



Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan

Monmouthshire County Council

February 2024



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Title	Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience (Section 6) Forward Plan
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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Section 6 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 places a duty on public authorities to seek to maintain and enhance biodiversity where it is within the proper exercise of their functions. In doing so, public authorities must seek to promote the resilience of ecosystems. This means that Monmouthshire County Council must take a pro-active approach to improve and not reduce biodiversity and ecosystem resilience when carrying out its functions.
- 1.2 The legislation also requires Public Bodies to prepare a 'Forward Plan' to outline how they shall meet the duty and report on that plan every three years from the first reporting round in 2019. This '**Biodiversity & Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan**' supersedes the plan of the same title which was published in 2017, following two rounds of statutory reporting (2019 & 2023) and six years of a rapidly changing landscape for nature recovery in Monmouthshire and Wales. The Forward Plan covers the unitary authority of the County Council including the area in the Bannau Brycheiniog National Park where functions of Monmouthshire County Council are relevant.
- 1.3 The updated Biodiversity & Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan will:
 - ✦ Summarise the relevant legislative requirements for biodiversity and the resilience of ecosystems, governance and the corporate framework, and its relationship to the Climate and Nature Emergency Strategy and other plans.
 - ✦ Consider the current known state of biodiversity and ecosystem resilience of Monmouthshire and consider how the Area Statements and Section 7 Habitats and Species should shape delivery.
 - ✦ Identify the Refreshed Biodiversity & Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan Objectives for Monmouthshire
 - ✦ Identify actions and delivery mechanisms to meet the objectives during the period of 2023-2028.
 - ✦ Identify a reporting framework for future reporting rounds.

2 THE CLIMATE & NATURE EMERGENCY

- 2.1 Monmouthshire County Council declared a Climate Emergency in 2019. The initial Climate Emergency Action Plan focused on decarbonisation of Monmouthshire County Council but also identified the importance of managing green spaces to reduce energy use, absorb carbon and be resilient. The plan was updated in 2021, the emphasis on nature recovery was strengthened and action addressing water quality was added to improve protection of our rivers and coasts.
- 2.2 In March 2022, a Motion for Rivers and Ocean was passed by MCC elected members, taking the Motion for the Ocean model developed by the Local Government Association Coastal Special Interest Group, and adapting it to recognise the importance of taking a catchment to coast approach to protecting water quality. MCC produced a report containing recommendations for how the council should act to realise clean, healthy, and productive rivers and oceans, alongside the commitment to tackle the climate emergency.
- 2.3 In October 2022, Welsh government published the [Recommendations of the 'Biodiversity Deep Dive'](#) as part of the two-part UN biodiversity summit COP 15. The main aim of this work is to protect 30% of land and seas by 2030. Of relevance for Local Government is the action to Embed Nature Recovery in Policy and Strategy in Public Bodies in Wales.
- 2.4 In April 2023, Monmouthshire County Council published the Community and Corporate Plan 2022-2028, which aims to take Monmouthshire forward, working together for a fairer, greener, more successful county. The objectives of the plan include making Monmouthshire a “green place” to live work, with reduced carbon emissions, and making a positive contribution to addressing the climate and nature emergency. The Plan recognises that we are a partner in the Public Service Board, which is responsible for setting well-being objectives for the county of Gwent. The local authority’s own well-being objectives are set by Council and form the backbone of the Community and Corporate Plan.
- 2.5 These significant changes in Wales, Gwent and Monmouthshire have triggered a need for a change in the governance structure around Climate and Nature. Monmouthshire’s approach will be based on four key pillars, as shown in Figure 1.

Climate and Nature Emergency Strategy

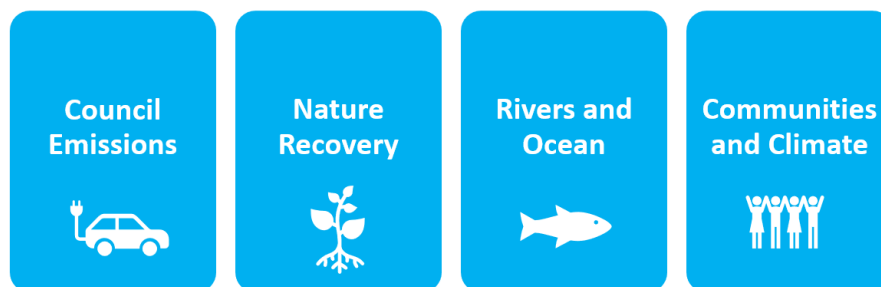


Figure 1 Climate & Nature Strategy planning

2.6 The Nature Recovery pillar includes 3 key and interconnected plans for delivery:

- ✦ Biodiversity & Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan (2024-2028) i.e. this plan,
- ✦ Monmouthshire Local Nature Recovery Action Plan (2024), and
- ✦ Monmouthshire Green Infrastructure Strategy (2024).

2.7 The Monmouthshire Local NRAP is being prepared by MCC in partnership with the Monmouthshire Local Nature Partnership (LNP). This partnership, hosted and coordinated by Monmouthshire County Council, exists to co-ordinate, promote and record conservation actions to promote and enhance nature locally. The Local Nature Recovery Action Plan for Monmouthshire is a key element to effective delivery of Nature Recovery by providing practical actions that meet the objectives of strategic plans, as well as promoting collaborative working with communities and other stakeholders to achieve common goals.

2.8 The refreshed Monmouthshire Green Infrastructure Strategy is being prepared to reflect the statutory and guidance requirement of Planning Policy Wales. Setting out Monmouthshire's approach to the delivery of GI; it identifies a clear vision, aims, strategic objectives and associated principles to inform and contribute to a range of national, regional and local goals plans and objectives. It forms a delivery mechanism for Nature Recovery, supports ways of addressing health and well-being outcomes, identifies solutions for tackling climate change, supports active travel, public rights of way and provides the framework for partnership working through a GI approach.

3 BIODIVERSITY & ECOSYSTEM RESILIENCE OF MONMOUTHSHIRE

3.1 Monmouthshire is a large and varied county, with the estuarine coast at the southern limits and the uplands of Bannau Brycheiniog to the north west. The landscape takes us from the wooded Wye Valley to our boundary with the eastern valleys of Gwent.

3.2 Monmouthshire has major biodiversity and ecosystem resources, many of which are internationally or nationally recognised. The Monmouthshire Unitary Authority area contains the following resources:

<p>✦ The Severn Estuary European Marine Site (EMS)</p>	<p>✦ The Severn Estuary is designated as a Special Area for Conservation (SAC), Special Protection Area (SPA), Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a Ramsar Site (Wetland of international importance).</p>
<p>✦ Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)</p>	<p>✦ There are seven other SACs in Monmouthshire: Cwm Clydach woodlands*, River Wye, River Usk, Sugar Loaf woodlands*, Usk Bat Sites*, Wye Valley woodlands and the Wye Valley (and Forest of Dean) bat sites.</p>
<p>✦ Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)</p>	<p>✦ There are 68 SSSIs in Monmouthshire, 16 of which are within BBNP area. Most are woodland or grassland sites with others designated for their wetland or geological interest.</p>
<p>✦ National Nature Reserves</p>	<p>✦ Cwm Clydach*, Coed y Cerrig*, Fiddler's Elbow and Lady Park Wood.</p>
<p>✦ Local Nature Reserve</p>	<p>✦ Cleddon Bog</p>
<p>✦ Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs)</p>	<p>✦ There are approximately 759 non-statutory SINC sites predominantly in relation to grassland and ancient and semi-natural woodland areas within the Monmouthshire planning area and eight SINCs within the BBNP part of the County.</p>
<p>✦ Priority habitat and protected species</p>	<p>Priority habitats and species are those recognised as being of principle importance for nature conservation in Wales listed on Section 42 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016.</p>

*Sites within the Bannau Brycheiniog National Park

3.3 The South East Wales Area Statement published by Natural Resources Wales in 2019 identified five landscape profiles in Monmouthshire which are useful to illustrate the differences across the county: Bannau Brycheiniog and Black Mountains, South Wales Valleys, Central Monmouthshire, Wye Valley and Wentwood, and the Gwent Levels (see Figure 2). The landscape profiles primarily share the same natural habitats but with clear differences which give them their distinctive character.

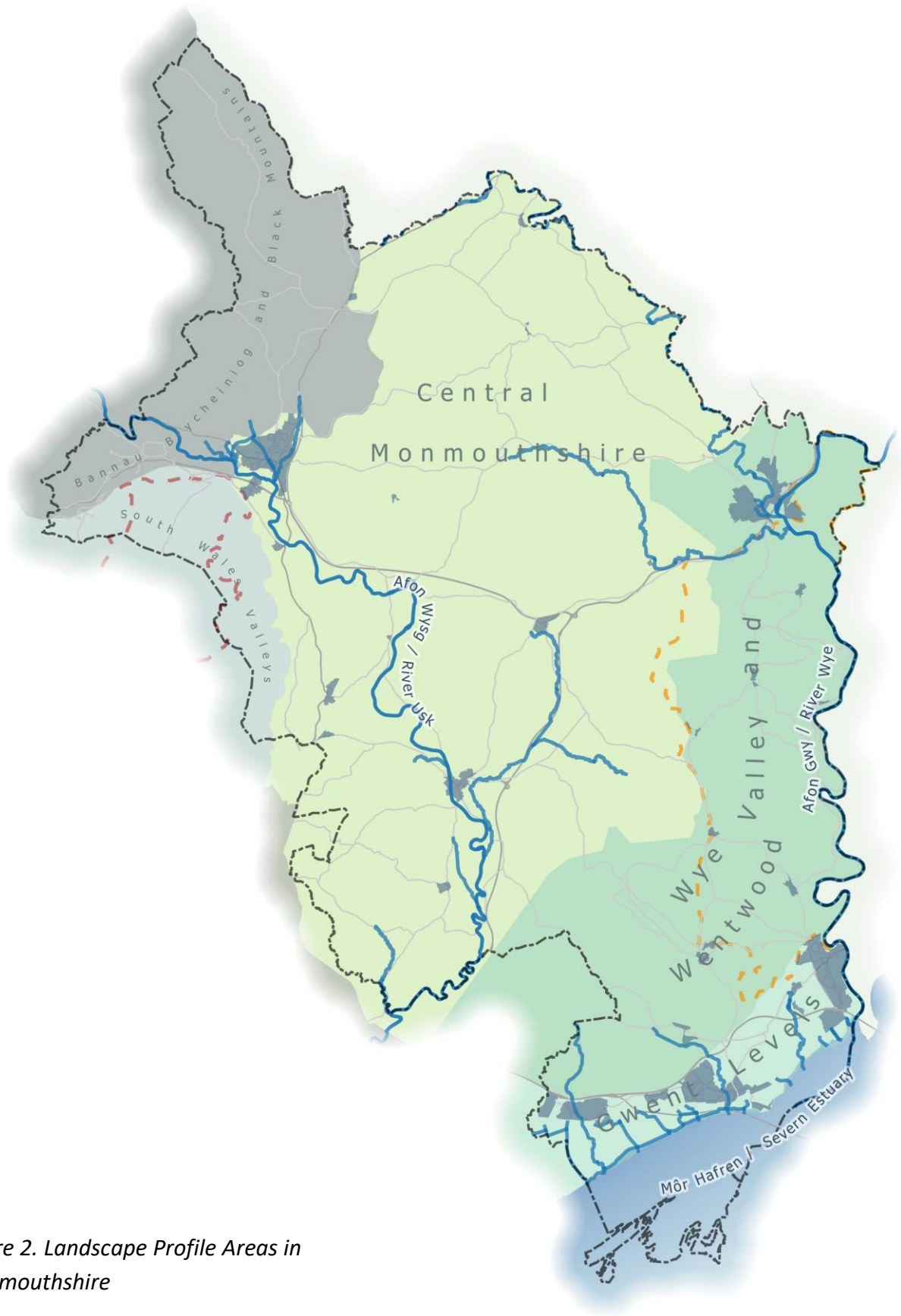


Figure 2. Landscape Profile Areas in Monmouthshire

- 3.4 Central Monmouthshire is noted for its undulating lowlands comprising pasture and arable farmland with isolated pockets of woodland. It is a valuable farming area with agriculturally improved pasture and arable fields. Hedgerows provide important links between small, isolated, ancient woodlands, often on hilltops and steep valley sides where farming is difficult. Parcels of unimproved grassland remain, and considered in the context of massive historical decline are of significant ecological importance.
- 3.5 Wye Valley and Wentwood is predominantly a wooded and riverine landscape. The steep sides of the Wye Valley are clothed in extensive blocks of internationally important woodlands, designated as the Wye Valley Woodlands Special Area of Conservation (SAC). The Wye Valley is home to internationally important bat species including Greater Horseshoe Bats and Lesser Horseshoe Bats with many of their roosts included in the Wye Valley and Forest of Dean Bat Sites SAC. Parts of the Wye Valley are known to be used by at least 15 species of bats including the rare Barbastelle Bat and Bechstein's Bat. The area is also important for species such as dormouse, nightjar, and woodland invertebrates.
- 3.6 In the south, the unique Gwent Levels form an extensive coastal habitat along the Severn Estuary comprising reclaimed agricultural land drained by a network of ditches known as reens. The reens support a particularly diverse community of insects and other invertebrates (for example water beetles) and are designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Following a successful reintroduction program at Magor Marsh SSSI in 2012, water voles have spread across the Gwent Levels with the furthest record 16km from the original release site.
- 3.7 Outside of the Monmouthshire Planning and Nature Recovery Action Plan area but within the administrative area of the MCC Unitary Authority, are areas of the Bannau Brycheiniog and Black Mountains and South Wales Valleys (Eastern Valleys) landscapes. The Bannau Brycheiniog landscape profile includes the Vale of Ewyas and surrounding upland in the Black Mountains, and the distinctive peaks of the Skirrid and Sugar Loaf framing the Usk Valley at Abergavenny. With exposed upland moorland with extensive views, this is a landscape noted for tranquillity, dark skies, and limited development. Conifer and broad-leafed woodland are present. Pastures are often enclosed by thick hedgerows, often with narrow lanes, scattered small settlements are in the valleys with prehistoric archaeology and Medieval sites including Llanthony Priory and historic parkland.
- 3.8 The Eastern Valleys includes the Bloreng mountain and eastern slopes of Mynydd Garn-wen, some areas are included in the Bleanavon Industrial Landscape World Heritage Site. Common land is a large and important component of the Eastern Valleys and there are extensive areas of beech woodland. Cave systems across the area are important to internationally important bat roosts protected by the Usk Valley Bat Sites SAC. The Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal on the National Park border is a perfect example of how this once industrial landscape can provide for wildlife today.

- 3.9 The two major rivers in Monmouthshire are the River Usk and River Wye. Both are designated as Special Areas of Conservation and together with their tributaries provide important wildlife corridors and migratory routes for key species such as otters, shad and white clawed crayfish. Another important freshwater habitat in Monmouthshire is the Llandegfedd Reservoir, designated as a SSSI for supporting overwintering wildfowl.
- 3.10 Despite having a wealth of protected and priority species, Monmouthshire's ecosystems are currently facing significant challenges. The State of Nature identified the key drivers of change in Wales (see Figure 2). These drivers are relevant to Monmouthshire. Grassland sites are at risk from poor management, air pollution and development pressures. The Wye Valley is our most ecologically rich area, but quality of the woodland is under threat from lack of management and the spread of ash dieback and invasive species. A considerable proportion of reens and ditches on the Gwent Levels are degraded and at risk from unsuitable development. Freshwater habitats are under threat from water abstraction, pollution, and siltation. Monmouthshire, like the rest of the world, is facing a Nature Emergency.

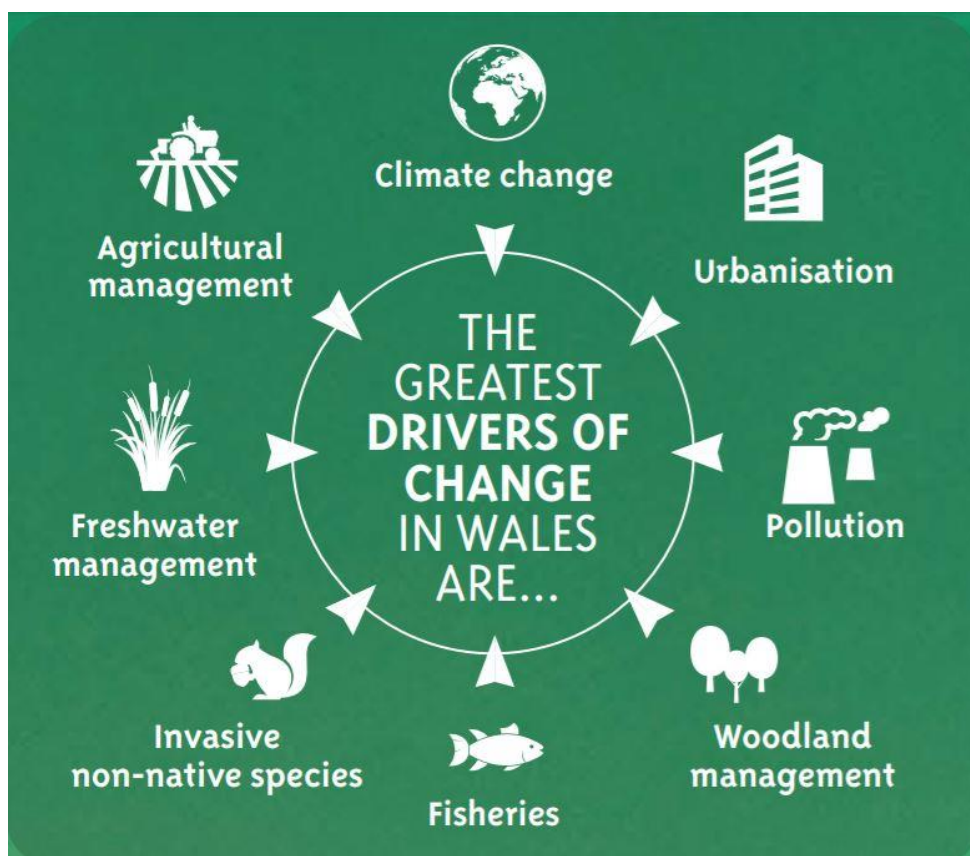


Figure 3 State of Nature: Drivers of Change

- 3.11 Section 7 of the Environment (Wales) Act says that the Welsh Ministers will publish, review and revise lists of living organisms and types of habitats in Wales, which they consider are of key significance to sustain and improve biodiversity in relation to Wales. An updated list is expected in 2024 however, in its absence, the list compiled in response to section 42 of the NERC Act 2006 is referenced.
- 3.12 An audit of the Section 7 species and habitats that occur in Monmouthshire undertaken in 2022 are included in the Nature Recovery Action Plan that will be published for consultation alongside this document. These are our 'Priority' habitats & species for nature recovery in Monmouthshire. Additional habitats and or species may be identified as local priorities continue to be developed through the Local Nature Recovery Action Plan.
- 3.13 The Greater Gwent State of Nature was published in 2021 and used existing data to analyse the status and trends of species within the Greater Gwent area. The report analysed individual species and groups of species representing over 500 individual species, presented as 100 different stories of these species and species groups. Of all the species and species groups analysed, 34% of species showed a decline in their numbers or are predicted to continue to decline. Only 12% showed stable populations. Twenty-one percent showed a welcome increase in their numbers, but the remaining 21% did not have enough data to describe the population trends.

4 REFRESHED FORWARD PLAN

4.1 During the 2020-23 report, a review of each of the Forward Plan objectives has been undertaken. It concluded that overall, much was being achieved under the objectives composed in 2017 however, the environmental education objective was too narrow in its scope and should be expanded to include wider nature-based solutions and their role in health & well-being in addition to raising public awareness. It was also considered that there was a gap around data and evidence which fell short of the Wales Nature Recovery Action Plan. The following table lists the Refreshed Forward Plan Objectives and the service areas of Monmouthshire County Council that they particularly appertain to:

Objective 1: Embed biodiversity throughout decision making at all levels	•Corporate Policy, Well-being Policy and Planning, Strategic Plans e.g. RLDP, Consents, Operational decisions,
Objective 2: Provide nature-based opportunities to raise awareness, support health and well-being and encourage action for nature	•Environmental Education, Health & Wellbeing activities in nature, providing interpretation and guidance, supporting local groups and citizens to act for nature.
Objective 3: Undertake land management for biodiversity and promote ecosystem resilience	•Management of Council estate for nature recovery.
Objective 4: Influence land management to improve ecosystem resilience	•Supporting other landowners and stakeholders to make positive changes e.g. Regenerative Farming and Natural Flood Management.
Objective 5: Tackle key pressures on species and habitats	•Addressing drivers through project and procedure e.g. Delivering net benefit through Development Management, Invasive non-native species control, impacts of lighting.
Objective 6: Support landscape scale projects and partnerships to maximise delivery	•Collaboration, co-design and co-production through Catchment Partnerships, landscape partnerships, project partnerships.
Objective 7: Use improved evidence, understanding and monitoring to inform action	•Nature Networks, undertaking and encouraging others to undertake monitoring and biological recording.
Objective 8: Monitor the effectiveness of the plan and review	•Undertake statutory reporting and assess the need to update the plan.

5 ACTIONS FOR DELIVERY 2024-2028

- 5.1 Unlike the first iteration of the Biodiversity & Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan, this refreshed version sets out specific actions together with key service areas responsible for delivery. A table of actions is available in Appendix 1 of this document.
- 5.2 The table also identifies the current funding status of the action, the source(s) of that funding.
- 5.3 The actions make up the 'living' element of the Section 6 plan. These will evolve as additional legislation, policy, funding come into place.

6 REPORTING FRAMEWORK

- 6.1 In line with Monmouthshire County Council Performance reporting the actions will be reported against every 6 months.
- 6.2 Statutory reporting to Welsh Government is due in December 2025 and every 3 years following this.
- 6.3 It is proposed that the Forward Plan Objectives and associated Actions shall be reviewed at the time of the 2028 statutory reporting round.