





A new chapter in the

# story of the South Wales Valleys...

In 2020, a crucial milestone was achieved. Thanks to the shared vision and collective efforts of individuals and organisations from across the South Wales Valleys and beyond, a dedicated core team was finally established to drive forward the long-held ambitions for a Valleys Regional Park.

Since then, our mission as a team and broader VRP partnership has been to unlock and maximise the extraordinary potential of the Valleys landscape with its unique natural and cultural heritage. By doing so, the team and wider partnership aims to unleash a wave of positive change, generating profound social, economic, and environmental benefit that will ripple through our communities and change the perception of the Valleys forever.

*As part of this new, more dedicated phase, 12 outstanding sites across our beautiful Welsh Valleys were designated as Discovery Gateways, sharing almost £6 million of Welsh Government funding.*

The purpose of the investment was to help realise the full potential of these sites in engaging local communities with the natural wonders and cultural riches on their doorsteps, while better conveying the stories, heritage, and beauty of the Valleys landscape to visitors.





This investment in the Discovery Gateways has also been crucial in enabling these sites to offer a greater range of opportunities to local people. This includes new education facilities for use by local schools, enhanced provision for volunteers, innovative interpretation of the local natural and cultural heritage and improved access into the variety of iconic natural habitats showcased so beautifully across the sites.

This has proved even more vital during the COVID pandemic when we saw so many more people desperate to be out connecting with nature. A Valleys Regional Park survey carried out between July and September 2020 highlighted this importance, with 96% of respondents saying being able to access local green space helped their mental health and resilience during lockdown.

The investment has helped in so many other ways, from developing family accessible bike trails at Dare Valley Country Park, to wonderful new children's play parks such as at Parc Bryn Bach, which provided some much-needed good news for the area when it opened during the pandemic. The improved access to the natural landscape included new boardwalks through the Wet Woodland at Bryngarw and across the restored peat bogs of Llyn Llech Owain. The raised walkways ensure more local people can reap the multiple benefits of engaging with these environments whilst safeguarding the sensitive natural habitat.



Through the VRP partnership, these sites are now working together, each delivering their part in the shared vision of realising the full potential of the world class landscapes we have throughout the Valleys, and the multiple benefits they can offer.

To help communicate this vision of a cohesive network of sites, an eye-catching new map was commissioned showcasing all the Discovery Gateways. This visually striking map is now prominently displayed across all 12 sites, unifying them into a single, remarkable asset for our Valleys communities and visitors from afar.



### The 12 Valleys Regional Park Discovery Gateways are:



- Afan Forest Park
- Blaenavon World Heritage Centre
- Bryngarw Country Park
- Caerphilly Castle
- Cwmcarn Forest
- Cyfarthfa Park
- Dare Valley Country Park
- Llyn Llech Owain Country Park
- Parc Bryn Bach
- Parc Penallta
- Parc Slip
- Ynysangharad War Memorial Park





# Afan Forest Park



Afan Forest Park was already a nationally popular destination for the mountain biking community, as well as being home to the superb South Wales Mining Museum. But the location has huge potential more broadly, which the VRP investment sought to unlock by funding new features and facilities that would appeal to a wider range of local audiences.

Through these improvements, the investment helped to establish the location as a high-profile gateway to the South Wales Valleys and beyond. This included enhancements to the Park's café and visitor centre, re-establishing the location as a hub for the valley and dispersal point for visitors exploring the local and regional landscape.

Overall improvements included engaging new signage and interpretation, refurbishment of the toilet & shower facilities, improved car parking and motorhome hook-ups to enhance the site's regional appeal, and an outstanding new children's play area to better cater for children and families.





# Blaenavon World Heritage Centre



The landscape in and around Blaenavon in Torfaen is rich with natural and industrial heritage. So much so that it was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2000.



At the heart of this landscape sits Blaenavon World Heritage Centre, providing an overview of the Blaenavon industrial landscape and an ideal starting point for visitors wishing to better understand and explore the area and all it has to offer.

The VRP investment for Blaenavon recognised that the interpretation at the World Heritage Centre (WHC) required updating. The VRP grant was an opportunity to modernise the approach and promote the industrial heritage across the Valleys as well as highlighting local cycling and walking trails.

The funding also helped to develop the landscape around the WHC with improvements to access for local trails including signage and way markers. It also allowed for improvements to local nature reserves with promoted walking routes from the World Heritage Centre.





# Bryngarw Country Park

**Bryngarw Country Park in Bridgend showcases a rich mosaic of natural habitats, reflecting the wider Valleys landscape.**

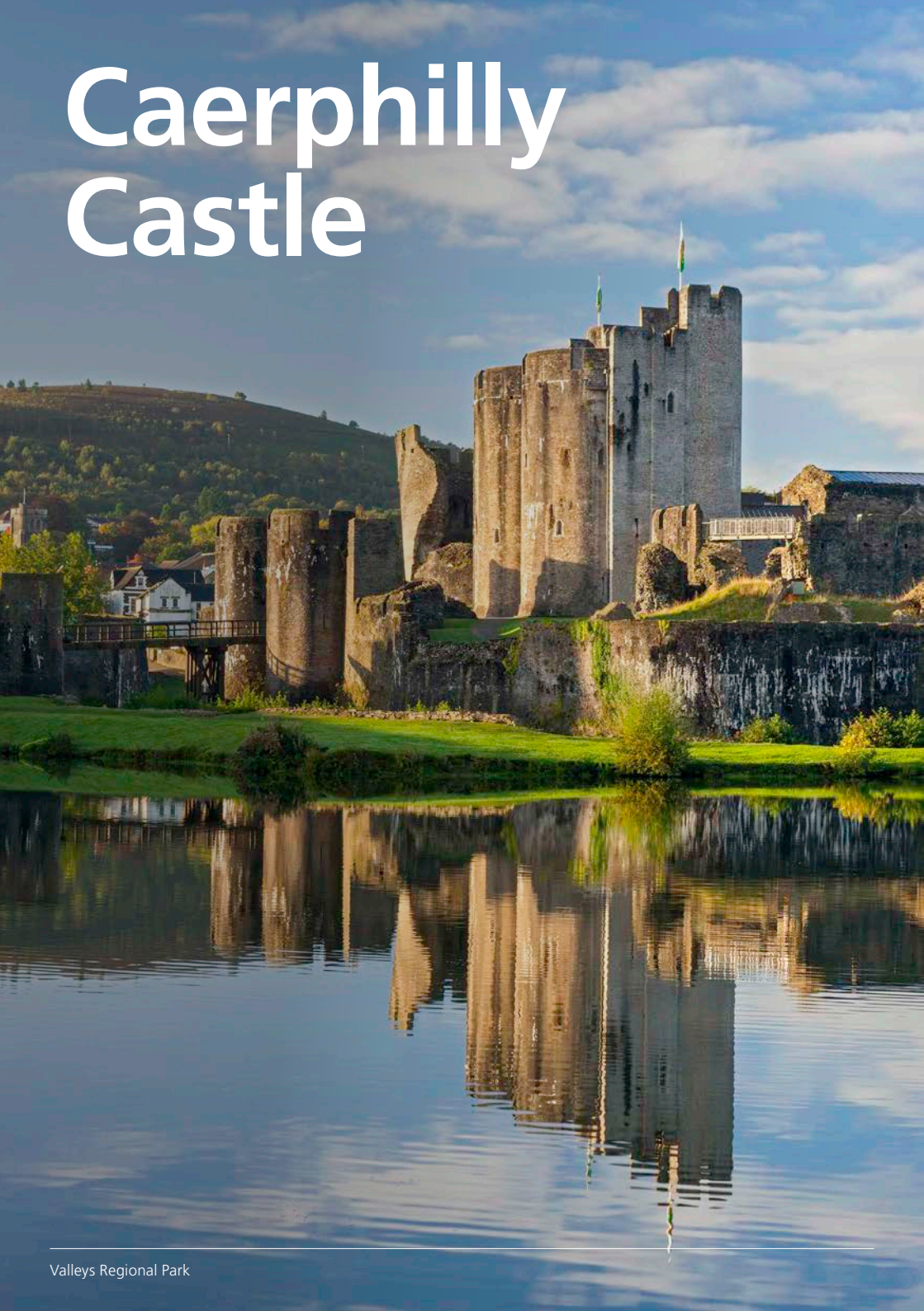
This includes native woodlands, wildflower meadows, wetlands and the River Garw. These, along with amenity features such as the excellent children's play area, attract over 220,000 visits annually. The VRP investment here aimed to build on the park's success by further enhancing the visitor experience while providing more opportunities to understand, access and engage with the outstanding natural environment.

The funding for Bryngarw Country Park encompassed a broad range of projects including the refurbishment of the park's visitor centre, development of a stylish new education building embedded in the beautiful natural environment; improved access and interpretation throughout the park; installation of solar panels on buildings across the site; facilities to promote active travel, new natural play installations and further enhancements to the biodiversity within the park, including new tree-planting and the creation of a wildlife pond.





# Caerphilly Castle



**Caerphilly Castle is more than just a picturesque ruin. As the largest castle in Wales and the first to introduce concentric castle defences to Britain, it is an embodiment of our history and heritage and an iconic feature of the Valleys Regional Park.**

The joint CADW and Caerphilly Council proposals for investment in the location built on a wider programme of CADW investment. The bid was strongly aligned to the connectivity elements within the Discovery Gateway Criteria and focussed on the development of landscape and nature corridors, better linking the castle to the surrounding parks and urban landscape.





# Cwmcarn Forest



Cwmcarn, with its flagship 'Forest Drive', is operated jointly by Caerphilly County Borough Council and Natural Resources Wales. Both organisations had invested heavily in the reopening of the scenic drive which had previously been closed for 6 years, along with improvements to the offer in and around the Caerphilly managed Visitor Centre area.

The Valleys Regional Park investment built upon this existing work and funding to help realise Cwmcarn's full potential whilst ensuring its long-term sustainability as a key tourism destination. The VRP-funded improvements included enhancements to the visitor centre and the creation of a shared office space, installation of much needed Wi-Fi provision within the Visitor Centre and wider site, improving and developing new waymarked trails, development of new landscape and nature interpretation points along the forest drive, and habitat management and biodiversity improvements throughout.





# Cyfarthfa Park



**The Grade II registered Cyfarthfa Park is one of the most frequently visited free tourist attractions in Wales. Occupying a prominent position overlooking the town of Merthyr Tydfil, the park also provides a beautiful setting for the Grade I listed Cyfarthfa Castle.**

The Valleys Regional Park investment in Cyfarthfa Park focussed on the development of the Canolfan Visitors Centre.

A fabulous newly modelled kitchen and café interior at the Canolfan now provides food and catering facilities for both local visitors and tourists and a welcome base for community activities.

In addition, the VRP funding provided for installing new accessible play facilities in the park and the creation of a new toilet and changing provision adjacent to the splash pad.





# Dare Valley Country Park



Dare Valley Country Park boasts over 500 acres of walks, trails, and family activities, set within an iconic Valleys landscape of woodland, pasture and moorland which is home to an abundance of wildlife.



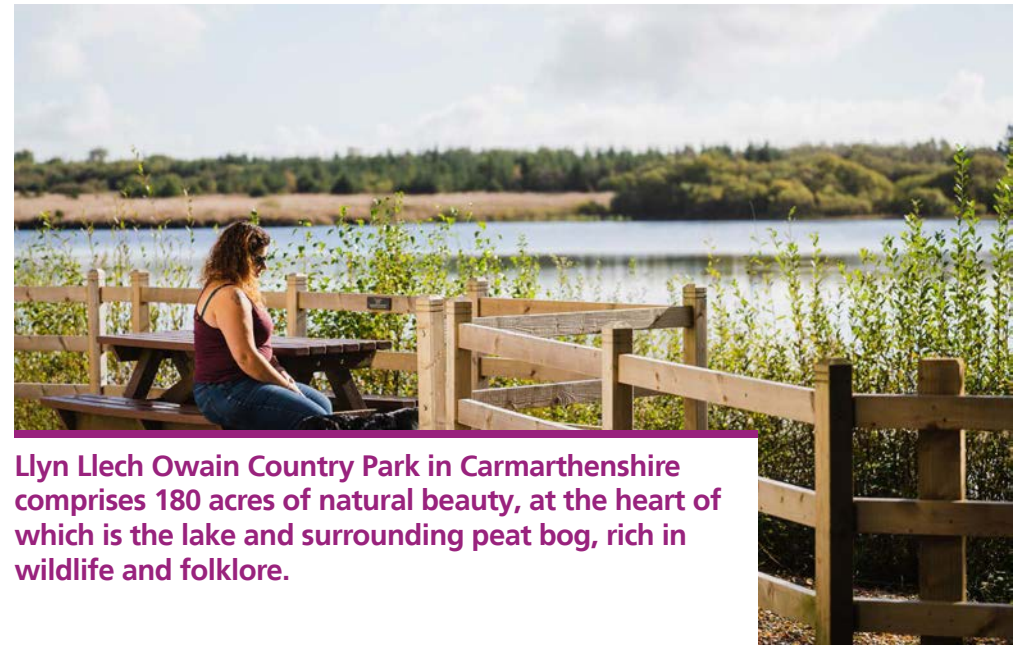
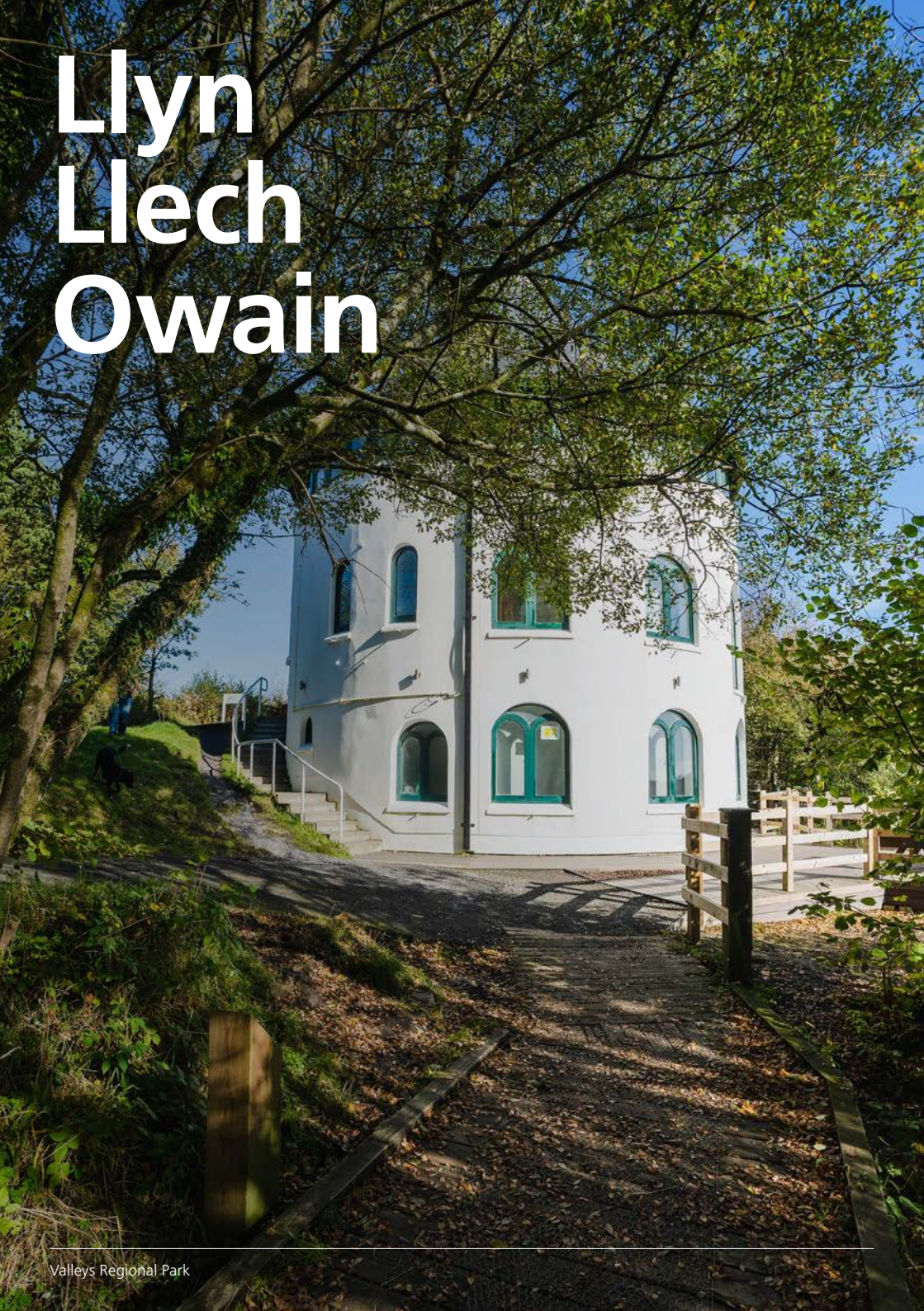
The VRP-funded improvements formed part of the overall masterplan for Dare Valley, with the introduction of cycling tracks and a laser tag activity area. The main elements of the VRP investment included the development of family accessible bike trails, which also comprised a number of 'Pump Tracks' with varying and unique layouts that were created at dedicated spots along the trail, catering for all ages and abilities.

The funding also updated and refreshed the existing play park while further enhancing its accessibility so that it can be enjoyed by all children regardless of their physical or sensory abilities.





# Llyn Llech Owain



**Llyn Llech Owain Country Park in Carmarthenshire comprises 180 acres of natural beauty, at the heart of which is the lake and surrounding peat bog, rich in wildlife and folklore.**



The VRP investment here recognised that the site, with its rare, restored peat bog habitat, adds to the narrative of the VRP Discovery Gateways.

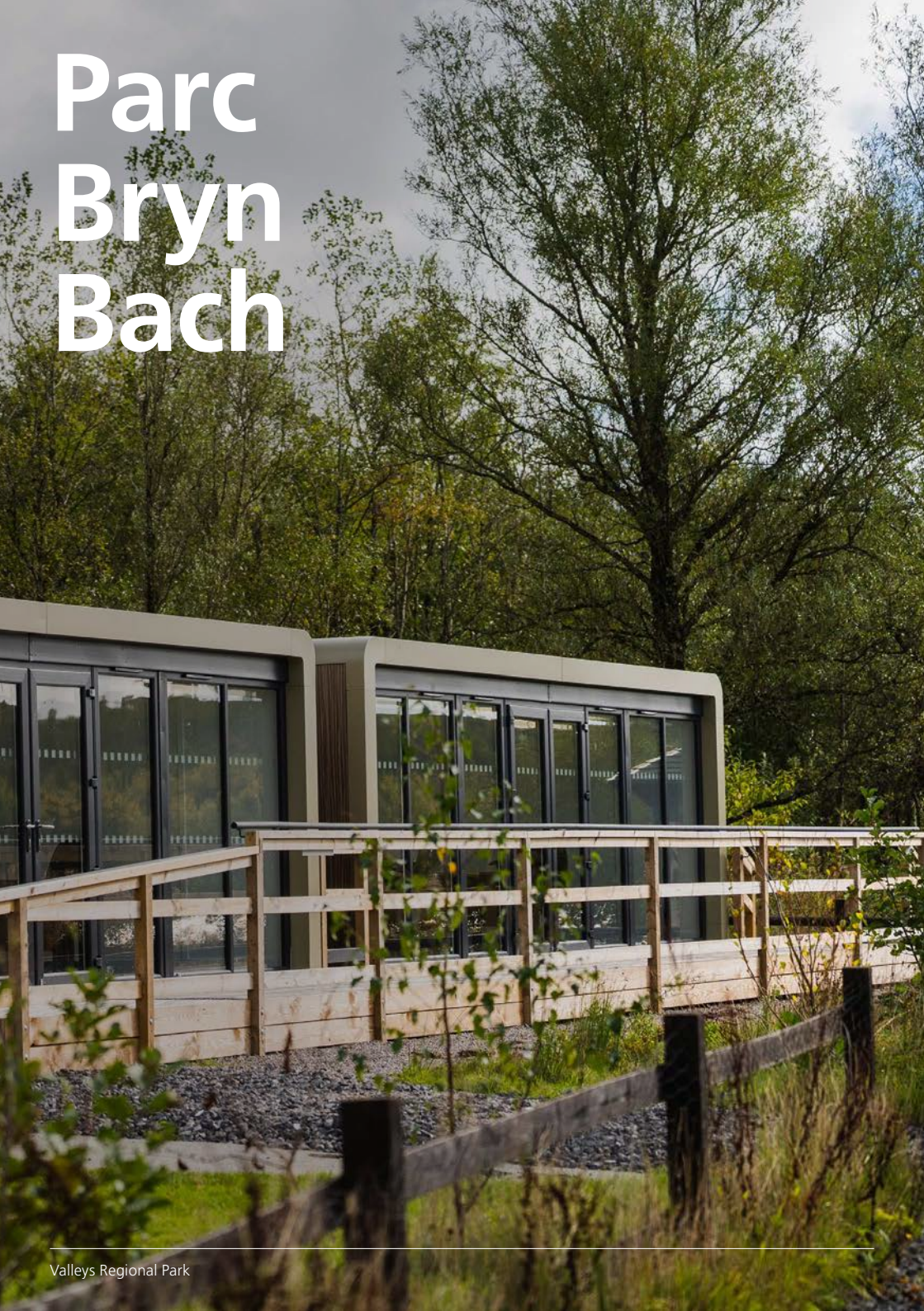
To realise the potential of the site in functioning as an iconic western Gateway to the Valleys Regional Park, investment was needed to improve access and the overall visitor experience. The funding provided for an enhanced entranceway and 'landing point' to create a memorable first impression, improvements to the path and boardwalk network over the bog landscape, upgrading of the visitor centre and volunteer facilities, new landscape interpretation and enhancements to the café and children's play area, creating new incentives to visit.

Llyn Llech Owain also received investment to develop a 'Wellbeing Workhub' within the Discovery Tower, with a new undercover outdoor meeting area. Wellbeing Workhubs are a concept designed and developed through the Valleys Regional Park. They aim to provide remote working opportunities embedded in the natural environment, allowing users to reap the multiple health, wellbeing and productivity benefits that come from being exposed to nature during the working day.





# Parc Bryn Bach



**Parc Bryn Bach in Blaenau Gwent is a local nature reserve set in 340 acres of woodland and grassland, with a stunning 36-acre lake at its heart.**

The VRP investment here focused on enhanced facilities and improvements to the overall visitor experience, helping to establish another iconic Discovery Gateway in the south-eastern valleys. The funded developments included improvements to the bunkhouse and visitor centre; an engaging new wooden play area; and improvements to active travel routes linking the park to local communities.

Parc Bryn Bach also received investment to develop the second of two VRP-conceived 'Wellbeing Workhubs'. This nature-based hub comprises a new glass-fronted cabin housing individual workstations and also a second building for use as a group meeting space. With stunning views of the lake, the hub is increasingly used as a tranquil space to work remotely whilst immersed in nature.





# Parc Penallta



Home to "Sultan the Pit Pony", one of the largest figurative earth sculptures in the country, Parc Penallta is a beautiful and tranquil place filled with hidden gems and natural beauty.



This is all the more remarkable given that this rich and verdant site was a black coal tip only 30 years ago. As such the park embodies the ongoing transformation of the Valleys landscape and its huge potential for local communities.

Through the VRP partnership, ambitious plans were agreed to provide a visitor centre and community space at the park. Unfortunately, significant cost increases and the proximity to a tourism and education facility about to be completed at the nearby Colliers Farm Park, led to a decision not to proceed with the visitor centre.

Instead of building a rival centre, steps to access the new tourism and education facility through Parc Penallta will be refurbished. The steps will be Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant, with handrails and a ramp.





# Parc Slip Nature Reserve



**Parc Slip Nature Reserve in Bridgend is a former opencast mining site. It has since been restored and transformed into a thriving haven of biodiversity and natural splendour thanks to the incredible work of the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales that now manage the site.**

The Valleys Regional Park investment here focused on enhancing the overall visitor experience and improving habitat management, whilst providing more opportunities for visitors to understand and engage with the iconic natural environment.

These developments included enhancements to the visitor centre, a new undercover seating area for dogwalkers, new bike racks and electric vehicle charging points, access improvements with enhanced signage and interpretation throughout, planting of a new fruit and nut orchard, sensitive management of the ponds and restoration of the miners' memorial featuring a renovated fountain as the centre piece.





# Ynysangharad War Memorial Park



**Ynysangharad War Memorial Park in Pontypridd has been attracting visitors for nearly 100 years. The stunning grounds are also home to the beautifully restored National Lido of Wales, Ponty Lido.**



The Valleys Regional Park investment in the site formed part of a wider package of improvement and investment, aiming to contribute to the emerging Pontypridd Masterplan which focuses on delivering significant investment and growth in both the town and Ynysangharad War Memorial Park (YWMP). This includes delivering positive impacts through improving the quality and quantity of green infrastructure in the town centre.

This funding here provided improvements to the footpaths and lighting within the park, as well as the provision of a new, inclusive 'Changing Places' facility.



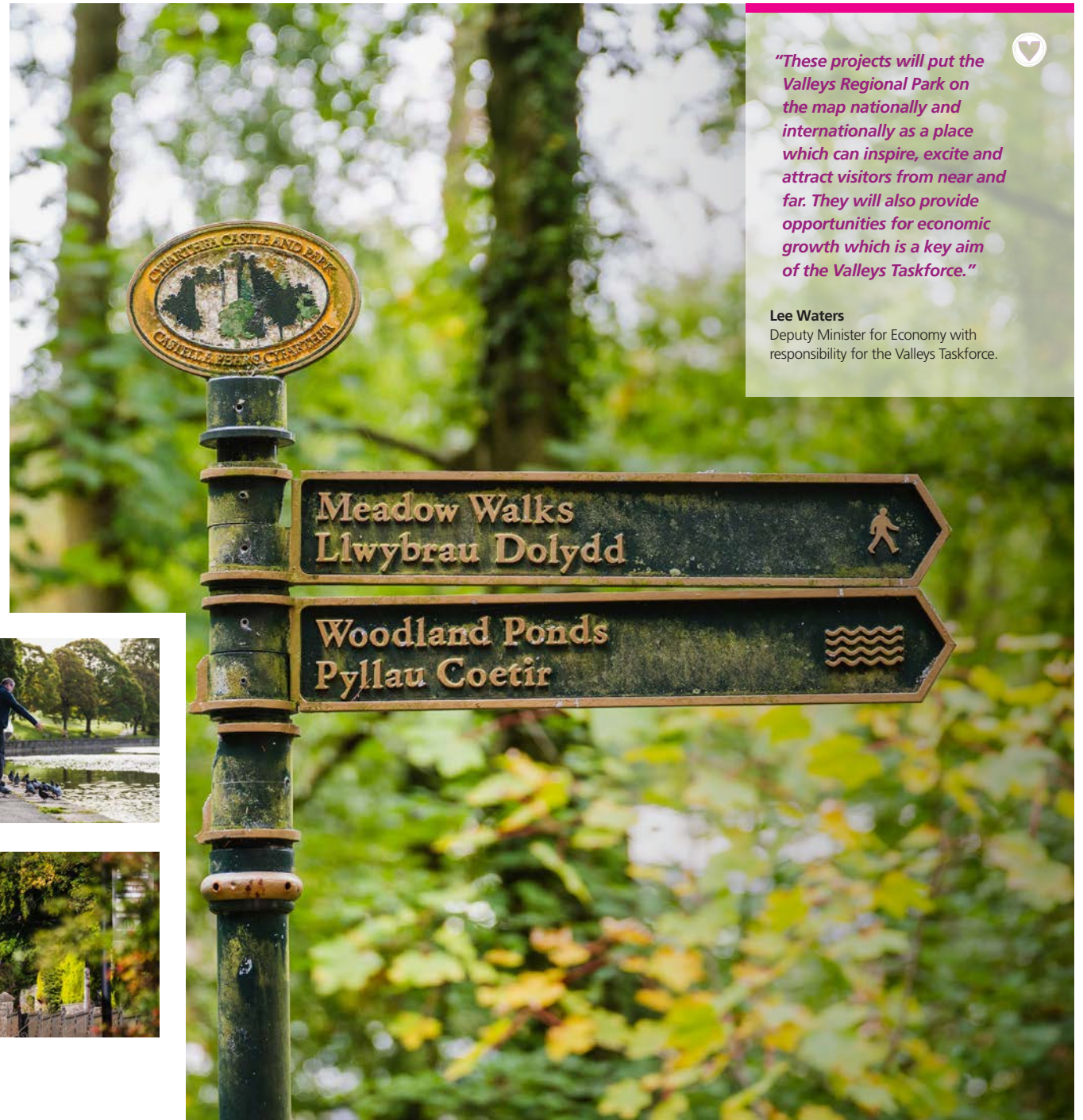


# What's next for the Valleys Regional Park Discovery Gateways – and beyond!

**We are committed to further exploring and advocating for the immense value of the Discovery Gateways and similar green spaces throughout the Valleys. One of our key goals is to ensure that these sites and the dedicated teams behind them receive widespread recognition for their importance.**

Our efforts involve continuously exploring and demonstrating to the Welsh Government and other stakeholders how these sites contribute to the realisation of policy and strategic goals. This includes leveraging the natural environment to support health and wellbeing, providing programs and services that offer skill-building, learning, and recreational opportunities, supporting local nature-based employment, and much more. By ensuring that the true value of these exceptional places is properly understood, we can position them favourably for future investments.

The landscapes and green spaces of the Valleys provide fertile ground for supporting sustainable local food growing. By exploring the potential for growing fresh produce in these spaces, we can contribute to local food security, promote healthier eating habits, and reduce carbon emissions associated with long-distance food transportation. Moreover, engaging the local community in these activities fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment, nurturing a deeper connection with the land as individuals become actively involved in cultivating their own food and reconnecting with nature. This will be another key focus of the next phase.



*“These projects will put the Valleys Regional Park on the map nationally and internationally as a place which can inspire, excite and attract visitors from near and far. They will also provide opportunities for economic growth which is a key aim of the Valleys Taskforce.”*

**Lee Waters**  
Deputy Minister for Economy with responsibility for the Valleys Taskforce.



Additionally, our efforts will include promoting green social prescribing initiatives, exploring how the Discovery Gateways and natural environment in the Valleys can be used as a means to improve overall wellbeing and address physical, social and mental health challenges. By demonstrating the therapeutic benefits of spending time in these green spaces, we can advocate for their inclusion in healthcare programmes and social services.

*The Guardians program, which has engaged over 1,400 participants in the past two years, clearly indicates a strong demand for nature-based skills, learning, and experiential opportunities in the Valleys. In the next phase, we will explore sustainable approaches to deliver more of these important opportunities locally. As part of this effort, we are collaborating with partners to develop a National Nature Service for Wales.*

In addition to enabling people to connect with their local natural environment and reap its numerous benefits, these opportunities align directly with the Welsh Government's priorities in addressing the Nature Emergency. For instance, the recent "Biodiversity Deep Dive" carried out by Welsh Government produced several key insights and recommendations, emphasising the importance of capacity building, behaviour change, awareness raising, and skills development as foundations for future actions.



national average, initiatives aimed at enhancing these capabilities can have a significant impact on the region. Using the network of Discovery Gateways and similar sites to provide these opportunities ensures that they are readily available to local communities.

Following from this, we will advocate for integrating the skills and expertise required for nature recovery into policy ambitions such as the Net Zero Skills Strategy and aim to create more visible and accessible pathways to green jobs in the Valleys. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) estimates that over 4,000 jobs in land, forestry, and agricultural improvements could be generated in Wales within two years. Moreover, RSPB Cymru estimates that, coupled with the right investment in nature, the National Nature Service could support nearly 7,000 new, direct full-time equivalent (FTE) jobs in Wales. A separate report commissioned by the Future Generations Office has highlighted the significant skills gap that must be addressed to unlock the potential of nature-restoration-based job creation.

The Discovery Gateways and similar green spaces in the Valleys can be the portals that help lead us to a brighter and greener future. They can be the key to unlocking a wealth of opportunities for a healthier, more prosperous, connected, and vibrant Valleys.

As we continue this transformative journey together, driven by our shared vision and passion for change, we are determined to forge a legacy that future generations will cherish. Through environmental stewardship, community empowerment and harnessing the full potential of our landscapes, together we will create a thriving Valleys Regional Park that we can all be proud of.

These studies and reports underscore the urgent need for more locally accessible opportunities that enable individuals of all ages and backgrounds to acquire the skills and experience necessary for a career in the nature sector. Considering that the Valleys have lower levels of skills and qualifications compared to the

There are opportunities across the Valleys to get involved and contribute the positive future that our landscape will help shape.

*To discuss how you can help get in touch by emailing [ValleysRegionalPark@Bridgend.gov.uk](mailto:ValleysRegionalPark@Bridgend.gov.uk)*







