

Walk, Wheel and Thrive

Well-being and the National Cycle Network in Wales



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Y MUNWCH Â'R MUDIAD

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Contents

Introduction	3
Your guide to the National Cycle Network	4
The Network & well-being goals	5
A prosperous Wales	6
A resilient Wales	7
A healthier Wales	8
A more equal Wales	9
A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language	10
A globally responsible Wales	11
A Wales of cohesive communities	11
What needs to happen?	12
References	13





Introduction

The National Cycle Network is an extraordinary national treasure that connects people and places throughout Wales, and transcends boundaries across the United Kingdom and into the rest of Europe. In Wales it criss-crosses the country, extending over an impressive expanse of around 1,600 miles, with almost 60% of the population living within a mile of the network.¹

It is there for everyone. Each day it welcomes people walking, wheeling, cycling, jogging, and horse riding. It grants us access to essential connections—family and friends, work and shops, essential amenities, leisurely pursuits, and green spaces. In 2022 alone, the Network facilitated an astounding 588 million journeys across the UK.² By alleviating congestion and fostering health and environmental benefits, the National Cycle Network is an invaluable asset.

Every visit and each mile of its length helps improve the well-being of the people of Wales. From serene grandparents enjoying leisurely strolls to excited little ones learning to cycle in a safe environment, and from bustling commuters taking a shortcut to picnicking tourists taking in the scenery, the Network is an unrivalled source of well-being for millions.

Yet, despite countless miles traversed, lives improved, and costs saved, the Network remains a work in progress. Our vision is that every section of the Network should be accessible to a 12-year-old child travelling independently.³ Much of the Network, sadly, still falls short of this aspiration. Barriers also hinder access for others including disabled people, people of colour and women. Access controls can restrict mobility scooters, wheelchairs, double buggies and cargo bikes.

Maintaining what we have is a challenge. Wales is experiencing the increasing impact of extreme weather, and cracks, fractures and landslides are all too common after scorching summers, harsh winters, and sudden downpours. As climate change increases, the growing season extends costing more in maintenance to keep under control. Particularly vulnerable are the Network's oldest components, including Victorian railway bridges, which need ongoing specialized maintenance to ensure their preservation.



The Network allows access to nature and is often a green or blue space in its own right, vital for our mental health. Since 2022 and using funding from our supporters and other sources, Sustrans staff, volunteers and other partners have helped to plant 495 miles of new species and rich native hedgerow, restored a further 365 miles and installed more than 100 bird, bat and dormouse boxes across England and Wales.

We are passionate about the well-being impact of the Network and believe that benefit can be even greater, by improving it, extending it and making it more accessible for everyone in Wales. We are not the only passionate ones, and we are heartened with the support we enjoy in this mission - from our staff, our volunteers and supporters, our partners in local and national government and their agencies, and the Welsh people as a whole.

Now, to push on again - to help achieve the Welsh Government's well-being goals and modal shift targets - we need to see urgent action and fair funding. The National Cycle Network represents a tried and tested method, and good value for money in helping Wales achieve these targets.



Your guide to the National Cycle Network

We see the National Cycle Network as an iconic asset with incredible reach, connecting people and places across all four nations of the UK – none more so than in Wales.

The National Cycle Network is a **UK-wide network of signed paths and routes** used for commuting, for leisure, and for tourism. It is comprised of traffic-free and low-traffic roads for everyone, connecting cities, towns and countryside.

Despite its name, **the vast majority of the Network is shared-use** and is well-used and enjoyed by people walking, wheeling, jogging, and horse riding, as well as cycling.

About 1,600 miles of the Network is in Wales, out of around 12,500 in the UK. At around 13% of the Network, people in Wales have better access to the Network compared to other parts of the UK. For comparison, Wales comprises 8.5% of the UK by area, and has 4.6% of the population. The Network passes within a mile of almost 60% of Wales' population.⁴

The Network is in **all 22 local authorities in Wales, all 32 new Westminster constituencies, and 39 of 40 Senedd constituencies**.⁵

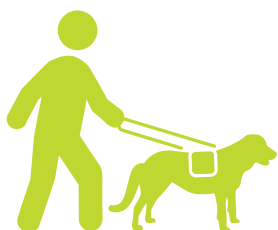
49% of people agree that **the National Cycle Network is a valuable national asset**. In a 2019 YouGov poll, only 9% of people disagreed with the statement.⁶

The Network will be 30 years old in 2025. It is young for such a well-known and ubiquitous asset.

Sustrans is the founder and custodian of the National Cycle Network. We are a charity founded in 1977.⁷

Our first route, the Bristol & Bath Railway Path, opened in 1984 and remains a highly popular 15-mile-long, traffic-free cycle route.⁸

Today, we are the custodians of a 12,500 mile long network of shared use routes across the United Kingdom, with an ambition to extend the network to 16,000 miles by 2040.



Case Study Mawddach Trail, Dolgellau

This beautiful short ride in mid Wales runs along the spectacular Mawddach Estuary below the foothills of Cadair Idris.⁹ As you cycle along the old railway line from the historic town of Dolgellau to the popular seaside town of Barmouth you'll pass stunning scenery and two striking bridges, including the historic Barmouth viaduct.

It forms part of Lôn Las Cymru (National Cycle Network Route 8) which runs from Holyhead to Cardiff.

"My choice for my fave route is The Mawddach Trail as it is car-free, flat so anyone can enjoy it, and the scenery is some of the most stunning in Wales and the rest of the UK."

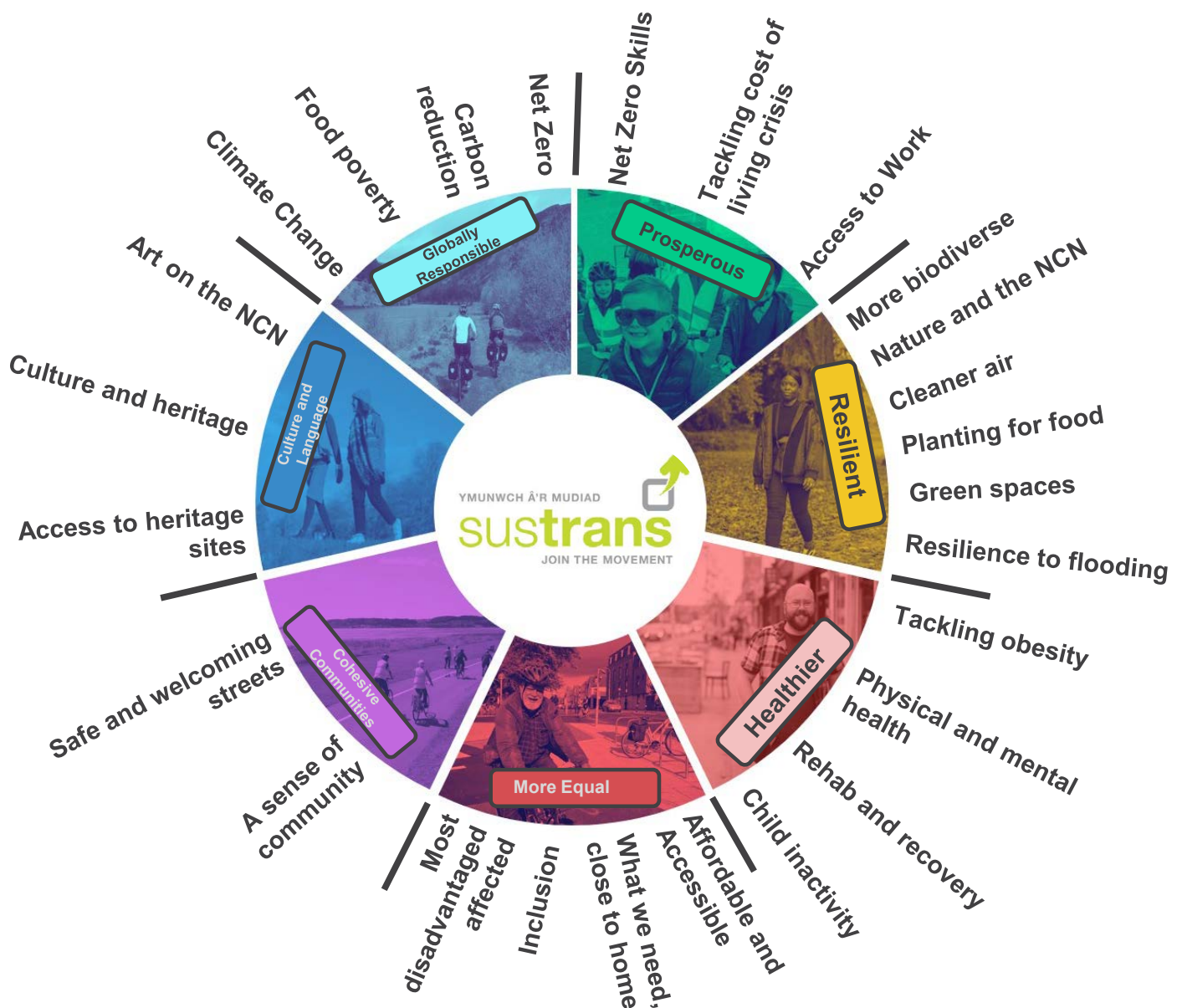
The Network & well-being goals

The outcomes and benefits associated with active travel extend far beyond those derived from other means of transport. The National Cycle Network has a practical use, and a measurable economic benefit. However, the modes used on the Network – walking, running, wheeling, cycling and horse-riding – are in themselves valuable for well-being.

Well-being of Future Generations

Well-being is underpinned in legislation in Wales.¹⁰ The Well-being of Future Generations Act was used by the Welsh Government as a starting point for its transport strategy, Llwybr Newydd.¹¹ After the publication of Llwybr Newydd, a new national Well-being for Wales indicator was added to measure the percentage of journeys by walking, cycling or public transport.¹²

Active travel in general and the Network in particular is strongly aligned to the seven well-being goals.



Users' experiences of well-being

90% say that improving their well-being is a factor in deciding to use the Network.
 83% say it improves their overall satisfaction with life.
 70% say that using the Network has improved their well-being.¹³



Unrivalled value for money

At around 1,600 miles, the National Cycle Network in Wales²⁰ is considerably longer than the trunk road network, at 938 miles.²¹ However, the Network's core funding is drastically lower. In the Welsh Government's 2023-24 budget, £70.5m of revenue funding and £185m of capital funding is allocated to trunk road operations.²² **Just £680,000 of capital funding is ringfenced for the Network.**

Any investment in the Network is able to deliver more infrastructure than would be possible in other parts of the transport budget. High-quality cycling schemes cost around £1.3 million per kilometre. This compares to around £50 million per kilometre for road schemes.²³ So, improvements to cycling and walking infrastructure involve low capital outlay compared to other types of transport schemes. And the maintenance costs of cycling or walking infrastructure are significantly lower too, making them much better value for money.



Case Study

Pontarddulais to Grovesend

Numerous studies have attempted to quantify the economic value the Network delivers on individual schemes in Wales.

A 2018 economic impact study was undertaken before the new route between Pontarddulais to Grovesend was built.²⁴ The economic benefits of a traffic-free link between them was appraised based on expected annual cycling and walking usage over the next 20 years. Under the median projected scenario (where the shared-use route would see significant increases in walking and cycling) the total economic benefit was £1,049,706, with health benefits of £696,597 and recreational expenditure of £262,525.

A prosperous Wales

In addition to financial metrics, the definition of this well-being goal includes decent work, a low carbon society, local economies, and using resources efficiently.¹⁴

Active travel is a low-cost form of transport which can connect people to their work or education across Wales. The Welsh Government wants sustainable transport options to be more affordable, and will take affordability into account in planning new transport interventions.¹⁵

Sustrans' Walking and Cycling index, which assesses active travel in cities and urban areas across the UK, has calculated walking, wheeling and cycling to be **worth £36.5 billion to the UK economy.**¹⁶

Our own analysis shows that 62% of users walk or cycle instead of using a car. This has potentially taken 70.9 million car trips and over 110 million kilometres off the road, equivalent to a **carbon reduction of over 23,000 tonnes.**¹⁷

People who walk and cycle take more visits to the high street than those who drive. Over the course of a month, research in London showed that those who tend to walk made 16 visits, those who cycle 12 visits, and those who drive just 8 visits. It found that over a month, people who walk to the high street spend up to 40% more than those who drive.¹⁸

We also know that **local businesses across the UK benefit by an estimated £1.7 billion annually** from people using the National Cycle Network.¹⁹





A resilient Wales

We are living through a climate and ecological emergency. As the climate changes, we see widespread loss of wildlife and biodiversity. More and more plants and animals are becoming extinct each year, with thousands of other species facing severe threats. The UK has already lost around half of its natural biodiversity. This loss puts the UK in the bottom 10% of all countries globally.²⁵

The Welsh Government has the ambition to maintain and enhance biodiversity, and increase ecosystem resilience through transport operations and infrastructure projects.²⁶

The National Cycle Network is part of the solution and can help to counter this trend for biodiversity loss, whilst connecting people to nature. We want to transform these linear spaces into a more resilient ecological network that supports both people and the planet. With our team of specialist ecologists, as well as our combination of land management, skills, volunteers, relationships and experience, Sustrans Cymru is uniquely placed to increase biodiversity and support wildlife habitats on the Network.

Whether managing the existing Network, building new paths, carrying out maintenance work, or repairing infrastructure such as bridges, we survey key species to avoid disrupting their habitats and to make sure we leave behind an enhanced natural environment.²⁷

When we expand or improve the Network, we create traffic-free greenways. We make space for nature by restoring biodiversity, building wetland areas to support great crested newts, installing roosting boxes for bats, and improving habitats for the common blue butterfly. We create routes for nature that can help to address some of the impact on wildlife of the road network. Roads often cut off habitats from each other, impacting wildlife, and we know that the Network can play an important role in improving connectivity between ecologically rich areas and habitats.

Case Study

Clydach Gorge, NCN46

Like many paths in south Wales, it's lived many lives – it used to be a railway servicing ironworks, a forge, a limeworks, and a quarry.²⁸ One of the most spectacular sections of the gorge is the site of special scientific interest, near Llanelly Hill. Sustrans has a licence on this section, and we work closely with Natural Resources Wales to manage it.

There are so many species of wildflowers, invertebrates, birds, and mammals that inhabit the site. There is a multitude of bats that roost in the old railway tunnels. There's always something to see at any time of the year. We know that people value green space and biodiversity, and the Clydach Gorge is a great example of a wild place that the NCN can take you to. If you visit the site, please treat it with care!



Extreme weather and climate change

The impact of extreme weather events and climate change is one of the principal risks for our charity and the Network.²⁹

Maintaining the National Cycle Network and Sustrans' estate involves managing historic engineered structures and ex-railway assets such as bridges, embankments and drainage systems, as well as the land and ecologies around our paths. Climate change related impacts, such as extreme weather events and extended growing seasons, increase the challenge of ensuring routes remain useable and accessible. To mitigate this risk, we have put in place a comprehensive inspection regime and a programme of planned maintenance for all our assets. Limited funding and resources for local authorities also causes problems in addressing significant environmental damage on sections under their ownership.

“When the spirits are low, when the day appears dark, when work becomes monotonous, when hope hardly seems worth having, just mount a bicycle and go out for a spin down the road, without thought on anything but the ride you are taking.”

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
Benefits of Cycling, 1896



A healthier Wales

Active travel is good for physical and mental health as it **builds gentle exercise into the daily routine**. It also **increases social connection** and gets people outdoors, **connecting them to nature** and boosting positivity.³⁰

As well as keeping people healthy and helping to prevent the development of life-threatening diseases, there is evidence to show that **active travel helps people recover from diseases such as cancer and heart disease**.³¹

In terms of mental health, active travel is known to have positive impacts through increasing the production of ‘happy hormones’ such as endorphins, oxytocin and serotonin.³²

For adults, achieving the recommended amount of 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity a week helps **prevent and manage over 20 chronic conditions** such as coronary heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and cancer.³³

Health gains from the National Cycle Network³⁴

- ♥ On average, more than 350,000 hours of physical activity took place every day on the UK Network in 2019.
- ♥ Over 3,200 cases of disease (ranging from type 2 diabetes to dementia) are estimated to have been avoided from walking and cycling on the Network. This saved the NHS over £21.5 million, the equivalent of more than 860 nurses’ salaries.
- ♥ Getting exercise is a motivation for 94% of users in choosing to use the Network. 85% of users say the Network has helped increase the amount of physical activity they regularly take. 33% of volunteers tell us they have increased their physical activity as a result of volunteering.
- ♥ Walking and cycling on the Network has prevented 542 early deaths. This equates to a saving of £413 million using the standard value of quality-adjusted life years. Physical activity on the Network is estimated to prevent nearly 600,000 sick days.



A more equal Wales

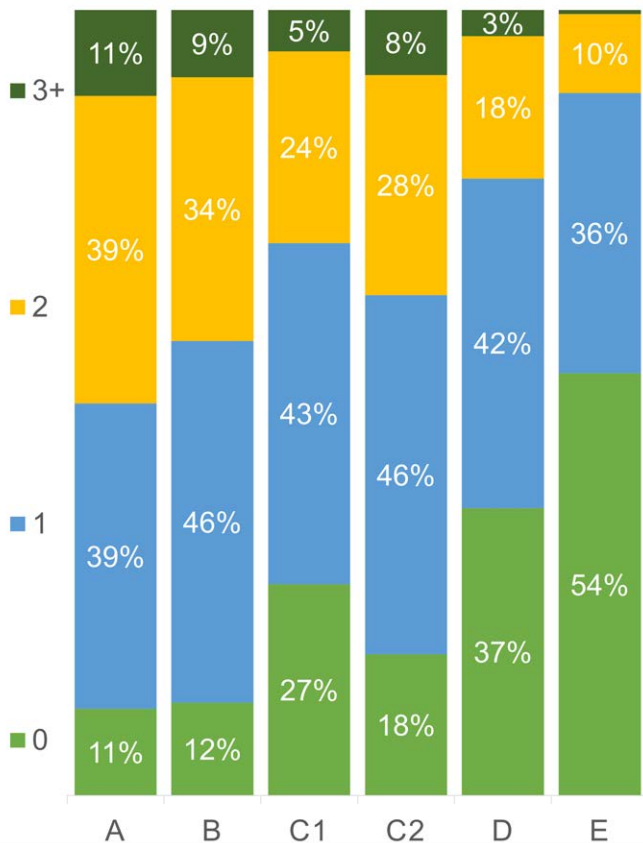
It is the communities who contribute least who suffer the most from the effects of air pollution. Welsh communities in areas of high deprivation are more likely to breathe polluted air.³⁵ There is also a significant disparity in car ownership between ethnic groups. Almost double the proportion of Black households have no access to a vehicle, compared to White households.

% no car/van in household, Wales, 2021 census ³⁶

Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African	35.6%
Other ethnic group	31.2%
Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups	28.8%
White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller, Roma or Other White	24.2%
White: Irish	22.4%
Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh	21.0%
White: English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	18.9%

There is also a significant disparity in car ownership between socio-economic grades. Sustrans' Walking and Cycling Index provide rich data for Cardiff. It shows that almost five times the proportion of households in social grade E (unemployed) have no access to a vehicle, compared to social grade A households (higher & intermediate managerial).

% number of cars/vans in household, Cardiff, 2021 ³⁷



Active travel routes are an important way to connect people to employment. In Wales, in 2021, 11% of people travelling to work did so by cycle or on foot.³⁸ The Welsh Government's target is for 45% of journeys to be made sustainably by 2040, this includes by public transport, as well as walking and cycling.³⁹ The Network links to many areas of high-density employment such as the Deeside Industrial Park, Cardiff City Centre and the Holyhead and Milford Haven Freeports.



We need to go further and faster to make the Network more accessible and inclusive. Removing physical barriers, such as steps and narrow gates from off-road walking and wheeling routes would be useful for 82% of disabled people to walk or wheel more.⁴⁰

Sustrans' Paths for Everyone strategy is aiming to remove all barriers from the Network.⁴¹ In Wales we are encouraging and supporting local authorities to ensure access for those using adapted cycles, mobility scooters and wheelchairs. In total we have removed 190 barriers and redesigned a further 71 to be accessible.





A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language

The National Cycle Network connects to a high number of Welsh tourist destinations, historic sites and monuments, cultural venues, towns and cities, national parks and landscapes and coastal areas. The Welsh Government agrees the Network should be in good condition in order to support the visitor economy.⁴²

In its circumnavigation of Wales, the National Cycle Network passes all six of Wales' awe-inspiring cathedrals, some of the world's most spectacular castles, and a host of sacred and precious places, some dating back to prehistoric times.⁴³ The Network also promotes culture through a number of art installations.



Left, above: Sustrans Cymru has mapped historic and sacred places as part of our Sacred Trails project.



Left, below: Active travel can support a thriving Welsh language by connecting people and providing more opportunities to use the language in Welsh speaking communities through higher levels of social interaction. Our Network signage is fully bilingual.



Art on the National Cycle Network

In 2000, artists from the four countries of the United Kingdom designed cast-iron, Millennium Mileposts artworks. Since 2021 we've been undertaking a UK-wide project to audit and repaint the mileposts. Volunteers from Sustrans Cymru, local community groups, and local school children are designing and carrying out the painting of the posts.⁴⁴

Across Wales there are 11 portrait benches, immortalising Welsh heroes as life-sized steel figures on the National Cycle Network. These are people who have made a positive impact on their local communities as well as the nation, including Tom Jones, Chartist leader Zephaniah Williams, designer Laura Ashley and railway engineer Richard Trevithick.⁴⁵



A globally responsible Wales

The National Cycle Network supports globally responsible, sustainable behaviour, through enabling people to travel in a way that is cost-effective, on infrastructure that has a low impact on the environment, and on modes of transport which do not create air pollution.

Notably, reducing car use and increasing active travel helps to reduce Wales' carbon emissions and contributes to Wales' Net Zero targets. A smaller contribution to climate change will result in fewer impacts in countries around the world.

A Wales of cohesive communities

Our vision is for a UK-wide network of traffic-free paths for everyone, connecting cities, towns and countryside, loved by the communities they serve. Having connected communities is also the essence of this well-being goal - the Future Generations Commissioner defines connected communities in relation to active travel and uses our work as evidence.⁴⁸

For most of us, our social lives depend heavily on getting to places where we can interact with our friends and family members. Sustrans has studied the connection between transport and loneliness and isolation.⁴⁹

Cycling and walking themselves can be a 'third space' in which you meet other people. We found that cycling was associated with reduced feelings of loneliness, and that people walking and cycling met more people and felt greater social cohesion than car drivers.

The National Cycle Network in itself also attracts people to gather and mingle, none more so than our fantastic volunteers. We currently have 250 volunteers in Wales, people who are passionate about walking and cycling, but also about nature and the communities where they live.

In February 2023, the Welsh Government accepted the "Roads Review", independent recommendations to limit new road building – primarily regional trunk roads – to a series of conditions, most relevantly that new roads must support modal shift and reduce carbon emissions. This was in recognition that transport makes up 15% of total emissions in Wales, but has been the slowest sector to reduce levels of greenhouse gas pollution over the last 30 years.⁴⁶

The Network is already playing it part. 62% of its users walk or cycle in place of using a car. Across the UK, this has potentially taken 70.9 million car trips and over 110 million car kilometres off the road, equivalent to a carbon reduction of over 23,000 tonnes. The Network has a positive impact on air pollution locally as well as globally - around 619 miles of the Network are within Air Quality Management Areas.⁴⁷

Volunteers Ogmore Valley Priide community group

Ogmore Valley Priide, who are a local voluntary group, have come into their own over the last couple of years.⁵⁰ They have done some fantastic work in the Valley, which includes litter picking the NCN883 route from Lewistown, sometimes up to Nantymoel, an extensive area to cover.

They meet once a week, sometimes with school children in tow, to litter pick around the Valley. They have also put up some makeshift bins along the Network in Ogmore, which they empty themselves regularly using a wheelbarrow and in conjunction with the local Council.

We are very lucky to have such a great bunch of dedicated volunteers, who do not mind getting their hands dirty and who always do their very best to keep their Valley tidy.





What needs to happen?

This paper has set out to share our passion for the National Cycle Network and why it is a valuable asset for Wales. We have drawn out links with Wales' seven well-being goals, to demonstrate the breadth of the value the Network provides.

We want to spread the knowledge of the Network and its many benefits, to encourage more people to use this fantastic resource, and to make it ever more accessible for people in Wales.

Maintaining the Network we have is a challenge. Along its many miles, we have natural habitats, historic infrastructure, and challenging terrain. We have the ambition to continue to improve it and to extend further.

To achieve all this, and to amplify the wellbeing benefits, it must be supported. The National Cycle Network represents a tried and tested, successful part of Wales' cultural, political and physical landscapes. For the well-being of Wales, it provides unparalleled value for money.

We need to see urgent action and fair funding.



We seek support for the National Cycle Network, to help us protect and enhance it. We are grateful for ongoing support from the Welsh Government. Until 2020, there was no specific public funding for the Network in Wales, and this has now risen to £680,000 per year. This has allowed us to work with local authorities to upgrade parts of the Network that are in poor repair or inaccessible.

To build on that support, we recommend:

- 1 Continued recognition that the Network is an essential part of a strategic transport network**
The Welsh Government's transport strategy aims to ensure the Network is in good condition and supports the visitor economy. Many parts are also essential commuting routes. Its importance in the transport network should continue to be recognised in policy and funding decisions.
- 2 Resilience funding**
Many sections of the Network are in urgent need of specialist maintenance. As we experience more extreme weather, heat, cold and flooding causes regular damage. Parts of the Network most at risk, such as Victorian railway bridges, often have cultural and historical significance. These local and national assets need protecting.
- 3 Barrier removal support**
We must ensure that the Network is accessible for everyone, including users on wheelchairs, adapted cycles, cargo bikes, trikes, riding horses, or pushing prams. This requires funding to audit existing inappropriate barriers, to remove, or install new designs. It also requires local political support that values accessibility.
- 4 Funding to improve biodiversity**
The geography allied to our previous work means much of the Network is already amazingly biodiverse. There is more potential to create exemplary habitats, with spaces and routes for wildlife to live and travel. We want to map specific habitats and their condition to identify what interventions are needed.



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About Sustrans

Sustrans works for and with communities, helping them come to life by walking, wheeling and cycling to create healthier places and happier lives for everyone.

Across the UK we involve communities in shaping our towns and cities. Together we campaign for and create spaces where everyone can move around safely and give people the tools and confidence to get out of their cars.

We inspire people to change the way we all travel every day, forging closer connections with our neighbours and reducing traffic to create a better environment and more sustainable society for everyone.

Join us on our journey. www.sustrans.org.uk

Get in touch

Sustrans Cymru
One Canal Parade, Cardiff, CF10 5BF

sustranscymru@sustrans.org.uk

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(England and Wales) SC039263 (Scotland)

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