welsh Government. Available at: WIMD 2019 Results Report
[11]Jones, H. (2019). Where are the most deprived areas in Wales? Senedd Research, National Assembly for Wales. Available at: Senedd Research

2.2 Historic overview of regional development funding in North Wales

For over four decades, regional development in North Wales was shaped by European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), including over £5 billion invested across Wales between 2000 and 2020. Early projects in Wales focused on reversing economic decline. For example, funding was used to develop new industrial estates (to attract businesses to areas with pit or factory closures) and provided retraining for workers transitioning out of shrinking industries.

Since the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales (now Senedd) in 1999, many economic development functions have been devolved to Wales with the Welsh Government establishing the Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO) to serve as the Managing Authority for EU programmes in Wales. WEFO managed project selection, monitored progress, and ensured compliance with EU rules in Wales.

West Wales and the Valleys, which included the four authorities in North West Wales (Gwynedd, Anglesey, Conwy, and Denbighshire), was designated an Objective 1 funding region, receiving more intensive funding, while the two North East regions (Flintshire and Wrexham) received less EU funding.

Early programmes (Objective 1, 2000–06) under this arrangement relied on highly localised partnerships. This was a bottom-up approach that was considered innovative and effective in Wales and praised for community engagement. A House of Commons inquiry in 2002 commended the "strong commitment to partnership working in Wales" and noted the structure had been "praised by the [European] Commission".[13]

However, the approach for the period was identified to have both strengths and weaknesses. While local partnerships allowed specific local community needs to be addressed and provided important assistance to project applicants, the large number of partnerships and overlapping responsibilities created administrative burdens and inefficiencies. [14]

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[13] House of Commons - Welsh Affairs - Second Report
[14] Swyddfa Cyllid Ewropeaidd Cymru

Later periods (2007–20) shifted towards regional coordination. The 2007–2013 period saw a significant streamlining of delivery structures in Wales. While partnership remained a cornerstone (the EU required a partnership approach), local partnerships were replaced by more regional coordination. There was also a focus on fewer but larger projects, emphasising collaboration among stakeholders, and increasing the use of competitive procurement.[15] By focusing on larger, strategic projects, the programme was seeking to achieve economies of scale – for example, regional projects like 'Skills for the Digital Economy' operated across multiple counties rather than each county running its own variant which would have been the case in the previous period. This theme continued into the 2014-20 programme period where all-Wales initiatives became the predominant delivery approach.

The greater regional coordination was operationalised through Strategic Engagement Teams (SETs) and Regional Engagement Teams (RETs), aligning EU funding with emerging regional structures such as the North Wales Economic Ambition Board (NWEAB). Their main objective was to ensure a more joined-up, strategic approach to planning and delivering EU-funded projects across the region. North Wales stakeholders also had greater influence through the NWEAB and SET, building regional coherence. This evolution improved strategic focus and reduced duplication, but challenges remained in balancing local responsiveness with regional coherence.

Brexit ended EU funding and governance arrangements, leading to the introduction of Welsh Government's Regional Economic Frameworks and Corporate Joint Committees. However, as already noted, the UKSPF is managed by the UK Government and local authorities, reducing the Welsh Government's strategic role.

The above is only a summary and the full review, including detailed historical context and governance evolution, is provided in Annex C, while discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of the UKSPF approach relative to previous programme delivery is covered in Section 6.1.

2.3   North Wales UKSPF programme design and implementation

2.3.1   Assigning priorities

The six local authorities collaboratively designed the Investment Plan underpinning the UKSPF programme in North Wales. This process followed a series of discussions and workshops between the local authorities and key local stakeholders and also drew on previous work to develop the North Wales Regional Economic Framework (which included a series of consultations and incorporating key local strategic documents, economic development plans, and previous programme evaluations).

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[15] An evaluation of the implementation of the programme in that period can be seen here: 171205-ex-post-evaluation-2007-2013-final-report-en.pdf

This approach was designed to help ensure alignment with both regional and local priorities. The Investment Plan was designed to be as broad as possible to capture a wide range of opportunities across the region. A key element of the programme structure was the emphasis on regional coordination and local decision-making.

Communities and Place

The six local authorities agreed that a main focus area should be on revitalising town centres, to help attract investment, improve the cultural and leisure offer, and revitalise local economies. The investment plan highlighted key challenges such as reduced footfall, an ageing population, lack of core infrastructure which limits growth in tourism and community cohesion, and vacant properties. Other key challenges included a need to better protect and enhance natural and cultural assets, and to address environmental challenges.

There has been a particular emphasis on local empowerment and the role of grassroots organisations to effect change in their local communities. Reflecting the prioritization of these themes, the region allocated almost £57 million of funding to Communities and Place interventions which was 46% of the entire budget. Activities focused on:

- improving access to open spaces,
- capacity building in the voluntary sector and strengthening the role of grassroots organisations and the third sector in building community cohesion,
- stimulating tourism and the visitor economy,
- supporting heritage and culture initiatives,
- town centre enhancement and improved perceptions of safety of the public realm, and
- expanding green and blue infrastructure.

Supporting Local Businesses

The Investment Plan also outlined several business-related challenges including rising costs, the need for businesses to decarbonise their operations, low productivity and wage levels compared to national averages, low business start-up rates, insufficient digital infrastructure, as well as the lack of footfall in town centres. Almost £25 million was allocated towards interventions under this investment priority which accounts for 20% of the budget, demonstrating that this was a lesser priority for the region.

There was a focus on support for businesses to transition to net zero by decarbonizing their operations and building skills required for the transition to the green economy. Other projects focused on strengthening support for social businesses, supporting start-ups and social enterprises, providing new workspaces and facilities (including for RD&I), and improving the visitor economy.

People and Skills

The Investment Plan highlighted skills shortages in key growth sectors (particularly related to net zero) and barriers to employment for those farthest from the labour market (including a lack of 'soft' skills such as confidence and motivation). Accordingly, many of the interventions focused on 'pre-employability' support which sought to move individuals closer to the labour market. This included projects that provided training opportunities and built pathways into work for young people, boosting 'soft skills' and enhancing basic and life skills. Other projects sought to improve digital skills and digital inclusion or overcome skills gaps in the region particularly related to decarbonisation. More than £40 million was invested in the skills-related investment priorities across the region, accounting for a third of the budget (programme expenditure is discussed in greater detail in Section 3.1).

2.3.2   Delivery model

The North Wales Collaboration Board is the governing board responsible for decisions related to the delivery of the programme and had oversight of the funding allocations. Membership consists of a Senior Responsible Officer (SRO) from each of the six local authorities, and one (or more) deputies. The Collaboration Board also includes Advisory Members who are invited to meetings as necessary to provide input on specific topics.

The design of UKSPF interventions, as captured in the Investment Plan, sought to balance a regional strategic framework with locally tailored projects which were aligned to each local authority's priorities. Having considered different options for delivering the interventions (including selecting some regional priority projects), local authorities decided to opt for a fully local decision-making approach. The programme team felt that local authorities were best placed to assess how projects would make a difference within their communities and believed this approach was better aligned with the ethos of the UKSPF programme.

Whilst decisions for the utilisation of the funds took place locally, the Regional Team at Cyngor Gwynedd managed contractual arrangements centrally. Project delivery leads reported directly to the Regional Team at Cyngor Gwynedd (rather than to their local authority UKSPF contact points) on a quarterly basis.

Implementation of the Investment Plan

To operationalise the Investment Plan, each of the six local authorities established Local Partnership Panels for their area which comprised appropriate sector representation. A two-stage open call process was launched by each local authority to invite project proposals from all interested parties in their areas.

The process was consistent across the six authorities with a shared approach to timelines, assessments, and decision-making whilst also retaining scope for adjustments for each local context. This approach resulted in a diverse set of projects, with over a third of interventions being delivered by local authority delivery providers while a substantial majority (63%) were delivered by external providers.

A similar approval process was undertaken across the region comprising an initial sift of applications by local UKSPF teams to consider alignment with priorities and the feasibility of delivery, a review by the Local Partnership Panels to shortlist applications and provide recommendations, and then a final decision by the local authorities to invite Stage 2 applications. The local authority then appraised the detailed project applications, undertook due diligence, before seeking cabinet approval to make a final decision on grant award[16].

Key Funds

Local Authority projects included the administration of 20 Key Funds[17] which were an important element of the programme. They arose from a decision to introduce a £250,000 minimum threshold for UKSPF projects in the region, due to the scale of activity taking place in North Wales. Local authorities were concerned that the minimum threshold would be a barrier for smaller organisations to participate, especially those from the voluntary and community sector. The Key Funds were therefore developed as a mechanism to distribute smaller grants (through a competitive bidding process) for community-focused projects. Thus, whilst each Key Fund was recorded as projects for administrative purposes, in reality they were simply a mechanism to fund projects which fell below the £250,000 threshold and could incorporate their own (simplified) application, approval, claims and monitoring processes.

Multi-local authority delivery

After each local authority approved their projects, a multi-LA approach was developed to allow authorities to "opt in" to collaborate on cross-boundary projects while maintaining local decision-making. This approach aimed to strengthen regional cohesion and pool resources in areas such as skills, employability, rural digital connectivity, and third-sector capacity building where a regional response was thought to be optimal. Cyngor Gwynedd was designated as the coordinating authority to manage this process. This led to 17 projects being delivered on a multi-authority basis (typically between two or three neighbouring authorities).

Maintaining delivery

According to the meta review, most projects (71%) were entirely new while a substantial minority (29%) were a continuation of pre-existing projects (although they typically comprised notable modifications). This did vary across the local authorities, with 50% in Anglesey based on pre-existing interventions compared with just 10% in Wrexham. This is largely due to the historic context of ESIF, in which the north-east counties had a much more limited legacy of large programme delivery. The continuation of existing interventions also varied by investment priority, with Supporting Local Business projects far more likely to be based on pre-existing interventions.

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[16] Flintshire secured delegated authority from the Cabinet, allowing it not to have to seek approval for individual projects.
[17] Key Funds were grant schemes designed to support smaller scale projects.

2.4   A theory of change for the programme

A theory of change explains how and why a programme is expected to work. It sets out the links between the activities delivered, the changes they aim to achieve, and the long-term outcomes, showing the steps needed to reach the intended impact. Figure 2.1 provides a high-level Theory of Change for the UKSPF programme in North Wales. It demonstrates the focus of each investment priority, the activities undertaken, and the intended results.

For Communities and Place, the programme aimed to enhance community pride and people's perception of the quality of place and enhance community engagement and cohesion. The output and outcome indicators identified to achieve these objectives focused on improvements to assets, the public realm, and increasing community capacity leading to improved perceptions, a higher footfall, and greater community engagement (including through increased volunteering). There was also a cross-cutting ambition to develop the capacity of the third sector through investing in new infrastructure or increasing the reach and sustainability of key third sector organisations and community groups.

For Supporting Local Businesses, the focus was on growing the local economy through creating new businesses, productivity, innovation, jobs impacts, and digital infrastructural improvements. The intended impact from People and Skills was to enhance the core skills of the local workforce and reduce economic inactivity through ensuring people experienced reduced structural barriers into employment and training and improving skills.

Figure 2.1: A theory of change for the UKSPF programme in North Wales

INPUTS	INTERVENTIONS	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES	IMPACT

Communities and place

£50.2m Communities and Place Funding

£25 .1m Supporting Local Businesses funding

90 Communities and place projects, centred on Community development, third sector and volunteer support, new infrastructure for community assets, culture, arts & heritage visitor economy, town centre development and improving green/blue infrastructure

Public realm and green/blue spaces improved

Increased volunteering opportunities

New community assets

Improved perceptions of facilities and amenities

Increased visitor numbers

Increased number of community hubs

Improved health outcomes

Enhanced pride in place

Supporting local businesses

£29.3m People and Skills Funding

£21.8m Multiply Funding

35 Support local businesses projects, including business support, supporting with decarbonisation plans, net zero support and capacity development, site and premises improvements, green skills support, and innovation

Enterprises supported

Social businesses supported

Improved net zero knowledge/capabilities

Reduction in carbon emissions of businesses

Improved knowledge of net zero requirements

Improvement green skills

Increased amount of investment

New products or processes

Enhanced perception of the quality of place

Enhanced community engagement and cohesion

16

INPUTS

INTERVENTIONS

OUTPUTS

OUTCOMES

IMPACT

People and skills

Match funding

Regional governance team and governance structures across six local authorities

North Wales Investment Plan and local/regional strategies including North Wales Economic Framework

36 People and skills projects, including:

'soft' skills development, employment support, overcoming barriers work, digital inclusion, green skills support, improving wellbeing and resilience

Multiply projects including:
- Mon Multiply (Mon Communities Forward)
- Multiply Key Fund (Wrexham)
- Strength in Numbers (Flintshire CC)
- Numeracy for Living (Grwp Llandrillo

People engaging with support services

People engaged in life skills

People engaged in education and training

Engagements between key workers and additional services

People supported to gain employment

Number of participants engaged

People becoming economically active and with improved employability potential

People improving digital skills

Increased confidence and resilience

People engaged in job searching

People securing employment

People with basic and life skills

Increased number of people achieving maths qualifications

Local economic growth

Enhanced core skills

Reduction in economic inactivity

Nature/biodiversity recovery

Cross cutting theme: Capacity Building of the VCS sector

Third sector and volunteer support, new infrastructure for community assets

Enhanced role of the third sector

Increased volunteering opportunities

Improved financial sustainability

Improved community cohesion

Increased number of volunteers

3.   Financial and KPI Performance

This chapter provides an overview of the progress of the UKSPF in North Wales, focusing on expenditure and the delivery of outputs and outcomes as reported through programme management information (MI), alongside a review of financial spend relative to initial projections.

3.1   UKSPF expenditure

Table 3.1 shows that the programme spent close to its full allocation, with an underspend of just 2% overall. The table also highlights the challenges in spending the full Multiply allocation, as most local authorities reported limited local demand—a point explored further in the next chapter. By contrast, the entire budget for the core SPF element was spent which was aided by the programme's flexibility in allowing the team to reallocate funding between investment priorities when necessary. The demand for support from the core SPF elements significantly exceeded available resources, however the programme team were not permitted to draw on Multiply underspends to help meet this demand.

The table further illustrates the programme's efficient and lean management, with only 3% of the budget allocated to this function. However, this lean approach also contributed to delays, as limited capacity affected the timely approval of grants and change requests.

Table 3.1: Aggregated profile and actual expenditure

	Profile spend (£)	Actual spend (£)	% spent
SPF Core	£107,039,757.00	£107,756,088.85	101%
Multiply	£15,236,252.00	£12,120,870.88	80%
Management	£4,184,891.00	£3,709,577.79	89%
Total	£126,460,900.00	£123,586,537.52	98%

Source: Actual spend data exported from the programme's centralised system in August 2025; Profile spend data extracted from Collaboration Board Report June 2023

The significance of C&P interventions as a priority in North Wales is evident, with funds reallocated from other investment priorities (primarily People and Skills) to support this area. The profile spend for each investment priority was highly speculative at the beginning of the programme period as the team had very little to base these projections on. In that context, it is not surprising to see the difference in actual spending.

Table 3.2: Aggregated profile and actual expenditure per Investment Priority

	Profile spend (£)	Actual spend (£)	% spent
C&P	£49,200,683.00	£58,976,269.81	120%
SLB	£24,446,806.00	£24,549,782.27	100%
P&S	£33,392,268.00	£24,230,036.77	73%

Source: Actual spend data exported from the programme's centralised system in August 2025; Profile spend data extracted from Collaboration Board Report June 2023

The meta review also explored progress against spend targets in each individual evaluation report. This demonstrates how the vast majority of projects spent their full allocations, whilst almost all other projects recorded only a slight underspend.

In those cases, underspend was almost entirely attributed to time constraints, delayed starts and reduced delivery windows. In some cases, projects decommitted a portion of their original budget due to the delayed starts. However, it is again important to re-emphasise that the level of underspend was invariably very modest.

Figure 3.1: Project expenditure per Investment Priority
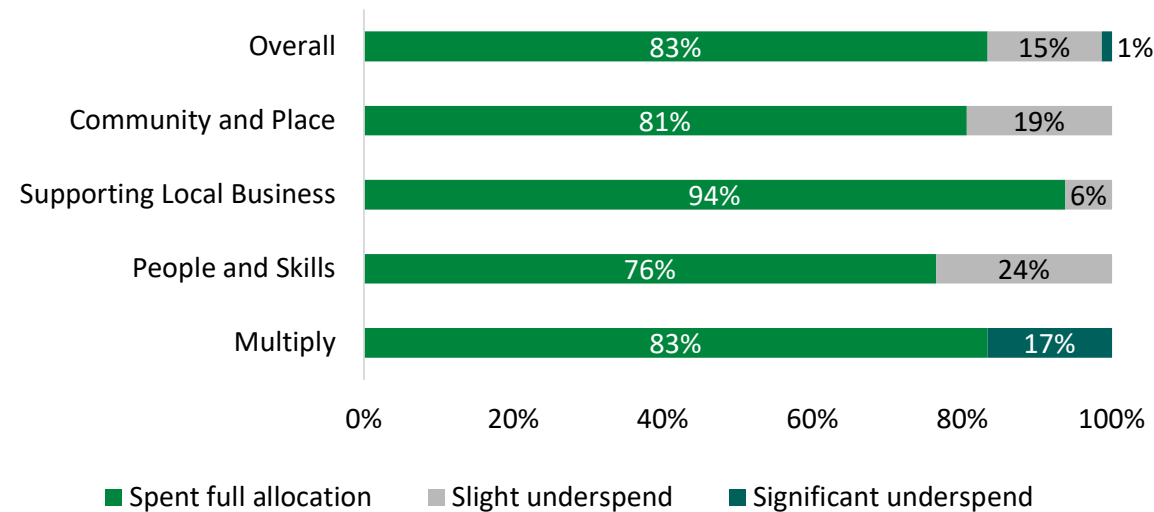
Source: Meta review of evaluation reports (n=72)

3.2   Performance against KPI targets

It is difficult to judge the programme's performance against the formal Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), such is their volume and variability. Indeed, there are 55 output KPIs and 58 outcome KPIs used by the programme in North Wales, covering themes as broad as the amount of rehabilitated land (M²) to the number of people supported to engage in life skills.

As we note in the introduction, a separate evaluation commissioned through MHCLG will be undertaking a deep-dive review focusing on the key impact areas it had identified (Empowering communities and enhancing the voluntary and community sector; Decarbonising North Wales; and Improving basic, digital, and 'soft' skills). To complement that, this evaluation considers the programme results achieved more broadly.

3.2.1   Review of programme management information

At a high level, our analysis reveals that the targets[18] were met or exceeded for 64% of the **output indicators** (35/55) while 89% of the indicators (49/55) saw at least 60% of their targets being achieved. In many cases, the indicator targets were exceeded by a substantial margin including 18% of indicators (10/55) where the targets had been at least doubled. Below, we focus on achievement against the main indicators that align with the outputs highlighted in the Theory of Change under Section 2.4.

Communities and Place

The formal indicator data illustrates positive performance against most of the key C&P output indicators highlighted in the Theory of Change:

- **Public realm and green/blue spaces improved –** there was a strong performance against this indicator overall with ca. 924 thousand m^2 of rehabilitated land against a target of 656 thousand m^2 (141%) and almost 1.6 million m^2 of green or blue space was created or improved which exceeded the target (138% of target achieved). The achievement of public realm created or improved (ca. 940 thousand m^2) was, however, slightly below its target of almost 1.2 million m^2 (80% achieved).
- **Enhanced role of third sector –** there was again fairly strong performance with the targets for the number of organisations receiving grant support (770 achieved) and non-financial support (2,357) (173% and 144% of targets achieved respectively).
- **Increased volunteering opportunities –** the programme performed very well against the related indicator target with 38,768 volunteering opportunities supported which was more than three times the original target (12,590; 308% of target achieved).
- **Community assets –** 544 amenities/facilities were created or improved against a target of 292 (186% achieved) while the number of tourism, culture or heritage assets created or improved was slightly below target (393 achieved against a target of 439; 90%).

Supporting Local Business

For SLB, the final achievement against output targets has been less impressive, but still commendable, as highlighted below:

- **Enterprises supported** – there was a slight underperformance for the number of enterprises receiving non-financial support and grants (4,135 and 1,100 supported respectively against targets of 4,560 and 1,216 which is equivalent to around 91% achieved for each target).
- **Social businesses supported** – there was no formal target for this.
- **Improved net zero knowledge/capabilities** – the programme exceeded its target for the number of decarbonisation plans developed as a result of support (426 achieved against a target of 342; 125%).

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[18] Targets from the April 2024 Collaboration Board Report were used as the benchmark to measure success.

- **Reduction in carbon emissions of businesses** – The main output target for actual reduction measures was also exceeded with 140 low or zero carbon energy infrastructure installed against a target of 98 (143% achieved).

People and Skills

Several P&S outputs were highlighted in the Theory of Change with the programme exceeding all relevant indicator targets, as illustrated below.

- **People engaging with support services** – 3,420 economically inactive people engaged with keyworker support services against a target of 2,028 (169%) and 517 were supported to engage with the benefits system against a target of 160 (323%).
- **People engaged in life skills** – 15,008 were supported to engage in life skills against a target of 7,375 (204%).
- **People engaged in education and training** – 4,184 were supported to participate in education against a target of 3,119 (134%).
- **Engagements between key workers and additional services** – 2,305 effective engagements between keyworkers and additional services were recorded against a target of 1,076 (214%).
- **People supported to gain employment** – 2,083 received support to gain employment against a target of 1,429 (146%).
- **Number of participants engaged** – there were numerous indicators for the number of people supported (to attend courses, access basic and life skills, engage in job-searching, and taking part in work experience) with all exceeded (see Annex D for further detail).

Overall, the effective performance against output targets demonstrates the vast scale of support provided and interventions delivered. The **outcome indicators** provide insights into the results from this support. Again, there are too many to discuss each indicator individually, however the high-level analysis reveals that the programme delivered effectively against its targets overall and has achieved good results. Of the 58 indicators, 60% (35) were met or exceeded while 86% of the indicators (50/58) saw at least 60% of their targets being achieved. For 26% of indicators (15/58), the targets were at least doubled. We again provide some of the most notable examples below, focusing on achievement against the main indicators that align with the outcomes contained within the Theory of Change under Section 2.4.

Communities and Place

Generally, the programme performed well against its C&P key outcome indicators with some exceeded substantially.

- **Improved perceptions of facilities and amenities** – the programme fell below the target for this indicator (74% achieved) where ca. 68 thousand people were recorded with improved perception of facilities/amenities against a target of ca. 92 thousand. However, the data does show that there was more than a 175 thousand increased use of facilities/amenities, far exceeding the target of ca. 92 thousand (190%).

- **Increased visitor numbers** – the programme exceeded this target by almost ten times (942%) with ca 1.1 million increased visitors recorded against a target of ca. 117 thousand.
- **Increased number of community hubs** – although there were no direct indicators, the data reveals that 1,773 were recorded as having an improved perception of facility/infrastructure against a target of 1,930 (92% achieved).
- **Increased number of volunteers** – as with the output indicator, the programme vastly exceeded its key outcome indicator for volunteering with over 17 thousand volunteering opportunities created as a result of support against a target of 5,293 (322% achieved).

Supporting Local Business

The KPI data again shows good performance against the SLB outcomes included in the Theory of Change.

- **Improved knowledge of net zero requirements** –the most relevant indicator against this indicator is the increased amount of low or zero carbon energy infrastructure installed, with 3,892 m^2 achieved against a target of 5,440 m^2 (72%).
- **Improvement in green skills** – there was formal target for this.
- **Increased amount of investment** – this target was met and marginally exceeded with ca. £2.3 million achieved against a target of ca. £2 million (113%).
- **New products or processes** – 237 enterprises adopted new or improved products or services against a target of 126 (188%) and there were 27 new to market products against a target of 23 (117%).

Equally, whilst not captured in the Theory of Change, we note that the programme struggled with the jobs target where only 610 were created and 1,004 safeguarded (equivalent to 70% and 58% of the respective targets achieved).

People and Skills

There was very positive performance against almost all the P&S outcome targets captured in the Theory of Change.

- **People becoming economically active and with improved employability potential** – there was successful performance against the most relevant indicators for this outcome, with 3,719 people reporting increased employability through development of interpersonal skills funded by UKSPF against a target of 2,367 (157%) and 5,734 experiencing reduced structural barriers into employment and skills provision against a target of 3,467 (165%).
- **People improving digital skills** – there was formal target for this.
- **Increased confidence and resilience** – while there was no formal target for this, many of those reporting reduced structural barriers into employment and skills provision are likely to, at least in part, include increasing their confidence and resilience.

- **People engaged in job searching** – 1,225 people were engaged in job searching following support against a target of 856 (143%).
- **People securing employment** – as with the SLB indicators, the programme struggled more with its key P&S job indicator, albeit only marginally below the target with 705 people in employment, including self-employment, following support against a target of 757 (93%). The target for people in supported employment was exceeded with 180 achieved against a target of 151 (119%).
- **People with basic and life skills** – the programme performed well against related indicators with 2,411 people achieving basic skills following support against a target of 1,189 (203%) and almost 9 thousand engaged in life skills support following interventions against a target of just under 3 thousand (316% achieved).
- **Increased number of people achieving maths qualifications** – the programme far exceeded related indicator targets with more than 10 thousand adults achieving maths qualifications up to, and including, Level 2 equivalent (568% of the ca. 2 thousand target) and more than 8 thousand adults participating in maths qualifications and courses up to, and including, Level 2 equivalent (421% of the ca. 2 thousand target).

The full set of output and outcome targets and achievement can be found in Annex D.

3.2.2　Meta Review findings

The meta review provides further insights on this. Overall, 83% of evaluation reports showed that the projects were making good progress against their KPI targets (this was defined as meeting at least 75% of indicator targets). This is particularly impressive given that many of the reports were produced before the final outputs and outcomes had been claimed.

The data does show some variation across the investment priorities, with Multiply lagging far behind the others. As already noted, the main reasons for this were a lack of local demand, the difficulty of assigning targets given the limited experience of delivering projects focusing exclusively on numeracy-based courses, and the lack of local capacity to deliver. Additionally, whilst some Multiply projects were successful in pivoting towards more creative 'maths by stealth' provisions leading to higher engagement, this also resulted in a lack of participation against the main Multiply outcome indicator which was to achieve formal Level 2 equivalent maths qualifications.

Figure 3.2: Project achievement against KPI targets per Investment Priority
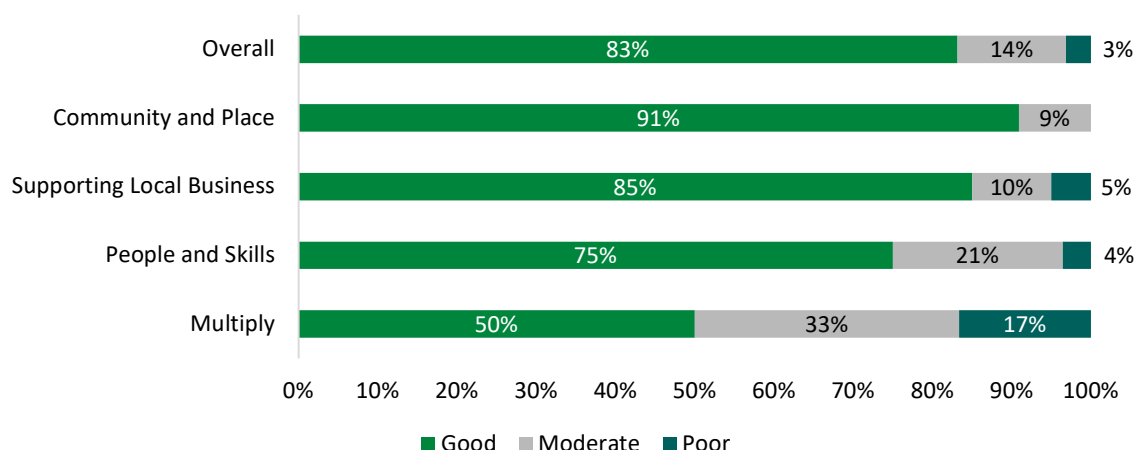
Source: Meta review of evaluation reports (n=95)

Beyond the challenges with meeting Multiply targets, the main reasons for underperformance more generally were the compressed delivery timeframes (cited in 14 reports), low engagement from participants (9 reports), and external constraints such as the economic environment, inflationary pressures, or construction-related delays (15 reports)[19]. These are similar to the reasons for lower than anticipated levels of expenditure.

These factors were sometimes interlinked, e.g. some of the failure to incentivise organisations to engage related to the compressed timeframe, while more generally this was an issue for participant recruitment. Two reports found that the lack of uptake was at least partly caused by competing offers from other provisions, which suggests an element of duplication. These include the Conwy SPF Final Evaluation report which noted that the Community Buildings Energy Audits (funded through the Community Led Local Development project) faced a challenge from other schemes offering a similar service, while GPs responding to the 'Prosiect Beicio i Bawb' evaluation reported that there were abundant activities that made social prescribing very competitive.

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[19] These figures are based on a total of 41 reports that discussed reasons for underperformance. Other evaluation reports simply did not include a narrative on KPI performance, or it was too early to report, or there was no underperformance to discuss.

3.2.3   Summary

On the one hand, the KPI data presented in this section suggests a very strong performance with most exceeded and some by substantial margins. Equally, it is important to note that the KPI data is flawed – firstly because there were so many, and secondly because the targets set could be quite arbitrary with some project leads reporting the difficulty in assigning targets for entirely new projects where there were no clear benchmarks. Accordingly, there was often very little to base targets on and there is a risk that some were perhaps too conservative. The fact that some of the targets were overachieved to such an extent does raise questions about their validity. That said, while there are limitations in the insights that can be gleaned from the KPI data, overall it does provide a positive indication of programme performance.

A more detailed analysis of programme impacts is discussed in Chapter 5.

4.   Delivery and Process Review

This chapter focuses on the effectiveness of the approach undertaken to deliver the programme in North Wales, from the initial decisions regarding delivery routes, to beneficiary engagement, the effectiveness of each delivery process, and programme management and governance. We also consider overall beneficiary satisfaction alongside the key lessons learned, including success factors and areas for improvement.

4.1   Open Call delivery approach

The exclusive open call delivery approach is an important feature of UKSPF delivery in North Wales. It is similar to the approach undertaken in Mid Wales, albeit some of their initial calls were ringfenced for internal local authority projects.

South East Wales undertook a different approach with local authorities generally undertaking an internal process to identify priorities and deliver projects (around two-thirds were delivered by local authority departments, while the remaining projects were commissioned directly). This demonstrates the different delivery routes that were open to implement the programme and the specific decisions undertaken and approach agreed in North Wales.

Stakeholders considered the open call approach as an appropriate method for sourcing projects aligned to local priorities and needs. Each local authority aligned their open call priorities with existing strategic and corporate plans, using these to shape the assessment criteria for applications. The rationale for this flexible approach was to ensure that a diverse range of projects could secure funding, allowing support to be tailored to emerging socio-economic needs rather than predetermined categories.

There are several benefits to this approach. According to local authority leads and other key stakeholder in the region, it proved effective in generating demand for project delivery. This is evident in the application data with local authorities reporting that they received a total application value that was four or more times larger than their funding allocation. Equally, it is important to note that achieving this high volume of demand does not necessarily lead to higher quality.

The approach in North Wales also ensured the funding could be made more accessible to relevant stakeholders within the region when compared with the delivery approaches undertaken in other regions where there was more focus on direct internal local authority delivery. There was a strong use of third-party providers in North Wales (accounting for almost half of project delivery) thereby ensuring the programme could draw on external capacity and expertise, which was particularly important for some of the smaller authorities who lacked internal capacity. Additionally, this approach was conducive to encouraging local community empowerment which was an important priority for the programme. The main negating factor in relation to equitability, however, was the capacity to deliver with the evidence suggesting that the larger projects were biased towards experienced organisations as we discuss in the next chapter.

Equally, the inclusive nature of the open call process had some disadvantages. The six local authorities recognised that this constrained opportunity for regional collaboration whilst also risking duplication of activity across the region. The North Wales UKSPF programme introduced a Multi-Local Authority (Multi-LA) option to address this challenge, although stakeholders did reflect that the lack of any pan-region delivery did represent a weakness and the programme would have benefitted from greater cross-authority delivery.

The open approach also generated a level of demand that could not be met. Whilst the EoI stage helped the local authorities to eliminate projects that did not fit the local context or could not realistically be delivered within the short timescales, it did lead to a heavy administrative burden at the local level. Accordingly, we can assume that this open approach was more time-consuming than the alternative options, which was particularly problematic within the context of UKSPF delivery given the already tight timescale.

It is also important to make the distinction between a demand-based approach and a needs-based approach, with implementation in North Wales arguably more akin to the former. There will also inevitably be bias within a demand-led approach, especially in the context of diminishing budgets when organisations that have been able to utilise EU funding for a long time were competing for resources to maintain their own structure as opposed to (or at least, as well as) provide support that is needed. If we compare with the previous ESIF delivery model, the Strategic Engagement Teams were introduced to help organisations apply for EU funding at least partly in response to concerns about ability to apply for support being governed by capacity rather than need. Arguably, the SPF approach implemented here has been less robust in ensuring alignment with strategic need and focused more on areas of demand. On the other hand, it is important to note that the initial framework for the programme was based on regional strategic needs and project proposals were assessed against those. Stakeholders recognized that they could have undertaken a more strategic approach but also highlighted the difficulty of doing so in a very short turnaround. This again illustrates the challenges caused by the programme's delays and short timescale.

The other disadvantage with this approach is that it potentially negates the opportunity to generate a more tangible region-wide impact against specific strategic priorities. The approach led to a very large collection of projects delivering different things. Whilst they all may have generated positive outcomes at a local level, this approach is less optimal in generating broader macro-level strategic impacts. It risks the impact becoming 'broad brushed' and failure to generate targeted, tangible change across the region. Indeed, this was the main criticism made in the initial delivery of ESIF through Objective 1, which led to the more centralised delivery approach focusing on fewer projects.

4.2   Beneficiary engagement

Generally, there were two types of beneficiaries supported by UKSPF which can broadly be described as direct beneficiaries (i.e. organisations who received grants to deliver the projects) and end beneficiaries (i.e. businesses, community groups, or individuals within the communities served by those projects). In some cases, such as the 20 Key Funds, there were three tiers of beneficiaries including the local authorities as the main grant holders, the organisations receiving funding from the key funds, and the end beneficiaries.

4.2.1   Engaging direct beneficiaries

The open calls were advertised widely for direct beneficiaries. Channels included council websites, Ambition North Wales, community council forums, public engagement events, business forums, social media, and through newsletters or email updates. Local authorities also worked closely with voluntary organisations and county-level Community and Voluntary Support (CVS) organisations prior to the launch of the open calls to ensure that the funding opportunity was promoted effectively to local communities.

The programme's monitoring data shows that around half of projects were delivered by external organisations including a substantial minority (28%) delivered by third sector organisations, demonstrating the focus on community empowerment. In addition, 11% were delivered by Higher or Further Education organisations who were well-placed to deliver P&S interventions alongside many of the RD&I projects funded through SLB. Around 10% of projects were delivered by private sector organisations across a wide range of areas, including a few projects focusing on the Net Zero agenda.

Figure 4.1: Type of organisation delivering NW UKSPF projects
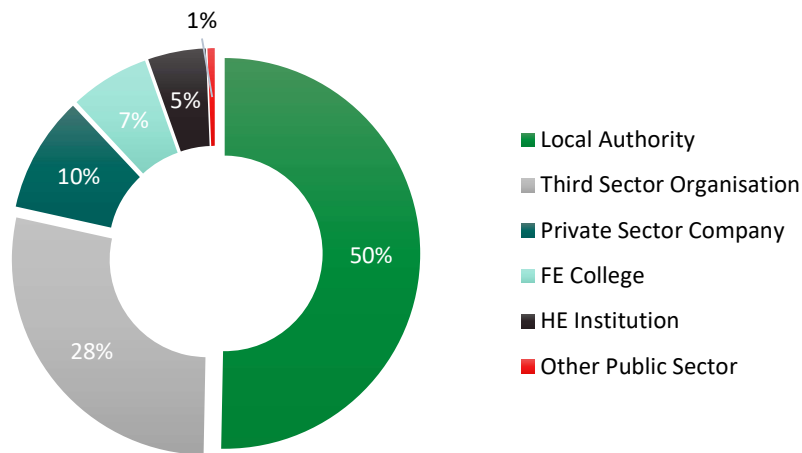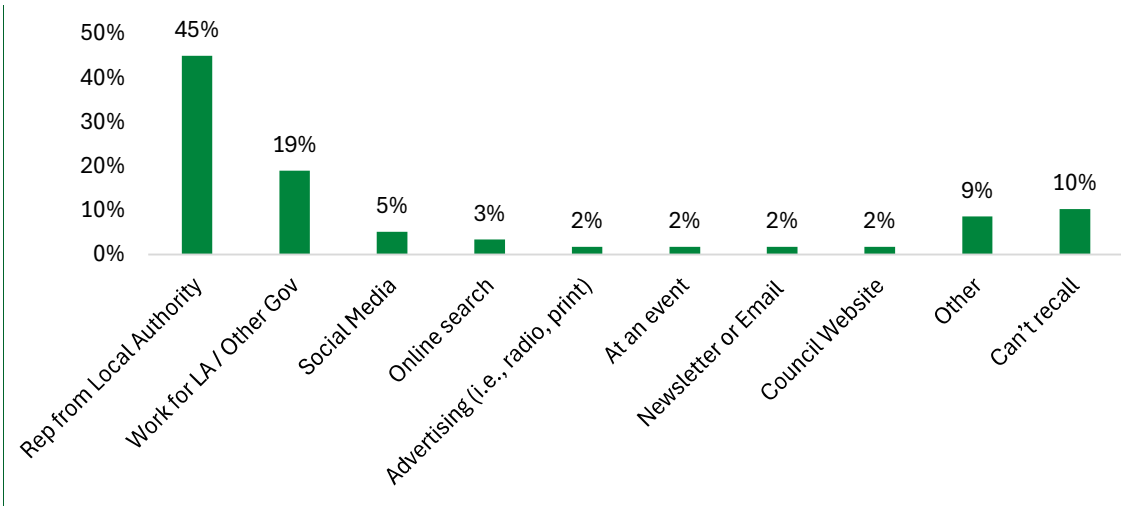

Source: Project MI data

The local authorities (apart from Flintshire, which used the same processes for all projects) used separate open call processes and communication strategies to market the 20 Key Funds. Target organisations for the Key Funds included town councils, small businesses, third sector organisations, and not-for-profit community-centred organisations.

While we do not hold data on the delivery of each Key Fund project, most of these were likely delivered by external organisations. Accordingly, if we look at all the projects funded through the Key Funds and the main funding together, we can see that the vast majority of projects were delivered externally, and often by community groups.

This communication strategy is thought to have helped the local authorities to distribute funding more equitably compared to approaches used in other regions. Indeed, local authority leads reflected how they had greater control over the geographic distribution of funds (relative to previous programmes) and commented that they were able to ensure a fairer distribution. In Anglesey and Gwynedd, this allowed areas within the authorities that had less exposure to support under previous programmes to benefit. This was considered to be a key success of the programme, helping to generate community buy-in and increase capacity in the areas that had the least experience of community development. This is also supported by findings from some of the Key Fund evaluations which found that many of the projects were delivered by small and inexperienced community organisations with important capacity-development results reported. It would be interesting to compare the geographic and organisational distribution of delivery between the UKSPF and ESIF programmes to further understand the programme's performance in relation to equitable delivery, and whether the perceptions from local authority leads can be corroborated.

A survey of project leads indicated that delivery leads for the main projects (excluding those funded through the Key Funds) most commonly learned about the UKSPF programme either through local authority representatives (45%) or via internal channels, including working within local authorities (19%).

Figure 4.2: How did you hear about the UKSPF programme?

Source: Project Lead Survey (n=58)

Thus, while the Key Funds appear to have generated good results in providing opportunities for 'new' organisations to deliver projects, the evidence for the main project delivery is somewhat different. The relatively low number of project leads who heard about the opportunity through other channels such as online searches, community groups, or networking events indicates that the reach of the programme was relatively limited to those already known by the local authorities[20]. This may also be due to the restrictive timescale of the UKSPF programme, which made it difficult for local authorities to target organisations they had not previously worked with and develop new relationships. Indeed, the evidence provided in the stakeholder interviews corroborated this, indicating that most of the main projects were delivered by trusted local partners already known to the local authorities.

The advantage of this approach is that it prevented organisations from outside the area, with little or no understanding of the local context but a desire to secure funds, from delivering projects. Stakeholders highlighted how this local knowledge was fundamental in avoiding duplication with existing local provision. Anecdotally, there were examples of UK-wide organisations targeting multiple local authorities speculatively with proposals which were less able to respond effectively to local needs. The approach in North Wales prevented this from occurring.

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[20] It is worth noting that unsuccessful applicants were not consulted and this finding may simply reflect that the applications received from organisations with pre-existing relationships were better.

Most of these partners, such as Cadwyn Clwyd and Menter Mon, had a long history of delivering in North Wales. Another local authority lead expressed frustration that some high-potential capital investment projects could not be supported because they were too early in their lifecycle to be delivered within the programme timeframe.

The Project Lead survey results support the view that there was limited engagement with new suppliers: 96% had already supplied services or supported delivery of activities for their local authority prior to UKSPF.

In conclusion, while the main projects were generally delivered internally or by experienced external organisations, the Key Funds did provide opportunities for less experienced community organisations to deliver projects, as we describe in the next section. Overall, the programme appears to have implemented a good balance whereby the larger core projects were delivered by experienced organisations who could be relied upon to deliver key activities within the tight timeframe, while considerable resources were also allocated to less experienced community organisations through the key funds. The Key Funds mechanism has therefore been especially valuable in opening up routes to delivery for new suppliers and expanding local authority relationships with organisations deeply embedded within local communities.

4.2.2   Engaging end beneficiaries

With regards to end-beneficiaries, our meta review of evaluation reports highlights the importance of community-based strategies such as engaging with local groups, the utilisation of referral networks, outreach and promotional activities, as demonstrated in Figure 54.3 below (e.g. with 63% of projects using community outreach to engage end beneficiaries). This also demonstrates the value of enabling community-based organisations, or organisations with strong networks within communities, to lead on delivery. In total, 74% of the evaluation reports we reviewed found these approaches to have been effective.

Figure 4.3: Coding of client engagement approaches
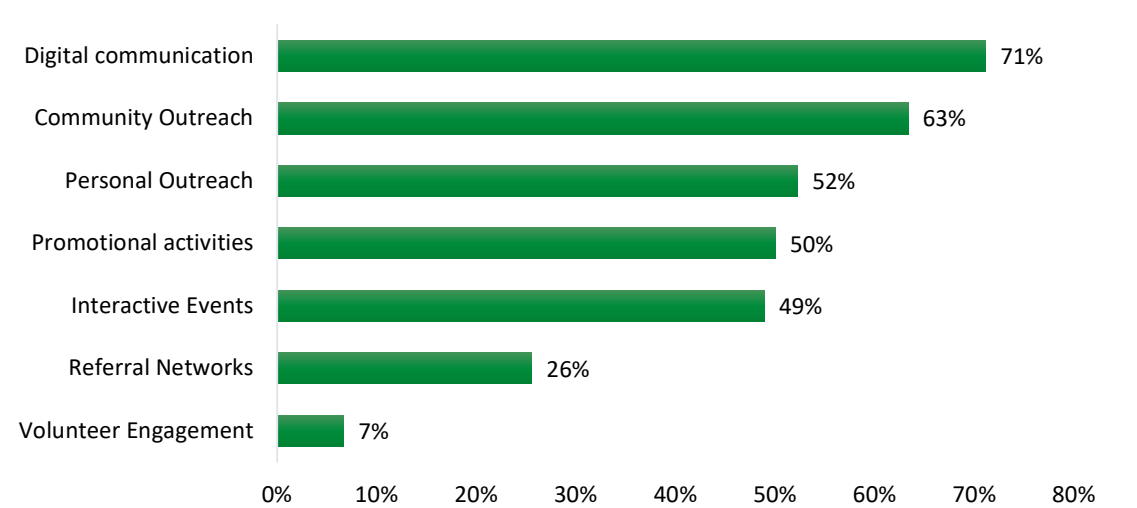
Source: Meta review of evaluation reports (n=90)

<u>Multiply</u>

The general theme across North Wales was that delivering Multiply funding was a challenge. Stakeholders mostly attributed this to the funding formula used for Multiply in Wales resulting in a level of funding that outstripped demand for numeracy-focussed projects.

Several local authorities found that there were initiatives already in place, including the Welsh Government's Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST) programme aimed at increasing numeracy and digital literacy for those aged 16 and over. In Denbighshire, the local authority found that delivery partners were competing for beneficiaries with other existing programmes.

Despite these challenges, some local authorities found it easier than others to deliver Multiply projects. The two best examples can be found in Anglesey and Wrexham.

Multiply in Anglesey was partly delivered by Môn Communities Forward who were a trusted partner of theirs and had a track record of delivering numeracy-based courses. Indeed, such was their success, we understand that ca. £400k of Multiply underspend was reallocated from other local authorities to Môn Communities Forward to cater for the demand in Anglesey. Much of its success was due to the use of a creative numeracy support programme using "hidden numeracy skills"[21] to improve adult numeracy across the community in Anglesey.

Wrexham used the Key Fund mechanism to deliver a substantial proportion of their Multiply allocation. Similar to the approach in Anglesey, this focused on more creative approaches by ensuring that the focus on numeracy could be incorporated into other activities. As with the Anglesey example, the success of the project led to an additional ca. £214k going into the Key Fund, drawn from underspend elsewhere in the region.

The Key Fund was launched through a webinar, which led to a wide range of ideas coming forward and eventually more than 20 community-led projects delivered. These included bakery classes, horticultural numeracy projects, practical accounting for micro-businesses, and targeted provision in HMP Berwyn (the prison in Wrexham). Evaluation reports found that this grassroots approach made Multiply more accessible and effective to smaller organisations and demonstrated how a flexible and creative approach to the types of projects delivered by Multiply helped to improve uptake.

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[21] Broadly, this term describes projects that incorporated numeracy into other activities, contrasting with more formal numeracy courses. 'Maths by stealth' is also often used as a reference to this.

4.3   Effectiveness of delivery processes

A key part of the meta review was to assess what evaluations had concluded about the effectiveness of each process within the delivery of the programme, from the initial application stage to the approval process, contracting experience, support from local authorities, and the monitoring and progress reporting aspects. Where information was available, researchers assigned an overall positive or negative score based on whether the narrative was more favourable than unfavourable. Although many reports contained mixed views, this binary rating provided a simple way to judge overall effectiveness, supported by notes explaining the reasons for each score.

It is important to highlight, however, that the meta review was constrained in that the coverage of these processes within the evaluation reports varied considerably. For the most part, no assessments were made on these specific processes and the meta review is therefore limited to a minority of evaluation reports where there was sufficient narrative to describe the effectiveness of each delivery process. This perhaps demonstrates the need for greater standardisation of project evaluation reporting in future programmes to enable a more robust aggregation of findings.

The remainder of this section describes the meta review findings for each process, alongside findings from stakeholder interviews and the project lead survey.

4.3.1   Application process

Where information was available, the evaluations were generally positive about the application process with 61% of the reports that assessed this (17/28) providing an overall positive assessment. The reports noted strong support and effective processes while in many cases applicants reported a smooth and straightforward process. There was less positive feedback in the evaluations of C&P interventions, which might be due to difficulties that some of the smaller community organisations may have had in navigating the process. This theme was particularly evident in some of the Key Fund evaluations which recommended having less stringent processes for the very small grant allocations.

Other weaknesses described in the reports included the requirement for multiple quotes – particularly where costs were as low as £2.5k or where there were preferred suppliers, and the volume of KPIs to select from which were often overlapped, leading to confusion among applicants. Both of these challenges stemmed from the programme requirements and were outside of the team's control.

Feedback from the project lead survey suggests that overall, the application process was clearly outlined and easy to follow (71% reported this or 40/56), the amount of information requested was reasonable (73%; 40/55), the questions were appropriate (80%; 44/55), the application process was sufficiently flexible to accommodate different types of projects (75%; 41/55), and feedback and communication during the application process was timely and constructive (65%; 36/55).

Overall, most project leads (67%; 38/57) felt that their experience with the application process was positive, with 49% finding it 'good' and 18% 'excellent.' Only a small proportion (7%) had a poor experience with the application process.

Those authorities who have historically received intensive levels of funding already have an ecosystem of delivery organisations who have had prior experience of funding applications. Interview feedback suggested that this was reflected by the overall high-quality of applications coming forward for the open call. The consultations also highlighted the perceived importance of the Expression of Interest (EoI) stage in screening out low quality or unsuitable applications.

Whilst the process was generally consistent across the local authorities, there were some notable differences. For instance, feedback from organisations applying across multiple counties reported that Denbighshire's clarity and structured approach stood out. The local authority published their funding priorities, interventions, outputs, and outcomes on their website with clear links which allowed applicants to align their proposals with the authority's strategic objectives. This was different to the approach undertaken elsewhere and could be replicated in future as good practice.

4.3.2   Approval process

Stakeholders generally viewed the decision-making process positively, as it prioritised local expertise and allowed for extensive cross-sectoral input which considered a broad range of perspectives. Wider stakeholders felt that the process was thorough, and project applications were each discussed rigorously and robustly. The Local Partnership Panels took a broad range of views into account which helped eliminate any partiality or bias.

Four of the six local authorities reported that in the first stage of the open call process, they received a total application value that was four or more times larger than their funding allocation. Accordingly, this required robust processes to identify the most suitable interventions to support which local authority leads were confident they had delivered. Stakeholders described robust assessment criteria which sought to ensure they supported projects with the highest potential impacts and strongest outputs. In one authority, an external organisation was commissioned to conduct an independent assessment to validate the internal initial assessments conducted by the local authority team. It also provided a complementary assessment focusing on value for money specifically whilst the local authority team focused more on the projects' strategic fit.

Whilst these processes were perceived by delivery stakeholders to be robust, they also resulted in a lengthy procedure, with delays frequently noted in evaluation reports. Indeed, most evaluation reports (71%; 20/28) covering the approval process provided an overall negative assessment with process delays identified as the primary factor. In the context of an already very short programme delivery timescale, any delays during the approval process only served to heighten the issue. These often had practical implications on delivery. For example:

'In the cases where offer letters slipped in terms of timeline, this had caused less implementation time for the projects themselves. This was not ideal as some groups were managing challenging capital construction projects.'

'Delays in securing funding agreement impacted the recruitment of the future leaders officers, meaning the project only hired five officers instead of six, and there was not enough time to find adequate community development expertise to fill all of the roles.'

Source: Extracts from project evaluation reports

Several other evaluation reports noted that delays to receiving formal notification led to delays in recruiting staff and initiating project activities, which affected output and outcome achievement and further amplifying the challenges of an already tight delivery timescale for the programme.

The local authorities noted that the decision-making processes varied considerably in terms of timescale across each local authority. This was challenging primarily for the Multi-LA projects. One stakeholder highlighted that they "could only move as fast as the slowest authority," because applicants could not be notified of the decision outcome until each local authority had approved the application.

Equally, local authority leads reported that the Multi-LA projects had been managed effectively by the Regional Team overall, highlighting clear roles and an effective setup resulting in good collaboration between each partner. This perhaps shows that a more streamlined approach for regional projects would have been more effective, potentially with a proportion of each local authority's funding 'ringfenced' at the outset for regional delivery as was done in other regions (e.g. South East Wales).

4.3.3   Contracting experience

Delays and bottlenecks were also a common theme in the evaluation reports that discussed the delivery experience, with 71% of the very small number of reports that covered this (12/17) providing an overall negative score on this aspect for that reason. Similar challenges were again highlighted in the reports with regard to insufficient time for recruitment and procurement, most notably in relation to capital build projects. Recruitment proved especially difficult given the short-term nature of the newly created roles, while uncertainty surrounding the transition year further compounded the challenge of retaining staff.

A more positive response was received in the project lead survey which suggested that a majority (56%) found that the time taken to complete the contracting process was reasonable while a large majority of project leads (68%) found the contracting process to be clear and straightforward. This underlines the need to treat the findings from the meta review on the contracting experience with caution (e.g. it may not have been discussed in most reports because there were no issues to report).

Overall, the delivery experience appears to have been fairly mixed with the main issues stemming from the short-term nature of the programme. Whilst the processes implemented in North Wales appear to have been robust, this was perhaps to the detriment of facilitating a more efficient and timely approach which would have helped to negate the already challenging delivery timescale.

4.3.4   Guidance and support from local authorities

Local authority UKSPF teams maintained direct, day-to-day relationships with local projects, providing informal support on delivery issues, project change requests, and liaising with the Regional Team as needed. The local authorities met with each project lead in their area on a monthly basis. There was also the option for informal catch-ups between each scheduled monthly progress meeting, depending on the needs of each project. The local authorities were not responsible for collecting UKSPF monitoring data, but they did provide support to projects in completing progress reports and issued reminders to encourage timely report completion.

The meta review found that this aspect of programme delivery was effective with a majority of evaluations (61%; 11/18) providing an overall positive score, which shows an important cultural change. Local authority officers responded quickly and effectively to queries raised by project leads on issues such as change request forms, although there were some reports of insufficient guidance provided at the outset in relation to evidence requirements. The delay in providing this guidance was said to be caused by the delays in receiving guidance from UK Government. Other reports highlighted changes to indicator definitions partway through delivery and issues surrounding inconsistency in interpretation across local authorities.

4.3.5   Monitoring and progress reporting

The lack of clear guidance from the UK Government was a recurring theme in stakeholder interviews, particularly in relation to the monitoring and recording of evidence. Whereas guidance for evidence capture under ESIF projects had been comprehensive and unambiguous, the UKSPF's lighter-touch approach provided insufficient clarity, leaving room for subjective interpretation of what qualified as evidence. It also increased the administrative burden for the Regional Team, who frequently had to seek clarification from the local MHCLG support team. However, they indicated that the local MHCLG team were responsive and helpful in providing guidance. To reduce the risk of subjectivity and contradictory advice, the Regional Team logged all requests into a centralised system, leading to more consistent advice in response to requests for clarification.

The Regional Team adopted a rolling reporting period for claims. Before each project started, the grant recipient and the Regional Team agreed on a claim schedule, which was set out in the Grant Funding Agreement (GFA). The grant claims were paid every three months (i.e. on a quarterly basis), based on the GFA. The process led to a consistent flow of data which avoided peaks in reporting that would negatively impact the Regional Team's capacity. Project leads also benefitted as they each had a full quarter to compile and submit their progress data accurately, resulting in fewer delays and more consistent reporting.

The monitoring process was designed to be "light touch", with a focus on assessing whether projects were progressing in line with their agreed outputs and outcomes, rather than imposing requirements beyond what was needed for UKSPF. This flexibility allowed projects to work within a framework that did not add undue administrative burden, while still providing a robust oversight mechanism to ensure that projects were delivering what they intended to.

This is supported by the project lead survey results, which indicate that a majority (63%) of survey respondents felt that progress reporting was straightforward to complete, that the reporting schedule was clear (81%), and that the claims process enabled projects to receive timely payments (66%). However, just under half (49%) felt that the evidence requirements were clear.

Figure 4.4: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the UKSPF contracting, reporting, and claims processes?
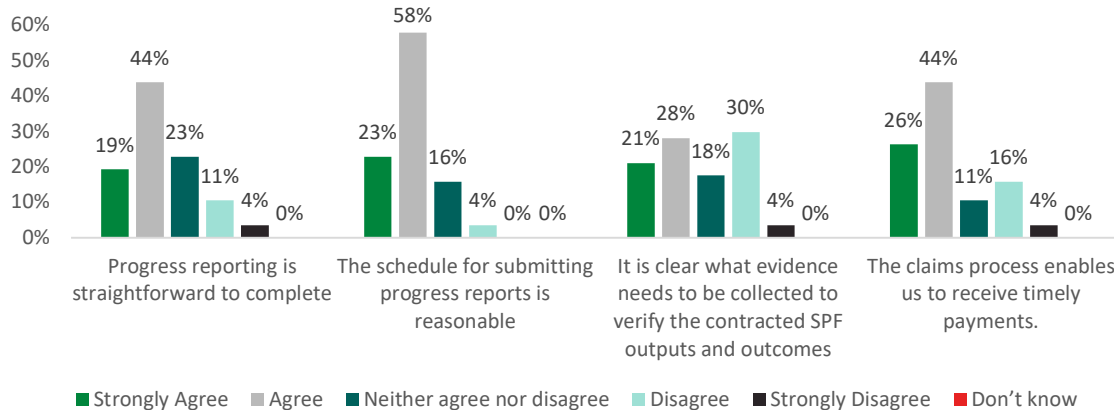
Source: Project Lead Survey (n = 57 each)

A key challenge was that the centralised process resulted in a substantial workload for the Regional Team, which was responsible for processing claims and monitoring data across all 169 UKSPF projects in North Wales, as well as approving project change requests. This administrative burden stretched the team's capacity and at times required additional support from the local UKSPF team at Cyngor Gwynedd. It also contributed to delays in processing change requests, which in turn affected delivery timelines.

Furthermore, the centralised process limited the visibility of the claims procedure for local authorities. As a result, they were unable to provide adequate support to their local projects when specific queries arose regarding monitoring and claims. They often had to refer back to the Regional Team for clarification of queries, who were slow to respond due to their constrained capacity.

Findings from the meta review support this mixed assessment of the monitoring and progress reporting processes. Overall, slightly over half of evaluation reports provided overall positive assessments of monitoring (51%; 22/43) and progress reporting (53%; 16/30). The main reason for negative responses related to the resource implications for project leads, with smaller, community-based, and volunteer-run organisations especially finding it difficult.

4.4   Satisfaction with support

The meta review also examined reported levels of beneficiary satisfaction. Approaches varied across evaluations: some assessed the satisfaction of grant recipients while others provided an overall score for end beneficiaries. It is worth noting, however, that only 22 evaluation reports included a measure of overall beneficiary satisfaction.

Despite these methodological limitations, the findings were consistently positive, with high levels of satisfaction reported among beneficiaries. The reports provided a 90% average recording of good or excellent satisfaction. Even the least positive evaluation reported that 68% of beneficiaries rated their satisfaction as good or excellent.

These results indicate that, although challenges were identified in some delivery processes, the support provided through UKSPF projects in North Wales was overwhelmingly well received by beneficiaries.

4.5   Programme management and governance

The Regional Team managed all monitoring and claims processes. They implemented a centralised, structured, and consistent approach to monitoring and data collection through their PowerBI-based dashboard. The Regional Team developed the dashboard in-house to provide real-time tracking of project outputs, outcomes, and spend for all projects, with the option to filter by local authority area. Data from the dashboard formed the basis of the Quarterly Programme Progress Reports for the Collaboration Board. The Regional Team submitted quarterly and six-monthly reports to MHCLG through the PowerApp system. While the PowerApp system was perceived as cumbersome, the PowerBI dashboard was designed to allow the team to easily transfer data from one application to the other. Some Local Authorities voiced challenges around the use of PowerBI app, where functionality relied on the regional team to keep the information up to date, which placed additional pressure on their capacity.

This approach was generally well-received by local authority leads, while more broadly stakeholders were satisfied with the management and governance processes and the role of Cyngor Gwynedd as lead.

At a project lead level, the survey results show that the majority (60%) had a positive experience with the programme management systems: 39% felt their experience was 'good,' and 21% found their experience was 'excellent.' Other survey responses revealed high levels of satisfaction with the skills and experience of the programme management staff, with 93% of survey respondents indicating that they rated the skills and experience of the programme management staff positively.

4.6   Key success factors and areas for improvement

The final part of the meta review focused on the key lessons contained within the evaluation reports pertaining to the enablers needed for projects to succeed and the main areas for improvement.

In relation to key success factors, there were four main themes evident within the reports, as shown in Figure 4.5.

Figure 4.5: Coding of key success factors from project evaluation reports
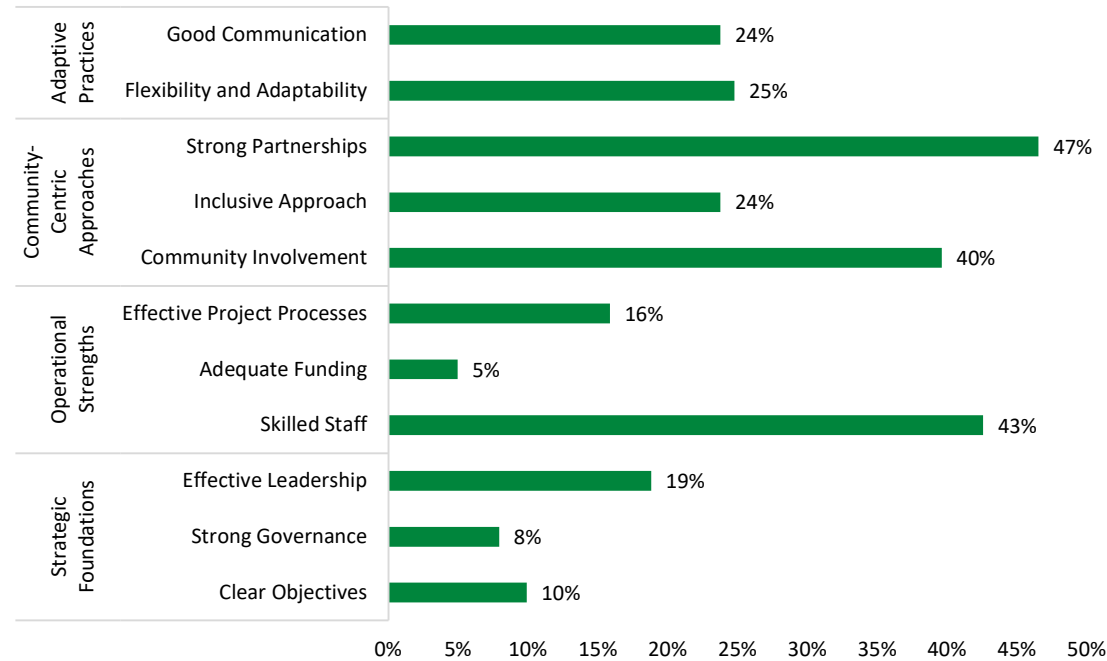
Source: Meta review of evaluation reports (n=101)

Some of these are self-evident, such as having strong strategic foundations with effective leadership, strong governance structures and clear objectives, alongside having strong operational foundations including experienced staff and effective processes. Both of these themes featured strongly in the success of the Conwy Community Regeneration Key Fund, as shown in the vignette below.

Vignette: Conwy Community Regeneration Key Fund

The findings highlight that the design of the Key Funds in Conwy was shaped by the need to ensure that smaller organisations within the area could access UKSPF funding. The Key Fund was successful in engaging a broad range of project applicants, from community groups led by volunteers to educational institutions and small, niche businesses.

The flexible, demand-led approach allowed funding resources to be allocated in response to emerging needs. This led to large uptake, particularly in the Community Regeneration Key Fund and Supporting Local Businesses, which both required additional top-up funding in response to high demand.

The strategic alignment with local and national priorities ensured that the Key Funds contributed to broader policy goals. At the design phase of the Key Funds, care was taken following input from a variety of key stakeholders representing a range of sectors to avoid duplication with other funding streams, such as the Transforming Towns programme and Levelling Up Fund.

The evaluation found that overall governance and management of the Key Funds was robust, with dedicated and experienced officers providing tailored support to applicants and a Local Partnership Panel overseeing decision-making. This structure facilitated strong local engagement, particularly in rural and non-coastal areas that often do not have access to grant funding opportunities. The responsiveness and support from Key Fund officers were key strengths and led to high levels of satisfaction reported by project leads.

The importance of having good community-centric approaches is perhaps the most interesting aspect and demonstrates the value of the bottom-up approach adopted by the programme team in North Wales. The evaluation reports highlighted the importance of being embedded in the communities to secure good engagement, alongside developing strong partnerships as demonstrated by the Wrexham Community Key Fund example shown in the vignette below.

Wrexham Community Key Fund

The project exceeded its target SPF outputs and outcomes, in part due to the high demand for the grant funding leading to a greater number of lower value grants awarded than initially intended. Successful delivery was enabled by an effective partnership between Cadwyn Clwyd and AVOW and the strong connections that both partners have with a wide range of local community organisations.

The funding has had a variety of positive impacts for participating organisations, such as organisations increasing their reach and the range of opportunities they can offer community members, enabling progression of larger scale projects and creating opportunities for future grant funding applications.

Finally, the need to be flexible and adapt the delivery model was a further key success factor frequently highlighted in reports. This often involved being responsive to changing circumstances (e.g. shifting towards delivering short courses in response to the limited timeline), reallocating funds to elements where greater demand was encountered, or making changes to accommodate the needs of participants and improve engagement. The GISDA-delivered TAPI 2 project is a good example of this adaptability, as demonstrated in the vignette below.

Tîm o Amgylch y Person Ifanc 2 (TAPI 2) pilot delivered by GISDA

The TAPI2 project provided person-centred support based on a wide range of activities including emotional support, job search skills, accredited courses and work experience to vulnerable young people in Gwynedd who were far away from the labour market.

The project developed a local approach with staff (when practical) working with young people in their local towns such as Nefyn and Aberdaron and not just in the key centres in Pwllheli, Caernarfon and Blaenau Ffestiniog which meant that the project was able to deliver to a wider range of young people. The project worked well with other organisations such as Cyfle Cymru, Gwynedd Youth and Care Services, and the Job Centre to access referrals and in relation to the provision of support to young people.

Key to the overall success of the project was the ability to change the way the project was delivered to meet the needs of participants. Initially, the project struggled to engage young people and it became clear that many wanted 'one-to-one' sessions due to confidence issues in social settings. Accordingly, the project changed its delivery model to accommodate this.

The feedback from young people was very positive, often referring to their satisfaction with the staff and the project activities. Indeed, the quality and dedication of the staff was one of the key strengths of the project.

The main areas for improvement discussed in evaluation reports often focused on the inverse of the success factors noted above, such as a need to increase community engagement and develop partnerships, and the need for operational enhancements such as addressing staffing capacity issues or deficiencies within project processes. However, there were two key areas for improvement that merits discussion.

First, as has been highlighted throughout this chapter, the short programme timeframe has been the key challenge affecting all aspects of delivery. This affected staff and participant recruitment and the quality of delivery with processes rushed and compromises made to accommodate the challenging timescale. The need for a rapid project start-up was hindered by the time it took to establish relationships between local authorities and delivery partners. Some of the larger capital projects faced delays due to slow planning permission processes and procurement bottlenecks and these issues were difficult to resolve within the tight funding timescale. The short timescale of the programme also led to uncertainty, particularly towards the end of 2024, which resulted in issues with staff retention. Many organisations lost key staff when contracts ended due to delays in announcing plans for transition funding, which led to difficulties in re-recruiting staff on short-term fixed-term contracts.

Second, the need for better monitoring and evaluation was also consistently highlighted in reports. This included aspects such as having clearer reporting structures, providing better guidance to participants regarding the importance of their feedback, and the need for better systems to document the participant journey and follow-up to track impacts. Others highlighted the need to streamline the KPIs being recorded to simplify the process, particularly for small community groups.

Figure 4.6: Coding of main areas for improvement from project evaluation reports
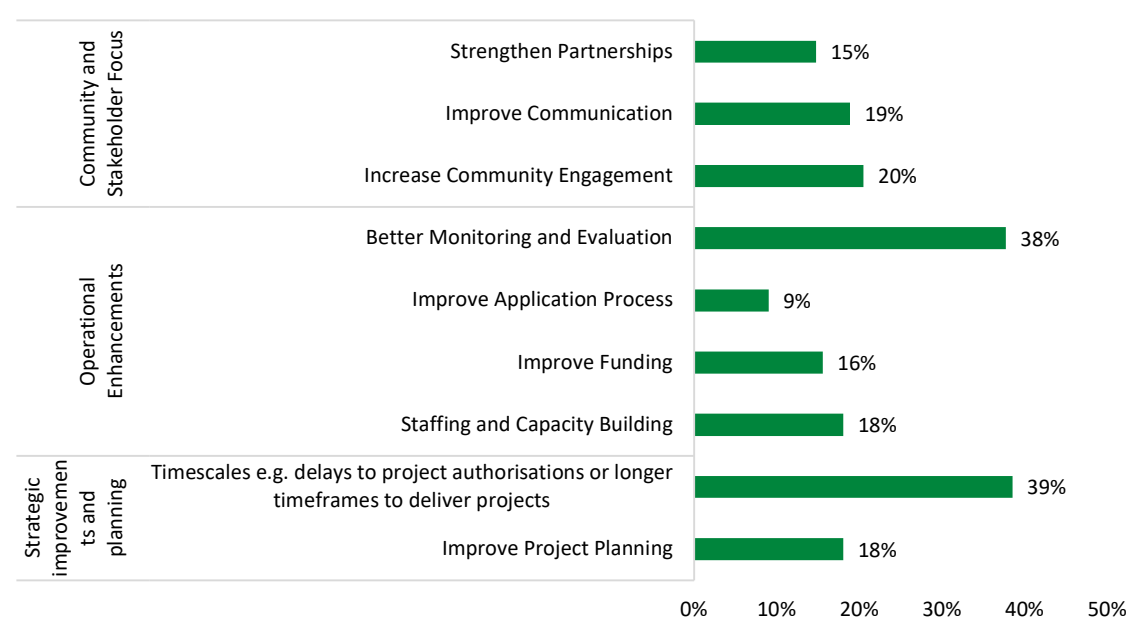
Source: Meta review of evaluation reports (n=121)

5.   Impact Evaluation

This chapter provides a high-level review of the impacts generated by the UKSPF programme in North Wales, drawing on evidence from our meta review of project evaluations. This has been designed to complement the work currently being undertaken through the national MHCLG-commissioned evaluation, which provides more of a 'deep dive' on the programme impact in specific areas (Empowering communities and enhancing the voluntary and community sector; Decarbonising North Wales; and improving basic, digital, and 'soft' skills).

In this section we consider the main short- and longer-term impacts generated, drawing on the Theory of Change and assessing contribution against the main needs identified at the outset (e.g. through the North Wales RIP UKSPF document), as well as covering unexpected or unintended outcomes or impacts. We discuss these impacts under the two broad themes of social and place-based impacts, and economic and environmental outcomes. This approach was undertaken instead of an assessment by investment priority because of the cross-cutting nature of the impacts each investment priority generated, as we demonstrate in the subsections below.

5.1   Social and place-based impacts

In describing the need for investment, the North Wales RIP UKSPF document highlighted a need to revitalise town centres in the region to help attract investment and regenerate local economies. There was also some discussion on the need to better protect and enhance natural assets, and to support heritage and culture initiatives or assets to stimulate tourism. Finally, there was also much emphasis on a need to address a lack of core infrastructure supporting community cohesion and to support the needs of an ageing population.

These needs then informed the interventions, outputs, outcomes, and impact areas outlined in the RIP document and summarised in the Theory of Change. Broadly, they can be categorised into two key impact areas: enhanced community engagement and cohesion, and enhanced pride in place. We provide a high-level assessment of the programme's impact against these themes below.

5.1.1   Community Development outcomes

As we discussed in section 3.2, the monitoring data collected by the programme provides some useful indications of the programme's impact in generating community development outcomes, documenting the thousands of community organisations supported. We explored this in much greater detail as part of our meta review, which included a detailed exercise to review and code all outcomes and impacts contained within the 121 evaluation reports.

The impact on increasing community engagement, cohesion, and access to services was the most commonly cited theme in these reports. As we show in Figure 5.1 over page, 43% of projects delivered these outcomes, and these often translated into improvements to people's health and wellbeing (reported in 36% of reports overall).

Figure 5.1: Coding of **community development outcomes** from project evaluation reports
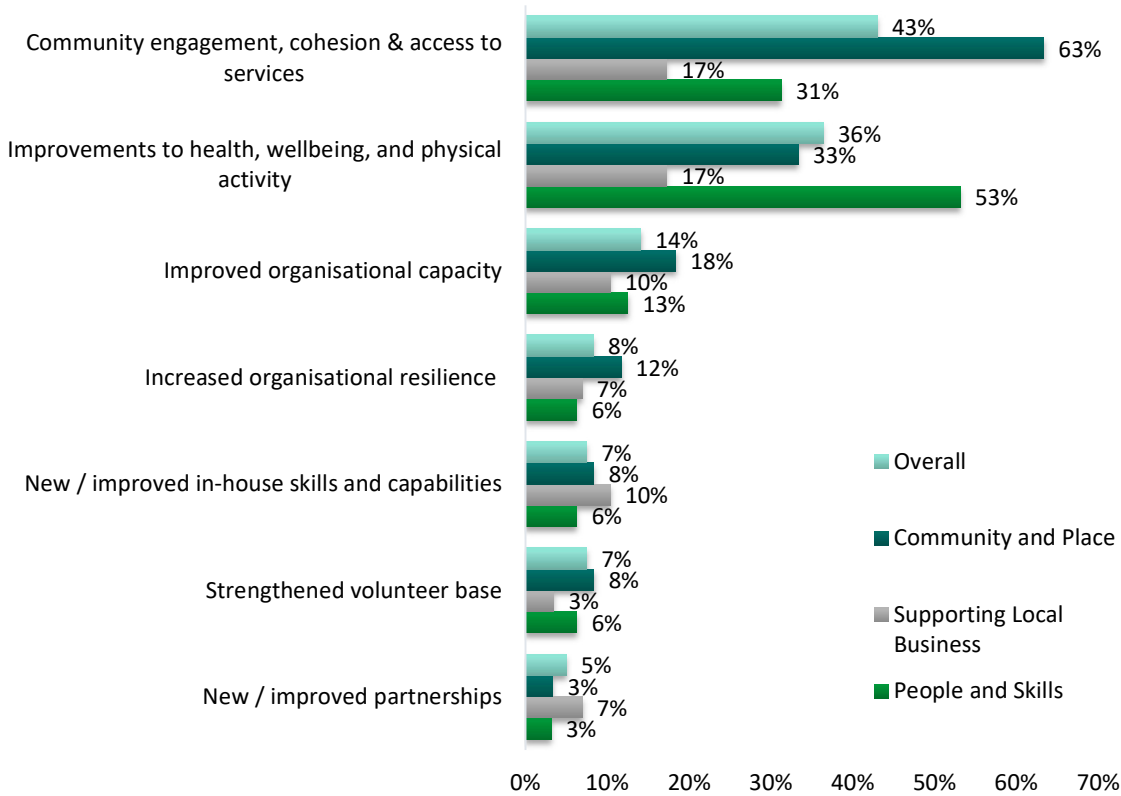
Source: Meta review of evaluation reports (n=121)

Increasing the capacity of community organisations

Perhaps the most significant type of projects in this respect were the key funds and other projects which sought to invest in and increase the capacity of community organisations, and in doing so helping to increase their reach or scale of service provision. These projects often allowed organisations to increase the number of users who could access their service or enable them to reach different, sometimes harder-to-reach groups. At other times, the investment supported the resilience of the community organisations and had an important safeguarding effect. The projects also had an important impact on the capabilities of supporting organisations who gained valuable bid writing and project delivery experience, representing a key legacy for the programme by ensuring communities are better equipped to deliver similar activity in future.

Almost every local authority had substantial Key Fund projects delivering this type of activity.

In Wrexham, three of their Key Funds (accounting for almost £5 million of their budget collectively) stand out in particular with respect to increasing community organisations' capacity. The Wrexham Community and Place Key Fund is the main example, although the People and Skills and Multiply Key Funds had a similar effect. In the case of the former, the evaluation report found that the project had increased the capacity and sustainability of local community groups through the development of new facilities/infrastructure, services, and new income sources. According to the report, 64% of supported organisations self-reported that they were more resilient following the support, 74% reported a better understanding of how to access funding, while 56% reported improved bid writing skills. The vast majority also reported that the project helped them gain the experience needed to deliver larger scale projects in future. The impact on the communities these organisations served was also evident, with 82% of grant recipients reporting the project had enabled them to expand their reach with a higher number of community members accessing their services or facilities as well as enabling them to reach new communities and demographics (e.g. developing services that support specific groups such as youth, the elderly, individuals with mental health needs etc.).

In Gwynedd, there were three large projects focusing on increasing the capacity of community organisations in different sectors or contexts with ca. £4.2 million spent on this activity collectively. These included Grymuso Gwynedd, where the evaluation found a successful model deploying outreach officers to help less experienced organisations to develop their applications. This support provided important capacity building outcomes in itself, and in some cases it led to the formation of new community groups. The combination of support from officers and the funding was found to have significantly impacted the community groups' capacity and self-sufficiency. A further project, Diwyllesiant, provided grant support for 40 cultural, historical and heritage organisations while the final project of note, Mantell Gwynedd, funded 36 grant projects to improve community facilities.

The Denbighshire Community Capacity Building Key Fund (a £1.5 million project) helped establish 8 new Community Interest Companies and provided capital grants for organisations to improve their facilities so that they could better serve community needs. Grant recipients demonstrated diversified income models, reduced financial vulnerability and increased revenue generation. Similarly, most organisations receiving grant support from the Flintshire Community Key Fund (a ca. £0.7 million project) reported improvements to their buildings, which resulted in reduced costs due to energy efficiency savings and enabled them to increase the range of activities they offered.

In Conwy, the Voluntary Sector Capacity Building Key Fund delivered a suite of training workshops tailored to the needs of the voluntary sector, covering topics such as volunteer management; sustainable funding strategies; governance and compliance; equality, diversity, and inclusion; and project evaluation and impact measurement.

On a smaller scale, there are several other examples of projects that invested in increasing the capacity of community organisations while some invested in specific community assets. Examples include the investments into the Penrhos garage and Post Office, the Conwy Paddling Pool improvements, and the Wrexham Tennis Centre. In the case of the former two, the programme effectively safeguarded these assets for the community. For instance, the Wrexham Tennis Centre example saw an introduction of new covered padel courts which was the first in the region.

Combined, the meta review found significant activity with regard to increasing the capacity of community organisations. There was good evidence to demonstrate that these investments had the intended effect in enabling them to increase their resilience and scale of their offer, while organisations widely reported impacts for their communities. However, we note that there was a lack of evidence from the community members directly within these reports which represents the main limitation in understanding the programme's impact on increasing community engagement and the social impact that entails.

Increased accessibility

Increasing the accessibility of community services and assets has been a further important area of impact which has the potential to increase community engagement. There are several examples where investments have made these more accessible for specific community groups. For example, the Erlas Victorian Walled Garden project improved access around the site particularly for older people and people with physical needs; the Conwy Youth Service Holiday project[22] distributed 150 bus tickets, enabling young people from rural or isolated areas to attend youth clubs and activities; while the Hwb yr Orsedd - Rossett Community Hub project oversaw increased accessibility to the park area. Other projects increased accessibility by removing financial barriers, including the Talent Development & Support project in Conwy which funded travel and equipment costs as well as coaching and competition fees for young athletes to engage in their activities; while the Conwy Paddling Pools Improvement Project ensured that the asset could be accessed free of charge.

Whilst there is again limited end beneficiary data to assess, we can assume that this increased accessibility will have led to more engagement from community members in key services and greater use of facilities, providing a range of leisure, wellbeing, physical activity and other benefits.

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[22] This was one of several initiatives funded through the Conwy Community Led Local Development.

Beyond the support for community organisations, we can also see the programme impact on increasing community engagement from the activities and events that were delivered. According to the programme monitoring data, there were 863 community-led arts, cultural, heritage and creative programmes delivered. These were often reported in the evaluations to have helped reduce social isolation, improve wellbeing and increase community engagement. The examples of this are varied, from over 20 events and 60 activities delivered at the Ruthin Town Hall Community Hwb, to projects engaging people in cycling activities, ramblers, litter picking, and community arts projects. These often focused on supporting vulnerable groups such as adults with learning disabilities, domestic abuse survivors, and people living with dementia. The reports found that the activities had a number of positive effects on participants; including, better physical and mental well-being, improved self-esteem and confidence, as well as a sense of purpose and belonging. Equally, unlike the support provided to develop community organisations' capacity, it was not clear how the outcomes from these activities would be sustained.

Summary

In conclusion, there is substantial evidence contained within the meta review to demonstrate the impact on increasing community capacity and activities which are likely to have increased engagement and had a positive impact on people's wellbeing.

Community empowerment also emerged as a strong theme in the stakeholder consultations and is a central focus of the national evaluation. The consultations highlighted that, compared with previous programmes, this initiative felt much closer to communities due to its ground-up approach. In some areas, there was a deliberate effort to target communities that had previously received less support. While this proved more challenging—given the limited presence of experienced organisations and individuals to deliver projects—some initiatives addressed this by combining grant funding with officer support to help community organisations build skills and capacity. This approach not only enabled more effective project delivery but is also believed to have created valuable long-term capacity within communities. The Key Funds played an important role in strengthening community-led delivery too and provides a useful model for future delivery.

5.1.2   Sense of Place outcomes and impact on visitor economy

Community pride

There is strong evidence of programme activity leading to an increase in pride in place too. This was, in part, delivered through investing in the physical appearance of places through public realm improvement funds such as the ca. £2 million investment in Gwynedd's 'Canol Trefi - Gosod Sylfaen ar gyfer Buddsoddiad, Balchder a Bwrlwm' project which aimed to increase pride by revitalising town centres in the authority area. Other projects invested in the physical appearance of specific assets, such as the improvements to the garden and church graveyard of the South Wrexham Community Heritage Inclusion Resilience Project, and others invested in upgrading commercial buildings such as Prosiect Parc Menter Dyffryn Nantlle where 16 businesses received funding and the Conwy Supporting Local Business Key Fund that supported 23 businesses with Commercial Property Improvements.

Some sense of place impacts can also be associated with community safety outcomes. Indeed, this was evident in the stakeholder consultation where the link between community members feeling safe in their community and taking pride in living there was highlighted. Perhaps the best example of this was the Gwynedd and Anglesey Community Safety Partnership CTV project which invested £250k in 108 new cameras and 14 new servers.

Figure 5.2 below shows that half of all C&P projects, and 36% of projects overall, were reported to have increased the sense of place within the communities supported. This is central to the whole ethos of the UKSPF programme generally which was about enhancing community pride. The chart also shows the link between improving the cultural and heritage offer, restoration of buildings, and enhancing community spaces (existing or new) with increasing pride in place.

It is interesting that these impacts were not limited to C&P projects. Indeed, the SLB projects were often linked with increasing sense of place (cited in 31% of evaluation reports) which is likely due to improvements to commercial buildings, markets, and the high streets.

Figure 5.2: Coding of **sense of place impacts** from project evaluation reports
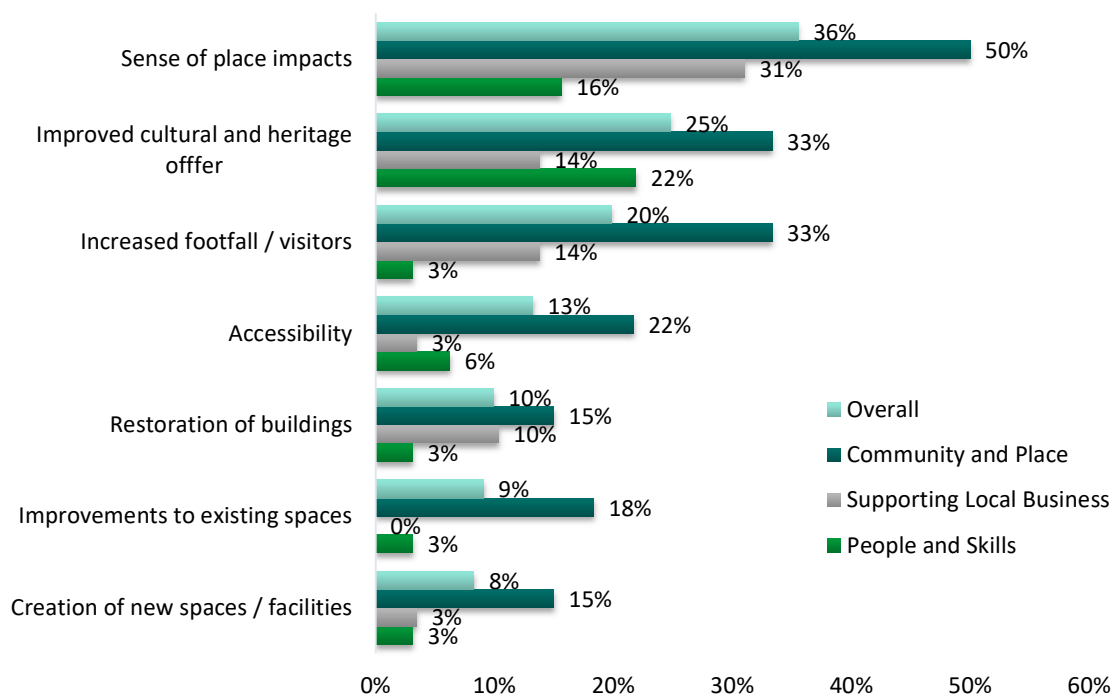
Source: Meta review of evaluation reports (n=121)

Visitor economy

The same activities which increased local residents' pride in the place they lived also often contributed towards the area's destination offer. The examples provided above will have contributed through improving the physical appearance of the area. There are also many examples of investments in heritage assets such as the Buttermarket project which was reported to have contributed to the regeneration of Denbigh's town centre and had an impact in attracting visitors. The Conwy Paddling Pools Improvement Project, which was discussed in the previous section, is another example with visitors reporting that the paddling pools add to the overall appeal of Conwy as a destination. Other projects in Conwy were also designed to improve the visitor offer, including two new shelters along Llandudno's North Shore Promenade, the Alice Town Trail and a marketing campaign to encourage visitors all year round to Conwy. There have also been investments in the Lloyd George and Wrexham museums, Galeri in Caernarfon, and the Gwersyllt Park Cricket Club. The chart above shows that a quarter of projects led to an improvement in the cultural and heritage offer, which can be associated with enhancing the destination offer.

Further, several projects invested in green or blue spaces such as the Connecting to Coast and Countryside project in Flintshire which invested in improved cycle ways and footpaths among other things, while the Green Destination Programme in Anglesey invested in boardwalks and other infrastructure.

Finally, other projects sought to create vibrancy and boost the visitor economy through events packages. Perhaps the best example is the 'Events within Wrexham' project which comprised the delivery of 29 events and vastly exceeded the footfall target with 92,669 achieved. In another example, the Diwyllesiant project supported 54 local events or activities, leading to a reported £2 million of visitor spending, whilst the 'Creu Conwy' project delivered over 200 events and activities supported by project investment in the mobile events infrastructure which is available for use by communities in Conwy. Officers in Conwy reported that this enabled cultural performances to be more accessible, inclusive, and local.

In each of these, there were reports of increased perceptions of facilities and increased visitor numbers. Indeed, Figure 5.2 shows that 20% of the evaluations we reviewed found that the projects had led to increased footfall and/or visitor numbers.

Summary

Taken together, there is good evidence to demonstrate that the programme has increased people's pride in where they lived and improved the region's destination offer, although it is not possible to quantify the scale of this impact as there were no formal indicators to capture improvements in pride in place or increases in visitor spending.

5.2 Economic and environmental impacts

Alongside improving community pride, UKSPF was also designed to increase life chances by investing in economic development and facilitating opportunities for individuals to progress. The UKSPF RIP document outlined several business-related challenges including the need to decarbonise their operations, strengthening support for social businesses, supporting RD&I, and improving the visitor economy (the latter was covered in the previous section). Further, the document also highlighted skills shortages in key growth sectors (particularly related to net zero) and barriers to employment for those farthest from the labour market (including a lack of 'soft' skills such as confidence and motivation).

The focus on environmental and economic impacts often intertwined, with a significant focus within business development projects on helping them to decarbonise. There has also been a substantial focus on increasing employability and addressing economic inactivity by helping people to move closer to the labour market, as well as supporting people into employment. Each of these themes are covered in this subsection.

5.2.1 Business development and decarbonisation

Most projects (57%) at least partly focused on generating positive economic outcomes, whilst unsurprisingly this was particularly pertinent for SLB with 83% of evaluation reports citing economic development impacts (see Figure 5.3 over page). Some of this stemmed from the activity discussed in the previous section with 20% of projects contributing towards improving the destination offer. However, it was slightly more common for the business support to be cited as the contributory factor to economic development.

As already noted, this often intertwined with environmental impacts with 55% of all SLB project evaluation reports also citing some form of environmental impact.

Figure 5.3: Coding of **business development, economic, and decarbonisation impacts** from project evaluation reports
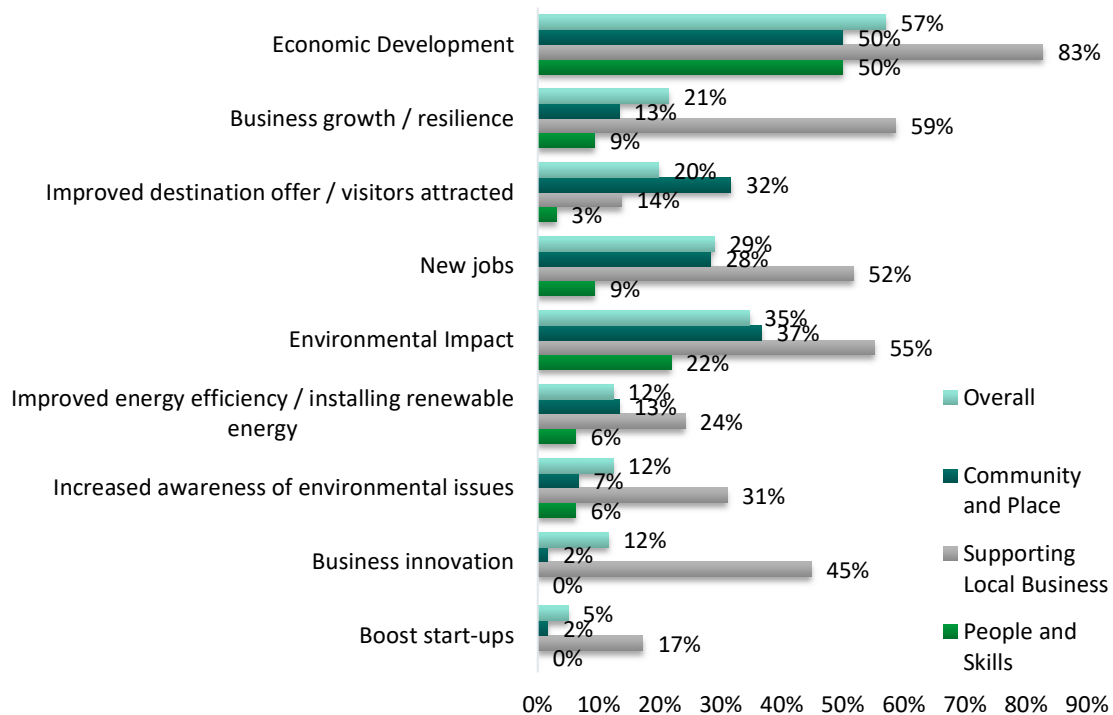
Source: Meta review of evaluation reports (n=121)

This dual focus on economic and environmental impacts was often seen in business support projects that sought help businesses to decarbonise. There were many examples of this in the projects supported, with projects seeking to increase awareness and knowledge within the business community, often with decarbonisation plans produced as the main outputs (indeed, 426 plans were developed across these projects). The Green Digital Academy projects, which were delivered in 5 of the 6 authorities (Wrexham being the only exception), were a good example of projects which contributed to reducing carbon emissions among participating businesses through decarbonisation plans. According to the reports, they increased business understanding of the green skills required for decarbonisation and led to the creation of two resources (a sustainable business guide and carbon literacy awareness resource) which are tools that can continue to be used to help with businesses' decarbonisation efforts. A further part of the projects' legacy was the establishment of the Green Digital Academy dedicated hub in Denbighshire, which continued to serve as an accessible facility for training and demonstration, focusing on sustainability, renewable technologies, skills, and innovation.

There are several further examples. The Conwy Supporting Local Business Key Fund supported a diverse range of green energy projects, such as supporting local businesses to take proactive steps towards decarbonising their operations, installing renewable energy solutions and improving their overall energy efficiency.

The Supporting Denbighshire Business Colomendy Net Zero Collaboration Project gave businesses effective data and resulted in reflection on their carbon emissions. The Flintshire Fund supported 37 businesses with feasibility studies on carbon reduction and engaged 90 businesses in knowledge transfer activities, with many utilising carbon reduction plans for strategic decision-making and securing additional funding. The Living Lab project supported skills, knowledge and workforce growth in decarbonisation and retrofit technology in the North West, while the Flintshire Sustainable Decarbonised Future project provided access for businesses to receive support from highly-qualified, experienced engineers at the AMRC. For this latter project, beneficiaries reported that the engineers demonstrated a good understanding of their specific business requirements and were able to provide relevant and applicable recommendations as a result of the visit, with decarbonisation route maps developed and providing good value. The evaluation of the Net Zero North Wales project found that 42% of supported businesses had already implemented sustainability related improvements after engaging with the project.

Other project evaluations showed more tangible carbon reduction impacts. According to the Supporting Denbighshire Business evaluation, there was an annual reduction of 147.43 tCO2e as a result of the renewable energy installed, while Prosiect Parc Menter Dyffryn Nantlle supported 15 buildings to improve their energy efficiency and/or reduced their carbon emissions.

5.2.2   Increased employability and addressing economic inactivity

The employability aspect of the programme covered a wide spectrum, from 'pre-employability' and support for those furthest away from the labour market, to the more traditional employability offer and supporting people into employment. Much of the focus was on the former, with projects aiming to tackle economic inactivity and long-term unemployment by supporting people with complex needs to move closer to the labour market and become work-ready.

The KPI data demonstrated the large scale of activity in this respect, with thousands supported to engage with support services and keyworkers, to engage in life skills and soft skills (confidence and resilience) and to become economically active with improved employability potential. One of the main achievements in this regard has been the 5,734 people experiencing reduced structural barriers into employment and skills provision following the support while 4,184 were supported to participate in education.

These results were also clearly evident in the meta review, where 63% of P&S evaluation reports cited skills development, 50% cited employability outcomes (including increased confidence), and crucially 47% of projects had supported individuals to move closer to the labour market or re-engage with education or training (see Figure 5.4 overpage).

There were numerous examples of projects that had a strong emphasis on this. The evaluation of Pathways into Employment, delivered in Conwy, found that 89% of participants believed that the course(s) taken helped reduce their structural barriers into employment and skills provision at least to some extent while 43% had managed to enter employment following the course(s). The TAPI2 project was reported to have improved the confidence of young people with an average increase of 29% while the MAPS project demonstrated that with the right support, flexibility, and tailored approach, disengaged young people could overcome barriers, build skills, and move towards positive futures.

With regards to education or training re-engagement, there are two examples that stand out. The Conwy TRAC project was a continuation of a long-running project. The evaluation found a significant positive impact on re-engaging the most challenging and vulnerable pupils in Conwy, while 33% of participants were reported to have improved behaviour at school and 36% of participants' wellbeing had improved. The Coleg Cambria Supportive steps evaluation found that 65% of learners rated considerable improvement in their attendance, 55% cited improved motivation, and 57% citing their grades had improved.

Figure 5.4: Coding of **employability and education-related impacts** from project evaluation reports
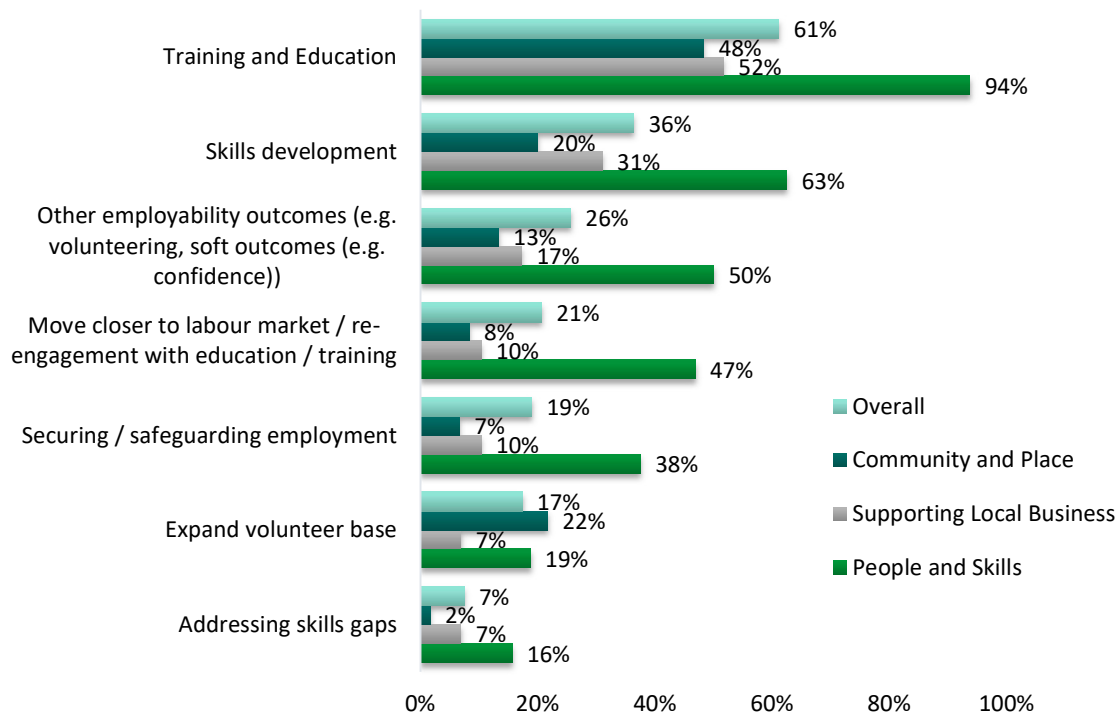
Source: Meta review of evaluation reports (n=121)

5.2.3 Securing employment

Finally, as noted, the programme has also supported people to gain employment, albeit with a modest achievement of 705 (93% of the target). The WorkWell Service in Conwy is a good example of a project that delivered a more traditional employability service, with 85 out of 102 clients supported to conduct job-search activities; they all reported increased employability through the development of interpersonal skills; 94 had completed a CV, 72 had applied for a job and 51 had secured an interview with an employer; and 28 clients secured employment.

Some of the projects focused on specific skills shortages that had been identified in the area. For instance, the Childcare Works project in Conwy focused on delivering training, supporting participants to gain qualifications, and providing work placements in the childcare and teaching sectors. As a result of this support, 12 participants entered into employment following their time in the programme – 6 as childcare workers and 5 as teaching assistants. The Coleg Cambria (Employer Skills North Wales) project provided subsidised training for Wrexham and Flintshire employers to address skills gaps, including group training, job-specific qualifications, leadership courses and 1-1 training. The evaluation found that the project was largely successful, with 74% of employers reporting that the project helped address skills gaps to a great extent and 86% reported that they felt able to overcome skills shortages in the market to some extent. However, despite these examples, most of the employability support does not appear to have been particularly tailored or directed towards defined groups and their needs.

5.2.4 Summary

A range of positive economic and environmental impacts have undoubtedly been achieved, with a particularly strong focus and project activity in supporting businesses to simultaneously reduce costs and cut carbon emissions through greater energy efficiencies. There also appears to be fairly strong evidence of impact for individuals furthest away from the labour market to improve their life chances and become economically active, while there has only been modest achievement with regard to entering employment. As with the previous findings, this assessment only serves to provide a high-level review of programme impacts and relies on the quality of data available in the evaluation reports. The main gap has been the lack of feedback from end beneficiaries and the use of more robust evaluation methods (such as the use of control groups to undertake counterfactual impact assessments). That said, the evaluation reports we reviewed do provide useful indicative findings which suggest that the programme has generated important business and employability impacts.

6. Comparative Analysis: Other Regions and Previous Funding Models

This chapter further explores the advantages and disadvantages of the approach undertaken in North Wales through two types of comparative analysis: first, to compare UKSPF delivery with previous regional development funding models; and second, a comparison with UKSPF delivery in other places across the UK. This seeks to identify good practice and further inform the design and planning for future delivery programmes.

6.1 A comparison of UKSPF and previous regional development funding models

Section 2.2. in this report provided a detailed outline of the approaches undertaken to deliver ESIF before discussing key characteristics of the UKSPF model. In this section we draw on our detailed desk review of previous evaluations, alongside our consultations with key stakeholders, in order to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the UKSPF approach relative to the previous delivery model.

6.1.1 Key characteristics and achievements of the ESIF model

We begin by summarizing the key characteristics of the ESIF model as described in section 2.2.

The Welsh Government (via WEFO) were responsible for selecting projects and thus had an important role in determining the strategic priorities.

There was longstanding and increasing regional collaboration to support project development that addressed regional priorities, from the local partnerships under the 2000-07 programme, to the SET and RET mechanisms in subsequent programmes. Equally, the initial period contained a strong 'bottom-up' approach which was found to have both strengths and weaknesses with the latter including inefficiencies and difficulties in securing alignment with regional and strategic objectives. As a result, the 2007-13 programme moved towards greater regional coordination in order to streamline delivery structures and focus on larger, strategic projects. While this may have delivered greater efficiencies and better strategic targeting, and was found to have reduced duplication, it also gave local bodies less influence to affect their areas and can be described as more of a 'top-down' approach in comparison. This trend continued into the 2014-20 delivery period with all-Wales initiatives introduced and often delivered by the Welsh Government.

<u>Structural Funds achievements</u>

Hundreds of projects were delivered in North Wales under Objective 1 (and associated programmes).[23] These comprised:

- Infrastructure Upgrades e.g. improvements on the A55 Expressway, industrial estates and business parks to develop businesses and jobs in areas that previously had little modern infrastructure.
- Business and Agriculture Support e.g. to invest in new technology in manufacturing, and support to create up to 2,500 net new SMEs (business start-ups).
- Skills and Jobs for unemployed people and Modern Apprenticeships for youth, with 44,700 participants helped into jobs or further learning across WWV.
- Community Regeneration through the LEADER programme and other measures to e.g. renovate village halls, start social enterprises, and run community IT learning centres. While these projects were small individually, collectively they improved quality of life and planted seeds for future development.

The ex-post evaluation (2012) found that the 2000–06 Structural Funds had made a "valuable contribution" to Wales's economic adjustment. [24] **However, the evaluation also cautioned that expecting a short 7-year programme to transform a regional economy would be unrealistic.** Illustrating this, the evaluators noted that even a hypothetical high return on the £2 billion EU investment would add only a fraction of a percent to Wales's GDP. In other words, the Structural Funds were vital but not sufficient alone to overcome a century of economic lag. North Wales by 2006 still faced issues like low productivity and pockets of joblessness, which is why the region continued top-tier EU funding in subsequent programmes.

The impact areas highlighted above generally continued to be the main focus in 2007-13 with further major infrastructure investments (new industrial parks and transport improvements), job creation and business growth. There was also a significant investment in research and innovation which sought to link academia with local industry and invest in high-end research facilities. By 2013, North Wales boasted much improved R&D infrastructure, helping double Wales's overall R&D expenditure as a percentage of GDP since 2001.[25]

The region also began to benefit from Wales-wide programmes during this period including ReAct, which provided retraining grants to workers laid off in the late-2000s recession (e.g. many from the manufacturing sector with employers such as Airbus benefitted from this) and the GO Wales graduate placement scheme.

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[23] [Overview of Evaluation - 2000-06 European Programmes](#)
[24] [Overview of Evaluation - 2000-06 European Programmes](#)
[25] [Overview of Evaluation - 2000-06 European Programmes](#)

Evaluations and audits of the 2007–13 programmes in Wales have been positive regarding implementation. Despite these achievements, the core challenge remained in relation to the lag in high-level economic indicators for WWV (including much of North Wales). By 2013, the region's GDP per head was still around 70% of the EU average – essentially unchanged in relative terms from 2000. This meant North-West Wales again qualified for the next round of top EU support. Some critics, such as the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) Wales, observed that after two rounds of funding Wales was "still playing catch-up" economically, questioning the transformative impact. However, others argued that without the funds, the region might have regressed further, and that many structural issues (like peripherality and industrial decline) take long-term effort to overcome. The consensus was that progress had been made in laying foundations (skills, infrastructure, network-building), but sustained investment was needed.

Similar themes can be found in the achievement from the 2014-20 funding programme. There were infrastructural improvements, including a significant focus on extending broadband connectivity through the Superfast Cymru project, while there was further investment in cutting-edge R&D and innovation facilities, and in employment, skills, and social inclusion projects. There was an increasing provision of Wales-wide projects while there were also region-wide projects such as TRAC, which supported over 1,200 at-risk youth to stay in education or training.

The Welsh Government's end-of-programme report in 2023 highlighted that every part **of Wales benefited** from EU funds – in North Wales, key legacies include improved transport links, a burgeoning renewable energy sector, cutting-edge research centres, and a more skilled workforce ready for future challenges. Evaluation findings have been largely positive about the 2014–20 delivery: targets for job entries, qualifications gained, businesses supported, etc., were met or exceeded in most categories by 2023. The governance model of regional engagement was cited as a best practice, fostering a collaborative approach that ensured strategic alignment of projects with regional needs (for example, tying skills programmes to the anticipated skills demand of big projects like Wylfa Newydd, which was in planning stages during this time).

However, the lack of progress against high-level outcome aims cannot be ignored; WWV (and thus North-West Wales) remained in the "Less Developed" category right up to Brexit. In fact, had the UK not left the EU, WWV would have been eligible for a new round of Objective 1/Convergence funding in 2021–2027, as its GDP per capita was still below the 75% threshold. This underscores that the Structural Funds, while instrumental in boosting the economy, did not fully "close the gap" for North Wales relative to more affluent regions of the EU. Long-term factors like geographic peripherality, an ageing population, and decades of pre-2000 underinvestment are contributing reasons. Nonetheless, it can be said that North Wales exits the EU funding era with far greater economic capacity and resilience than it had at the start of Objective 1 in 2000.

6.1.2   Local versus national approaches to economic development

Recent research and policy analyses provide insights into the dynamics between local or regional governance and national or centralised approaches. These studies collectively highlight the limitations of centralisation and the potential benefits of devolving powers and resources, while also presenting arguments in favour of maintaining or strengthening national coordination.

A recurring theme across multiple reports is the inadequacy of a centralised governance model in addressing regional disparities and fostering sustainable economic growth. For example, the British Academy (2024)[26] and the Institute for Government (2022)[27] emphasise that the concentration of economic, financial, and political power in London has contributed to persistent geographic inequalities in the UK. Central government control over key economic levers such as transport, skills development, and funding mechanisms has, those sources say, restricted local authorities' ability to tailor interventions to their specific contexts. Moreover, reliance on ring-fenced grants rather than flexible funding can limit local governments' capacity for strategic, long-term planning.

Evidence from the Local Government White Paper (2024)[28] and case studies such as Manchester demonstrate that empowered local leadership and meaningful devolution can drive stronger productivity growth and more effective service delivery. Manchester's experience exemplifies how devolved powers, coupled with stable frameworks and respect for local autonomy, enable regions to outperform even London in economic terms. The British Academy report further supports the argument for deeper devolution, calling for integration of regional policy within national economic strategies to unlock the productive potential of all UK regions.

Effective local governance requires robust accountability and public engagement mechanisms. NatCen Research (2025)[29] highlights that public support for devolution hinges on transparent governance structures that ensure local leaders remain responsive to community needs. Residents prioritise local issues such as housing, transport, and integrated health and social care services, expecting devolved authorities to deliver tangible improvements. The research underscores the necessity of clear accountability frameworks to prevent political agendas from overshadowing community interests.[30]

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[26] Transforming the UK economy requires a transformed regional policy | The British Academy
[27] Subnational government in England | Institute for Government
[28] Local Government White Paper | Local Government Association
[29] Public priorities around effective governance of new devolved areas | National Centre for Social Research
[30] Why hasn't UK Regional Policy worked? - Yorkshire Universities

There is however an alternative viewpoint emphasising the benefits of a national or centralised approach. Proponents argue that centralisation allows for greater policy coherence, efficient resource allocation, and the ability to address large-scale challenges that transcend local boundaries. The Bennett Institute for Public Policy (2023) critiques the UK's system as "incoherent," characterised by an overly dominant but disconnected centralised policymaking approach, which can lead to inefficiencies but also reflects the need for strong national coordination in complex policy areas.[31] It is argued that centralised governance is essential for managing strategic national challenges such as climate change and the economy, which require unified direction and cannot be effectively handled by fragmented local authorities.[32]

Centralisation is also argued to facilitate standardisation of performance metrics and accountability, enabling clearer oversight and comparability across regions. Centralised systems can reduce duplication, ensure consistent service quality, and prevent local mismanagement or financial instability, as seen in cases where councils have run up unsustainable debts. The Centre for Cities (2022) highlights that the UK economy suffers from an under-resourced and fragmented local government system, suggesting that without strong central support, local governments may lack the capacity to deliver effectively.[33] The conclusion of that report is that incremental reforms will not be sufficient; to deliver meaningful "levelling up," the UK government must implement bold reforms that devolve power, fix structural inefficiencies, and properly resource local authorities.

The debate centres on finding an optimal balance between a devolved approach and centralised oversight. While decentralisation promises responsiveness, innovation, and local engagement, centralisation offers coherence, scale, and strategic direction. Recent policy discussions suggest that effective governance in the UK requires a partnership model where local and national governments collaborate closely, with clear roles, responsibilities, and accountability frameworks that respect local autonomy while ensuring national priorities are met. The Local Government White Paper (2024) explicitly calls for "an equal, respectful partnership between local and national government—a genuine partnership model backed by statute, based on best international practice."

[Key advantages and disadvantages of devolved delivery](#)
Devolving delivery to regional and local bodies is generally recognised as offering several advantages:

- Tailored Interventions: Local actors better understand specific economic challenges and opportunities within their areas, enabling more targeted and relevant policy responses.

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[31] [The UK's incoherent state, levelling-up and the problems of English governance - Bennett Institute for Public Policy](#)
[32] [Real decentralisation will bring great benefits - Effective Governance Forum (2023)](#)
[33] [Centralisation Nation: Britain's system of local government and its impact on the national economy | Centre for Cities](#)

- Enhanced Responsiveness: Regional bodies can adapt more quickly to changing economic conditions compared to centralized national departments.
- Community Engagement: Local delivery mechanisms provide opportunities for greater public involvement and democratic accountability, fostering policies that reflect local priorities.
- Integration of Services: Regional coordination can facilitate the alignment of economic development with transport, skills, and social policies, promoting holistic regional growth strategies.

However, 'devolved delivery' also faces significant challenges:

- Implementation Gaps: There can be a disconnect between policy formulation at the Welsh Government level and effective on-the-ground delivery by regional bodies. Passing legislation or policy is frequently assumed sufficient to drive change, but practical execution can lag behind.
- Fragmented Governance: The multiplicity of local and regional actors can lead to overlapping responsibilities, inconsistent approaches, and difficulties in coordinating efforts across boundaries.
- Limited Accountability: The relative opacity of decision-making within local consortia reduces public scrutiny and democratic challenge, with voluntary and civil society sectors heavily dependent on government funding and influence.
- Capacity Constraints: Smaller local authorities and regional bodies may lack the resources, expertise, or strategic capabilities to manage complex economic development initiatives effectively.

Summary

There is a tension between centralised control and local empowerment. Reports advocating decentralization emphasise its potential to reduce inequalities, improve public services, and enhance democratic engagement. Conversely, arguments for centralization stress the necessity of unified policy direction, resource efficiency, and safeguarding national interests.

Devolving the delivery of economic development policy to regional and local bodies in Wales offers the potential for more tailored, responsive, and integrated economic growth strategies. However, challenges in policy coherence, implementation capacity, and accountability limit the full realisation of these benefits. A balanced approach that combines devolved delivery with strong national strategic oversight, resource allocation, and capacity support is essential to drive sustainable economic development across Wales.

6.1.3   Key lessons on project scale

Alongside the consideration of local versus national delivery approaches, our desk review also considered the advantages of the high-volume / small-scale / locally driven projects model delivered through the UKSPF programme in North Wales with more strategic / top-down models which contain fewer, high-value interventions.

The immediate outcome from the high-volume / small-scale project approach is typically a high degree of community involvement and a diversity of project types. During the 2000–2006 ESIF delivery in WWV, 1,700 separate projects were delivered, often by local authorities and community organisations. Such dispersion of effort meant that small towns and rural areas in North Wales benefited from a variety of community-level initiatives – from local training schemes to town centre improvements. One concrete example is the North East Wales Town Centre Regeneration project in Wrexham and Flintshire, a ca. £2 million project which delivered improvements to local town centre buildings and public spaces [34]. This typifies the bottom-up model: modestly scaled, location-specific projects aiming to revitalise communities at the micro level. This approach is often better at directly targeting local problems (e.g. a project tailored for a particular disadvantaged group in a specific town). The policy challenge is how to amplify these myriad small successes into broader regional change.

The fragmented nature of this model also has implications. Sustainability of outcomes can be a concern for small-scale projects, with many locally driven projects depending on short-term funding cycles. Larger programmes are also better-placed to target systemic issues and address structural inequalities e.g. by improving a region's education level via an all-region skills programme. On the other hand, bottom-up projects can have subtle long-term benefits by building social infrastructure. For example, a local youth centre established with a grant might instil lasting community pride or leadership skills in those involved in running it, even if the centre closes later. The impact is often diffuse and hard to measure – spread across many individuals and communities in small increments.

Policymakers have also observed that a plethora of uncoordinated local projects sometimes led to duplication of efforts and competition for resources. A 2012 inquiry into EU funds found instances of multiple EU-funded projects "delivering similar training or targeting the same businesses" in one Welsh locality, which was deemed inefficient and not particularly sustainable.[35]

Additionally, **administrative overhead** tends to be high: each small project requires management, reporting and auditing. Evidence from Welsh programmes indicated that the paperwork burden on small organisations was significant – "the volume of administration required, over and above normal accounting, is prohibitive", requiring some projects to hire dedicated administrators just to handle grant paperwork.[36]

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[34]EU funds celebration - GOV.WALES
[35]The Effectiveness of European Structural Funds in Wales - Senedd
[36] Ibid.

By the 2007–2013 programming period, the number of EU-funded projects in Wales was dramatically reduced with 273 projects funded by late 2012. This was a conscious effort to move towards fewer, larger-scale projects. The outcomes of these top-down projects are often more immediately visible in macro indicators e.g. they were found to have contributed to headline achievements like the creation of 71,000+ new jobs between 2007 and 2020 through EU programmes.[37] This approach was also found to have improved administrative efficiency and alignment with broader strategies by concentrating funds into a manageable number of interventions. Strategic oversight was strengthened; indeed, one critique of earlier Welsh programmes was the lack of strategic overview in coordinating many local projects.[38] A focused approach can also ensure that long-term outcomes (like raising regional GDP or productivity) drive project selection – avoiding the temptation to fund agreeable but low-impact local schemes.

On the downside, top-down interventions risk being less responsive to local nuances and can suffer from a one-size-fits-all mentality. In some cases, communities may feel a lack of ownership over centrally designed projects, which can affect engagement and the ultimate success of the initiative. For example, a large training programme rolled out nationally might miss specific local barriers or fail to reach deeply into every community, whereas a local group might have higher success engaging participants.

There is a question as to whether large-scale 'broad strokes' programmes reach the most marginalised effectively. These programmes risk being *"spatially blind"* – lifting overall averages but leaving pockets of deprivation unresolved. Smaller-scale and locally driven projects can target very specific inequalities. For example, a community project might focus on helping long-term unemployed women in a particular rural area, or provide after-school programmes in a deprived neighbourhood, directly reaching those most in need. This fine-grained targeting is a strength of the bottom-up approach; it can design interventions for minorities or sub-groups that a broad national scheme might overlook. In Wales, EU-funded community initiatives often worked with the most vulnerable populations (e.g. helping ex-offenders into work, or providing training for people with disabilities) as part of the **"active inclusion"** agenda. These efforts can chip away at inequalities on a small scale. However, without coordination, their effect may remain isolated.

The **trade-off** is between depth and breadth: bottom-up gives depth of reach in a small area or group, top-down gives breadth across a wider canvas. The ideal scenario might combine them – using top-down allocation to ensure every deprived area gets something, and bottom-up methods to ensure the something is tailored to the needs there.

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[37] [EU Structural Funds in Wales 2000–2023: A Celebration of Achievements](#)
[38] [2014–2020 EU Structural Funds Programmes in Wales: Impact and Benefits](#)

There is also the risk of misallocation with the larger value, centralised model: if central planners choose the wrong "big bets" (say, investing in an industry that fails to take off), the opportunity cost is high because so much of the funding was tied up in a few projects. In Wales, while many strategic projects delivered impressive outputs, critics have noted that despite billions in structural funds, underlying economic disparities (notably between Wales and richer parts of the UK) persisted – implying that even strategic projects struggled to fundamentally "close the gap."

Summary

Both the high-volume locally driven model and the strategic top-down model have distinct advantages and weaknesses. The locally driven approach shines in participation, local relevance, and inclusivity, but can suffer from inefficiencies and limited macro impact. The strategic approach excels in efficiency, scale, and potentially transformative impact, yet risks overlooking grassroots needs and nuances. The historical experience of structural funds in Wales exemplifies these points. Early, locally focused programmes empowered communities and delivered a wide array of small wins, whereas later, centralized programmes achieved bigger, more measurable outcomes at the cost of reduced local autonomy. Neither approach alone completely solved Wales's regional development challenges, implying that new strategies must combine insights from both.

6.2 A comparison of UKSPF delivery in North Wales with other regional delivery

The following sub-section draws upon a synthesis of process evaluation findings from the MHCLG commissioned UKSPF place level case study evaluations of 34 areas. It is important to note that at the time of writing, fieldwork is ongoing and the final report will only be completed by the end of December 2025. As such the findings presented below may be subject to change following the completion of all case study fieldwork. These findings will be revised and included in the final synthesis report for the 34 UKSPF place level case studies. However, it is possible to highlight some of the learning from the UK-wide case studies with regards to how the UKSPF has been administered locally. Where findings relate to specific places these have been highlighted, however, there have been findings which have proven consistent across the 34 places. Detailed findings for the 34 case studies will be published by MHCLG following the end of the UK-wide evaluation (early 2026).

6.2.1 Successes

Local Flexibility and Autonomy: The most consistently praised aspect of UKSPF was the devolution of decision-making, allowing local authorities to design interventions that addressed specific, evidence-based local needs. This autonomy was noted as a welcome contrast to the perceived rigidity of some previous EU funds.

The Value of a Dedicated Local Management Hub: Across all delivery models, the presence of a skilled, stable, and supportive local MHCLG management team (e.g. a UKSPF Programme Manager or team) was a critical enabler. They were praised by delivery partners for providing clarity, facilitating partnerships (see Southend, Tamworth), and navigating challenges.

Leveraging Existing Partnerships and Infrastructure: Successful delivery was almost always built on pre-existing and established foundations. This included strong partnerships with the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector, established governance boards (e.g. North Ayrshire's Local Economic Partnership, Tamworth's Partnership Board), and experienced delivery partners.

Continuity of Provision: A common and effective strategy was to use UKSPF to continue successful and valued services previously funded by the CRF or European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), preventing gaps in provision for vulnerable groups and businesses (see Chesterfield, North Ayrshire, SE Wales).

6.2.2 Challenges

Constraining Central Government Timelines: This was the most significant and most commonly identified barrier. Each of the 34 case studies highlighted that the timelines for planning and delivery resulted in limited consultations, procurement delays, and difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff as a result of the short-term nature of employment contracts.

Central Guidance and Reporting Systems: Local Authorities reported challenges including the late provision of clear definitions for outputs and outcomes (see Edinburgh, CIOS, Redbridge), a reporting portal that was difficult to use (see Highland, Maidstone), and an administrative fee (4%) that was widely considered insufficient to cover the actual costs of programme management (see Southend, Maidstone, Watford).

The Measurement Gap: LA's perceived quantitative outputs required for central government reporting as too rigid and not able to capture the value, often qualitative, of the interventions. Stakeholders consistently reported that KPIs failed to capture long-term impacts, preventative outcomes, and positive outcomes such as increased confidence or community cohesion (see Adur & Worthing, Tamworth).

Structural Funding Inflexibility: The split between capital and revenue funding was frequently cited as misaligned with local demand. Many areas, such as Southend and Chesterfield, had high demand for revenue-based projects (e.g. for staffing and support services) but struggled to allocate their required capital spend.

6.2.3 Lessons Across Local Authorities by Group

The case study findings highlighted different lessons for local authorities based upon their type. Below are some process observations relative to each of these groupings. There may be lessons from each that can be considered within the North Wales context.

Combined Authorities (see WMCA, SYMCA): These areas benefited from a structure that could facilitate a strategic regional overview. However, this also created some tension between the regional strategy set by the combined authority and the specific priorities of the constituent local authorities. For example, a decision to allocate a large portion of funding to business support by the CA may not have been given priority locally (WMCA).

Rural Areas (see Highland, Mid-Wales, South Hams, Uttlesford): These areas faced a common set of challenges, including higher costs for service delivery due to geography, difficulties in engaging dispersed populations, and the critical barrier of poor public transport, which hindered participation in projects (e.g., Blaby's Blue Prescribing project).

Sub-Regional Partnerships (see Richmond within the South London Partnership): These structures could create efficiencies but also resulted in misaligned priorities. The clearest example was Richmond, where sub-regionally set diversity targets were unrealistic and inappropriate for the borough's specific demographics.

Adjacent District/Borough Councils: There were examples of close collaboration, such as running nearly identical programmes to create efficiencies. However, this was hampered by administrative constraints such as being unable to formally pool funds or management resources, highlighting a lack of flexibility for cross-authority working.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Summary of the key findings

The evaluation indicates that the UKSPF programme in North Wales has delivered a wide range of activities and outputs within a challenging context. Overall, the programme achieved a high level of financial performance, with 98% of the allocation spent, although there were variations between investment priorities. Communities and Place interventions accounted for the largest share of expenditure and outputs, while Multiply underperformed relative to its allocation due to limited demand and delivery challenges.

Performance against KPI targets was generally positive, with most indicators met or exceeded. However, the extent of overachievement for some indicators suggests that targets may not always have been set at an appropriate level, and caution is needed in interpreting these results as evidence of impact. Some important outcome indicators, such as job creation and Multiply qualifications, were not fully achieved.

The open call approach enabled local tailoring and strong engagement with established delivery partners, supported by the introduction of Key Funds which widened access for smaller organisations. However, this approach also created administrative pressures and limited opportunities for more strategic, region-wide interventions. The hybrid governance model combining regional coordination with local delivery was perceived to be broadly effective, but capacity constraints and short timescales created bottlenecks in approvals, contracting, and change requests.

Compared to previous EU funding models, UKSPF offered greater flexibility and local autonomy but lacked the long-term certainty and strategic coherence that supported transformational projects under earlier programmes. The compressed delivery window was a recurring challenge, affecting recruitment, procurement, and the ability to plan for sustainability.

7.2 Anticipated longer-term effects

It is too early to make definitive statements about long-term impacts, but the evidence reviewed suggests several areas where benefits may continue to emerge:

- **Community assets and pride in place:** Investments in public spaces, cultural facilities, and local amenities have delivered visible improvements in many communities. These changes are likely to contribute to enhanced perceptions of place and increased community engagement, although the durability of these effects will depend on ongoing maintenance and complementary activity.
- **Third-sector capacity:** The programme has enabled some voluntary and community organisations to expand their reach and strengthen their operational capacity. This may improve their resilience and ability to deliver services in the future, though this will require sustained funding and support.

- **Employability and skills:** Many People and Skills interventions targeted individuals furthest from the labour market, including young people at risk of becoming NEET. These projects have provided training and confidence-building activities that could support progression into employment or further learning. However, the short delivery window and reliance on short-term contracts may limit the sustainability of these outcomes without follow-on provision.
- **Business development and decarbonisation:** Support for local businesses, including advice on innovation and decarbonisation, has the potential to contribute to longer-term competitiveness and environmental goals. The scale of this impact is likely to be modest given the relatively small proportion of funding allocated to this priority and the short timeframe for delivery.

Overall, while the programme has laid some positive foundations, the extent to which these translate into lasting change will depend on future investment and policy continuity.

7.3   Key lessons learned

The evaluation highlights several lessons that should inform the design of future programmes:

- **Balancing flexibility with strategic focus:** Local autonomy was widely valued and enabled interventions to reflect local priorities. However, the absence of strong regional mechanisms limited opportunities for cross-boundary projects and strategic alignment. Future programmes may benefit from a mixed approach that combines local flexibility with regional coordination.

- **Importance of realistic timescales:** The compressed delivery window was the single most significant challenge identified across all sources of evidence. It affected recruitment, procurement, and the ability to plan for sustainability. Multi-year certainty is essential for achieving meaningful outcomes and retaining skilled staff.

- **Clarity and proportionality in monitoring:** While the lighter-touch approach to monitoring was welcomed, the lack of clear guidance created uncertainty and inconsistency. At the same time, the large number of KPIs placed a burden on smaller organisations and nullified their usefulness in assessing performance. Future programmes should aim for clearer definitions and a streamlined set of indicators aligned with the theory of change.

- **Targeting specialist interventions:** The Multiply experience illustrates the risks of applying uniform funding formulas without considering local demand or delivery capacity. It shows the weakness of nationally-determined programmes when they lack appropriate local input. Future programmes should allow for greater flexibility in allocating resources to specialist interventions.

- **Capacity and capability:** Both local authorities and delivery partners faced capacity constraints, particularly in programme management and compliance. Adequate resourcing for these functions is critical to ensure effective delivery.

7.4 Recommendations

10) **Adopt a mixed delivery model:** Combine open calls for community-led projects with strategic commissioning for regional priorities such as employability, business support, and decarbonisation. This would allow for both local responsiveness and targeted investment in areas of greatest need.

11) **Strengthen regional coordination:** Introduce formal mechanisms for joint planning and pooled resources to avoid duplication and enable cross-boundary projects where these add value. This could include a regional investment panel or a shared pipeline of strategic projects, included within the initial stages of the programme design.

12) **Provide longer-term funding certainty:** We recognise that this is beyond the control of the programme in North Wales. However, it is important to recommend that there should be a move away from short-term allocations to multi-year settlements aligned with regional strategies. This would enable better planning, reduce delivery risk, and improve staff retention.

13) **Simplify monitoring and evaluation:** Reduce the number of KPIs and focus on a smaller set of meaningful indicators linked to the theory of change. Provide clear guidance at the outset and ensure consistency across local authorities.

14) **Maintain and enhance Key Funds:** Continue to provide mechanisms for smaller organisations to access funding but streamline application and reporting processes and offer technical assistance to build capacity in the voluntary and community sector.

15) **Align with devolved governance structures:** Ensure future UK and Welsh Government programmes complement each other and avoid fragmentation. This includes aligning priorities with Regional Economic Frameworks and Corporate Joint Committees.

16) **Invest in capacity and skills:** Allocate sufficient administrative funding to local authorities and delivery partners. Consider providing shared resources or regional support teams to reduce duplication and address capacity gaps.

17) **Plan for sustainability:** Encourage projects to build exit strategies and explore opportunities for continuation funding or integration with mainstream services to maximise the legacy of UKSPF investments.

18) **Greater standardisation of evaluation reporting:** The requirement for each project to be evaluated has generated a wealth of data to inform this report. While this has been highly valuable, variations in robustness and content have limited the extent to which findings could be aggregated. For future programmes, greater standardisation of evaluation requirements would help ensure comparability and facilitate the aggregation of results.

Annex A: List of North Wales UKSPF Projects

Table A1: List of projects delivered by single Local Authorities:

Project Name	Project Description	LA Area
A Space for Life	Renovating a current storage facility in Llangefni Library to create a welcoming space which can be used by the community and organisations as well as by the library service and its internal and external partners. Piloting a comprehensive and varied programme of events and activities designed to introduce a variety of subjects to Anglesey's residents.	Anglesey CC
Anglesey Communities Bridging Project	This project, in partnership with Medrwn Môn aims to develop a resourceful and resilient island, where communities can engage and involve themselves in designing and delivering community focused solutions, based on real need.	Anglesey CC
Anglesey Young People – 'succeeding together'	The aim of this project is to support young people on Anglesey to reach their full potential, by improving skills, wellbeing and reducing the risk of them being NEET in the future.	Anglesey CC
Balchder Bro Môn	The project aims to deliver activities, events and improvements and interventions across Ynys Môn, responding and realising the priorities identified by both the communities themselves as well as strategic priorities identified by the Local Authority and other active organisations.	Anglesey CC
CCTV project – Gwynedd and Anglesey Community Safety Partnership	The installation of CCTV in 2 areas on Anglesey, namely Llangefni and Holyhead. The project will also include work on selected lighting columns.	Anglesey CC
Coed Môn (Anglesey Trees)	Enhancing our green infrastructure through the tree management and planting.	Anglesey CC
Connecting People, Nature and Place	This project will improve skills, community resilience and wellbeing for those furthest from the employment market (including those over 50, facing complex barriers, with health and wellbeing needs), by establishing and developing accessible outdoor sites, increasing learning activities and skills, improving woodlands and knowledge of the local environment on Anglesey.	Anglesey CC
Creating an Active Island	A programme of 3 projects to create an active Anglesey.	Anglesey CC
Enhancing Heritage and countryside assets and skills to support the visitor economy	Enhancing Heritage and countryside assets and skills to support the visitor economy.	Anglesey CC

Project Name	Project Description	LA Area
Green Destination Programme	The Project will deliver environmental and visitor economy benefits in line with the aims and objectives of both the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan and the Destination Management Plan.	Anglesey CC
Green Digital Academy	The project will provide expert evaluation and mentoring support to SMEs to improve their digital and Net Zero capabilities in line with their core business strategy, supporting businesses to accelerate efficiency, productivity, carbon reduction and to reduce costs.	Anglesey CC
Heritage asset enhancement at Oriel Môn and County Archives	The project will enhance two key heritage assets – the Oriel Môn and Anglesey archives.	Anglesey CC
Igniting Innovation	Igniting Innovation will provide opportunities for businesses, communities, and people across Anglesey to level up. Creating new and high-level employment opportunities, support business growth, create innovative start-ups, and upskill local people in the digital and energy sectors.	Anglesey CC
Improving Anglesey Residents Financial Resilience and Wellbeing Economy	This project, in partnership with Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) Ynys Môn aims to improve the financial resilience of households on Anglesey.	Anglesey CC
Lle Da – Place Making Programme	Place-making programme for Anglesey's town centres and larger villages.	Anglesey CC
Melin Llynion Restoration	To restore Melin Llynon, a grade 2 listed building at Llanddeusant, Anglesey.	Anglesey CC
Môn Multiply	The project involves Anglesey CF running community courses across Anglesey with hidden numeracy skills incorporated to improve adult numeracy across Anglesey.	Anglesey CC
Môn Ymlaen 2	This project is an intense employment support service aiming to reduce unemployment and inactivity rates (and employability) across Anglesey, which will in turn assist local businesses to fill empty vacancies and upskill staff.	Anglesey CC
Supporting Anglesey Businesses 2	The project will provide one to one support from a named mentor, support with business planning and cash flow preparation, support with Unique Tax Reference number (UTR) application and small financial grants for both new and existing businesses.	Anglesey CC
Town Centre Improvements	Anglesey town centre and public realm improvements.	Anglesey CC
Better Open Spaces through CCTV	Enhancement of the existing CCTV service through the provision and operation of additional redeployable cameras.	Conwy CBC
Bron y Nant Nursery and Shop	The purpose of the project is to provide work opportunities and skills development for people with a disability through the supported employment model.	Conwy CBC

Project Name	Project Description	LA Area
Childcare Works	The project offers a 16-week employment programme of training and paid work placements to enable participants to begin careers in childcare and early education as Trainee Nursery Assistants (TNAs).	Conwy CBC
Community Regeneration Key Fund	The fund is aimed at supporting community focused organisations to deliver projects across Conwy that will address local needs and will contribute to building community pride and 'make a visible difference' through the Communities & Place Investment Priority of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.	Conwy CBC
Conwy Community Led Local Development	The project will utilise the Community Led Local Development (CLLD) methodology to empower local individuals, groups and community organisations to participate in the generation of innovative ideas to address local problems, develop high quality applications and ensure the capability of delivering projects is at a high level.	Conwy CBC
Conwy Community Wellbeing Project	The Community Wellbeing Programme helps people to maintain and improve their wellbeing. The programme helps people to reduce isolation and strengthen links in their local community through activities they want to engage in and opportunities to volunteer locally.	Conwy CBC
Conwy Green Digital Academy	The project will provide expert evaluation and mentoring support to SMEs to improve their digital and Net Zero capabilities in line with their core business strategy, supporting businesses to accelerate efficiency, productivity, carbon reduction and to reduce costs.	Conwy CBC
CREU'R SBARDUN - CREATING THE SPARK	A CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION PROJECT FOR CONWY COUNTY.	Conwy CBC
Conwy Paddling Pools Improvement Project	Improvements to 4 paddling pools in Llanfairfechan, Penmaenmawr, Llandudno (Craig Y Don) and Rhos on Sea.	Conwy CBC
Conwy Voluntary Sector Capacity Building Key Fund	This is a Capacity Building Project to support local 3rd sector groups to recover and develop into the future. The project consists of the Voluntary Sector Key Fund and a Capacity Building Training Programme.	Conwy CBC
Ffit Conwy Junior Sports and Activities Engagement	The project will support 11-15 year olds to increase activity levels, develop physical and mental health resilience. It will also focus on activities to encourage more girls to participate.	Conwy CBC
Improving and futureproofing the visitor economy	Range of activities to improve the visitor economy in Conwy.	Conwy CBC
Justice in a Day Programme	Justice in a Day is a unique project that uses professional actors and partners to examine key issues about the criminal justice system and young people.	Conwy CBC
Learn to Swim Programme Development	The project will provide investment to modernise the swimming provision in Conwy County.	Conwy CBC

Project Name	Project Description	LA Area
Llandudno Promenade Enhancements	This project will involve the replacement of shelters along Llandudno's North Shore Promenade, as well as the refurbishment of the Colonnades near Happy Valley.	Conwy CBC
Multiply Courses and Resources for Employees	N/A	Conwy CBC
Multiply Support for Individuals in Conwy	N/A	Conwy CBC
Pathways into Employment	The project will deliver a range of pathway training courses incorporating sector specific accredited qualifications, employability skills and work placements in growth and priority sectors in Conwy.	Conwy CBC
People and Skills Key Fund	The fund supports organisations to carry out projects across Conwy County that will contribute to the People and Skills and Multiply (adult numeracy) interventions of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.	Conwy CBC
Supporting Local Business Key Fund- Conwy	The fund supports our local commercial or social businesses to renew and develop into the future and will enable the provision of grants to support economic growth and sustainability.	Conwy CBC
Talent Development and Support	The project will support people in Conwy to participate and develop in sport.	Conwy CBC
TRAC	The TRAC wellbeing project provides support to young people aged 11-16 who are identified as being at risk of becoming NEET (Not in Education Employment or Training) when they leave school.	Conwy CBC
Transforming Young Minds – I2EM	The purpose of this project is to deliver a range of projects under the UK SPF People and Skills priority aimed at young people which will involve delivering activities in schools to provide the opportunity for young people to develop new work-related skills and provide an insight into career paths in the STEM sector in the North Wales region.	Conwy CBC
iCAN Work (WorkWell)	Support for people with mental health needs find and sustain employment.	Conwy CBC
Accessible play area provision	This project will deliver play areas in strategic locations across the county that are accessible to all by installing specialist equipment and making improvements to footways and street furniture in the public realm and immediate vicinity.	Denbighshire CC
Accessing our Heritage	To enable increased accessibility, use and awareness of two key Heritage Museum Assets in Ruthin, Denbighshire; Grade 1 listed Nantclwyd Y Dre historic house and Grade 2 listed Ruthin Gaol – the only Pentonville style prison open as a Heritage Attraction in the UK.	Denbighshire CC
Additional DM resources	Provision of additional environmental cleansing, grounds maintenance and AONB resources.	Denbighshire CC
Barod	Work with people not ready to enter the labour market to address their barriers.	Denbighshire CC
Bodelwyddan Country Park	This project will develop a Country Park on Woodland/Parkland adjacent to Bodelwyddan Castle.	Denbighshire CC

Project Name	Project Description	LA Area
Botanical Garden & Rhyl Prom Ponds	Regeneration of recreational areas at Botanical Gardens and Rhyl Promenade.	Denbighshire CC
Buttermarket Culture, Heritage and Wellbeing Centre	The project involves developing a tourism and community Hub to support the regeneration of Denbigh. The project will bring back to life a building of significant importance to the heritage of Denbigh.	Denbighshire CC
Communities and Nature – A sustainable Visitor Welcome	This project will provide Rangers at a number of key visitor sites across Denbighshire in response to the dramatic increase of visitors to these areas.	Denbighshire CC
Community Grants Scheme and Creative Arts Programme	Community Grants Scheme and Creative Arts Programme in Denbighshire, delivered by Denbighshire Leisure Ltd.	Denbighshire CC
Denbigh Town Centre CCTV	Upgrading aged CCTV cameras across Denbigh town.	Denbighshire CC
Denbighshire Community Capacity Building Key Fund	Key fund for Denbighshire community capacity building. This project aims to transform the power and ability of people in the Third Sector and within communities across Denbighshire to create and deliver essential services in a changing and challenging world.	Denbighshire CC
Denbighshire Green Digital Academy	This project will provide expert evaluation and mentoring support to Small Medium Enterprises to improve their Digital and Net Zero capabilities in line with their core business strategy, supporting businesses to accelerate efficiency, productivity, carbon reduction and to reduce costs.	Denbighshire CC
Denbighshire Woodland Creation Project	This project is aimed at enhancing and improving approximately 55.5 hectares of council owned land for carbon sequestration, biodiversity and the community.	Denbighshire CC
Destination Management and Tourism Strategy; Additional Summer Resources	This project will provide additional environmental cleansing and grounds maintenance resources to cope with additional visitor numbers and footfall in the county during summer 2023/24.	Denbighshire CC
Feasibility Study Fund	12 feasibility studies for potential future projects for driving economic development and regeneration across the whole county.	Denbighshire CC
Green Gates Nature Reserve	This project aims to establish a 13.3ha nature reserve at Green Gates, near St Asaph Business Park.	Denbighshire CC
Increasing levels of digital inclusion and basic digital skills across Denbighshire	This project will offer direct digital inclusion support to individuals. Support will take the form of digital inclusion advice and training and provide suitable devices to individuals depending on their needs.	Denbighshire CC
Llangollen Railway Trust – Staying on Track	The Llangollen Railway Trust aim to develop a 'package to strengthen the organisation' enabling them to continue their restructure process following several years of organisational change.	Denbighshire CC

Project Name	Project Description	LA Area
Llwybrau	The Llwybrau project will provide support to approximately 420 young people per academic year in Denbighshire to reduce their risk of disengagement, provide support to re-engage in education, or to move into employment or training at the end of year 11.	Denbighshire CC
Llwybrau (2022-23)	Llwybrau offers support to disengaged young people back into education.	Denbighshire CC
Nature for Health	Weekly sessions include conservation and rural skills, health and nature walks.	Denbighshire CC
Nature for Health Programme	The Nature for Health Programme provides opportunities to help people live healthier and more fulfilled lives through improved access to the natural environment at a local level.	Denbighshire CC
North East Wales Heritage Skills Partnership	This heritage and skills project will support and protect heritage crafts, construction, and engineering through the creation of training and knowledge sharing opportunities across sites in Denbighshire.	Denbighshire CC
Parks for People	Ranger presence at each site to provide positive advice and guidance to visitors.	Denbighshire CC
Public Realm and Open Spaces Improvements	This project aims to improve recreation areas across the county with a focus on: Bastion Road, Prestatyn and Riverside Park, Llangollen. Environmental improvements such as upgrading steel rails and bollards which will also improve accessibility to the area at Botanical Gardens, Rhyl.	Denbighshire CC
Public Space CCTV Improvements	Upgrading existing aged public space CCTV cameras across principal towns in the north of Denbighshire, including car parks and bus stations.	Denbighshire CC
Purchase of ANPR cameras	The purchase of six specialist ANPR specification redeployable surveillance cameras.	Denbighshire CC
Queen's Market Fund	This project will support the establishment of a new retail market in the Queens Building in Rhyl.	Denbighshire CC
Ramblers Community Outreach (North Wales)	To engage communities and empower local people to be more active in, and proud of, their local places.	Denbighshire CC
Response to Cost of Living Crisis	Financial assistance, through grant schemes to our Croeso Cynnes community hubs and community foodbank initiatives.	Denbighshire CC
Rhyl Promenade Regeneration	This project aims to improve the popular promenade area of Rhyl to compliment the ongoing Rhyl regeneration works as well as the multimillion pound coastal defence works.	Denbighshire CC
Rhyl Youth Centre Refurbishment	Refurbishment of Rhyl Youth Centre.	Denbighshire CC
Ruthin Town Hall Community Hwb	This project aims to create a Community Hwb for people of all ages and abilities in Ruthin, by improving facilities of Market Hall, the Town Hall and the Old Fire Station.	Denbighshire CC
School Sports Tournaments	School based sports tournaments will be held between Jan-March 2023.	Denbighshire CC
Sports Pitch Officer and Maintenance Inspection Team	This project will initially aim to address the immediate issues surrounding the development of an all-round sports offering with the aim of providing facilities up to an acceptable and safe standard. The	Denbighshire CC

Project Name	Project Description	LA Area
	project will also recruit a Sports Pitch Officer and Maintenance Team to oversee the use, provision of maintenance and bookings of public sports pitches across the county.	
Supporting Local Business Denbighshire Key Fund	Denbighshire key fund for Supporting Local Business through boosting productivity, pay, jobs and living standards by growing the private sector, especially in areas where they are lacking.	Denbighshire CC
Town Centre Property Improvement Scheme	Project to target vacant, under-utilised or untidy properties in Denbighshire town centres.	Denbighshire CC
Warm Wales – Supporting Communities	This pilot will work with communities in Denbighshire, including primary and secondary schools year 5,8,9 and 10, those living in all tenure. It will look at people, property, place, and partnerships to bring about social action to improve people's wellbeing, confidence and skills. Encourage more impactful volunteering, with wider community to educate, make everyone more aware of energy efficiency, green technology and the impact of fuel poverty and the cost of living and provide free advice and support to residents to reduce energy bills and improve energy efficiency.	Denbighshire CC
Working Denbighshire (WD) Strategic Programme	Denbighshire aims to tackle poverty by supporting Denbighshire residents into education, employment and training.	Denbighshire CC
Workstart Scheme	Offering high quality work placement opportunities providing residents of Denbighshire aged 16 plus.	Denbighshire CC
Accelerating Decarbonisation and Productivity through Technology and Skills (ADAPTS)	The project will provide Flintshire manufacturers with unparalleled access to advanced manufacturing technology engineers and demonstrators, knowledge transfer, training, and upskilling in digital and decarbonisation strategies.	Flintshire CC
Buckley 'Original Factory Shop'	Pre-acquisition stage activities for property known as the 'Original Factory Shop'.	Flintshire CC
Connecting to Coast and Countryside	Two projects to connect people to Flintshire coast and countryside	Flintshire CC
Flintshire Community Key Fund	The project will support community led and / or community owned venues / facilities / spaces / groups to develop, strengthen and enhance community infrastructure and community-based projects with a particular emphasis on local communities and grass roots services within Flintshire.	Flintshire CC
Flintshire Green Digital Academy	The project will provide expert evaluation and mentoring support to SMEs to improve their digital and Net Zero capabilities in line with their core business strategy, supporting businesses to accelerate efficiency, productivity, carbon reduction and to reduce costs.	Flintshire CC
Flintshire Sustainable Decarbonised Future (FAST)	The project aims to legally incorporate the already-established Deeside Decarbonisation Forum to unlock its full potential to support green growth.	Flintshire CC

Project Name	Project Description	LA Area
Greenfield Valley Heritage Park Improvement Programme	The project will deliver a programme of nine related revenue projects which have been identified as key building blocks and enablers to the delivery of the 10-year strategy for the Greenfield Valley.	Flintshire CC
LEAP (Learn, Explore, Achieve, Perform)	The project will deliver a wide number of education services and interventions that will be tailored to individual needs. The services offered will enhance the current education provision.	Flintshire CC
Minding the Gaps of the Young People in Flintshire	The project will deliver a pathway of programmes to support a gap in engagement provision to meet the post covid needs of young people aged 16 – 25. It seeks to addresses issues such as social exclusion, loneliness, low skills and lack of confidence.	Flintshire CC
Project 11	The project involves a multi-agency and multi-modal approach to reducing exploitation, violence, and organised crime involving young people in order to create safe neighbourhoods.	Flintshire CC
Strength in Numbers	The project will offer free, flexible opportunities for adults aged 19 or over to improve their numeracy skills and gain a qualification.	Flintshire CC
Supporting Tourism Business & Sector Key Fund	The project aims to aim to boost productivity, pay, jobs and living standards of micro, small and medium enterprises operating within the tourism and experience economy.	Flintshire CC
The Flintshire Fund	The project involves the provision and management of three grant funds to provide first stage support designed to support businesses take their first steps on the zero carbon and innovation journeys.	Flintshire CC
Town Centre Investment Programme – Flintshire	The project comprises several projects that will be implemented across seven town centres and adjacent communities. The project will benefit the local authority, town centre property owners, businesses, community group, town councils and the environment.	Flintshire CC
Warm Welcome	Creating Warm Welcome spaces throughout Flintshire for all residents to attend.	Flintshire CC
WeMindTheGap	A programme designed to support young people.	Flintshire CC
Adra Academy	The project will deliver a program of two-week courses, combining accredited training and work experience in a work sector chosen by the participants.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Bakery purchase for Llanaelhaearn	Purchase of a bakery site in Llanaelhaearn which includes two empty buildings, with the aim of ensuring continuity for a local business.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Bang Bangor – Olion	A large-scale community arts and cultural project will take place in Bangor over an extended period of 20 months.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Beicio i Bawb (Cycling for All)	The project will present a variety of cycling sessions and activities in Gwynedd to improve skills, build confidence and encourage people of all ages and abilities to cycle.	Cyngor Gwynedd

Project Name	Project Description	LA Area
Business Support Project including the Business Support Fund	The purpose of the project is to provide Gwynedd businesses with the help, information, and financial support that they need to start, develop, and thrive.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Caernarfon Town Centre Regeneration	Intention to buy, renovate and let empty commercial properties in Caernarfon town centre.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Community Regeneration Support Fund	A competitive grant fund that will be a means of supporting local organisations, including initiatives and regeneration groups, to be able to lead and develop projects that respond to local needs and priorities.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Cost of Living Response	The scheme will offer a series of training opportunities (paid) that will improve people's skills in call centre services, customer support, reception skills and administrative skills.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Diwyllesiant Project	A project to support the wellbeing of residents, communities, the environment and businesses in Gwynedd.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Dyffryn Nantlle Enterprise Park	Making essential improvements to existing workshops, improving their energy efficiency, and ensuring that they are suitable for use by local businesses to create and maintain jobs for years to come.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Empowering Gwynedd	The project will work in partnership with Cymunedoli Cyf (Gwynedd Social Enterprise Network) on various schemes that create community resilience, and create community solutions to challenges facing Gwynedd, placing emphasis on geographical areas without current provision.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Glyn Rhonwy Events Hub	Completion of part 1 of a larger scheme to develop an events Hub on the Glyn Rhonwy site, Llanberis. It includes the construction of a warehouse and multi-purpose space that could be used as an office / meeting room and available for hire by the community.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Gwynedd Community Resilience Program	A project to provide support to people and to build community resilience.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Gwynedd Community Transport	A scheme for community transport provision in partnership with social enterprises – namely Siop Griffiths, Ogwen Partnership, Y Dref Werdd, and O Ddrws i Ddrws.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Gwynedd Green Digital Academy	A scheme that provides specialist evaluation and mentoring support to businesses to improve their digital and Zero Net capabilities. It will support small and medium businesses to be more efficient, more productive, to reduce their carbon footprint, and save costs.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Helping hands – growing Caru Eryri	A scheme to provide, develop and grow a programme of practical conservation work and training with volunteers in Eryri and the surrounding area.	Cyngor Gwynedd

Project Name	Project Description	LA Area
Llŷn Ecomuseum	The plan will develop the Llŷn Ecomuseum scheme that has existed since 2015, by together to promote specific sites and resources in the Llŷn peninsula. It will develop activities related to the archaeology, biodiversity, and the culture of the area.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Menter Ty'n Llan	Delivering two elements of a wider project to develop the Ty'n Llan, Llandwrog community initiative. Development of the kitchen and 5 rooms for visitors.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Nature zone and community woodland, Parc y Coleg	The plan will transform an area in Parc y Coleg, Bangor, which is currently unwelcoming, into a quiet place to enjoy and experience nature.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Net Zero Training (Tŷ Gwyrddfai)	The aim of the project, which will be developed in partnership with Adra, is to create a dedicated training centre for decarbonising and retrofitting houses, at Tŷ Gwyrddfai in Penygroes.	Cyngor Gwynedd
NumberWise Living - A Numeracy Campaign for Social Housing	Develop numeracy skills amongst social housing tenants in Gwynedd.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Penrhos Garage and Post Office	The plan will facilitate bringing the Penrhos Garage building and the Post Office in Aberdyfi into community ownership.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Reinterpretation and modernisation of the Lloyd George Museum	The project will aim to reinterpret and modernize the Lloyd George Museum, its relationship with the local community and its role in interpreting the past internationally.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Sero Net Gwynedd (Phase 2)	The project will employ a team of Energy Wardens to encourage residents across Gwynedd to reduce their energy use and increase reusing and recycling levels to reduce waste.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Skills and Work Potential Gwynedd	The aim of the project is to support young people and adults across Gwynedd to reach their personal potential by offering support to individuals either to prepare for work; moving into employment and/or offering opportunities for individuals to train and develop skills while in employment.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Sustainable Shellfish and Aquaculture North Wales- Môr Ni Gwynedd	The project will engage with the fishing sector across the County to assess the need, with the intention of creating a more resilient and diverse sector.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Team Around the Young Person 2	TAPI 2 will be a project that provides intensive person-centred support, tailored around the vulnerable young people of Gwynedd who are furthest away from the labour market.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Town Centres – laying the foundation for investment, pride and activity	The Town Centre regeneration programme includes several schemes aimed at laying a foundation for future investment and pride.	Cyngor Gwynedd

Project Name	Project Description	LA Area
Ty Gwyrddfai (Phase 3) – Living Lab	A joint project with Bangor University which will include the construction of two atmospherically controlled chambers, for controlled tests of building materials in various and extreme environmental conditions. This unique facility will play a key role in accelerating progress towards low carbon and net zero housing design.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Voluntary Sector Support Fund	The Fund offers funding opportunities of between £2k and £250k to voluntary or community groups located in Gwynedd.	Cyngor Gwynedd
Enhanced business support provision	Programme of business support activities and grant scheme.	Wrexham CBC
Erlas Victorian Walled Garden	Provide daytime activity, education and work experience in horticulture.	Wrexham CBC
Gwersyllt Park Cricket Club Inclusive Facilities	Creation of a new cricket club pavilion.	Wrexham CBC
Hwb Yr Orsedd – Rossett Community Hub	Develop a community hub in the centre of Rossett.	Wrexham CBC
Let's change the lives of 1000 young people in Wrexham	A programme designed to support young people in Wrexham.	Wrexham CBC
Low Carbon Communities – Decarbonisation Officers	Two Decarbonisation officers to work with 6 low carbon communities in Wrexham county.	Wrexham CBC
Maps Plus	Mentoring and volunteering project in Wrexham for young people aged 16-24 that are NEET.	Wrexham CBC
Pathway to Employment – Wrexham (P2E)	A range of employment pathway interventions for young people.	Wrexham CBC
Plas Madoc Leisure Centre Net Zero Project	Reduce carbon emissions at Plas Madoc Leisure Centre, Wrexham.	Wrexham CBC
Pontcysyllte Aqueduct and Canal World Heritage Site	A community-led arts and placemaking project	Wrexham CBC
Sites & Premises Feasibility and Capital Grant Key Fund	Revenue and capital grants for entities within Wrexham.	Wrexham CBC
South Wrexham CHIRP (Community Heritage Inclusion and Resilience Project)	Strengthening the social fabric and fostering a sense of local pride and belonging in South Wrexham.	Wrexham CBC

Project Name	Project Description	LA Area
Sustainable Large Scale Community Events Calendar for Wrexham County	A series of innovative events in Wrexham county.	Wrexham CBC
Welsh Football Museum – Museum of Two Halves	New national football museum for Wales and for Wrexham.	Wrexham CBC
Wrexham City – Empowering a Green Evolution	A co-creation project, utilising play and science to deliver inspiring engagements across Wrexham county.	Wrexham CBC
Wrexham Community & Place Key Fund	Community and place key fund in Wrexham.	Wrexham CBC
Wrexham Community Key Fund	Community key fund and wrap-around support for community groups.	Wrexham CBC
Wrexham Multiply Key Fund	Key fund for numeracy projects in the county of Wrexham.	Wrexham CBC
Wrexham People and Skills Key Fund	People and Skills key fund for Wrexham.	Wrexham CBC
Wrexham Placemaking Plan	Placemaking plan for new urban Wrexham city centre.	Wrexham CBC
Wrexham Regional Tennis Centre Transformation Project	Transformation of the regional tennis centre in Wrexham.	Wrexham CBC

Table A2: List of projects delivered by multiple Local Authorities:

Project Name	Project Description	LA Area
Camau Cefnogol - Supportive Steps	The scheme will provide a bespoke package of mentoring support for young people aged 16-25 who are moving on to Further Education, as well as offering a comprehensive Mental Health and Wellbeing service to support those moving on from college to employment.	Anglesey, Conwy, Flintshire, Gwynedd
Caru Cymru	The project will provide a range of proven Keep Wales Tidy activities to create and support a number of volunteering roles and community opportunities.	Anglesey, Conwy, Flintshire, Wrexham
Changing Places – Changing Lives Lleoedd Newid – Newid Bywydau	Our project will install Changing Places Toilets in Denbighshire to ensure people with complex and multiple impairments can access facilities that provide the space and equipment they need to enjoy day-to-day activities many take for granted.	Conwy, Denbighshire
Employer Skills North Wales	A plan that will support employers to identify and meet training needs and skills gaps in their workforce. This will allow their employees to develop additional skills which in turn will create growth and achieve the strategic objectives of the business. Training will be offered in group and individual sessions in the workplace.	Anglesey, Conwy, Flintshire, Gwynedd, Wrexham
Horticulture Wales (North East)	Project to deliver increase productivity, profitability, collaboration and resilience in the horticulture sector in Denbighshire and Flintshire.	Denbighshire, Flintshire
Mentergarwch - Ynys Môn a Gwynedd - Enterprise	The project will maintain and develop the Hwb Menter business support service, providing information, advice, networking opportunities, and space for entrepreneurs to develop their initial ideas into a successful business	Anglesey, Gwynedd
Multiply	The project will deliver a 'Numeracy for Life' Programme for employed and unemployed residents in Flintshire and Wrexham designed to provide flexible courses, digital learning, and personal tutoring to support people to transform their lives by improving their daily numeracy skills.	Wrexham, Flintshire
Net Zero North Wales Network	Activities that enable, support and guide businesses and organizations across all sectors on business growth, while aiming for Zero Net and promoting the circular economy.	Conwy, Gwynedd
North East Wales Innovation and Skills Network	Knowledge Transfer voucher scheme for businesses in Denbighshire, Flintshire and Wrexham.	Denbighshire, Flintshire, Wrexham
An Active, Happy and Healthy North Wales	The project will work together with the community in 2-3 locations that have the greatest need for support in Anglesey, Denbighshire, Flintshire and Gwynedd, to develop skills and confidence to find sustainable solutions for the good of the community in the long term.	Anglesey, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd

Project Name	Project Description	LA Area
North Wales Growth Vision Opportunities	The project aims to maximise the benefits and opportunities to residents, businesses, and communities across North Wales through investments aligned to the Growth Vision including the North Wales Growth Deal.	Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd
Numeracy for Living - Rhifedd Byw	A project to promote adult numeracy in a wide range of communities and work locations in Conwy, Denbighshire, Gwynedd and Anglesey improving skills in a practical context that is relevant to them.	Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire, Gwynedd
Skills and Innovation Voucher Scheme (SIV)	The project will support SMEs and graduate entrepreneurs to access Bangor University expertise, facilities, skills and talent relevant to their research and development (R&D), innovation and skills needs.	Anglesey, Flintshire, Gwynedd
Specialist support for Social Enterprises in North Wales	To deliver social business and employee ownership support in Gwynedd and the Anglesey.	Anglesey, Gwynedd
Tourism Talent Pathfinder	The scheme provides exciting opportunities for educational institutions in the field of hospitality and tourism, which will include work experience and basic skills.	Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire, Gwynedd
Working Sense	The project will enhance the employability of people over 25 with a sensory loss or disability, by providing specialist support to enable the target group to enter/re-enter and remain in employment or move closer towards employment.	Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire

Annex B: Evaluation Framework

This chapter provides the main output from the first phase of the evaluation by essentially providing the 'plan' for Phases 2 and 3. We begin by discussing the objectives for the evaluation and key considerations such as the need to align with other evaluation activity, before identifying the key evaluation questions and describing the approach that will be used to address those questions.

Evaluation aims and requirements

The evaluation aims to assess how effectively the UKSPF programme has been delivered in North Wales, what short-term impacts it has achieved, and what longer-term outcomes are anticipated. It also seeks to identify lessons learned, review programme management, and provide evidence-based recommendations to inform future regional development policy.

The following specific aims and requirements were set out in the brief for the evaluation:

1. To summarise the short-term impacts of the interventions and taking a view on the anticipated longer-term impacts on North Wales as a whole and in individual local authority areas.
2. To evaluate the success and effectiveness of the region's SPF programme in providing opportunities for local and community based economic development.
3. To assess the success of the approach adopted in meeting the needs of communities, local authority areas and North Wales as well as supporting the goals of the Welsh and UK Governments.
4. To deliver an initial review of the lessons learnt and anticipated impact of the 2022/23 to 2024/25 funding tranche to be carried out by Summer 2025 (i.e. Phase 2, which is presented in the next part of this report).
5. To deliver an updated report, including information from 2025/26 to be completed by Spring 2026 (i.e. Phase 3).
6. To synthesize data from the evaluations carried out on 2022/23 to 2024/25 funded activities in order to:
   a) Calculate the cumulative impact of the supported activities, and
   b) Identify common themes, lessons learned and key messages across projects and/or within areas of activity / geographies.
7. To review the management and administration of the SPF in North Wales.
8. To produce a finalised programme level Theory of Change.
9. To undertake comparative analysis with other areas in Wales and beyond.
10. To provide evaluation findings, conclusions, and recommendations, detailed in bilingual reports which will help to inform the regional development needs and priorities for North Wales going forward.
11. To draw conclusions from the first phase of research which will help inform the dialogue with the Welsh and UK Governments on the future of regional development funding beyond 2025/26, in terms of activity, approach and administration.

12. To minimise duplication of effort and ensure additionality in relation to other evaluation activity.

It was however clear from subsequent discussions with the Regional Team that there are two particularly important and pressing considerations for the evaluation, which we discuss below.

Input into Welsh and UK Government planning

A key objective of the evaluation is to inform ongoing UK and Welsh Government planning and design for future regional development interventions. There have been important differences in the delivery model of UKSPF in comparison to what preceded it under the EU funding model. These include differences in the decision-making structures and the role of different levels of government, the value and focus of funding (e.g. prescribed and strategically targeted vs broad and open approaches) and more. Accordingly, a key focus for this first evaluation phase has been to assess the merits of both approaches.

Alignment with other evaluation activity

With evaluation work being delivered nationally (commissioned by MHCLG), locally through this study, and at project level, there is a risk that some aspects of evaluation could be duplicated two or three times, without careful planning. This evaluation has therefore carefully focused on ensuring complementarity between the different studies that have been commissioned.

There has already been extensive consultations with stakeholder and beneficiary groups through the national and project-level evaluations. For the national evaluation, this process is ongoing with many of the project leads, beneficiaries, and other stakeholders being engaged at the same time that this evaluation is being delivered. To avoid duplication, the second phase of this evaluation has primarily focused on undertaking secondary research activities, not least a meta review of all project level evaluation reports. Equally, it is important to note that the national evaluation is only concerned with assessing the impact from the 2022/23 to 2024/25 funding tranche. Accordingly, Phase 3 of this evaluation will include primary consultations with project leads and other stakeholders focusing specifically on the 2025/26 funding tranche.

We have ensured effective management across the three tiers of evaluation through co-ordinating with, providing input, and drawing evidence from national-level evaluation work while, similarly, drawing on evidence from project-level evaluations.

Phase 2: Initial Evaluation Report covering delivery from 2022/23 to 2024/25

Key aims and objectives

The main aim for Phase 2 was twofold. First, to deliver an initial review of the lessons learnt and anticipated impact of the 2022/23 to 2024/25 funding tranche. Second, to help inform the dialogue with the Welsh and UK Governments on the future of regional development funding beyond 2025/26.

Our approach

Due to the reasons described above, our initial evaluation has primarily consisted of desk-based research activities, albeit with some supplementary primary research activity. There were four main tasks in total, which are outlined below.

Task 2.1: Detailed desk review

The evaluation has undertaken a review of the latest programme reporting data including delivery against Key Performance Indicator (KPI) targets and spend profile. This included a review of performance for North Wales as a whole alongside an assessment of performance in each local authority.

The second part of this task concerned a desk review to compare differences in the delivery model for UKSPF relative to preceding regional development funding models. Specifically the review has focused on key characteristics of the delivery models for the Objective 1 funding approach, ESIF funding over the 2007-20 delivery period, and the UKSPF funding approach, with consideration of the main advantages and disadvantages associated with each model. The review has comprised consideration of the decision making structures and the role of different levels of government (e.g. local vs centralised approaches), the value and focus of funding (e.g. prescribed and strategically targeted vs broad and open approaches) and more.

Task 2.2: Meta review of project level evaluations

The most resource-intensive element of the initial evaluation has been our comprehensive meta review of all project-level evaluation for the period covering 2022/23 to 2024/25. This included a review of 122 evaluation reports covering 169 projects. A synthesis tool was developed in Microsoft Access to conduct this review with the following data fields included to capture the evidence:

- Evaluation activity (to consider the robustness of the findings);
- Project design (geographic delivery, beneficiaries, and whether they were new projects);
- Delivery approaches and satisfaction (engagement approaches and their effectiveness, activities invested in, experience with various management and delivery processes and any issues encountered);

- Performance against KPI and Spend targets and reasons for underperformance (where relevant);
- Outcomes achieved and any negative or unintended outcomes; and
- Key lessons identified by the evaluation including success factors and areas for improvement.

The data collated through this process was synthesised and used to inform the Phase 2 evaluation findings presented later in this report. The analysis considered key themes across the region as well as a comparison between the six authorities.

Task 2.3: Drawing on evidence gathered through national evaluations

There were two parts to this task. First, we have drawn on findings from the MHCLG-commissioned evaluation of delivery and impact in North Wales to avoid duplication. An Interim Report was published in March 2025 which included a detailed discussion on the programme management and administration, which was particularly useful in addressing the process and delivery evaluation questions covered in this report. This report was informed by 30 stakeholder consultations with local authority staff and external delivery providers alongside a survey of 59 project leads. Findings from both consultations are referenced frequently throughout this report.

Second, we have undertaken comparative analysis on findings from other areas delivering UKSPF in Wales and beyond, to draw out good practice. This focused on identifying lessons around how different areas have approached design, development and implementation of the programmes with a focus on identifying best practice.

Task 2.4: Consultations with Local Authority Leads

The secondary research described above was supplemented by a small number of consultations with the lead contacts from each local authority. This comprised both scoping elements (e.g. by discussing the evaluation priorities for each area) as well as exploring their views on key lessons in relation to the delivery of UKSPF in North Wales. These individuals were also interviewed for the interim stage of the national evaluation in January and February 2025. With that in mind, we were careful not to cover the same questions. The feedback obtained through these consultations will also inform the final stage of the national evaluation which will be delivered through until September 2025.

Phase 3: Final Evaluation Report covering delivery during 2025/26

The main aim for Phase 3 is to assess delivery performance and impact from the 2025/26 funding tranche and to provide an updated report (including information from 2025/26) to be completed by Spring 2026.

Many of the research tasks focus on updating activity that took place during Phase 2, although there will be a greater focus on primary research activity to capture the experiences of delivery team members, strategic stakeholders, and project leads involved in 2025/26 project activity. A brief description of each task is provided below.

This will involve an update of the earlier Task 2.1 by reviewing the key monitoring data for projects delivered under the 2025/26 funding tranche.

This will involve an update of the earlier Task 2.2 by reviewing any completed evaluation reports for projects delivered under the 2025/26 funding tranche.

The consultations with delivery personnel and strategic stakeholders will be focused on identifying the impacts generated by UKSPF covering the entire period of 2022/23 through to 2025/26. We will also undertake consultations with the leads for projects funded under the 2025/26 funding tranche and combine with the project lead consultations undertaken through the national evaluation in order to have a complete picture of their views in relation to the performance and impact of the programme.

Key evaluation questions

The table below sets out the questions that form the basis for the evaluation of the North Wales UKSPF programme. Against each question, we show the evaluation tasks used to inform our assessment.

Table A3: Evaluation questions

Evaluation question	Tasks to address question
a) **Delivery and Process Evaluation**	
1. How effectively has the programme been managed and administered in North Wales?	2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.2
2. What are the common themes, lessons learned and key messages in relation to the delivery of UKSPF in North Wales and in each individual local authority?	2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.2, 3.3
3. How does the delivery of UKSPF in North Wales compare with other areas in Wales and beyond?	2.3
4. Which aspects of UKSPF delivery in North Wales should help to inform the regional development needs and priorities for the area going forward?	2.1, 2.2, 2.4
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the UKSPF approach relative to previous regional development funding models (specifically Objective 1 and ESIF funding approaches)?	2.1, 2.2, 2.4

Evaluation question	Tasks to address question
6. In what way is the UKSPF model conducive to delivering effectively against key regional and national priorities?	2.1, 2.2, 2.4
b) **Financial and KPI Performance**	
7. What progress did the programme make towards the achievement of its financial, output, and outcome targets across North Wales and in each local authority?	2.1, 3.1
8. How did this performance vary by investment priority??	2.1, 3.1
9. What factors explain variations, including under- or over-performance?	2.2, 2.4, 3.2, 3.3
c) **Impact Evaluation**	
10. What are the short-term impacts of the interventions?	2.1, 2.2, 2.4, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3
11. What are the longer-term impacts on North Wales as a whole and in individual local authority areas?	2.2, 2.4, 3.2, 3.3
12. How has the programme provided opportunities for local and community based economic development?	2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.2, 3.3
13. To what extent have the interventions met the needs of communities, local authority areas and North Wales as a whole?	2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.2, 3.3
14. What unexpected or unintended outcomes or impacts (positive or negative) have occurred?	2.2, 2.4, 3.2, 3.3

Annex C: Historic overview of regional development funding in North Wales

Regional development funding in North Wales, and throughout the country, has been shaped by several decades of investment from European funding programmes. The European Social Fund (ESF) has existed since 1958, but Wales' engagement with EU funds truly began after 1975, when the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) was launched. Early ERDF projects in Wales focused on reversing economic decline. For example, funding was used to develop new industrial estates (to attract businesses to areas with pit or factory closures) and provided retraining for workers transitioning out of shrinking industries.

In 1988, the European Community (EC) undertook a major reform of the Structural Funds designed to increase their impact. The funds were integrated into a more cohesive multi-annual programming approach with principles like concentration on poorer regions, partnership with local authorities, and multi-year planning. The budget for structural and cohesion funds was significantly increased around this time doubling by the 1994–1999 period. For Wales, this meant more funding opportunities and more structured programmes.

During 1989–1993, parts of Wales were designated under specific Objectives of the EU's cohesion policy. Notably, Rural Wales was classified under Objective 5(b) (targeting rural development) and received a dedicated Community Support Framework for rural structural assistance. This programme co-funded rural diversification and agricultural restructuring projects in eligible Welsh counties. At the same time, parts of industrial South Wales (the Valleys and some urban areas facing industrial decline) were eligible under Objective 2 (which aided regions in industrial transition). Through Objective 2 in the early 1990s, EU funds supported the regeneration of former coal and steel communities in South Wales (for example, redeveloping derelict industrial land and promoting new enterprises).

European Structural and Investment Funds

2000-06

Structural Funds have played a central role in Wales's economic and social development since 2000. Over more than two decades, Wales received over £5.3 billion from Structural Funds programmes, which were invested in local initiatives, regional priorities, and major strategic projects across the country. These funds aimed to strengthen the Welsh economy, reduce disparities between regions, and support communities, particularly in areas facing economic challenges.

Ever since establishing the National Assembly for Wales (now Senedd) in 1999, many economic development functions have been devolved to Wales with the Welsh Government establishing the Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO) to serve as the Managing Authority for EU programmes in Wales. WEFO managed project selection, monitored progress, and ensured compliance with EU rules in Wales.

West Wales and the Valleys (including Gwynedd, Anglesey, Conwy, and Denbighshire in North Wales) received Objective 1 status for 2000–2006., divided between ERDF (for infrastructure, enterprise, etc.) and ESF (for skills, employment) programmes. The north-east counties (Flintshire and Wrexham) did not qualify for Objective 1 falling under a smaller Objective 2 (industrial areas) and Objective 3 (pan-ESF) programmes in the East Wales (EW) region.

The Objective 1 programme in Wales was managed through a multi-layered approach. It included local partnerships which comprised the four local authorities, private sector and community representatives who developed local action plans and supported project development by assisting applicants with ideas and applications. A key part of their role was to ensure that EU-funded projects addressed local needs. Regional partnerships were also set up, focusing on specific economic sectors and operated on a Wales-wide level. Finally, strategy partnerships were created to address challenges in linking local and regional action plans.

This was a bottom-up approach, driven by the local partnerships, and was considered innovative and effective in Wales. A House of Commons inquiry in 2002 commended the "strong commitment to partnership working in Wales" and noted the structure had been "praised by the [European] Commission".[39] The inquiry also found the inter-relationship between the European Commission, UK Government, Welsh Government (via WEFO), and the partnerships was working well. But the approach for the period was identified to have both strengths and weaknesses. Local partnerships allowed specific local community needs to be addressed and provided important assistance to project applicants. However, the large number of partnerships and overlapping responsibilities created administrative burdens and inefficiencies. Aligning local action plans with regional and strategic objectives also proved difficult, leading to the creation of the 'strategy partnerships' noted above to seek to address those gaps.[40][41][42]

2007-13

WWV continued to receive the highest support under the 'Convergence' programme in 2007 (the new name for Objective 1). EW was classed as a "Competitiveness and Employment" region, receiving a smaller pot.

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[39] House of Commons - Welsh Affairs - Second Report
[40] Swyddfa Cyllid Ewropeaidd Cymru
[41] bus-guide-n000000000000000000000000000349-english.pdf
[42] Evaluating Objective 1 in Wales: the experience of the Mid-term Evaluation | Welsh Economic Review

The 2007–2013 period saw a significant streamlining of delivery structures in Wales. While partnership remained a cornerstone (the EU required a partnership approach), local partnerships were replaced by more regional coordination. There was also a focus on fewer but larger projects, emphasising collaboration among stakeholders, and increasing the use of competitive procurement.[43] By focusing on larger, strategic projects, the programme was seeking to achieve economies of scale – for example, regional projects like 'Skills for the Digital Economy' operated across multiple counties rather than each county running its own variant which would have been the case in the previous period.

Strategic Engagement Teams (SETs) were established to replace the Local Partnerships. Their main objective was to ensure a more joined-up, strategic approach to planning and delivering EU-funded projects across the region. SETs - hosted by local authorities but funded by WEFO - provided advice, support, and partnership facilitation for project applicants and stakeholders. They assisted projects during development, delivery, and closure, and provided aftercare visits and support with audit preparations. The SETs were organised according to the then **Wales Spatial Plan** regions[44], with a dedicated team for North Wales hosted by Conwy County Borough Council.

The North Wales Economic Ambition Board (NWEAB) was established in 2012 as a partnership to develop a regional approach to economic growth and address the challenges facing the North Wales economy. It originally included the six local authorities alongside regional HE and FE institutions. A formal Joint Committee structure for the Board was established in 2019 to further develop and deliver regional economic initiatives, including the North Wales Growth Deal[45]. Over time, the Board's functions and branding have evolved, **with Ambition North Wales** becoming the public-facing name in 2021.

From its establishment, the North Wales SET became closely linked to the NWEAB's work, effectively serving as the "European arm" of that regional approach.[46]

A 2013 evaluation noted that the approach during the 2007-2013 period improved strategic focus – larger projects serving multiple counties were brought forward, and duplication was reduced.[47] WEFO still managed approvals and finances centrally, but the SET provided a local touchpoint in North Wales. North Wales stakeholders also had greater influence through the NWEAB and SET building regional coherence. This can be seen as an early move toward the "regionalism" that would later characterise Welsh economic development (anticipating City/Growth Deals, etc.).

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[43] An evaluation of the implementation of the programme in that period can be seen here: 171205-ex-post-evaluation-2007-2013-final-report-en.pdf
[44] The Wales Spatial Plan was a strategic framework developed by the Welsh Government to guide the long-term spatial development of Wales. First published in 2004 and updated in 2008, its purpose was to ensure that decisions about investment and development across Wales were coordinated and sustainable, taking into account the unique characteristics of different regions.
[45] The North Wales Growth Deal was signed on 17 December 2020, spanning 15 years.
[46] SET Final North Wales and Europe 2007 - 2013 Booklet
[47] Thematic Evaluations of the 2007- 2013 Structural Funds Programmes in Wales Synthesis Report. Available here: Thematic Evaluations

2014-20

WWV continued to receive al larger investment in the 2014-2020 funding period as a "Less Developed Region" relative to the settlement for EW as a "More Developed Region", while many **all-Wales initiatives** were also introduced in this period.

Building on the model from 2007–2013, the approach in Wales sought to further strengthened regional collaboration and the North Wales SET evolved into the North Wales Regional Engagement Team (RET). Regional partnerships were also increasingly aligned with emerging City Deals and Growth Deals, including the **North Wales Growth Deal**.[48] These deals complemented EU funding, focusing on long-term regional economic strategies.

The North Wales RET was again hosted by Conwy and co-located with the NWEAB's offices in Llandudno Junction, aligning EU fund management with the broader **North Wales Growth Vision strategy** described as follows:

> "…a single, joined-up vision for economic and employment growth for North Wales. It will be achieved through collaboration and partnership working, with a strong private sector involvement and a "Team North Wales" approach, building close economic relationships with neighbouring areas."[49]

In practice, this meant the RET and NWEAB worked together to identify large strategic projects for North Wales and to "proof" proposals against regional needs (e.g. ensuring a project in one county complemented, not duplicated, a project in another). It is important to note however that the programme also included several 'All-Wales' schemes which were often delivered by the Welsh Government.

An evaluation published in 2020 concluded that the RETs had been generally effective in supporting the implementation of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) in Wales, particularly in facilitating communication between WEFO and regional stakeholders.[50] The report made a series of recommendations, including a suggestion that RETs should continue to play a key role in future EU funding programmes, with some adjustments to their remit and operations to maximize their effectiveness.

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[48] New era for North Wales growth with new government fund leadership - GOV.UK
[49] https://democracy.gwynedd.llyw.cymru/documents/s14828/Item%2010%20-%20Appendix%201%20-%20North%20Wales%20Growth%20Deal%20Bid.pdf
[50] Regional engagement teams evaluation | GOV.WALES

Regional Skills Partnerships were also established during this period to identify skills needs and priorities.[51] The **Economic Prioritisation Frameworks (EPFs)** also introduced in this period, provided a strategic context for investments, with regional input playing a crucial role in its development and implementation. The EPF approach was developed following recommendations from the Guilford Report[52], which reviewed how ESIF should be implemented in Wales for the 2014–2020 period.[53] These frameworks increasingly incorporated broader metrics beyond economic growth, such as wellbeing, sustainability, and community resilience, aligning with the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act.

Post Brexit arrangements

Governance arrangements

The UK's departure from the EU brought the support of ESIF in Wales to an end. A 2024 OECD report describes how Brexit also led to a significant and fundamental shift in the governance arrangements supporting regional development in Wales with WEFO's role coming to an end. [54] An OCED report (2024) describes how WEFO provided a de facto source of governance for regional development in Wales from 200 to 2023.

In response to Brexit, the Welsh Government developed governance mechanisms and tools that would provide continuity for regional development and the regional-level allocation of investment funding. Four economic regions were introduced (North, Mid, South West and South East Wales) to develop **Regional Economic Frameworks**, introduced in 2021, that would guide regional, place-based economic development interventions in the future.[55] It also finalised the national framework for **Regional Investment in Wales** (2020), developed as the replacement model for EU funds.[56] A mix of national, regional and local delivery approaches would contribute to implementation. A new national spatial plan - **Future Wales: The National Plan 2040** - was introduced in 2021, with programmes in the economic regions.[57]

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[51] https://ambitionnorth.wales/economic-well-being/regional-working/regional-skills-partnership/

[52] The report, officially titled Investing in Growth and Jobs: An Independent Review of Arrangements for Implementation of European Structural Funds Programmes 2014–2020 in Wales, was published in March 2013. See: Investing in Growth and Jobs: An Independent Review of Arrangements for Implementation of European Structural Funds Programmes 2014 – 2020 – European Sources Online

[53] The Economic Prioritisation Framework: background

[54] OECD (2024) Regional Governance and Public Investment in Wales, United Kingdom: Moving Forward Together, OECD Multilevel Governance Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/e143e94d-en   https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/regional-governance-and-public-investment-in-wales-united-kingdom_e143e94d-en.html

[55] Regional economic frameworks | GOV.WALES

[56] Regional investment in Wales: framework | GOV.WALES

[57] Future Wales: the national plan 2040 | GOV.WALES

To support and operationalise the framework and spatial plan, the Welsh Government passed legislation establishing regional-level structures in the four economic regions for regional planning and investment, **Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs)**. CJCs represent a significant reform in Welsh regional governance, aiming to deliver more coordinated and impactful regional development across Wales.

The OECD report (2024) identifies several constraints in terms of applying the model in full including budgetary constraints at both a Welsh Government and Local Authority level. Wales also lost significant investment funding for regional development from the EU as a result of Brexit.

Launching the UKSPF

The UK Government's response to the loss of EU funds for regional development was to launch the UKSPF in April 2022. This followed a one-year pilot in 2021/22, called the UK Community Renewal Fund (CRF). The SPF is directly distributed to local authorities. The funding provided to North Wales as a whole between 2022-25 was ~£40m per year on average, which is significantly less than the ~£100m+ per year North Wales used to benefit from EU funds.

It is also important to note that via new financial powers granted to the UK Government in devolved nations by the **United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020,** the SPF distribution mechanism limits the Welsh Government's role. While the Welsh Government managed and delivered EU funds, the UK Government directly delivers the SPF through local authorities with the rationale of empowering local-level decision making (Bachtler and Downes, 2023)[58]. This has effectively limited the Welsh Government's role in setting strategy and managing public investment for regional development, weakening its ability to influence and then support regional and cross-border projects (between Wales and England [United Kingdom], Ireland as well as with other EU regions) (Senedd Wales, 2023).[59]

The NWEAB has remained involved as a forum aligning the SPF investments with the regional Growth Deal and strategy. However, ultimate decisions on funding lie with the UK Government and local authorities, rather than the EU/Welsh Government framework used previously.

The UKSPF priorities are broadly similar to those that were in place for the EU Funds. However, there is more local flexibility without the thematic regulations of EU funds. This has been broadly welcomed by local authorities who have highlighted a range of benefits including being able to better tailor funding to local needs and align with other local provisions, removing many of the restrictions in relation to support eligibility, and more.

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[58] Bachtler, J. and R. Downes (2023), Rethinking Regional Transformation: The State of Regional Policy in Europe, University of Strathclyde, https://eprc-strath.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Rethinking-Regional-Transformation-EoRPA-report-23_1-ISBN.pdf
[59] Senedd Wales (2023), Welsh Government response to recommendations from the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee's Report: Post-EU Regional Development Funding, https://senedd.wales/media/o0sfpizn/gen-ld16114-e.pdf.

Although Wales' local authorities within the City and Growth Deal regions (geographically equivalent to economic regions) needed to jointly submit a RIP to the UK Government to access SPF funds, there was no mandatory mechanism or incentive to ensure that the funds would be used to pursue regional-level interests or invest in regional-level project. In addition, timescales for spending the funding have been very short compared with 8-9 years period for EU funding programmes. Within the spending window, local authorities face pressures to deliver while managing external risks like inflation and skills shortages. In addition, some local authorities have limited capacity and capability to execute projects (National Audit Office, 2023, p. 30).[60] These limitations are said to have restricted the potential for local authorities to use the SPF to pursue strategic projects and regional collaboration.

Local authorities have adopted different approaches with respect to using the funds. The OECD report (2024) concludes that South East Wales appears to have the most institutionalised mechanism for regional investment, using the Cardiff Capital Region (CCR) City Deal (and its Regional Cabinet) as the lead body deploying the SPF, including approving the RIP. The CCR's SPF investment plan also sets out a regional delivery dimension, with a small allocation of ca. £7 million ringfenced for regional tourism and business support projects. However, the vast majority of projects and investment in South East Wales have been delivered at a local level, and there are few examples of multi-authority delivery beyond the ringfenced allocation. There appears to have been more multi-authority projects in North Wales, with the SPF North Wales team established under the Ambition North Wales structure (with Gwynedd Council as the lead local authority) to manage projects seeking to deliver in more than one local authority area. The OECD report also concluded that the other two Welsh regions (Mid Wales and South West Wales) did not have explicit mechanisms to ensure investment at a regional level.

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[60] National Audit Office (2023), Levelling Up Funding to Local Government, https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/levelling-up-funding-to-local-government.pdf

Annex D: Outputs and Outcomes Performance Tables

Table A4: Output achievement against targets

Output	Total Achieved	Target	% Achieved
Amount of commercial space completed or improved (M2)	13,776	37,395	37%
Number of enterprises engaged in new markets (Number of enterprises)	4	20	20%
Number of tournaments supported (Number of tournaments)	9	186	5%
Number of Tourism, Culture or Heritage assets created or improved (Number of assets)	393	439	90%
Number of neighbourhood improvements undertaken (Number of improvements)	1,749	2,358	74%
Number of people accessing mental and physical health support leading to employment (Number of people)	899	1,116	81%
Number of commercial buildings completed or improved (Number of buildings)	220	299	74%
Number of trees planted (Number of trees)	55,681	64,435	86%
Number of organisations receiving financial support other than grants (Number of organisations)	64	280	23%
Number of enterprises receiving financial support other than grants (Number of enterprises)	189	381	50%
Number of households receiving support (Number of households)	3,416	3,961	86%
Number of people taking part in work experience programmes (Number of people)	1,061	1,051	101%
Number of organisations receiving non-financial support (Number of organisations)	2,357	1,639	144%
Amount of public realm created or improved (M2)	939,845	1,177,767	80%
Amount of land made wheelchair accessible/step free (M2)	10,115	14,670	69%
Number of enterprises receiving non-financial support (Number of enterprises)	4,135	4,560	91%
Number of people supported onto a course through provision of financial support (Number of people)	2,149	1,637	131%
Number of potential entrepreneurs assisted to be enterprise ready (Number of entrepreneurs)	544	440	124%
Number of organisations receiving grants (Number of organisations)	770	445	173%

Output	Total Achieved	Target	% Achieved
Number of courses developed in collaboration with employers (Number of courses)	135	0	0
Number of amenities/facilities created or improved (Number of amenities or facilities)	544	292	186%
Number of people supported to participate in education (Number of people)	4,184	3,119	134%
Number of local markets created or supported (Number of markets)	89	49	182%
Number of feasibility studies developed as a result of support (Number of studies)	211	253	83%
Number of people supported to access basic skills (Number of people)	4,697	2,293	205%
Number of people supported to engage in life skills (Number of people)	15,008	7,375	203%
Number of enterprises receiving grants (Number of enterprises)	1,100	1,216	90%
Number of people attending training sessions (Number of people)	9,921	6,963	142%
Number of people achieving a qualification (Number of people)	1,924	0	0
Number of events/participatory programmes (Number of events/participatory programmes)	3,459	3,684	94%
Number of decarbonisation plans developed as a result of support (Number of plans)	426	342	125%
Number of people receiving support to gain employment (Number of people)	2,083	1,429	146%
Number of new or improved cycleways or footpaths (Number of cycle ways or footpaths)	42	22	191%
Number of people referred from partners onto upskill courses (Number of people)	421		0
Number of people supported to gain a qualification (Number of people)	7,142	3,827	187%
Number of people in employment engaging with the skills system (Number of people)	1,774	2,651	67%
Number of people participating in Multiply funded courses (Number of people)	15,134	0	0
Number of people reached (Number of people)	4,680,845	2,463,853	190%
Number of potential entrepreneurs assisted to be business ready (Number of entrepreneurs)	71	53	134%
Number of adult numeracy courses run in a local area through Multiply (Number of courses)	1,740	0	0
Number of projects successfully completed (Number of projects)	322	361	89%
Number of local events or activities supported (Number of events/activities)	10,274	4,668	220%
Number of people receiving support to sustain employment (Number of people)	669	579	116%
Number of volunteering opportunities supported (Number of opportunities)	38,768	12,590	308%
Number of people supported to engage in job-searching (Number of people)	2,001	1,188	168%

Output	Total Achieved	Target	% Achieved
Number of households supported to take up energy efficiency measures (Number of households)	1,813	605	300%
Number of socially excluded people accessing support (Number of people)	6,095	3,112	196%
Number of economically inactive people supported to engage with the benefits system (Number of people)	517	160	323%
Amount of rehabilitated land (M2)	923,520	655,910	141%
Number of economically inactive people engaging with keyworker support services (Number of people)	3,420	2,028	169%
Amount of green or blue space created or improved (M2)	1,582,907	1,148,940	138%
Amount of low or zero carbon energy infrastructure completed (M2)	66,684	2,001	3,333%
Amount of low or zero carbon energy infrastructure installed (M2)	6	0	0
Number of angel investors engaged (Number of angel investors)	45	43	105%
Number of different cohorts participating in numeracy courses (Number of cohorts)	295	0	0
Number of effective engagements between keyworkers and additional services (Number of engagements)	2,305	1,076	214%
Number of enterprises receiving angel investment (Number of enterprises)	9	4	225%
Number of low or zero carbon energy infrastructure installed (Number of units)	140	98	143%
Number of people receiving support to gain a vocational licence (Number of people)	409	62	660%
Number of people retraining (Number of people)	455	321	142%
Number of rehabilitated premises (number of premises)	8	19	42%
Total Length of new or improved cycleways or footpaths (KM)	63	49	129%

Table A4: Outcome achievement against targets

Outcome	Total Achieved	Target	% Achieved
Reduction in neighbourhood crime (Number of crimes reported)	34	345	10%
Estimated Carbon dioxide equivalent reductions as a result of support (Tonnes of CO2e)	481	662	73%
Increased number of innovation active SMEs (Small and medium-sized enterprises) (Number of enterprises)	41	1	4,100%
Number of R&D (Research & Development) active enterprises (Number of enterprises)	51	195	26%
Number of people in supported employment (Number of people)	180	151	119%
Increased amount of low or zero carbon energy infrastructure installed (M2)	3,892	5,440	72%
Improved perception of attractions (Number of people)	527	1,302	40%
Improved perception of facilities/amenities (Number of people)	67,996	91,761	74%
Jobs safeguarded as a result of support (Number of full time equivalent)	1,004	1,729	58%
Improved perception of safety (Number of people)	2,982	2,628	113%
Improved engagement numbers (Number of people)	155,541	98,963	157%
Jobs created as a result of support (Number of full time equivalent)	610	876	70%
Number of economically inactive individuals engaged with benefits system following support (Number of people)	166	342	49%
Improved perception of facility/infrastructure project (Number of People)	1,773	1,930	92%
Increased users of facilities/amenities (Number of Users)	175,432	92,165	190%
Number of enterprises adopting new to the firm technologies or processes (Number of enterprises)	523	486	108%
Increased use of cycleways or footpaths (Number of cyclists or pedestrians)	197,357	58,244	339%
Number of people in employment, including self-employment, following support (Number of people)	705	757	93%
Number of economically active individuals engaged in mainstream skills education and training (Number of individuals)	1,377	1,938	71%
Number of enterprises with improved productivity (Number of enterprises)	110	317	35%
Increased footfall (Number of people)	997,568	275,905	362%

Outcome	Total Achieved	Target	% Achieved
Number of community-led arts, cultural, heritage and creative programmes as a result of support (Number of programmes)	863	621	139%
Premises with improved digital connectivity as a result of support (Number of premises)	111	129	86%
The number of projects arising from funded feasibility studies (Number of projects)	103	140	74%
Increased business sustainability (Number of enterprises)	297	489	61%
Number of people sustaining employment for 6 months (number of people)	132	216	61%
Increase in visitor spending (Amount of visitor spend in £)	362,763	400,718	91%
Reduced vacancy rates (Number of vacant units filled)	60		0
Number of people with basic skills following support (Number of people)	2,411	1,189	203%
Increased take up of energy efficiency measures (Number of households)	1,802	2,136	84%
Number of organisations engaged in knowledge transfer activity following support (Number of Organisations)	520	968	54%
Number of new to market products (Number of products)	27	23	117%
Number of adults participating in maths qualifications and courses up to, and including, Level 2 equivalent (Number of adults	8,103	1,925	421%
Number of people experiencing reduced structural barriers into employment and into skills provision (Number of people)	5,734	3,467	165%
Increased number of web searches for a place (Number of web searches)	141,086	34,220	412%
Number of people familiarised with employers expectations, including, standards of behaviour in the workplace (Number of people)	3,369	2,748	123%
Number of enterprises adopting new or improved products or services (Number of enterprises)	237	126	188%
Number of volunteering opportunities created as a result of support (Number of volunteering roles created)	17,042	5,293	322%
Number of new enterprises created as a result of support (Number of new enterprises)	202	214	94%
Number of people engaged in job-searching following support (Number of people)	1,225	856	143%
Increased number of enterprises supported (Number of enterprises)	1,171	640	183%
Number of people gaining qualifications, licences and skills (Number of people)	3,368	2,271	148%
Improved perceived/experienced accessibility (Number of people)	204,647	207,277	99%

Outcome	Total Achieved	Target	% Achieved
Number of enterprises engaged in new markets (Number of enterprises)	267	132	202%
Number of people sustaining engagement with keyworker support and additional services (Number of people)	2,448	1,543	159%
Increased visitor numbers (Number of People)	1,099,572	116,730	942%
Number of people engaged in life skills support following interventions (Number of people)	8,954	2,832	316%
Number of early-stage enterprises which increase their revenue following support (Number of enterprises)	90		0
People gaining a qualification or completing a course following support (Number of people)	6,076	3,728	163%
Number of active or sustained participants in community groups as a result of support (Number of participants)	1,738	528	329%
Number of adults achieving maths qualifications up to, and including, Level 2 equivalent (Number of adults)	10,323	1,819	568%
Number of people in education/training following support (Number of people)	4,251	2,911	146%
Improved perception of events (Number of people)	28,399	5,581	509%
Improved perception of markets (Number of people)	676	76	889%
Increased affordability of events/entry (Affordability in £)	87,377	50,589	173%
Increased amount of investment (£)	2,255,693	2,005,001	113%
Number of enterprises increasing their export capability (number of enterprises)	8	4	200%
Number of people engaging with mainstream healthcare services (Number of people)	555	255	218%
Number of people reporting increased employability through development of interpersonal skills funded by UKSPF (Number of people)	3,719	2,367	157%
Number of vacant units filled	2	45	4%

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