

Learning from Blue Spaces – we'll be starting soon. In the meantime, get involved...

What questions do you have about freshwater?

We will collect all your questions and share anonymously

Pa gwestiynau sydd gennych chi am ddŵr croyw?

Nawn ni gasglu eich cwestiynau a'u rhannu yn ddi-enw.



Blue Spaces:

Working in partnership to improve local freshwaters in the UK

Of **£687m** given to environmental causes in 2020/21, grants to freshwater were only **£7.9m**.



Freshwater



**Communities
working together
for change**



Space for nature

Areas we were particularly interested in included:

Restoring and creating freshwater habitats and the recovery of freshwater dependent species.



Developing robust ways to report and share learning as widely as possible.



Demonstrating the role of freshwater habitats in addressing pollution, flooding, drought, and other effects of climate change.



Developing innovative approaches to funding – including leveraging private investment.



Embedding new ways of working that benefits projects beyond the funded period.



Demonstrating novel approaches to understanding the health of freshwaters through innovations in monitoring and sharing information.



Addressing barriers and inequalities in the opportunity to influence, access, and enjoy freshwater environments.



Overview of Blue Spaces

Our funding to date

£4.1m

Total awarded

26

Grants to 19 projects

Our support

Main grants

£3.4m

Total awarded

12

Total grants

37 months

Average term length; terms ranged from 24 to 48 months

£282k

Average grant size; grants ranged from £138k to £540k

Development grants

£736k

Total awarded

14

Total grants

12 months

Average term length; terms ranged from 6 to 24 months

£55k

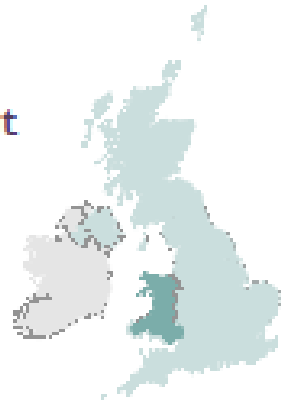
Average grant size; grants ranged from £16k to £90k



Wales

12 development grants

4 main grants



We launched a specific call for development projects in Wales as we were aware that there was innovative work underway, but partnership working at catchment scale had received little funding support.

The grants in Northern Ireland focus on building capacity in the sector, which was highlighted as a need by organisations we fund as well as public and water sector bodies in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland

1 development grant

1 main grant



England and Scotland

1 development grant

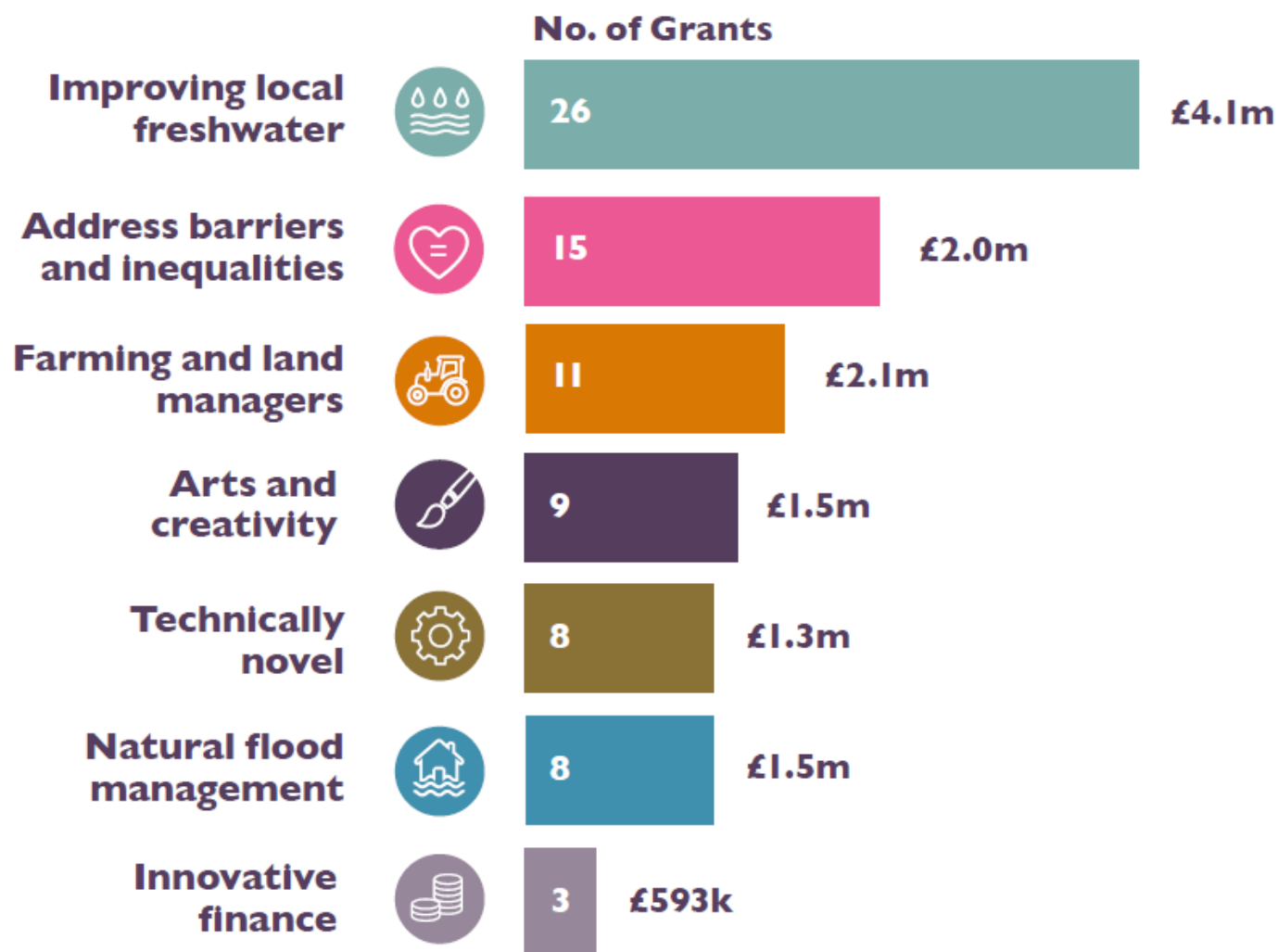
7 main grants



Whilst the grants in England and Scotland were not made through Blue Spaces, they met the programme's aims and have joined the learning programme that runs alongside Blue Spaces funding.



















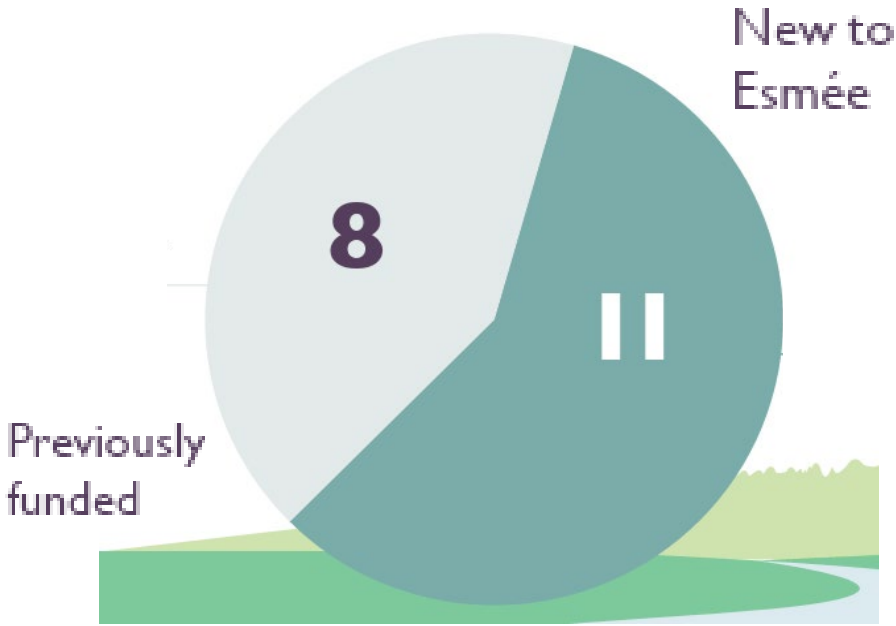
Blue Spaces objectives

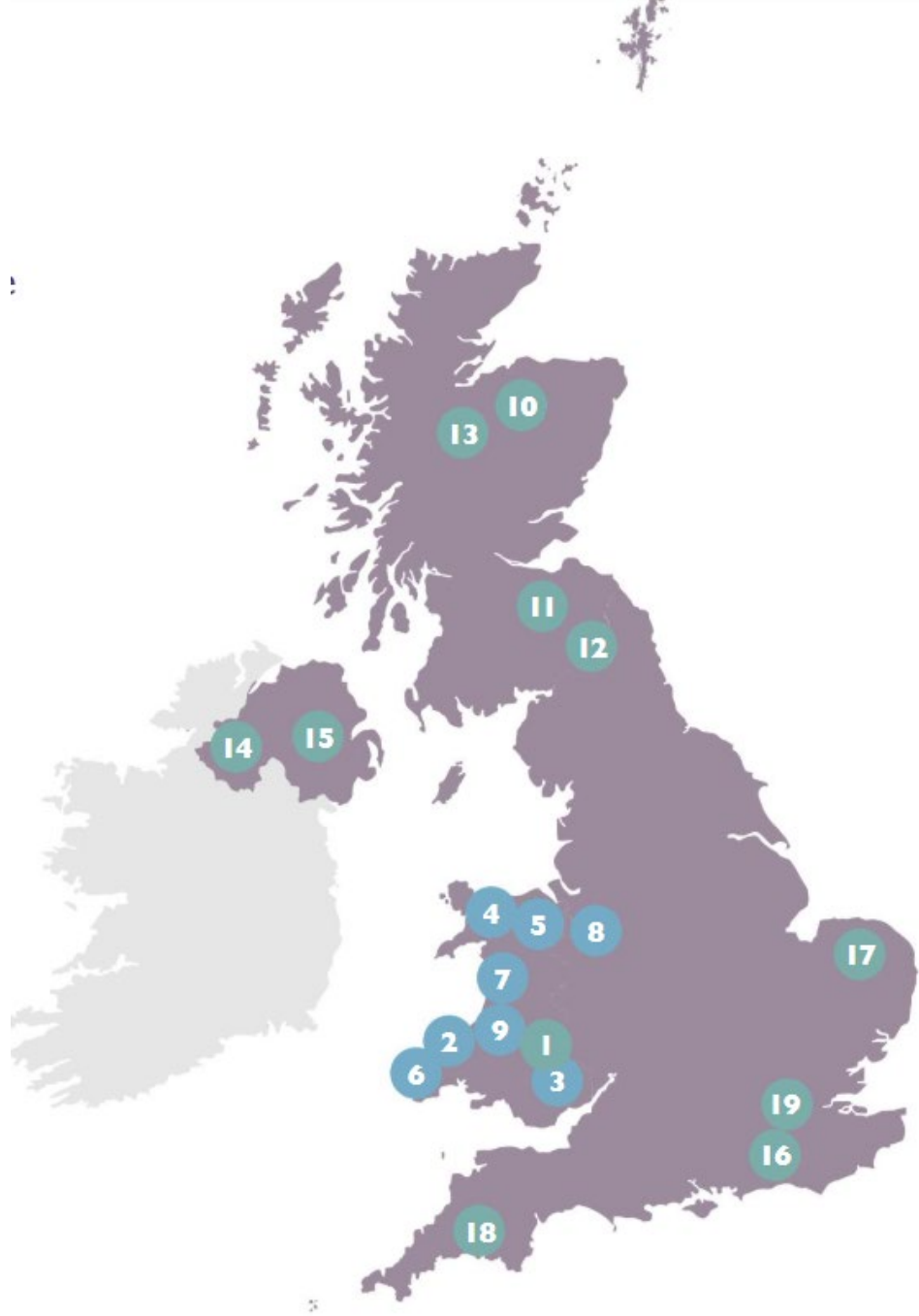


© Action for Conservation/Jamie Curtis-Hayward


The organisations involved had multiple focuses

| | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| Catchment management 16  | Academia 8  | Green economy and jobs 8  | Local authorities 5  |
| Nature protection and recovery 10  | Local authorities 5  | Conservation evidence 3  | Private industry  Farming  |
| Arts and creativity 10  | Marine and coastal protection and recovery 5  | Water company  Youth leadership  | Community energy and land management  Rural development  Policy and advocacy  |





- 1 Action for Conservation
- 2 Cwm Arian Renewable Energy
- 3 Groundwork Wales
- 4 North Wales Rivers Trust Ltd
- 5 North Wales Wildlife Trust
- 6 Pembrokeshire Coastal Forum
- 7 Tir Canol (RSPB)
- 8 Welsh Dee trust
- 9 West Wales Rivers Trust
- 10 Findhorn, Nairn, and Lossie Rivers Trust
- 11 Forth Rivers Trust
- 12 Southern Uplands Partnership
- 13 Spey Catchment Initiative (SCIO)
- 14 Lough Erne Landscape Partnership (RSPB)
- 15 Northern Ireland Environment Link
- 16 Knepp Wildland Foundation
- 17 Norfolk Rivers Trust
- 18 Rent-A-Role Drama Service
- 19 The Zoological Society of London

 **Blue Spaces** – funded through the main programme

 **Blue Spaces Wales** – funded through a specific call for projects

Blue Spaces Wales – call for projects

2024 – 2025

THE JOURNEY

March – May 2023

40

Expressions of interest received



We received **39** eligible expressions of interest in addition to **1** through our main application process, with a total value of £1.9m.

May – Sept 2023

15

Applications longlisted by the assessment panel and invited for a follow-up call



Applications were assessed by a panel of Esmée staff and the Involving Young People Collective against Blue Spaces – Wales criteria.

Sept – Dec 2023

8

Organisations invited to submit a full proposal and were all awarded a grant (7 development grants and 1 main grant)



5

Organisations awarded further funding



This included **4** development grants and **2** main grants.



Blue Spaces Wales

Our support

£1.65m

Total awarded

14

Grants to 8 projects

Main grants

3

Total grants

£359k

Average grant size; grants ranged from £250k to £426k

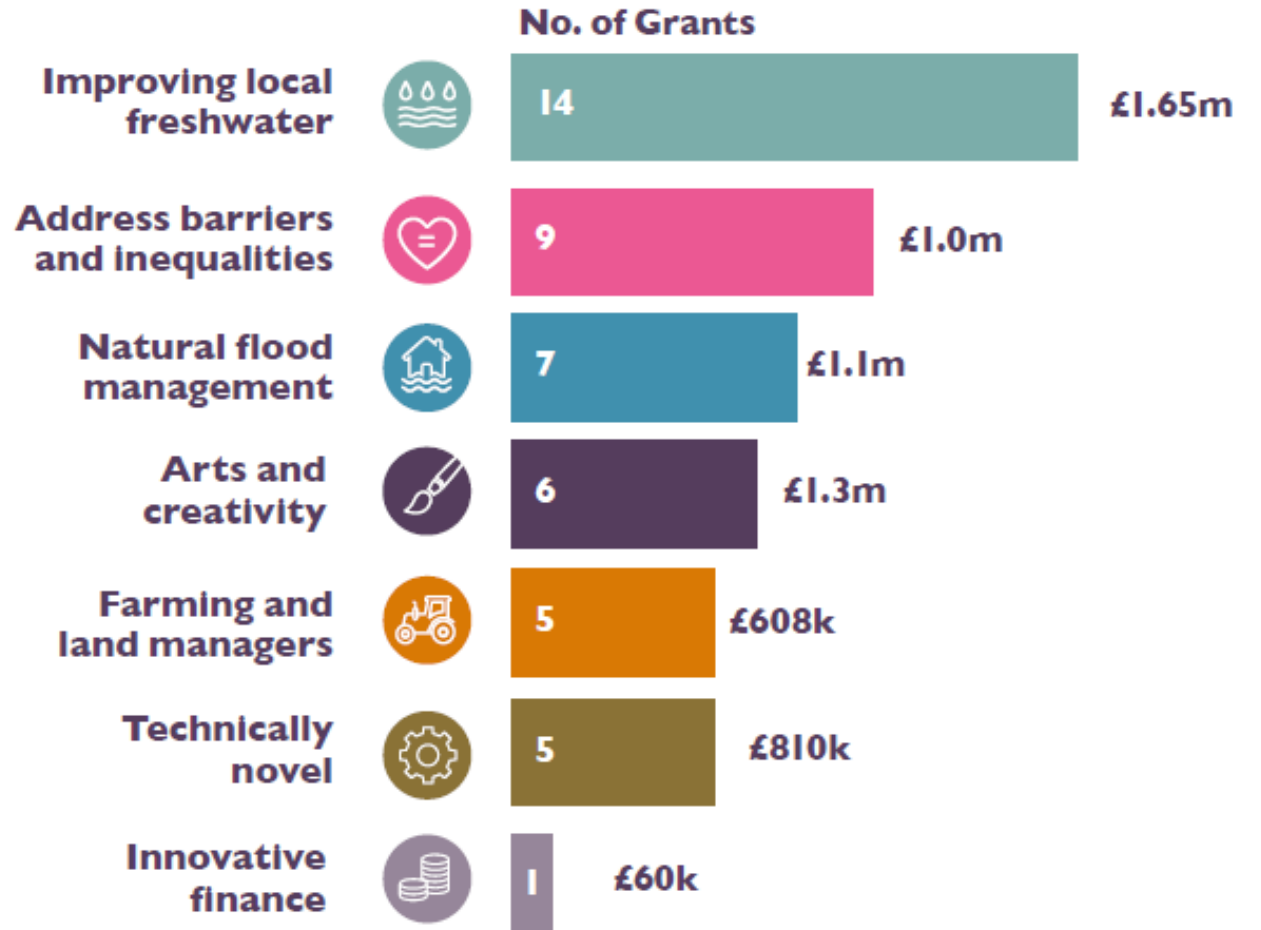
Development grants

11

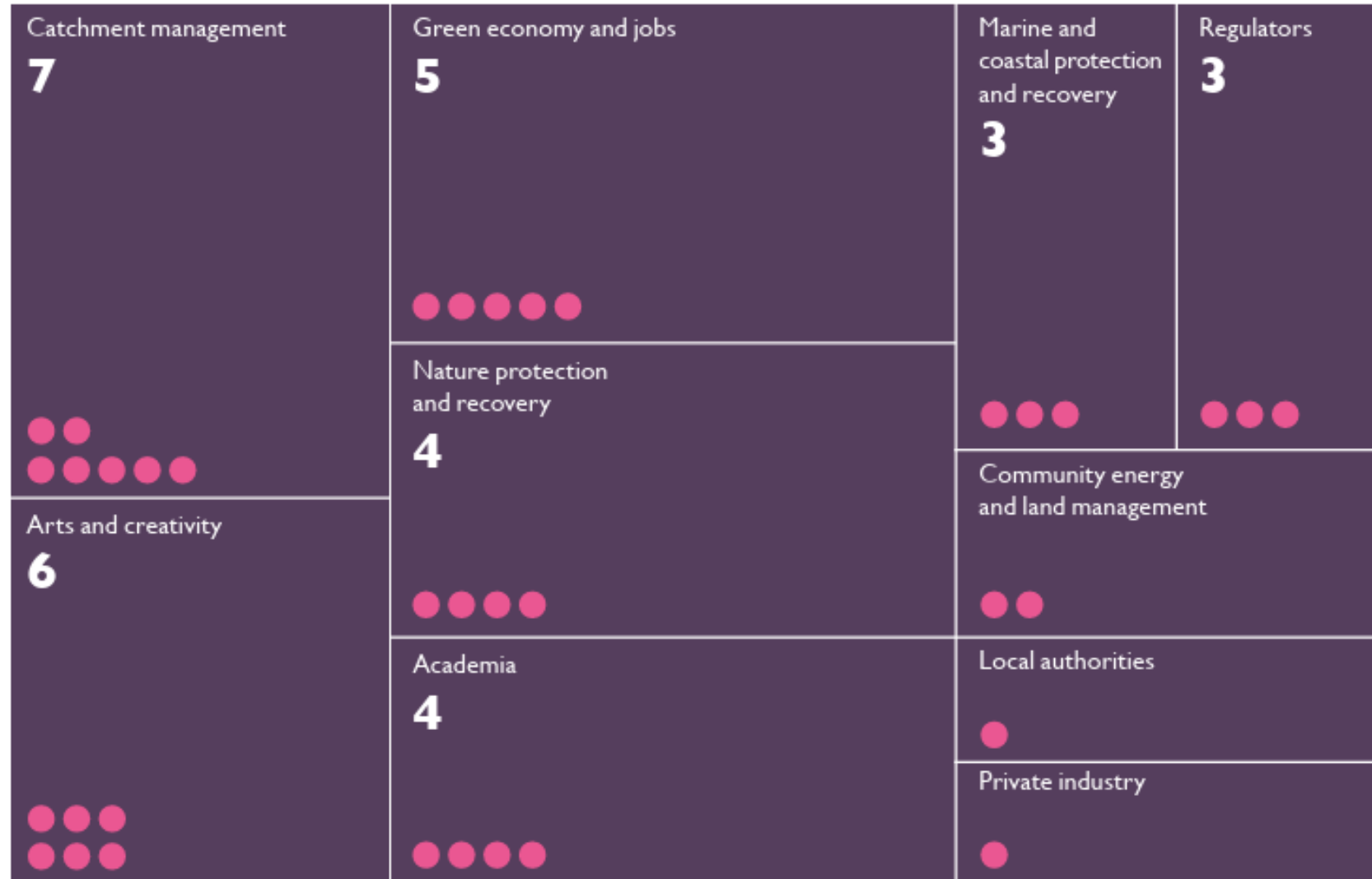
Total grants

£52k

Average grant size; grants ranged from £16k to £90k



Blue Spaces Wales – the organisations



6

Projects were delivered by a partnership;

4

of these were formed specifically for the project.



ACTION
FOR CONSERVATION

Llifo / Flow

Mapping for restoration along the Usk and across the generations

















You have to "respect the RIVER"

THE FLOODING

ACCESS FOR ALL

WHAT WILL YOU ASK?

DON'T TAKE THEM TO THE RIVER, NOT BEING PASSED ON!

TEXAS 1





ACTION
FOR CONSERVATION



Ymddiriedolaeth Natur
Gogledd Cymru
North Wales
Wildlife Trust

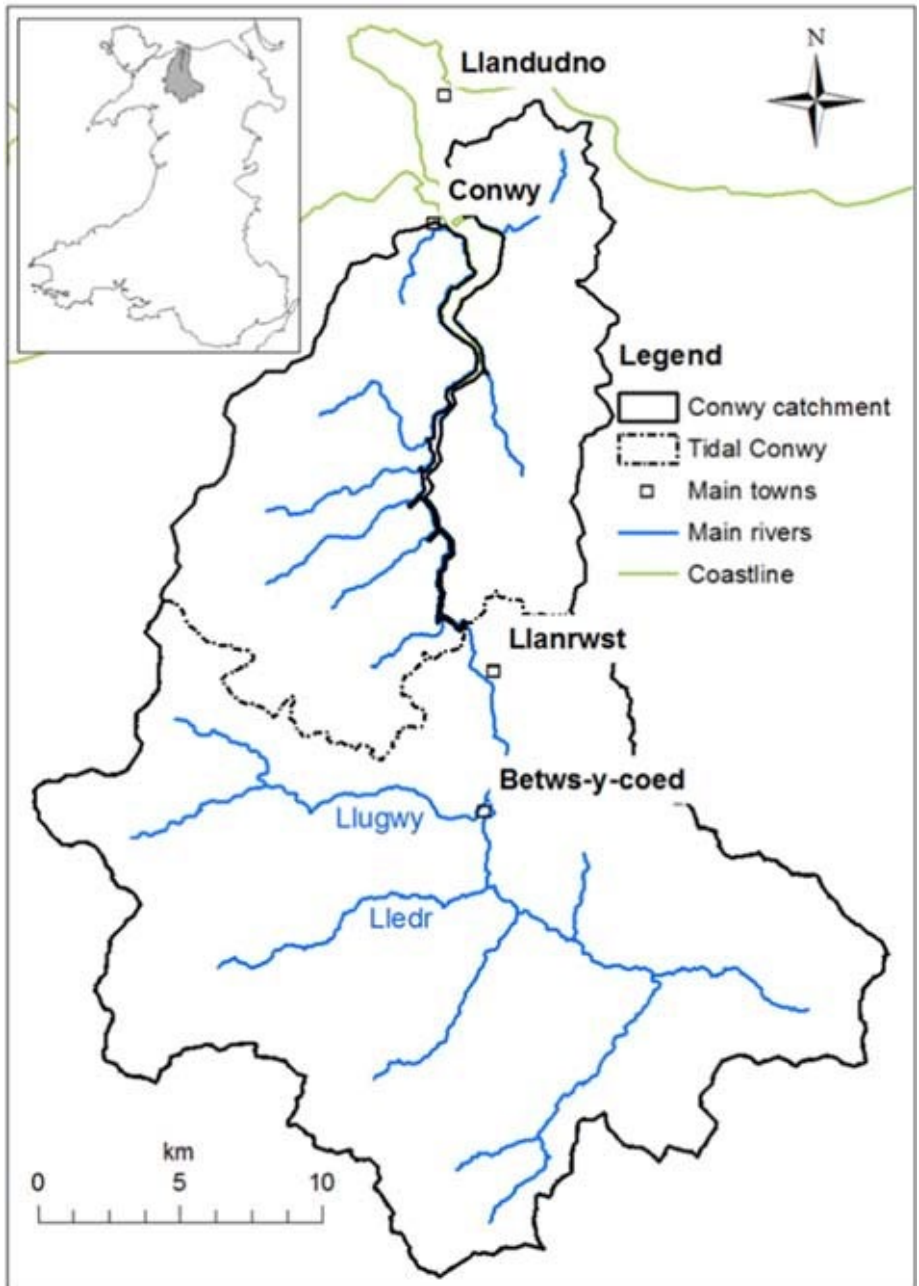


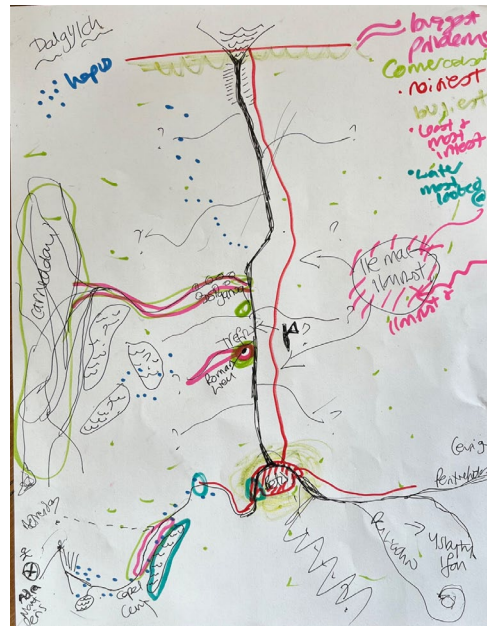
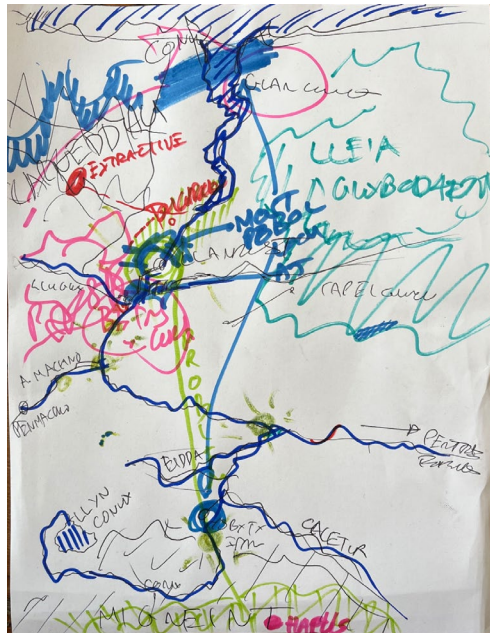
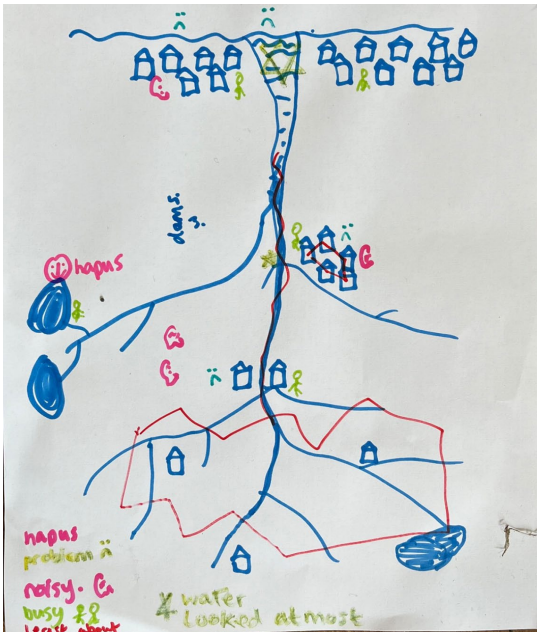
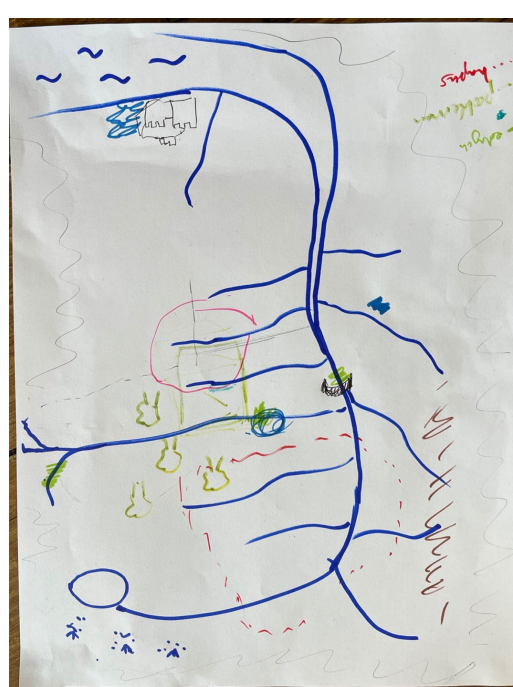
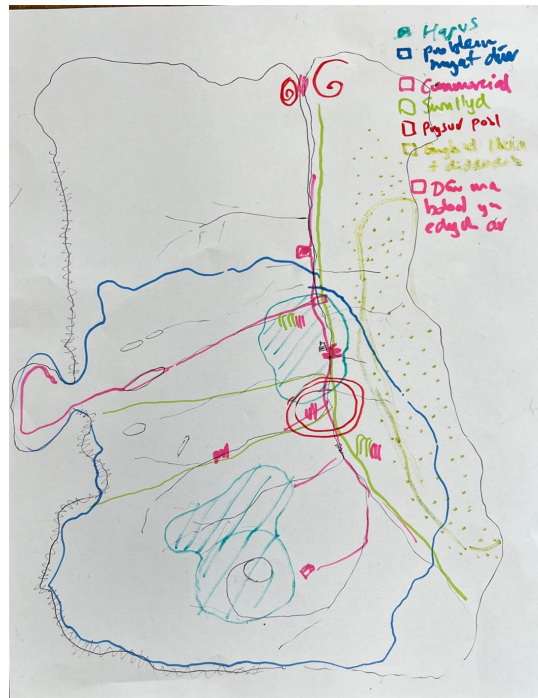
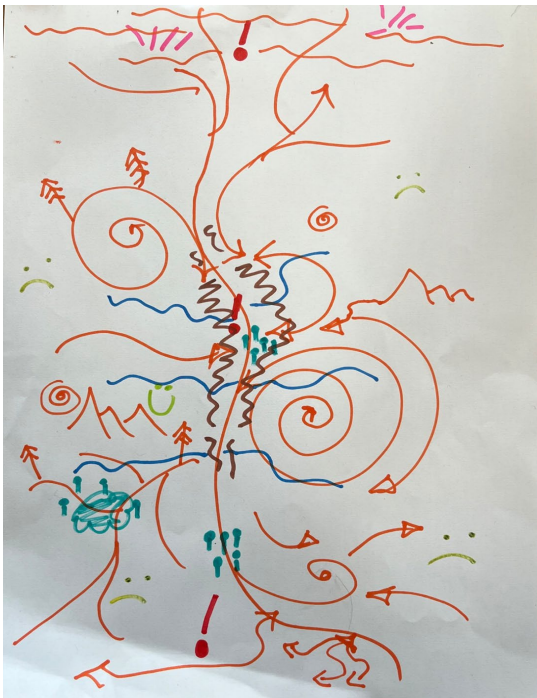
Cyfoeth
Naturiol
Cymru
Natural
Resources
Wales



**Dyffryn
Dyfodol**









Gofod Glas

Working in different ways

Gweithio mewn ffyrdd gwahanol

A shift from expert-led, outcome-driven, pre-packaged solutions to a community-led, emergent, question-based, collaborative process.

Bedrock of the project: learning how to truly collaborate and how to work in different ways.

Acknowledging what we don't know / accepting and being aware of the limitations to our knowledge.





Be' sy yn y dwr - What's in the ...



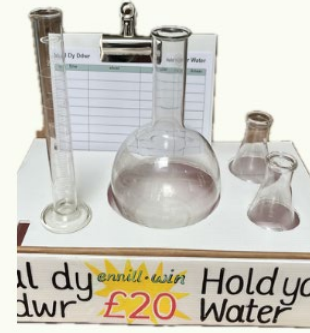
Lin Cummins: Symydydd Siâp/...



Oracl Cwrwgl Conwy Convers...



Rhodri Owen (Copy) (Copy)



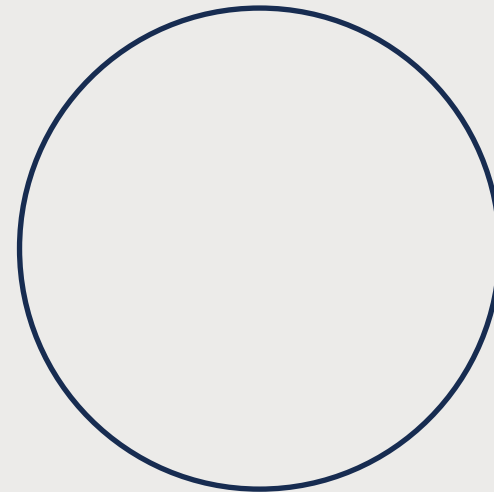
il dy dwr £20 Hold yo Water

Iwan Williams - Dal Dy Dwr (Co...



Conveyor | Cyfleuwr (Copy) (C...

Partnership plus:
engaging with
the creative
approach

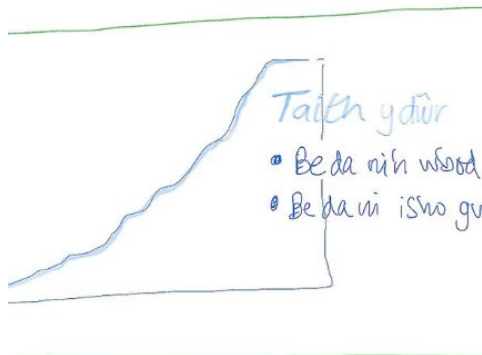
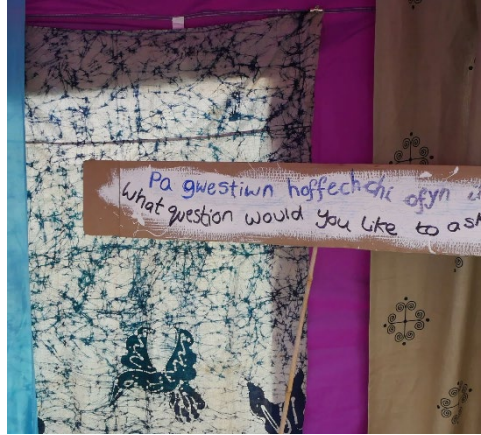




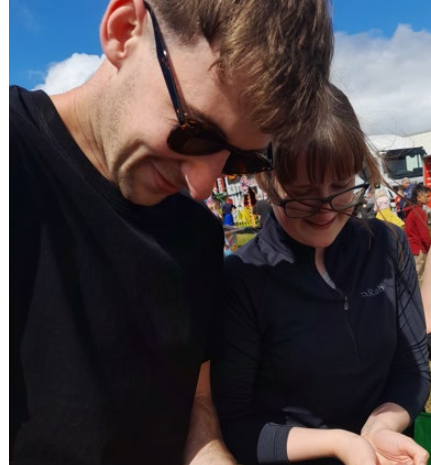
Some examples
Rhai enghreifftiau

Gathering / Casglu questions

Asking questions in different ways,
with different people, in different
places.



Some examples
Rhai engrheifftiau



Dal dy Ddwr



Iwan Williams - Dal Dy Dwr (Co...



Sut allwn ni wella ansawdd
y dŵr o'n gwmpas?
How can we improve the
quality of the water around
us?

£250 ar gael am dy syniad!
We offer £250 for your idea!



Ydych chi eisiau
darganfod neu wneud
dŵr croyw?

Rydan ni'n cynnig £250 ac
ein cefnogaeth i wireddu
eich syniad yn Nyffryn Conwy



Ydych chi isho ddarganfod
neu wneud dŵr croyw?
do you want to learn about
freshwater?

£250 ar gael am dy syniad!
We offer £250 for your idea!



Some examples
Rhai enghreifftiau

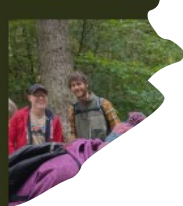
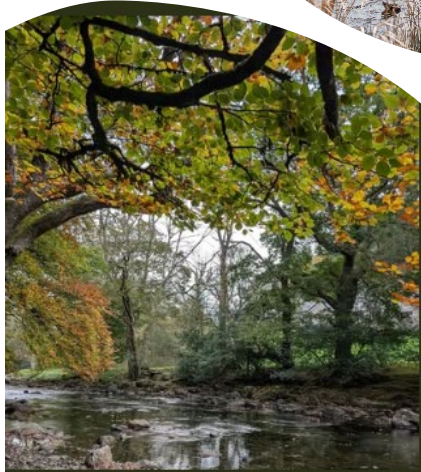
£250 for your idea

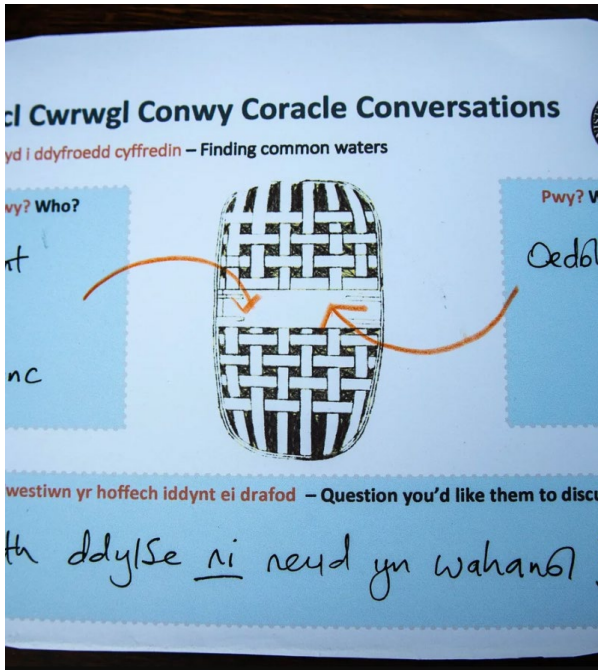
A gateway to
deeper
conversation

Some examples
Rhai engrheifftiau



Dro Dŵr
Water Walks





Join at menti.com | use code 1491 4700

 Mentimeter

What questions do you have about freshwater? Pa gwestiynau sydd gennych chi am ddŵr crogw?

All responses to your question will be shown here

Each response can be up to 200 characters long

Turn on voting to let participants vote for their favorites



LD



Menti

Blue Spaces webinar



Choose a slide to present



HU



DDL



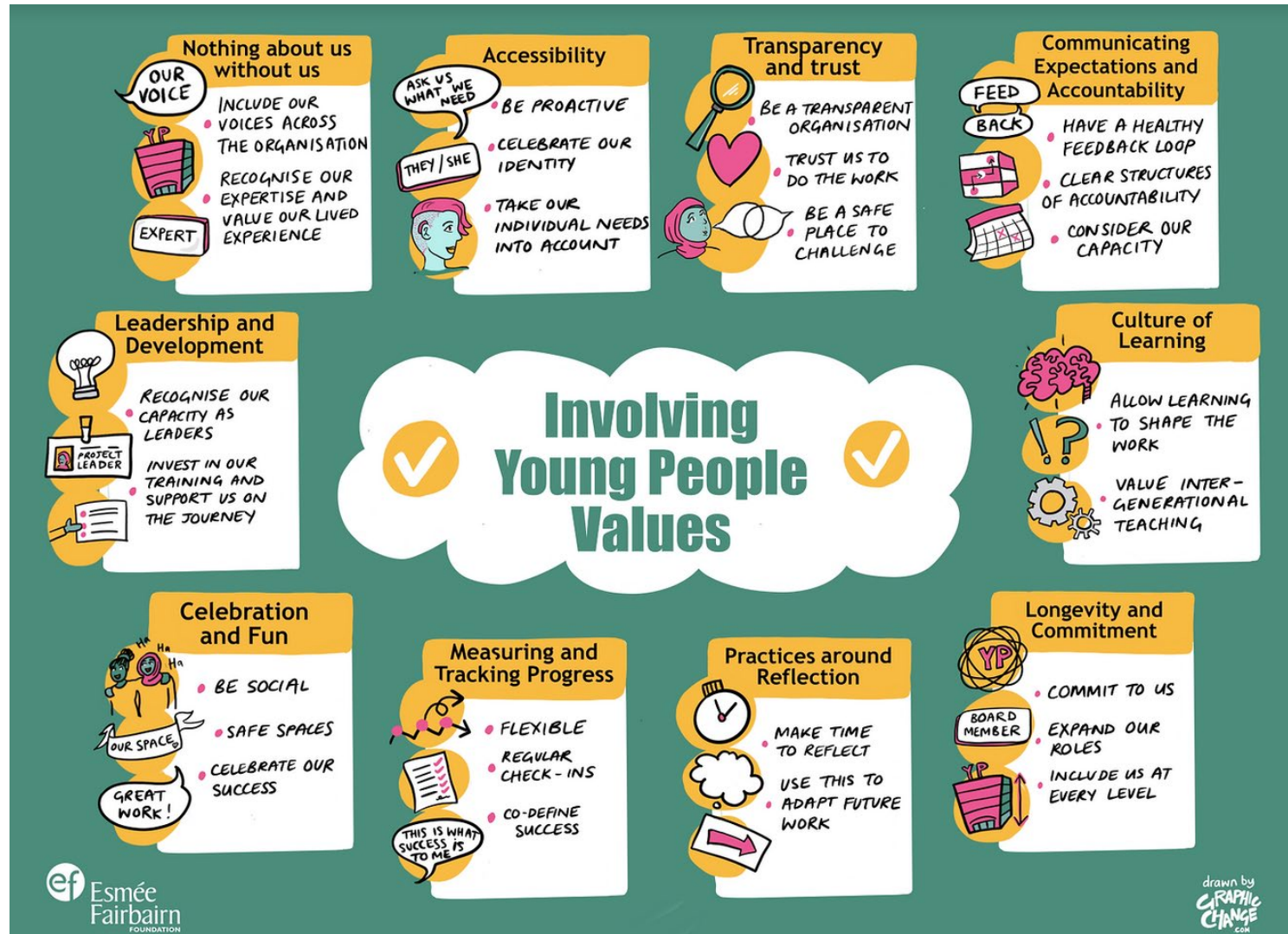
Esmée
Fairbairn
FOUNDATION

Who are IYPC?



- The EF x HUDL partnership was established in [2020](#)
- Responding to a need to bring young people into the grant-making sector to influence decision-making
- Our role is to bring our insights and experience and act as a critical friend to EF and to expand on processes, projects and funds

Ways of Working



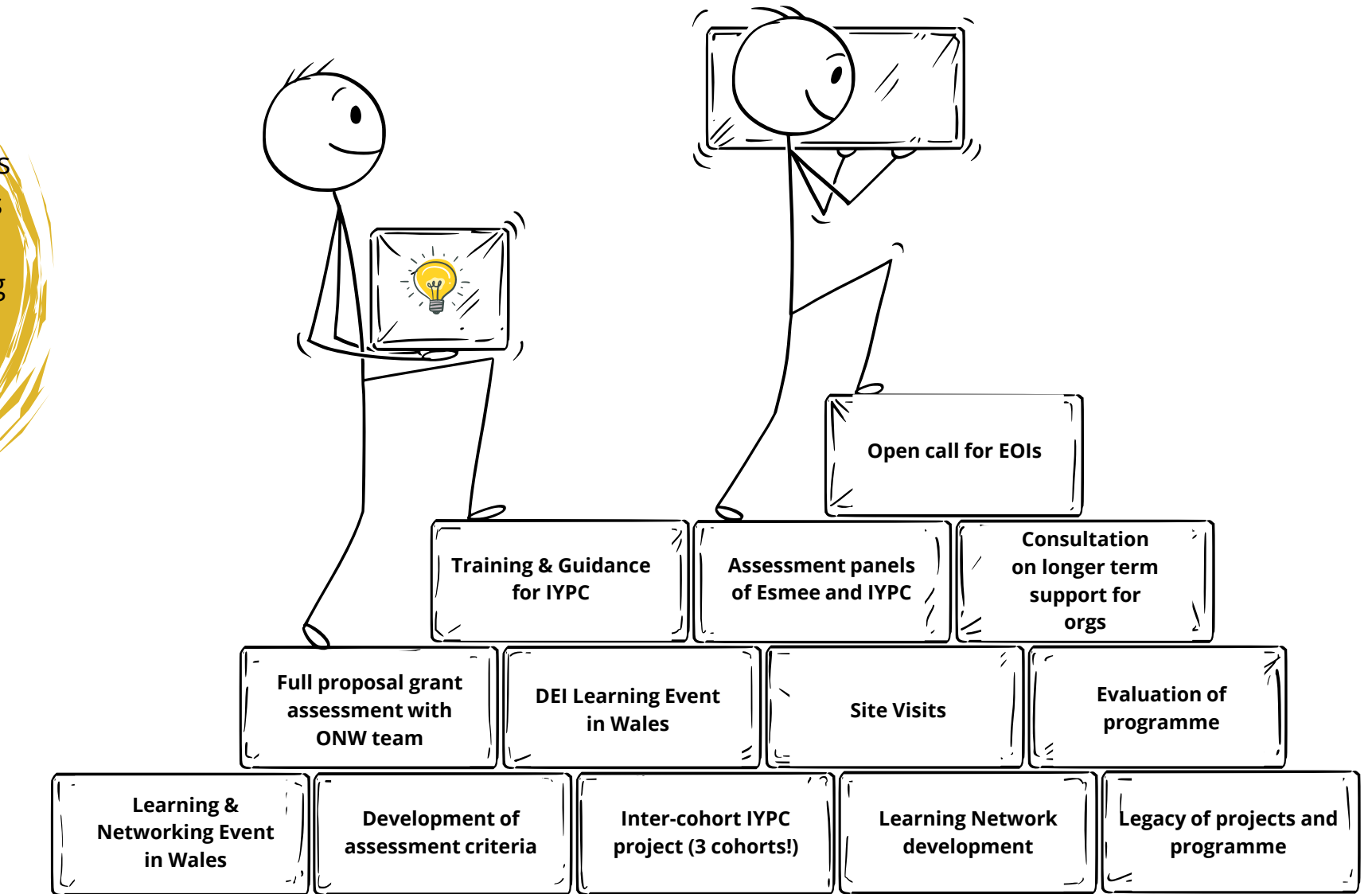
Blue Spaces & IYPC

Involvement of IYPC as this brought new perspectives on project proposals, and more fun into the learning events.

EF Staff Member

The Blue Spaces programme has been a really big part of my IYPC experience. It taught me the most about how a grant programme works

IYPC Member



DEI Workshop

August 2024

Identified DEI as an area of development within the freshwater sector

World Café Workshop

- Climate and social justice
- Working with young people
- Rurality
- Cultural significance and Context

Opportunity to be completely IYPC-led

Created a safe space to have open and difficult conversations, putting IYPC values into practice (Welsh interpreter)



Strengths of the project

IYPC Skills and Learning:

- Increased confidence in reflective dialogue
- Stronger assessment and evaluative skills
- Improved facilitation and leadership abilities
- Deeper understanding of environmental and place-based issues

IYPC contributions helped make Blue Spaces more intentional and grounded in lived experience.

“IYPC held us to account in a really healthy way — it deepened the process.”

“I felt genuinely listened to. It didn’t feel tokenistic.”

Collaboration one of the strongest elements of Blue Spaces

Described as relational, supportive and rooted in mutual respect

Recommendations for meaningful youth engagement

1. Extend timelines and improve scheduling consistency
2. Provide clearer expectations, criteria, and written guidance
3. Continue or expand place-based learning sessions
4. Strengthen communication loops and updates
5. Integrate structured reflection throughout, not only at the end

Learning programme

- Support and facilitate learning
- Share insights and findings
- Inform wider work with communities and partnerships

Network

- Encourage connection, collaborations, and collective action (future)?

Evaluation

- Learning plan
- Reflection on process and impact
- Feedback surveys
- Progress reports
- Mid and end of grant calls



Understanding impact

| Outcome | Research questions | Evaluation |
|-------------------|---|--|
| Nature | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent is the health of the river/catchment likely to measurably improve because of the project? | Varies by project, nature& scale will take time to become apparent. |
| People | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent does the project involve the community? | Varies by project, but all aim to deliver meaningful co-creation |
| Places | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How effective was the project at bringing people and organisations together? What were the benefits for people and communities? | Varies by project, nature& scale will take time to become apparent. |
| Innovation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What have projects learned from their innovative methods, approaches, or collaborations? To what extent will more funding or capacity be leveraged to improve the local environment or support lasting engagement because of the project? What have projects learned from the difficulties they have encountered? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> New partnerships have formed, different ways of working have been tested, under-represented voices are shaping decision making, and additional funding has been secured by several projects. All projects have found that meaningful community co-creation has taken longer than originally planned and requires skills that environmental organisations may not have- partnership working has been invaluable to making progress. It is a challenge to work meaningfully with communities when funding for longer-term delivery of co-created action plans is not guaranteed. |

Understanding impact

| Outcome | Research questions | Evaluation |
|--|--|---|
| Esmée's additional learning questions | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are we finding and supporting the projects that need our help the most?• Did we fund organisations led by and for the people they serve?• How effective was the approach to reporting and sharing learning through the project? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The role of communities in project governance and longer-term planning was a key consideration in decisions about longer-term funding.• Supported organisations said that they appreciated our flexible and light-touch approach to reporting.• Feedback from the learning network was largely positive with organisations valuing the opportunity to connect and share experience. |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How effective was the approach taken to engaging the IYPC in the programme?• What did we learn about the funding process e.g specific call for Wales, development funding, flexibility in approach?• What additional or unexpected learning came up? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The IYPC experience of engagement in Blue Spaces has informed their involvement in other Esmée funding initiatives such as Youth-Led Creativity.• Learning from the funding process and additional or unexpected learning is captured in “Key Insights and learning” section. |

Principles for community initiatives

- **Puts the place first** - reflects unique character and needs of local people and place
- **Community-led and collaborative** - local people at heart of change and have decision making power
- **Leaves a positive legacy** - develops long terms community capacity and resilience
- **Prioritises equity** - principles of fairness and equity embedded, work engages diverse communities in a place
- **Creates long-term, sustainable change** - disrupts and changes things that don't work, pushes forward in new way
- **Has scope to spread** - can expand influence beyond initial impact



Learning network

- Encourage connection, collaboration, collective action (future)?
- Co-ordinated by Blue Spaces lead, co-designed
- 4 meetings online, 2 in person
- Participation payments key to attendance in person

Themes

- Diversity, equity, and inclusion, rurality, young people and Welsh language
- Working effectively with land managers and rural communities
- Catchment planning & scaling up through genuine co-design
- Environment, creativity, arts
- Citizen science and acceptance of evidence
- Leveraging impact investment
- Legacy of cohort
- Rights of nature

“ Getting to meet and be in the same room as so many folk working on different projects with different approaches was really inspiring and exciting. I definitely left the day feeling ‘zoomed out’ – like I was seeing more of the big picture – and feeling reinvigorated about what we’re doing with Connecting Threads.”

Tiki Muir (she/they), River Culture Curator, Southern Uplands Partnership (Destination Tweed Connecting Threads project)

“ It is really critical for our project that has freelancers on the partnership, that you are able to pay additional costs. Thank you.”

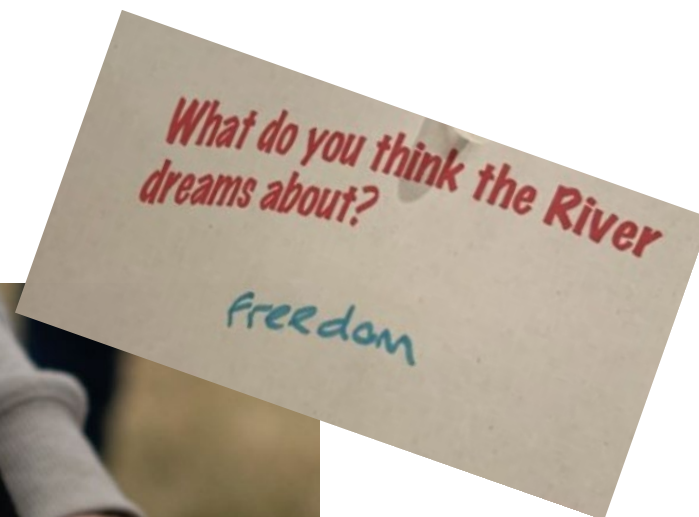
Key insights and learning

Learning for the freshwater sector

1. Development funding
2. External factors and policy uncertainty
3. Community involvement
4. Role of arts and creativity
5. Demonstrating catchment-based approaches
6. Reaching new audiences
7. Data and evidence



© Gofod Glas



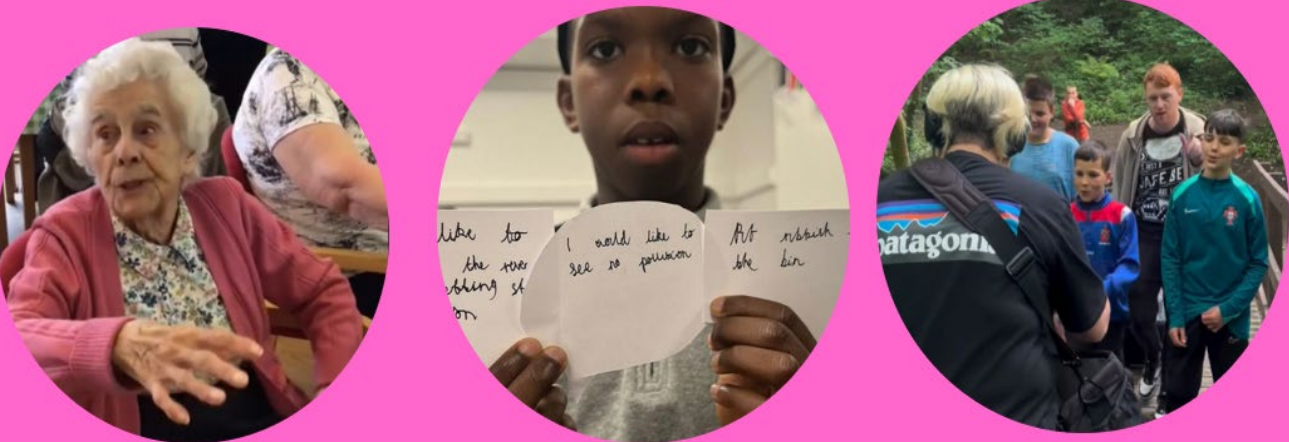
Key insights and learning

Learning for funders

1. Funding approach
2. Diversity, equity, and inclusion
3. Partnerships
4. Sector and network development
5. Place-based insights

INCLUSIVE OUTREACH © North Wales Rivers Trust

BEYOND THE USUAL SUSPECTS



TAILORED ENGAGEMENT=REAL IMPACT

"WE PROACTIVELY ENGAGED UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS BY MEETING THEM IN THEIR SPACES AND TAILORING OUR APPROACH TO THEIR INTERESTS, ENSURING GENUINE INCLUSION RATHER

The graphic features three circular images on a pink background. The first image shows an elderly woman with white hair wearing a pink cardigan. The second image shows a young boy holding a white sign with handwritten text. The third image shows a group of people outdoors, including a man in a Patagonia jacket. The text 'INCLUSIVE OUTREACH' is at the top, 'BEYOND THE USUAL SUSPECTS' is in the middle, and 'TAILORED ENGAGEMENT=REAL IMPACT' is at the bottom. A quote is at the very bottom.

Influence on Esmée and next steps

- Informing Esmée ways of working
- Place-based funding
- Strengthening the sector
- Focusing support
- Maintaining our independence

Learning and sharing

We will continue to learn from and support the projects seeded through the Blue Spaces programme, as well as share learning on lessons and impact. This will help inform and strengthen other areas of our strategy, including our work on seascapes.

Supporting community-led change

We remain committed to supporting community-led initiatives but we're aware that the demand for support is much greater than we can meet. We are an open funder and will consider applications for place-based and community-led action on freshwater.

Blue Spaces:

Working in partnership to improve
local freshwaters in the UK



Jenny Wheeldon, Blue Spaces Manager
December 2025



Read the full report:

www.esmeefairbairn.org.uk

