



WALES AUDIT OFFICE  
SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

Archwilydd Cyffredinol Cymru  
Auditor General for Wales

# Review of Involvement – Brecon Beacons National Park Authority

Audit year: 2019-20

Date draft issued: February 2020

Document reference: 1741A2020-21



This document has been prepared as part of work performed in accordance with statutory functions.

In the event of receiving a request for information to which this document may be relevant, attention is drawn to the Code of Practice issued under section 45 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

The section 45 code sets out the practice in the handling of requests that is expected of public authorities, including consultation with relevant third parties. In relation to this document, the Auditor General for Wales and the Wales Audit Office are relevant third parties. Any enquiries regarding

disclosure or re-use of this document should be sent to the Wales Audit Office at

[infoofficer@audit.wales](mailto:infoofficer@audit.wales).

We welcome correspondence and telephone calls in Welsh and English. Corresponding in Welsh will not lead to delay. Rydym yn croesawu gohebiaeth a galwadau ffôn yn Gymraeg a Saesneg. Ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

Mae'r ddogfen hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg. This document is also available in Welsh.

The team who delivered the work comprised Nick Selwyn and Steve Frank.

# Contents

The Authority carries out good project-by-project engagement but lacks an integrated strategic approach to involvement and finds it challenging to mainstream involvement in its current financial and operating environment.

## Summary report

The Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015	4
Involvement	5
Scope of our audit	6
Our findings	6
Proposals for improvement	12

## Appendices

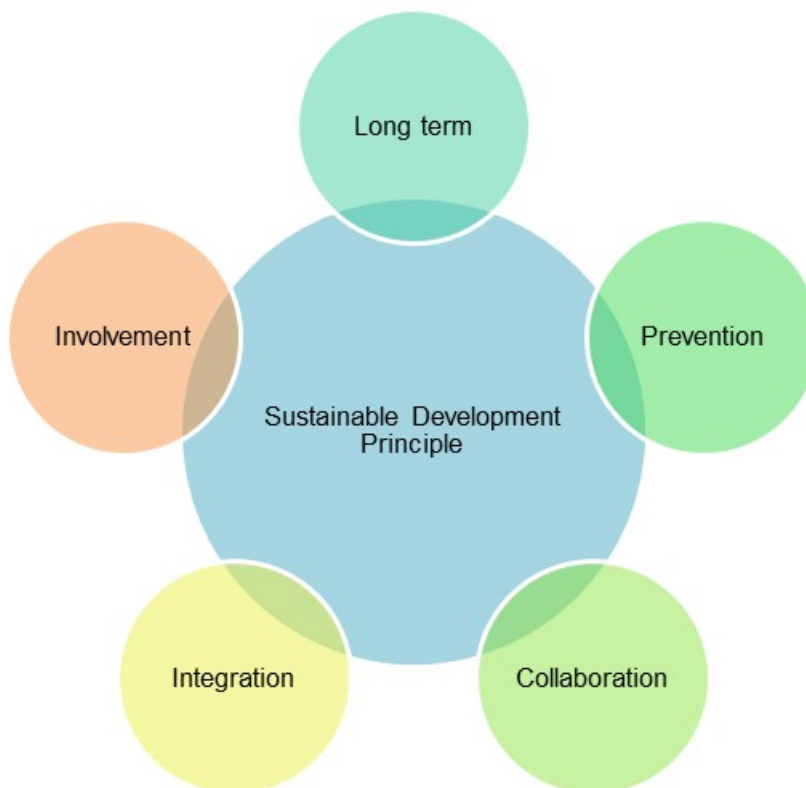
Appendix 1 – examples of involvement approaches in UK National Park Authorities	15
---	----

# Summary report

## The Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015

- 1 The Well-being of Future Generations Act (the 'Act') requires public bodies in Wales to think about the long-term impact of their decisions, to work better with people, communities and each other, and to prevent persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change. The Act also puts in place a 'sustainable development principle' which tells those public bodies covered by the Act how to go about meeting their duty.
- 2 Public bodies need to make sure that when making their decisions they consider the impact they could have on people living their lives in Wales both now and in the future. There are five things that public bodies need to think about to show that they have applied the sustainable development principle. These are set out in [Exhibit 1](#). Following these ways of working will help public bodies to work together better, avoid repeating past mistakes and tackle some of the long-term challenges facing Wales.

Exhibit 1: the sustainable development principle and the five ways of working



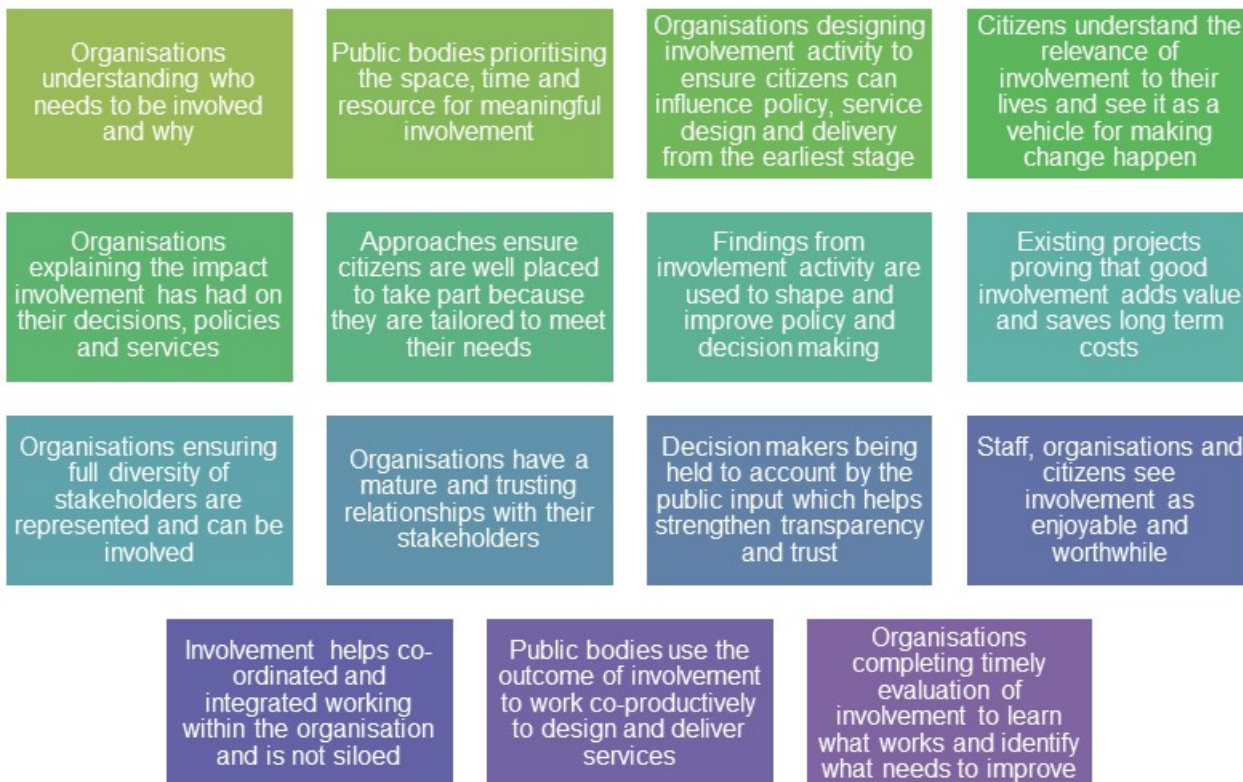
Source: Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 – [The Essentials](#)

## Involvement

- 3 Involvement is about having rich and meaningful conversations with the people in their community, finding out what matters to them, and reflecting that in the decisions that NPAs take. Involvement requires organisations to be open to influence from citizens and stakeholders, moving to a culture of ‘working with’ rather than ‘doing to’. In contrast to consultation, involvement approaches work with people at earlier stages, such as helping to identify issues and potential solutions, and being supported to remain involved right throughout design, implementation and evaluation processes.
- 4 Drawing on our most recent feedback presentation to the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority (the Authority) on 3 May 2019, the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales’ [Journey Checker](#) and the [National Principles for Public Engagement in Wales](#) developed by Participation Cymru, [Exhibit 2](#) summarises the characteristics of an organisation with an effective approach to involvement.

### Exhibit 2: the characteristics of a public body which has an effective approach to involvement

Effective involvement is embodied by....



- 5 Authorities should therefore set their agenda by listening to people, meaningfully involving them throughout the decision-making process, and being open to real change as a result. It is vital that activities and mechanisms for involving people are appropriately planned, monitored and reported, so they can be developed, challenged or championed. Ensuring that staff and organisations have the necessary skills, structures as well as time and resources to involve the public effectively is vital. This ensures that public services in Wales reflect what is important to the public and their needs, rather than what we may traditionally think works best.

## Scope of our audit

- 6 Given the challenges for public bodies in embodying the sustainable development principle, we have on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales reviewed the Authority's approach and management of involving stakeholders when proposing service and policy changes, and in the design of activities. We agreed with the Authority two tracers for us to examine in more detail to test corporate arrangements 'on the ground' and along a pathway through live projects. The two projects we agreed with the Authority are as follows:
- **the Waterfall Country Project.** Waterfall Country is a collection of internationally recognised waterfalls that are located at the head of the Vale of Neath, within the boundaries of the National Park, at the junction of the county of Powys and the county boroughs of Rhondda Cynon Taff and Neath Port Talbot. The area not only supports internationally important habitats and species but also over 100 adventure activity businesses, 290,000 visitors a year and several small settlements and farmsteads. The Project Masterplan's three main project themes are: 1) Preventing loss of ecology; 2) Engaging with People and Communities; and 3) Economic Sustainability. The latest Waterfall Country Management Masterplan has no specific budget but is supported by two dedicated full-time equivalent staff funded from a variety of grant funded sources. Other investment includes monies from the capital budget to pay for car parking upgrades, and in staff time from various departments.
  - **the Small Steps green health project.** This project is a mental health and wellbeing initiative delivered by the Authority with support from Powys Teaching Health Board (PTHB) Adult Mental Health and Psychology Services. Welsh Government funding of £72,000 given to the Authority in 2018 helped set up the initiative as a research project. The project is supported by six volunteers. Other resources include Authority staff management time, use of facilities, and PTHB evaluation.

## Our findings

- 7 Overall, we have concluded that **the Authority carries out good project-by-project engagement but lacks an integrated strategic approach to involvement and finds it challenging to mainstream involvement in its current financial and operating environment.** We came to this conclusion because we found the following.

### The Authority is involving key stakeholders in designing and delivering projects, but this is not integrated into a coherent strategic approach to involvement

- 8 The Authority is taking a leadership role in projects and recognises the need for long-term involvement of key partners to build capacity. For example, leading on community regeneration and improving traffic measures in Pontneddfechan where the Authority has led on engaging and working with the local community. In particular, the positive work with Natural Resources Wales to find a managed way of involving businesses to reduce the negative impact of visitors by coproducing an agreed code of practice is positive.
- 9 Many of the issues the Authority is seeking to address in the Waterfall Country project go back over 20 years and the Waterfall Country project has changed over this time. We found that there has been a clear evolution in project planning activity from car park surveys to developing a long-term evidence base about visitors, local needs, and user satisfaction and the project has now grown to become a community regeneration initiative seeking to address a range of local issues. Whilst we can see some integration of the Waterfall County vision and plans with local community council and public service partners, community and stakeholder involvement activity is not yet making a visible and tangible impact, and despite an ongoing commitment and involvement has not resulted in services improving.
- 10 We are concerned that the aspirations of members of the Community Council to significantly increase tourism and generate more money in the local economy could be unrealistic in the current financial climate, the relatively slow progress to date and the commitment of partners. Despite the positive work undertaken by the Authority to improve the local environment through its work on path maintenance and signage for instance, a number of the problems are not within the remit of the Authority to address. Whilst it is commendable that the Authority has stepped up to help, the involvement – and commitment – of key partners is variable and it is debatable if the Authority is best placed to deal with the issues in hand, for instance, key decision makers who can pledge resources and make the changes necessary are not consistently involved in agreeing nor delivering the actions needed. The Waterfall Country partnership is also entirely focused on public bodies and has not sought to broaden membership to involve the private and voluntary sectors.

- 11 In comparison, the Small Steps project has made good progress and is delivering positive outcomes for both those who commissioned the project, but also those who have benefited from being involved and receiving services. There is good engagement with and involvement from both health staff and the local community council in the Small Steps project. In particular, the approach to project evaluation and impact shows the health benefits for those involved, with psychologists using a range of questionnaires to monitor mood and sense of wellbeing. This evaluation has taken place over the life of the project and has enabled the health board to map progress against a series of consistent measures to judge the improvement for individuals who have participated and been involved in the project (although the end of project evaluation had not been produced at the time of our fieldwork). Despite its success, funding for the project is due to terminate in 2020.
- 12 More broadly, the Authority lacks an overarching integrated approach to all its involvement and is not always learning from its varied approaches to make every involvement contact count. The Authority is engaging with service users and stakeholders on for example the production of the Local Development Plan. Despite this positive work, we found that the Authority it is not always involving people in identifying, developing and agreeing solutions. For example, the Authority's website contains a section on 'Getting Involved' which includes information on accessing Members, committee meetings, consultations, making comments and complaints, social media links, and how to request information. This could be improved with feedback on what changes have resulted from getting involved to show how citizen involvement is shaping the work of the Authority. At present the Authority lacks a formal corporate stakeholder engagement evaluation methodology to help identify what works and why.
- 13 Defining 'people' to involve with is challenging because involvement is not just about the people who live in the Park area, the businesses which work in the Park area and key public sector partners but also the wider population. Consequently, the Authority needs to consider tourists/visitors to the National Park. Many of these come from outside of Wales, which can make engagement challenging. There is also a tension between the Authority's two primary purposes – to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the National Parks; and to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the Parks by the public. Managing the potential effect of increasing visitor numbers going forward – making tourism and its impact on the Park sustainable in terms of the environment – remains a key challenge for the Authority and its partners, including the Welsh Government. To date, involvement work has been focussed on the Authority area and its inhabitants. This falls short of the expectations of the Act which requires public bodies to involve the full range of potential users and stakeholders.
- 14 Effective involvement therefore requires a shift in both thinking and doing by the Authority to ensure that the full range of interested parties (such as residents, businesses and visitors) can be involved in its work. Especially those from hard to reach and underrepresented groups such people from a Black Minority Ethnic



background and those with protected characteristics. Working through representative groups across the local area and the wider Wales region will help the Authority find an efficient way to engage with overarching representative groups which can provide insight and challenge on the effectiveness of current approaches to involvement with hard to reach groups.

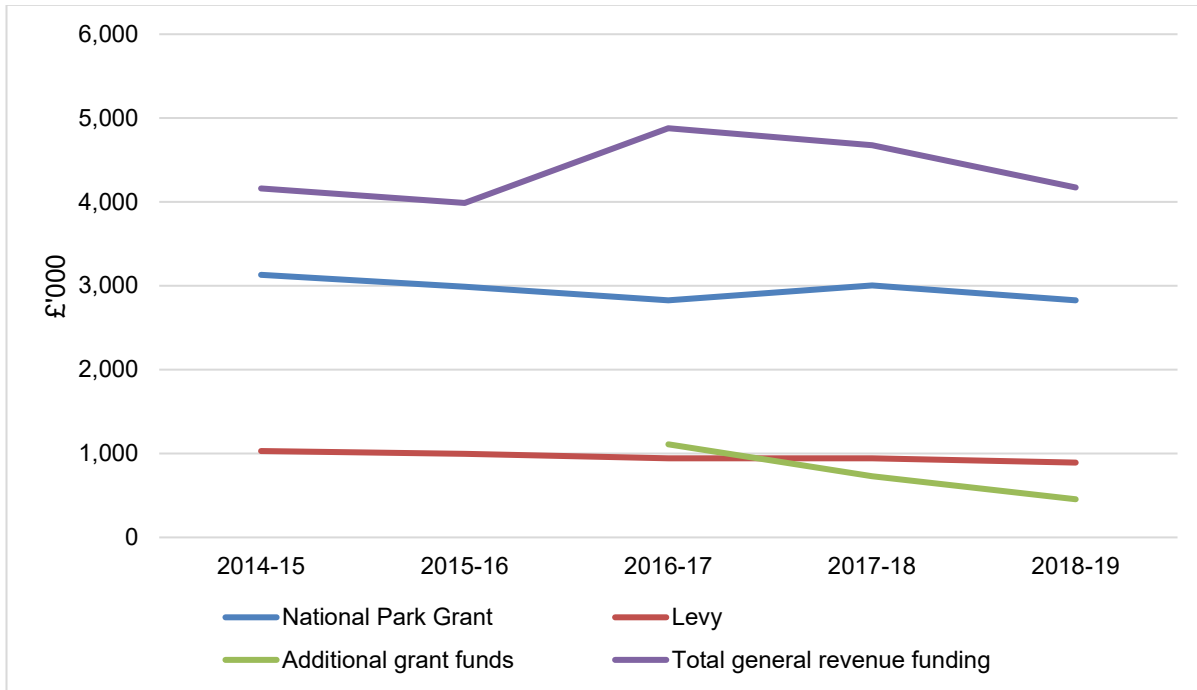
- 15 There are a wide range of tools and techniques that can be used to help deliver a positive involvement experience. For instance, stakeholder workshops, forums, e-voting, conferences, community competitions, mapping events, street stalls, open house events, videography, webinars, drop-in sessions and advertising. These are all options for the Authority to consider in developing a more strategic and corporate-wide approach to involvement. The Authority's approach to developing and encouraging Welsh-language provision is too passive. It is not involving people and communities to shape its efforts to overcome its steady decline. This is despite the Authority promoting the Welsh language as a key priority.

#### The Authority's ability to strengthen its involvement work is difficult in the challenging financial and operating environment

- 16 The impact of austerity remains the most significant challenge facing all national park authorities in Wales. The short-term nature of Welsh Government funding and allocation of additional capital and revenue monies close to the year-end continues to impact on the Authority's ability to plan long term. These financial pressures are likely to continue for the medium term. The current operating environment and challenges do mean, however, that it is questionable how sustainable its approach to involvement is, and whether the Authority can take a sufficiently long-term view.
- 17 In 2018-19, the Authority generated a surplus on the provision of services of £51,000 (2017-18 surplus £657,000). **Exhibit 3** below identifies that the Authority's core funding of national park grant and levy has reduced significantly since 2014-15. The impact of the annual reductions has been offset in 2016-17, 2017-18 and 2018-19 by additional Welsh Government grant awards received at the end of the financial year.

**Exhibit 3: core funding and additional grants**

Core funding by national park grant and levy has reduced since 2014-15. This has been offset by additional grant funding received at the end of 2016-17, 2017-18 and 2018-19.

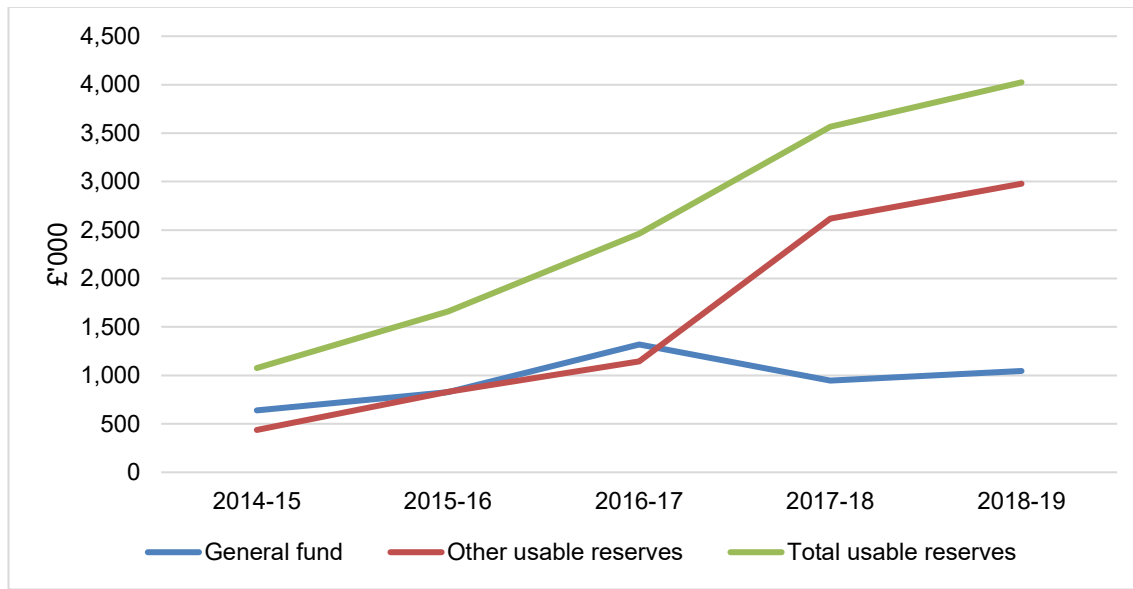


Source: Wales Audit Office, Annual Audit Letter, 3 December 2019.

18 On the basis that the additional grant funds were unplanned, the Authority's reserves have increased in these years. These funds are held as earmarked reserves until they are applied to finance expenditure – **Exhibit 4** below. Careful consideration of reserves balances and how they might be used to support financial plans is particularly important as it is not sustainable to rely on reserves to support ongoing costs. Once reserves have been depleted, other sources of funds or efficiencies must be identified. The challenge for the Authority is to determine how to use reserves generated by unexpected grant receipts in the context of a reduced core budget.

#### Exhibit 4: Usable reserves

Usable reserves have increased by almost £3 million between 2014-15 and 2018-19 due to additional financial pressures funding in 2016-17, 2017-18 and 2018-19.



Source: Wales Audit Office, Annual Audit Letter, 3 December 2019.

- 19 The Authority has recently developed a change management programme to respond to this challenging operating environment. At the heart of the Authority's change programme is refocusing priorities on landscape and nature recovery; engagement and understanding; and rural enterprise. Supporting these themes are nine priorities with five key work programmes. This is ambitious, especially because of the uncertainty created by the workforce changes taking place. Subsequently, senior managers recognise there is a need to have greater clarity and purpose to match aspirations with budgets and resources available.
- 20 Despite seeing reserves increase in recent years, the Authority has also sought to identify alternative sources of funding to offset reductions in core grant from the Welsh Government. Consequently, much of the involvement activity is funded by grants and increasingly involvement activity is 'project' led. Because each project is funded via different grants, operates to different award criteria, has different timescales and is delivering different outcomes, there is little consistency between projects. Often the focus of project work reflects the award body's priorities, not necessarily the Authority's priorities. Manging multiple projects can also be resource-intensive with lots of starting afresh as one project ends and the Authority seeks new funding. Project-led activity is therefore not helping develop and embed a strategic approach to involvement. We found that this has resulted in very different models for involvement.

- 21 There is a risk that projects are delivered in silos with little read across between teams to learn what works and why, which consequently falls short of meeting the involvement expectations of the Act, and more needs to be done to integrate current work. There are also shortcomings in project management arrangements for involvement activity with action plans too unclear and not specific enough to give a direction of travel or demonstrably show how users' and stakeholders' concerns have been addressed. For instance:
- a. the Draft Report on the Waterfall Country Visitor Traffic Study includes a range of intentions to review or consider with no substantive actions to progress;
  - b. Action plans mostly focus on measuring numerical outputs and struggle when it comes to monitoring qualitative outcomes for people on the impact of involvement and do not always feed back what changes as a result of involvement; and
  - c. Many of the problems which existed in 1994 remain in 2018-19 and it is not clear what has meaningfully improved in the last 20 years.
- 22 Corporately, capacity to deliver small frontline projects is fragile and short term and the current restructuring with 19 staff placed at risk – approximately 20% of the workforce – is having a major impact on morale, the pace of change and creates some underlying risks for corporate resilience. As a result, it is not always clear how involvement activity is making a visible and tangible impact and resulting in services improving.

## Proposals for improvement

- 23 Rather than list proposals for improvement we have produced a self-assessment for the Authority's staff and members to use in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of its current approach to involvement. This self-assessment can be used at both a corporate strategic level but also on individual projects to judge how well the Authority is doing and where change is needed to ensure involvement is mainstreamed and made sustainable. We expect the Authority to use this tool to evaluate its current performance and to identify how it can improve its work.

### Exhibit 5: self-assessment

Action	We do this well on every occasion and do not need to improve our approach at all	We do this well some of the time but there are opportunities to improve our approach	We are not good at this and need to improve our approach
We have a strategic approach to involvement which directs all our activity			
We understand who needs to be involved and why			
We prioritise the space, time and resources for meaningful involvement			
We have designed our involvement activity to ensure that citizens and partners can influence our policies and plans			
We have designed our involvement activity to ensure that citizens and partners can influence how we design and deliver services			

Action	We do this well on every occasion and do not need to improve our approach at all	We do this well some of the time but there are opportunities to improve our approach	We are not good at this and need to improve our approach
We have made clear to citizens and partners how their involvement will help improve their lives			
We have made clear to citizens and partners how their involvement with us will result in change happening			
We explain the impact involvement has had on our decisions, policies and services			
We tailor our approach to involvement to ensure all citizens and partners can take part			
We use the findings from involvement activity to shape and improve policy and decision making			
We can demonstrate that our approach to involvement adds value to what we do			
We can demonstrate that our approach to involvement saves long-term costs			
We ensure the full diversity of stakeholders can be involved in what we do and how we do it			
We have mature and trusting relationships with all our stakeholders			
Our approach to involvement allows our partners to hold us to account for the decisions we make			
Our approach to involvement allows citizens to hold us to account for the decisions we make			

Action	We do this well on every occasion and do not need to improve our approach at all	We do this well some of the time but there are opportunities to improve our approach	We are not good at this and need to improve our approach
Our approach to involvement is enjoyable and worthwhile			
Our partners see our work on involvement as enjoyable and worthwhile			
Our citizens see our work on involvement as enjoyable and worthwhile			
Our approach to involvement helps us to integrate our work to avoid silos			
We use the outcome of our involvement to work co-productively to design and deliver services			
We undertake timely evaluation of involvement to learn what works			
We undertake timely evaluation of involvement to identify what needs to improve			

# Appendix 1

## Examples of involvement approaches in UK National Park Authorities

National Parks England has produced some guidance for organisations and individuals wanting to get involved in developing National Park Management Plans. See [nationalparksengland.gov.uk/get-involved](https://nationalparksengland.gov.uk/get-involved), [get-involved-in-a-national-park-management-plan](#) and [National Parks England publications](#). This contrasts strongly with the lack of output from National Parks Wales despite the benefits of collaborating on common issues.

National parks elsewhere are using multi and mixed media to engage communities and prevent problems. South Downs National Park Authority asked its communities to answer the following question: **How do you bring about behavioural change among irresponsible dog walkers without demonising them?** Responses are [here](#) and demonstrate what can be achieved by taking a different approach to involving subject experts and local businesses in finding solutions.

Cairngorms National Park Authority Communications and Engagement Strategy 2018-2022 contains some key features that enable this national park authority to do involvement activity more effectively. Features include:

- including a baseline of information and data on how effectively the national park authority involves the public, a measure of people's awareness of what goes on in the national park, how they like to be involved, and what people think about services;
- a commitment to evaluate engagement work measuring outcomes where possible, to test impact and continuously learn and improve;
- involvement activity integrates with the work of nearby partners and national campaigns, for example the Scottish Nature BIG weekend; and
- a key priority is for the national park authority to inspire new generations to be park champions and take the lead of community projects in the future.

North York Moors National Park Authority Measuring Health and Well-being Impact report from November 2018 highlights the importance of involving stakeholders and the difference it makes to the work of the Authority. Examples include:

- how the Authority has included involvement activity in its Social Return on Investment (SROI) calculations, and the value people's views add. Specific changes post consultation are tracked and valued.
- people engage better when they understand the wellbeing benefits they may gain and after acquiring knowledge about the special qualities of the park. This includes telling people what the National Park Authority does and exactly how they can get involved.
- the Authority thinks that the best data is collected as a routine part of the work of the Authority or as an integral part of any intervention, initiative, programme, or activity. They find that people are less willing or able to provide feedback or views



in 'set piece' type events and need to understand the relevance of involvement to their lives and be assured the Authority will make change happen.

Wales Audit Office  
24 Cathedral Road  
Cardiff CF11 9LJ

Tel: 029 2032 0500

Fax: 029 2032 0600

Textphone.: 029 2032 0660

E-mail: [info@audit.wales](mailto:info@audit.wales)

Website: [www.audit.wales](http://www.audit.wales)

Swyddfa Archwilio Cymru  
24 Heol y Gadeirlan  
Caerdydd CF11 9LJ

Ffôn: 029 2032 0500

Ffacs: 029 2032 0600

Ffôn testun: 029 2032 0660

E-bost: [post@archwilio.cymru](mailto:post@archwilio.cymru)

Gwefan: [www.archwilio.cymru](http://www.archwilio.cymru)