

Promoting Access to Eryri National Park

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Summary report

Why we did this audit

Our audit duties

- 1 Eryri National Park Authority (the Authority) has to put in place arrangements to get value for money for the resources it uses, and the Auditor General has to be satisfied that it has done this.
- 2 We undertook this audit to help discharge the Auditor General's duties under section 17 of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004. It may also inform a study for improving value for money under section 41 of the 2004 Act, and/or an examination undertaken by the Auditor General under section 15 of the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015.

Our objectives for this audit

- 3 To provide assurance that the Authority has proper arrangements to secure value for money in its use of resources to promote access to the National Park (the Park).
- 4 To explain the importance of people from all walks of life exploring and visiting national landscapes and outline Welsh Ministers' priorities for National Park Authorities (NPAs).
- 5 To assure people that the Authority encourages a wide range of diverse visitors, is collaborating effectively with key partners, and to determine how well it is delivering statutory responsibilities.

Why promoting access is important

- 6 A range of organisations across the public, third, and charity sectors have publicised the benefits of accessing nature. The Office for National Statistics calculates that the health benefits from outdoor recreation in 2021 had a value of £22.7 billion in Wales¹. This is through improving both physical and mental health from activity. Promoting access can benefit public health and wellbeing and in turn deliver economic benefits through a healthier population.
- 7 Promoting access also helps the Authority to act within its legal framework. One of the Authority's two statutory purposes² is to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the Park by the public. To achieve this, the Authority needs to ensure activity is aimed at maximising participation, which reflects the diversity of the population.

¹ ONS, [Health benefits from recreation, natural capital, UK: 2022](#)

² Environment Act 1995

- 8 Promoting access also helps the Authority meet national policy and priorities. In 2022, the Welsh Government asked Welsh NPAs to 'increase engagement in opportunities for people in vulnerable or disadvantaged groups and under-represented communities to benefit from the landscapes you manage'³. The Welsh Government supported this by funding and included the provision of a national lead officer for promoting Inclusion, Diversity and Governance Excellence 'to drive up diversity and equality' within National Parks. The lead officer also aimed to support National Parks to meet the socio-economic duty, introduced in March 2021.
- 9 UK Government research⁴ found that most visits to English National Parks are repeat visits made by people who were relatively better off and not representative of society. It also found that other communities visited the parks less often. These include older and younger people, people from the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic community, and people from more deprived communities.



What we looked at and what does good look like⁵

- 10 We have taken a broad definition of access, including both physical access constraints and broader barriers to enjoying the Park.
- 11 We have not considered other matters within the remit of the Authority nor wider matters relating to the socio-economic profile of the Authority, such as the delivery of housing through its planning function. We have not evaluated the projects delivered by the Authority to promote access. Our focus is on the arrangements the Authority has put in place to evaluate and monitor them.
- 12 We have limited our review to reflect the Auditor General's duty to satisfy himself of the arrangements the Authority has in place to secure economy, efficiency, and effectiveness (commonly known as value for money). As a result, we have not evaluated the projects delivered by the Authority to promote access. Therefore, we make no judgement on the sufficiency or nature of the actions to promote access within the Park. Our focus was on the arrangements the Authority has put in place to meet its objectives, including how it plans, resources and monitors them. We recognise, however, the considerable work that the Authority has undertaken to promote access to the Park and the number of visitors that come to the Park each year.
- 13 The audit sought to answer the overall question – **Is the Authority doing all it can to encourage and improve access to the National Park from**

³ Welsh Government, [Term of Government Remit Letter](#), May 2022

⁴ DEFRA, [Landscapes Review](#), September 2019

⁵ Defined as 'what should be' according to laws or regulations, 'what is expected' according to best practice, or 'what could be', given better conditions.

underrepresented groups? To do this we looked to answer the following questions:

- Does the Authority have a comprehensive understanding of who uses the National Park and who does not?
- Does the Authority have a clear vision of what it needs to achieve to improve access from underrepresented groups and communities?
- Is the Authority working effectively with the right people and partners to address the barriers facing groups or communities that are underrepresented visitors to the National Park?
- Has the Authority invested sufficient resources so it can deliver long-term and preventative benefits?
- Is the Authority monitoring, evaluating and reviewing progress?

- 14 The audit criteria that we used to assess the Authority's arrangements against each of our questions is set out in **Appendix 1**. This has been informed by our cumulative knowledge, as well as drawing on the National Parks Wales 2021 policy statement **Landscapes for Everyone**.



Our audit methods and when we undertook the audit

- 15 Our findings are based on document reviews and interviews with officers and representatives of groups involved in projects within the Park. We also visited the Park. Our findings are limited to these sources. We undertook this work during August and October 2024.



What we found

- 16 Overall, we found that **the Authority is missing opportunities to strategically plan for improved access to underrepresented groups**. We set out below why we reached this conclusion.

Does the Authority have a comprehensive understanding of users?

- 17 The Authority generally understands who visits the Park. For example, the Authority counts visitors on key paths and records information on some groups. However, this records activity, rather than information that gives a comprehensive understanding on who visits the Park. Through its visitor surveys, the Authority does collect some demographic information. Whilst this provides some detail, the Authority does not centrally bring information together to build a more complete picture of who visits the park, and where there are potential gaps in its knowledge.
- 18 The Authority understands potential barriers to access faced by some visitors. Its Recreation Strategy sets out some physical access barriers and includes actions to

address them, such as adapting trails. The Authority does not centrally analyse the wider factors that might prevent or make it difficult for underrepresented groups to access the Park. Making better use of the information it already collects about underrepresented groups may help the Authority address barriers to accessing the Park.

- 19 We acknowledge that it is not practical for the Authority to collect data for all visitors to the Park, particularly visitors who do not engage directly with the Authority. We also acknowledge that the Authority collects details of groups it engages with. For example, the Authority has a community and organisational groups contact list and engages with groups about physical access improvements. However, the Authority does not centrally analyse the information it collects from the groups on this list. The Authority also does not analyse information on infrastructure access alongside its other sources of information about wider barriers to access. Understanding further insights into visitors and potential visitors are important to help the Authority to target its resources.

Does the Authority have a clear vision for improving access?

- 20 The Authority has set an ambition to promote access in its strategic plans. This includes its Management Plan, Cynllun Eryri 2020-25, and for example its Recreation Strategy. The Authority aims to help visitors and local communities have improved access to the Park. However, the Authority does not clearly link its long-term strategic objectives to the outcomes it is seeking to achieve around improving access. While the Authority has set an ambition to promote access, actions are led by short-term grants rather than its strategic outcomes. We recognise the challenges of short-term grant funding for strategic planning. However, by not planning over a longer period, the Authority risks short-term interventions that may not deliver outcomes and value for money over the long-term.

Is the Authority working effectively in partnerships to promote access?

- 21 The Authority works with partners on a range of projects to improve access. This includes visits to the Park by school, faith, and refugee groups, as well as monthly guided walks to help promote social cohesion. However, the Authority has not mapped out other potential partners that it could work with to improve access to the Park. As a result, the Authority risks missing potential opportunities to improve access and value for money through, for example, sharing expertise and resources with partners.
- 22 The Authority lacks a clear approach to involving Park users in the planning and delivery of projects that are designed to increase access to the Park for underrepresented groups. The Authority shares health and safety information with some groups and visitors to help them access the Park safely. Whilst important,

this work shows the Authority is not always clear in its approach about the difference between providing information and targeted involvement to design solutions to improve access.

- 23 The Authority undertakes some engagement activity with Local Access Forums on improving infrastructure and physical access barrier, for example work on improvements to walking or bridle routes. However, the Authority does not have similar approaches in place for engagement with groups about non-physical access barriers. The Authority does not map where it does or could engage with groups about wider access barriers, and ways of addressing those. The Authority therefore risks missing opportunities to consider options that may better target its resources to improve access and value for money.

Has the Authority strategically resourced its activity to promote access?

- 24 The Authority has strategically resourced some projects to promote access. The Authority has set out priorities for spending grant funding and reviews these priorities annually. The Authority has also identified and taken steps to mitigate some of the risks from short term funding. The Authority has also used core funds to promote access. For example, by funding officers to promote engagement with volunteers and school groups. The Authority also funds infrastructure improvements, accessible vehicles (known as 'trampers'), and equipment for young people. However, risks remain around fully resourcing the longer-term strategic aims around increasing access. We understand the challenging financial context for all public bodies and the challenges of short-term funding cycles for longer-term planning. However, by not setting out the resources needed to deliver its objectives in the long term, the Authority increases the risk of them not being deliverable.

Is the Authority monitoring, evaluating, and reviewing progress?

- 25 The Authority does not monitor and evaluate the impact of its activity to promote access. The Authority collects and reports information on grant funded projects to the bodies that funds them. It also presents project and quarterly reports to the Performance and Resources Committee. However, the Authority does not clearly evaluate the impact of its activity. We recognise that measuring the impact of some projects and activity can be difficult. However, by not evaluating the outcomes of its activities, it is difficult for the Authority to have assurance that it is securing value for money.



Our recommendations for the Authority

Exhibit 1: our recommendations for the Authority

Recommendations

- R1 We found weaknesses in the Authority's arrangements to collect and analyse visitor data. To make the most of the data the Authority collects from visitors, groups and communities, the Authority should set up a more consistent arrangement to collate and analyse demographic information, activity data and feedback.
- R2 The Authority has not mapped out all potential partners that it could work with to improve access to the Park . To address this the Authority should map out all potential partners that it could work with to identify if there are opportunities to improve value for money.
- R3 To help ensure that its vision for promoting access secures value for money, including over the longer term the Authority should clarify and then cost its proposed actions to deliver its vision.
- R4 The Authority does not have arrangements for regular monitoring or evaluation of its work to promote access to the Park. To address this the Authority should:
- 4.1 Set out how it will assess and monitor the value for money of individual projects and its overall strategic approach to promote access.
 - 4.2 Provide Members with regular reports on the progress and value for money of its work to promote access to the Park.

Appendix 1

Audit questions and criteria

Overall question: Is the Authority doing all it can to encourage and improve access to the National Park from underrepresented groups?

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
2.1 Does the Authority have a comprehensive understanding of who uses the National Park and who does not?	• 2.2.1 Has the Authority recently analysed who visits the National Park? • 2.1.2 Has the Authority recently identified which groups or communities do not visit the National Park? • 2.1.3 Does the Authority have a thorough understanding of its socio-economic profile? • 2.1.4 Has the Authority identified barriers facing groups or communities that are underrepresented visitors to the National Park? • 2.1.5 Does the Authority have a thorough understanding of the long-term factors that may impact on access opportunities for underrepresented groups?	• The Authority knows which groups and communities visit the National Park. • The Authority knows which groups and communities do not visit the National Park. • The Authority has a thorough understanding of its socio-economic profile. • The Authority understands and knows the barriers facing groups and communities that are underrepresented visitors to the National Park. • The Authority has a thorough understanding of the long-term factors that reduce access opportunities for underrepresented groups.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
2.2 Does the Authority have a clear vision of what it needs to achieve to improve access from underrepresented groups and communities?	• 2.2.1 Does the Authority have a comprehensive plan to address barriers facing underrepresented groups and communities? • 2.2.2 Has the Authority involved relevant groups or communities in shaping its approach? • 2.2.3 Is the Authority taking an integrated approach? • 2.2.4 Is the Authority planning over an appropriate timescale? • 2.2.5 Is the Authority's approach driven by clear and effective leadership?	• The Authority has a comprehensive plan to address barriers facing underrepresented groups and communities. • The Authority fully involves relevant groups and communities in helping to shape its approach. • The Authority is taking an integrated approach and considers issues across all services and all key partners. • The Authority has a strong track record of engaging stakeholders with inclusive opportunities to access and use the National Park. • The Authority actively promotes its work and this is resulting in positive impacts on addressing social exclusion, improving health and wellbeing and alleviating the impact of poverty. • The Authority has set a range of targets for delivery over an appropriate timescale. • The Authority has good track record of delivering actions and plans and taking remedial action where necessary. • The Authority has clear and effective leadership, and increasing access to the National Park is promoted consistently and clearly at the highest levels. • The Authority has good evidence to draw showing the value of National Parks for health and wellbeing and their role in helping to reduce social exclusion and alleviation of the barriers posed by poverty.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
2.3 Is the Authority working effectively with the right people and partners to address the barriers facing groups or communities that are underrepresented visitors to the National Park?	• 2.3.1 Has the Authority identified who it needs to involve in designing and delivering its work? • 2.3.2 Is the Authority effectively involving the full diversity of the population? • 2.3.3 Is the Authority working with the right partners? • 2.3.4 Is the body collaborating effectively? • 2.3.5 Is the Authority learning lessons from how it works with others?	• The Authority demonstrates the value of National Parks for health and wellbeing and their role in helping to reduce social exclusion and alleviation of the barriers posed by poverty, by contributing towards evidence-based policy and practice. • The Authority tailors opportunities for all people in Wales to benefit from the natural environment and landscape features of National Parks. • The Authority works with the right people, organisations and communities to design inclusive services that encourage access for all. • The Authority effectively involves the full diversity of the population in developing its programmes of work to ensure everyone is provided with an equal opportunity to access and use the National Park. • The Authority is open to challenge and learning to ensure its services are fit for purpose and delivering what is intended.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
2.4 Has the Authority invested sufficient resources so it can deliver long-term and preventative benefits?	• 2.4.1 Has the Authority set aside sufficient resources to encourage access and use of the national park by underrepresented people and communities? • 2.4.2 Does the Authority understand the long-term resource implications? • 2.4.3 Is the Authority allocating resources to deliver better outcomes over the long term? • 2.4.4 Has the Authority conducted demographic modelling to ensure resources are appropriately targeted to attract underrepresented groups in the future?	• The Authority has set aside sufficient resources to improve access and encourage people to access and use the National Park. • The Authority reviews its use of resources to ensure that it is able to target future allocations on underrepresented visitor groups and communities. • The Authority has conducted demographic modelling to ensure resources are appropriately targeted to attract underrepresented groups in the future.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
2.5 Is the Authority monitoring, evaluating and reviewing progress?	• 2.5.1 Is the Authority drawing on qualitative and quantitative information to measure the impact of its work? • 2.5.2 Do Authority members effectively scrutinise performance?	• Tailoring opportunities for all people in Wales to benefit from the natural environment and landscape features of National Parks. • The Authority has developed a suite of appropriate and relevant performance measures/metrics that enable it to judge how it is improving access and use of the national park by underrepresented groups and communities. • The data the Authority uses allows it to demonstrate the positive impact of people accessing the National Park on people's wellbeing and social outcomes; impact on poverty; and impact on health. • The Authority monitors and evaluates performance on a regular basis and takes corrective actions as a result of its review work.



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