



## VRP opportunities post-pandemic Board Discussion Paper June 2020

### Purpose of the Paper

The VRP team request comments on, and approval of, the proposals for development as discussed in the following paper:

### Summary

As a result of the current COVID pandemic and feedback from stakeholders it has become necessary to urgently review the current VRP Delivery Plan (2019 – 2021). Suggested amendments to the plan will ensure it remains both fit for purpose, and also is more dynamic in its response to emerging developments and trends.

This paper proposes new areas to be added to the current Delivery Plan and the plan itself has been updated to illustrate where aspects are no longer deliverable or applicable at this time. The new proposals ensure there will be greater engagement and delivery amongst the Discovery Gateways once current restrictions are relaxed.

Three key emerging areas are being reported both by our partners and the media in general:

- The greater demand anticipated for outdoor spaces/nature opportunities and projects that are proven to help improve mental wellbeing
- The need for new opportunities for remote working
- The increased demand anticipated in relation to families using their **local** green spaces

We will continue to work with partners to identify opportunities as we move towards supporting them with recovery plans, and update this paper as necessary.

### Background

Since January 2020 the VRP team has been working to further develop and deliver the existing VRP Delivery Plan (2019 – 2021). This plan was written some time ago and it was already clear to the team and the VRP forum that there had been a number of shifts in what was needed to address the themes in the plan. For example, in health there is now the new Healthy Weight Healthy Wales strategy which has a set of targeted delivery plans



(children/young people and 60+ age groups for example). In business, the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales triggered a review into procurement practices in the public sector in Wales which we hope will highlight further opportunities for businesses in our valleys, including a diverse social business community. In terms of landscape, culture and identity, the recent publication of Area Statements by Natural Resources Wales provides a clearer picture of where VRP would provide best added value to that agenda.

Also, as a result of the recent floods, a number of the Discovery Gateways have been forced to revisit their own plans, meaning some of those sites will be unable to deliver some of the services/activities that are integral to the delivery of the current VRP plan.

As a result, the team were already assessing which parts of the delivery plan needed to be amended and refocussed before the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

### **Impact of COVID-19**

Now, as a result of the huge disruption caused by the pandemic, there is an even greater need for an urgent refocus of the VRP work. Apart from the obvious loss of income at all the Discovery Gateway sites, their closure means that their Welsh Government capital funded work is also on hold, with great uncertainty as to whether everything they had in their plans will be delivered.

The VRP work plan needs to quickly and flexibly respond to the new trends and opportunities that are emerging from the crisis.

Parks and the outdoors have featured prominently in recent news coverage as people recognise more than ever the vital role these places play in supporting our collective mental health and resilience. In particular the necessity for families to exercise together outdoors has seen a dramatic increase in family activities in our parks and green spaces.

Market researchers are also looking at ways in which the pandemic will change our behaviours, values, attitudes and culture. They are seeing a retreat from 'luxury goods' and desire for more authentic, healthy, grounded experiences and ways of living. People will want to be outside more, in touch with nature more, focus more on individual and collective health (social health, physical health, mental health). Parks and landscape can play a vital role in meeting those needs.

While we must be realistic about the damage to businesses that will result from the current crisis, many businesses have shown incredible creativity, flexibility and resilience. And for consumers, we have witnessed a return to local shops, partly out of necessity and partly out of a sense of community. The future for businesses in our valleys, including social businesses, is uncertain but we have seen glimmers of a change in attitude which may prove a long-lasting opportunity.

Only 9% of Britons want to return to life as normal after the end of the lockdown triggered by coronavirus pandemic, according to a recent YouGov poll commissioned by the Food Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC) and the Food Foundation charity.

The poll suggests an overwhelming majority hope to see some personal and social changes continue following the pandemic, with fewer than one in 10 wanting a full return to how things were before.

51% of respondents said they had noticed cleaner air, and 27% said they had recognised more wildlife since the lockdown began, finding huge value in this.

40% they felt a stronger sense of community in their local area since the virus shut down “normal” life, while 39% said they had been more in touch and felt more connected with friends and family.

Around 42% of the 4,343 adults surveyed said they now valued food more – with one in ten sharing with a neighbour for the first time.

Barclaycard’s Consumer Spending Index for March 2020 showed that specialist food and drink shops (which account for many small, local retailers) went up 35%.

This represents a huge desire for cultural and behavioral change, a renewed emphasis on nature, health, community, work-life balance, local foundation economies and supply chains. Earthy, grounding, authentic experiences which support health, community and the ‘important things in life’.

Professor Tom MacMillan from the Royal Agricultural University, and research lead for the FFCC, quoted:

*“This data shows there is a real appetite for change, and for the nation to learn from this crisis. People are trying new things and noticing differences, at home, in their work and in communities. This is really apparent when it comes to the countryside, but is clear in other areas too.*

*Alongside the emergency response, it is important to keep track of these changes in what we’re doing and our collective mood, to help shape the kind of country we want to be when we recover from this pandemic.”*

This means, as restrictions are lifted there is a unique window of opportunity to foster significant and long lasting behavior change relating to our use of the ‘great outdoors’.

### **Opportunities post COVID-19**

There are three particular areas of interest for VRP where there is significant research to ensure evidence-based development:

- The use of outdoor spaces/nature to improve mental wellbeing
- Remote working
- Family exercising space



## The use of outdoor spaces/nature to improve mental wellbeing

There are a great deal of predictions on the negative impact COVID-19 and its related lockdown will have on population mental health going forward. With one in four people suffering poor mental health pre-COVID-19 and as mental health services were already severely stretched, there is an even more pressing need to support people that feel they need clinical intervention.

A great deal of research has shown that various types of nature experience are associated with mental health benefits in many ways. Controlled lab studies illustrated the beneficial psychological and stress/physiological impacts of nature images and sounds (Bratman et al, 2019). This study also showed the benefits of nature experience by contrasting within-group change across affective, cognitive, and physiological dimensions in participants who walked in natural versus urban environments. Other research in the Bratman et al study also found that the psychological well-being of a population can be associated, in part, with its proximity to green space, blue space, street trees or private gardens in both urban and rural settings.

In addition, experience of nature has been demonstrated to positively affect various aspects of cognitive function, memory and attention, impulse inhibition, and children's school performance, as well as imagination and creativity (Bratman et al, 2019).

Nature experience has been associated with improved sleep and reductions in stress which many studies have shown reduces the incidence of poor mental health, in particular, depression and anxiety.

There is also significant evidence that there is a need to increase opportunities for green space engagement in areas of high deprivation/low opportunity as removing social and physical barriers is an essential part of working to reduce inequalities.

90% of articles studied by Lackey et al (2019) for their systematic review observed at least one positive association between nature-based recreation and mental health, including improvements in affect, cognition, restoration, and well-being, and decreases in anxiety and depression symptoms.

In addition, Dr Jason Strauss the Director of geriatric psychiatry at Harvard-affiliated Cambridge Health Alliance states that:

*"Interacting with natural spaces offers other therapeutic benefits such as lower blood pressure and levels of the stress hormone cortisol, which calms the body's fight-or-flight response".*

The VRP is well placed to work closely with both Discovery Gateway sites, other valleys-based organisations and community members to promote and support more outdoor activity post-pandemic. In particular the Guardians scheme (to be delivered by Groundwork Wales) will offer new and exciting opportunities to engage local communities into their natural surroundings. In addition, the Ramblers Cymru Family Walking project will dovetail with the Guardians work at the Discovery Gateway centres.



## Remote working

Pre-COVID there was already a steady movement towards more agile/remote working. During lockdown there have been such demonstrable benefits to both the environment (air pollution being astonishingly lowered for example) and in terms of money saving to companies (reduced travel claims, travel time etc.). Post-COVID there are clear opportunities to continue these significant environmental benefits and accrue further monetary savings, as reported by numerous think tanks, including the World Economic Forum. VRP and the Discovery Sites are very well placed to offer remote working opportunities that incorporate opportunities for being 'in nature' and provide all the benefits listed above.

In a 2015 research review (Allen et al, 2015) it was found that overall, remote working increased job satisfaction, performance and feelings of commitment to an organisation among employees. People who worked remotely also tended to experience less work stress or exhaustion.

It is important to note that the Allen et al study also reported drawbacks such as social and professional isolation, fewer opportunities for information sharing and a blurring of boundaries between work and personal life.

One other showed that the blurring of such boundaries causes remote workers to associate their homes with their work roles as work obligations repeatedly intrude upon family time (Eddleston, & Mulki, 2017).

The [University of Michigan Coworking Project](#) reported that for some people operating a shared 'office' that provides remote workers with internet access, meeting rooms and other amenities can help address social isolation. The study reported that such spaces can create a sense of community without threatening remote workers' prized autonomy (Garrett et al, 2017).

The VRP area's parks with cafes and other facilities with free wifi etc. can address the above cons of remote working and will become increasingly important as these type of venues become more in demand.

These venues of course have the 'Unique Selling Point' of the added health and wellbeing benefit of being immersed in the outdoors, creating immediate cues for getting out for a walk during the working day/having 'walk and talk' meetings followed by a coffee at the venue (increasing footfall and income at the parks).

As well as offering great spaces for employees, this is beneficial to the employers as access to 'nature' has been shown to boost productivity in 7 key ways:

1. Improves short-term memory
2. Sparks inspiration
3. Decreases stress levels
4. Increases concentration skills



5. Boosts positivity
6. Enhances creative functions
7. Increases mindfulness

Source: <https://medium.com/thrive-global/get-outside-how-nature-enhances-work-productivity-25e26386c348>. (accessed 22.4.20)

To get the most out of the associated health & wellbeing benefits from being in such environments opportunities to actually work outside and be embedded within that landscape need to be made available.

To enable this, Discovery Gateway sites could be supported to explore providing reliable outdoor wifi access across the parks at designated outdoor working areas, in what we could term 'inspiration stations'. Examples of this type of provision can be seen here:

<https://www.performancenetworks.co.uk/caravan-site-wifi/>

They could combine this by investing in outdoor undercover areas which protect from any bad weather yet still provide the experience of being out in nature. The time is right in terms of behaviour change for a totally new approach to 'the office' that integrates work with the wider benefits of exposure to nature and the natural environment.



VRP marketing / promotion of Discovery Gateways as remote working hubs can therefore focus on doing your work in a healthy, health-giving environment which also boosts productivity etc. VRP can anticipate this trend and help DG sites be ready / develop accordingly.

As this pattern of working becomes more established, employers will become real stakeholders in the sustainable management of our local parks and greenspaces. It would



not be unreasonable to see this eventually reflected in more support for our parks (financial and otherwise) from private enterprise, local employers etc.

### **Family exercising spaces**

As a result of lock down and the permitted exercise outdoors time each day, there has been a huge rise in families exercising outdoors together. Notoriously, engagement and retention in formal family related exercise schemes (such as MEND) is difficult so this is a very positive side effect of this difficult time.

Sylvia Rimm, a psychologist and director of the Family Achievement Clinic in Cleveland (author of 24 books on parenting, including "See Jane Win" and "Rescuing the Emotional Lives of Overweight Children), reports that there are all kinds of ways that physical activity enables good family relationships – not only improving health but increasing self-confidence and reducing childhood anxiety. She also reports that families exercising together can also make the family unit stronger, not just its individual parts. She states that parents who exercise with their children not only get healthier, but strengthen the family's bond, and recommends family exercise as a solution for both the nation's obesity epidemic and increasing family instability. In terms of health benefits, Rimm reports that even taking a 15-minute walk together after a meal can have immediate health benefits, such as lowering blood sugar levels (which can help prevent type 2 diabetes) and helping the body digest food more effectively.

Brown et al (2015) cited social benefits as a key incentives for involvement in physical activity with emphasis on children experiencing new things with even just “being outdoors” being considered beneficial.

Discovery Gateways, community groups that engage in outdoor activities (such as Welcome To Our Woods, Keep Wales Tidy, Groundwork etc.) are going to be key in harnessing this new ‘trend’ and ensuring its sustainability.

VRP is ideally placed to both promote and develop opportunities with partners across the VRP footprint. This increase of family exercising is key to the delivery of the Healthy Weight Healthy Wales strategy with one of their first 2 year delivery plans being about engaging more children and young people.

### **Conclusion**

There is a need to refresh the current 2019 – 2021 VRP Delivery Plan and the above proposal – to frame the plan through the lens of these three major opportunities would seem an appropriate way to progress in light of the pandemic. VRP request the input of stakeholders on this proposal and the draft amended Delivery Plan for 2020-2021.



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