

Minister for Environment announces over £3.4m for improvements to Wales' Designated Landscapes

The funding will be used to support a wide range of projects across Wales' designated landscapes, including improving access to the outdoors, promoting conservation and regenerating some of their most fragile areas.

The announcement follows a commitment made by the Minister earlier this month to retain Wales' designated landscapes and their current purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty.

Hannah Blythyn said:

"I re-affirmed my commitment to the designated landscapes in a statement I made in the Senedd earlier this month. Today's announcement is further proof of our commitment to Wales' National Parks and AONBs.

"This funding will help our designated landscapes continue to deliver rich ecosystems, vibrant and resilient communities and opportunities for outdoor recreation for all people across Wales."

Among the improvements being made will be the introduction of electronic vehicle charging points to increase sustainable travel and improvements to recycling facilities to reduce littering within the National Parks. Access improvements for people with disabilities and other mobility issues will also be rolled out across all designated landscapes.

Hannah Blythyn added:

"This funding is helping support projects which will improve visitor facilities but also help with the long term protection of the environment. Projects such as peat land restoration and the prevention of habitat loss will all help tackle key environmental challenges and create a strong, diverse ecosystem for our designated landscapes.

"Millions of people visit our designated landscapes every year so it's vital we continue to provide the best experience for them in order to encourage them to come back time and time again. I look forward to re-visiting our National Parks and AONBs to see these projects in action."

New eight week target for heart disease tests in Wales

Health Secretary, Vaughan Gething, has approved the move after a review found the majority of tests cardiac patients need are currently not subjected to the eight week target.

From the 1st April eight additional diagnostic tests for patients with suspected heart disease will be added to the eight week target. Previously only stress test and echocardiogram were included in the target.

The additional cardiology diagnostic tests were shadow reported between April 2017 and December 2017. During this period the number of patients waiting over eight weeks for their test decreased from 33% to 17%.

The Health Secretary said:

“There has been an improvement in diagnostic waiting times in Wales in recent years, but we are committed to making further improvements. It is only right that we add these additional heart disease tests to the eight week target – this is expected to result in a significant decrease in patients waiting longer than they should for tests and means potentially very ill patients will be diagnosed and treated sooner.”

President of the Welsh Cardiovascular Society, Dr Jonathan Goodfellow said:

“The Welsh Cardiovascular Society welcomes this announcement. People suffering with symptoms of heart disease need access to quick and effective diagnosis and treatment. Providing appropriate imaging and diagnostics, in local settings, allows patients to receive the minimum investigation necessary to get an accurate diagnosis, allowing some patients to avoid unnecessary treatment.

“We’re encouraged by the improvements in waiting times since these tests were shadow reported and hope that with formal reporting health boards will address any remaining problems.”

Housing Minister hears from rough sleepers on breakfast run

The Minister joined the rough sleeper intervention team from homelessness charity the Wallich, based at Dinas Fechan in the centre of Swansea.

The Wallich receive over £256,000 of Welsh Government funding to run Intervention teams which work to find rough sleepers, offer them support and link them to services which can help them to move off the streets. The teams work in known rough sleeping hotspots in Bridgend, Cardiff, Newport and Swansea.

Rebecca Evans said:

“It was really important to me to speak to the people who receive these services and listen to their stories, as well as the people who are delivering services to help people to get off the streets.

“For many people who have begun sleeping rough, this team is the first point of contact and can help them to find support and access services that can help them.

“In Swansea, the team operate a drop in service which can provide people with advice, information, health services and assistance with benefit claims, as well as access to phone and computer services – all things which can really make a difference.

“We are providing an additional £10m of funding to tackle homelessness in each of the next two financial years, and we are currently supporting the City and County of Swansea, working with The Wallich, to increase emergency accommodation provision locally.

“Our Rough Sleepers Action Plan is a two year plan developed with organisations working with rough sleepers and vulnerably housed people . We are working together as a sector to address the practical, emotional, physical and psychological needs of people sleeping rough and support them to reintegrate into society.

“People find themselves sleeping on the streets for a range of complex reasons, and we are committed to supporting them to find safe affordable housing, so they can achieve their full potential.”

Lindsay Cordery-Bruce, chief executive of The Wallich, said:

“The need for homelessness services is growing in demand and this has been a concerningly consistent trend in recent years. In 2017,

our rough sleepers' intervention teams increased the number of people we support by 55% compared to the previous year – working with 526 people in Swansea-alone.

“Our intervention teams are crucial in gaining the trust of rough sleepers and helping them to transition into one of our many other accommodation or learning and development projects which help people break the cycle of homelessness.

“There are people in Wales who are stuck on the streets and others across the country who are vulnerably housed; yet no two situations are the same. We have a range of innovative projects but there is more work to be done to create more choice for the people we support.

“It is a positive indicator that the Minister is taking an active interest in the work we do and the people we support. It is a positive indicator that the Welsh Government has committed more funding to support vulnerable people. And it is a positive indicator that we're seeing more sympathy towards people experiencing homelessness from the general public. This gives us, as a charity, hope that we can help people to live safer, more stable and happier lives for the long-term.”

[Landscape lessons from Europe for Taskforce team](#)

One of the priorities contained within 'Our Valleys, Our Future', the Valleys Taskforce's delivery plan, is to explore the concept of a Valleys Landscape Park, to help local communities build on their many natural assets, including the potential for community energy generation and tourism.

Neckar Park, Stuttgart, Germany, and Hoge Kempen National Park, Genk, Belgium are two global-leading examples of landscape parks, and Alun Davies, as chair of the Taskforce, was keen to learn more about how both celebrate their heritage while supporting local economies.

Alun Davies said:

“I have said all along that the taskforce must make a positive difference to the lives of people working and living in the Valleys.

“We all agree the Valleys should be a place people are proud to

call home; a place where businesses choose to invest and operate; where communities are empowered and show pride in their environment, and the environment itself is an integral part of people's lifestyles.

"The areas we visited this week are excellent examples of what could be achieved in the South Wales Valleys. Both parks were developed in former industrial areas, where the heritage was celebrated, rather than left to rot. These inspiring public spaces have enhanced the environmental quality and recreational value of their region for the benefit of their communities and tourists alike."

The Cabinet Secretary pledged to meet with community partners from across the Valleys to discuss his visit and proposals to establish a similar scheme here in the future. Stakeholders will be asked to consider how the concept could work in their community and for contributions to the name and branding.

He said it was essential the people of the Valleys were involved in developing these proposals and building on the distinctive and breath-taking natural and cultural landscapes and fantastic recreation opportunities that already exist there.

M4 Project Public Inquiry Concluding

Opened in February 2017, views have been heard from those for and against the proposal to build a new 14 mile (23km) six-lane section of motorway south of Newport, including a bridge across the River Usk and major remodelling of junctions 23 and 29 of the M4.

The current M4 route, running north of Newport, is regularly congested particularly where it narrows to two lanes at the Brynglas tunnels.

The inquiry received 319 unique objections out of a total of 6189 and 216 letters of support.

Economy Secretary Ken Skates said:

I have been clear that this inquiry should robustly and openly scrutinise the proposed scheme, the embedded environmental mitigation measures, the Business Case and all objectors' suggested alternatives including the Blue Route.

I want to thank all individuals and groups for their involvement in the inquiry. We will now await the independent inspectors report and we expect to be able to make a decision later this year on

whether to proceed with construction.

The Inquiry inspectors will now report on their findings to inform Welsh Government's decision on whether to proceed with construction. Their report will make recommendations to the Welsh Government.

After the Welsh Government has had the opportunity to scrutinise the recommendations, the government has confirmed it will bring forward a debate in the National Assembly for Wales on the scheme.

If the decision is made to go ahead with the project, construction could start around the end of this year and the new section of motorway could be open by the end of 2023.