

What would you like to do?

Starting with Nature/ Dechrau Gyda Natur Gwent is a regional, collaborative early years programme designed to connect babies and children under five—and their parents, carers and wider families—with nature in meaningful, inclusive and enjoyable ways. The project will focus particularly on families living in disadvantaged communities across Gwent, including expectant parents, foster families, (kinship, Reg 38 and generic), unpaid carers and families facing barriers related to poverty, isolation, developmental needs, mental health and limited access to safe green spaces.

Our ambition is to embed joyful, bilingual, community-led nature play into the daily life of families across the region, ensuring that the youngest children—those who benefit most from nature-rich experiences—can access high-quality outdoor learning from the very earliest moments of life. By working through trusted local partners, strengthening community nature hubs and co-designing activities with families, we aim to make nature accessible, familiar and empowering for those who currently have the least access to it.

The project will transform familiar local places—community woodlands, gardens, play spaces, Flying Start settings and volunteer-led nature groups—into vibrant centres for outdoor learning, family connection and early years development. Alongside direct activity with families, the project will train early years practitioners and community volunteers in nature-based early years practice, developing local capacity to sustain delivery long after the project ends.

What we will do:

1. Deliver nature-based activities for babies, under-5s and their caregivers

We will offer a rich programme of high quality, evidence informed nature experiences that promote child development, early learning, relational bonding and caregiver wellbeing. These will include:

- **Structured 6-week programmes** focused on sensory exploration, communication, outdoor play and parent–child bonding.
- **Pram-friendly wellbeing walks**, outdoor coffee mornings and nature picnic sessions that reduce isolation and support maternal mental health.
- **Sensory and curriculum-linked play trails** featuring colour, sound, texture and simple physical challenges suitable for all developmental stages.
- **Creative nature sessions** such as leaf printing, water play, mud kitchens, bug hunts, den building and storytelling circles.
- **Pollinator Play & Learn**, using nets, pots and child-friendly resources to introduce ecological concepts.
- **Family engagement days**, outdoor celebrations, mini-festivals and intergenerational activities.
- **Participatory evaluation**, including children’s drawings, nature diaries, creative prompts and feedback activities.

All activities will be **bilingual, co-designed with families**, and adapted to meet sensory, communication and access needs. Families will influence session themes, timings, locations and greenspace improvements through parent insight groups, focus groups, ongoing consultation and children's own creative contributions.

Activities will take place both outdoors in local nature settings and within community outreach locations such as parks, community gardens, Flying Start sites and existing nature hubs.

2. Develop and improve local community green spaces

Working with community groups and local partners, we will deliver low-cost, high-impact improvements that make neighbourhood green spaces more attractive, biodiverse and suitable for early years play. These may include:

- Wildflower and pollinator planting
- Bug hotels, insect towers and simple habitat creation
- Toddler-friendly sensory trails
- Pram-accessible paths and child-safe spaces
- Community allotments and family growing beds
- Community-designed murals, nature art and interpretation boards
- Seating, bilingual signage and accessible layouts

These improvements will encourage independent family use, support biodiversity and create a legacy of nature-rich spaces long after project delivery ends.

3. Activate and strengthen community nature hubs

We will work through a network of trusted community organisations already playing vital roles in their local areas. These include:

- Tafy at Cwm (Blaenau Gwent)
- Sirhowy Hill Woodlands, Tredegar
- Pentref Tyleri, Cwmtillery
- Caerphilly Woodland Trust
- Community Volunteers Wales, Risca
- Twmps Nature Recovery Group, Newport
- Cando, Griffithstown (Torfaen)
- Equine Therapy Centre, Mamhilad
- Abergavenny Youth Centre
- Pillgwenlly community organisations (including Pill Trust, Pill Parents Group, Arise Shine Light, People's Prosperity Project, Kurdish Community Centre, Newport Sudanese Association, Newport Yemeni Association)

Each hub will provide a base for family sessions, community events, drop-ins, volunteering opportunities and partnership working. Strengthening these hubs creates long-term community capacity for early years nature connection.

4. Provide training for early years practitioners and community volunteers

We will develop and deliver specialist training in nature-based early years practice for:

- Early Years practitioners
- Flying Start staff
- Childminders
- Community volunteers
- Hub staff and local champions

Training will equip practitioners with confidence, skills and resources to embed outdoor learning and nature connection in daily practice, creating sustained capacity across the region.

Who will benefit and how many people?

Starting with Nature Gwent will benefit:

- **Babies and children under 5**, especially those living in poverty or isolated from nature.
- **Expectant parents, new parents and carers**, including foster carers, kinship carers and unpaid carers.
- **Families experiencing trauma, poverty, disability, neurodivergence or limited access to mainstream services.**
- **Early Years practitioners, Flying Start teams, volunteers and community workers.**

Estimated beneficiaries over six years:

- **4,200** under-5s
- **4,200** caregivers
- **4,800** participants at family events
- **300+** practitioners and volunteers trained
- Thousands of community members benefiting indirectly through improved greenspaces

Sessions delivered in trusted, local settings will engage communities traditionally underrepresented in nature-based provision.

What difference will the project make?

1. Improved child development and early learning

Regular nature play will support:

- Language and communication
- Sensory development
- Physical activity
- Emotional regulation and resilience
- Curiosity, creativity and independence

Children will have more opportunities for safe, joyful, developmentally rich outdoor play—something currently lacking in many communities.

2. Better parental and carer wellbeing

Parents, carers and expectant parents will experience:

- Reduced loneliness and improved mental health
- Stronger peer support networks
- Better confidence in supporting child development outdoors
- Practical tools for low-cost, sustainable activities they can continue at home

Nature-based social spaces will help rebuild community connection after years of isolation and service reduction.

3. Stronger family bonding

Outdoor shared experiences will:

- Strengthen bonding and positive shared experiences
- Create more opportunities for child-led play
- Support healthier routines and active lifestyles
- Increase trust and connection with local services and support networks

4. Stronger, more resilient communities

Communities will benefit from:

- Enhanced biodiversity and safer, improved greenspaces
- Higher levels of volunteering and community participation
- Stronger relationships between families and practitioners
- Reduced inequalities in nature access and early years support

Nature becomes a shared, accessible community asset.

5. Long-term sustainable impact

By building local capacity through hubs, training and co-design:

- Activities can continue long term
- Skills remain within communities
- Greenspace improvements endure
- Local ownership grows

The project creates a foundation for lifelong nature connection for thousands of children.

How we know the project is needed and what gaps it will fill

Starting with Nature is based on extensive evidence, community and professional consultation, and a clear understanding of regional priorities for early years, health equity and community wellbeing.

1. Robust evidence and regional priorities demonstrate clear need

The proposal has been developed in partnership with **Aneurin Bevan University Health Board's Early Years Team**, and aligns directly with major regional strategies and programmes, including:

- **Gwent Public Service Board: Giving Every Baby and Child the Best Start in Life**
- **Best Start in Life Leadership and Regional Management Groups**
- **Gwent Marmot Region Early Years Programme**
- **The Gwent Wellbeing Plan (2023)**
- **The Healthy & Sustainable Pre-School Scheme**

These frameworks all stress the vital importance of investment in early years (preconception–age 4) as the foundation for lifelong health, wellbeing, school readiness and reduced inequalities. They also highlight the need for more nature-based, preventative, low-barrier support for families.

Regional data clearly demonstrates the scale of need:

- **18.6% of children aged 0–4 in Gwent live in poverty.**
- **23% of mothers report a mental health condition.**
- **23% of children aged 0–4 are living with overweight or obesity.**

The **Director of Public Health's Annual Report (2023-24)** emphasises the profound impact of the pandemic on children's development, family resilience and mental health, calling for renewed focus on early years support and reducing inequalities.

2. Gaps in existing local services for young children and caregivers

Although Gwent has nature-based organisations and outdoor activities, the evidence shows a **significant gap in provision specifically tailored to babies, under-5s and their caregivers.**

Key gaps identified through the **Gwent Green Grid Health Impact Assessment (HIA)** and engagement with Flying Start and early years providers across Gwent include:

- a) **Limited access to safe, high-quality greenspace in deprived areas**

Families in the communities where our Nature and Wellbeing Hubs are based (Risca, Tredegar, Cwmtillery, Griffithstown, Cwm, Pillgwenlly) often live in areas with poor housing quality and few safe outdoor play spaces.

In some areas, over **37% of children aged 0–4 live in income deprivation.**

b) Nature-based programmes are often costly or exclusive

Many existing outdoor programmes:

- Charge fees that are unaffordable
- Are not accessible by public transport
- Do not provide outdoor clothing or equipment
- Do not actively include parents and carers
- Are not designed for babies or very young children

c) Lack of outdoor early years provision and gaps in child development support

Research across local Flying Start areas found:

- Too few opportunities for speech, language and numeracy development through outdoor play
- A lack of early years outdoor play provision
- 56% of Early Years Professionals identified concerns around speech and language
- 29% of parents lack resources to support development
- 51% of parents report not knowing how to support their child’s developmental needs

d) Barriers that disproportionately impact disadvantaged families

The **GGG HIA** shows that families face:

- Transport and cost barriers (reported by 60% of providers)
- Mental health challenges affecting parental confidence
- Cultural and structural barriers (“activities not for people like us”)
- Anxiety about outdoor safety
- Digital distraction and overscheduled lives
- Lack of knowledge about low-cost nature play
- Lack of suitable clothing and equipment
- Limited time outdoors despite nearby natural environments

These barriers are most acute for **babies, toddlers and caregivers**, meaning key developmental windows are being missed.

e) Need for targeted approaches for families with multiple disadvantages

Priority populations identified include:

- BAME families
- Families living with poverty
- Young parents
- Families with disabled children or additional learning needs
- Foster, kinship and Reg 38 carers
- Parents with mental health challenges

Starting with Nature Gwent is specifically designed to reach these groups.

3. Local data on community disadvantage reinforces need

Communities where the hubs are located face significant inequalities:

- **Blaenau Gwent:** highest rate of children aged 0–4 in income deprivation (37%)
- **Cwmtillery:** high economic inactivity and low access to safe outdoor spaces
- **Risca:** Healthy life expectancy up to 5 years below the Wales average
- **Tredegar:** one of the most deprived wards in Wales for education, training and skills
- **Pillgwenlly:** 37% of children live in poverty, far above the Welsh average.

These areas urgently need low-cost, localised, safe early years nature provision.

4. How the project fills these gaps

Starting with Nature Gwent directly responds to these gaps by offering:

- **Free, inclusive nature-based sessions for under-5s and caregivers**

No financial barriers. Clothing, equipment, refreshments and transport are provided.

- **Activities designed specifically for babies, toddlers and parents**

Unlike many existing schemes, sessions are age-specific and designed to build early speech, language, attachment and development.

- **Co-designed activities rooted in local needs**

Families will help shape:

- Activity content
- Greenspace improvements
- Cultural adaptation
- Accessibility requirements

- Timing and location

- **Culturally relevant, bilingual sessions** will ensure families feel represented, safe and welcome.
- **Greenspace enhancements in deprived communities** will create safer, more attractive and family-friendly outdoor environments.
- **Support for parental confidence and wellbeing** will address parental anxiety, mental health challenges and isolation.

5. How our project complements existing activities

Starting with Nature will:

- Strengthen and extend work delivered by community nature groups and Hubs across Gwent
- Build on Flying Start early years programmes
- Support the Healthy & Sustainable Pre-School Scheme
- Align with ABUHB Early Years and Public Health priorities
- Enhance regional green infrastructure work led by the Gwent Green Grid Partnership
- Complement speech, language and development-focused support by providing nature-based learning
- Add capacity where existing services face budget pressures and limited outdoor resources
- Provide outdoor play opportunities where providers currently cannot
- Support the Gwent Public Health Team's push to integrate formal and informal play in local environments
- Contribute to the Gwent Marmot commitment to health equity and sustainable communities

The project will act as the *connecting tissue* between environmental organisations, early years services, public health, Flying Start, community hubs and nature-based youth/family organisations.

Community involvement is fundamental to Starting with Nature Gwent. The project is designed with, for, and alongside the communities it seeks to support. It builds on four years of deep, place-based partnership working in which Groundwork Wales and the Gwent Green Grid Partnership (GGGP) have established strong, trusted relationships with community groups, public-sector services and early years settings across the region. These relationships have enabled communities to contribute directly to shaping our Nature and Wellbeing Hub model and the Starting with Nature project proposal.

1. Communities, organisations and groups we currently work with

Over the past four years, we have built a strong regional network of more than **80 community groups** and numerous public, third-sector and environmental partners, including:

- Natural Resources Wales
- Gwent Wildlife Trust
- GAVO
- Keep Wales Tidy
- Valleys Regional Park
- RSPB, Woodland Trust Wales, WCVA
- Growing Spaces, Food Sense Wales
- Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, via the Integrated Wellbeing Networks

This collaboration has supported **over 60 community-led projects**, nature-based wellbeing programmes, climate-action initiatives and training for more than **100 staff and volunteers**.

We also work with all five Gwent local authorities—Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Newport, Monmouthshire and Torfaen. GGGP officers are embedded within three councils, building strong links with Countryside Services, Parks Teams, Education and Early Years services and Community Support departments. This ensures alignment with local priorities, rapid problem solving and place-based delivery tailored to local needs.

2. Nature and Wellbeing Hubs – rooted in community

A major strength of the project is our network of **Nature and Wellbeing Hubs**, each led by established local organisations:

- Tafy at Cwm (Blaenau Gwent)
- Sirhowy Hill Woodlands, Tredegar (Blaenau Gwent)
- Pentref Tyleri, Cwmtillery (Blaenau Gwent)
- Caerphilly Woodland Trust (Caerphilly)
- Community Volunteers Wales, Risca (Caerphilly)
- Twmps Nature Recovery Group, Barrack Hill (Newport)
- Pillgwenlly, network of community groups (Newport)
- Equine Therapy Centre, Mamhilad (Monmouthshire)
- Canddo, Griffithstown (Torfaen)
- Abergavenny Youth Centre

Hubs offer inclusive nature spaces, community-led environmental action, wellbeing programmes, education and skills development. Each has significantly shaped the project's design and delivery approach.

3. Groups we will work with during delivery

Alongside existing partners, we will work with:

- Flying Start teams
- Maintained and non-maintained nurseries
- Cylch Meithrin and Welsh-medium early years provision
- Childminders, playgroups and sessional providers
- Schools with early years units
- Health visitors, midwives and ABUHB early years teams
- Local parent networks and bilingual family groups
- Community volunteers and Starting with Nature Champions

Further consultation with early years settings will refine activity design, accessibility and delivery.

4. How communities shaped the development of our idea

Starting with Nature has been developed through extensive, multi-layered consultation across Gwent.

a) Local authority engagement

Meetings with directors, managers and officers responsible for green spaces, early years and wellbeing ensured early buy-in, understanding of local needs and alignment with existing strategies.

b) Engagement with all Nature and Wellbeing Hubs

Each hub contributed insight on:

- Local barriers facing families
- Opportunities to complement ongoing programmes
- Greenspace needs and ambitions
- Cultural and social considerations

c) Focus groups with partners and early years specialists

Workshops with Flying Start staff, volunteers, community leaders, parents and caregivers helped identify gaps and emphasised the importance of focusing on babies, toddlers and caregivers.

d) Community conversations

Families shared lived experience relating to:

- Barriers to outdoor play
- Cultural and linguistic needs
- Accessibility and sensory considerations
- Preferred timings and formats
- Transport and safety concerns

This shaped commitments including pram-friendly design, sensory-inclusive activities, clothing and equipment support, refreshments and travel assistance.

5. Scale of engagement – who we have spoken to

We held **over 30 formal stakeholder meetings** and engaged with **more than 100 community representatives**, including council officers, hub leaders, early years practitioners, parents and partner organisations. Key consultation dates include:

- **1 Nov** – Caerphilly CBC (Green Spaces & Planning)
- **5 Nov** – Blaenau Gwent CC & TAFY
- **10 Nov** – Sirhowy Hill Woodlands CIC
- **13 Nov** – Pentref Tyleri
- **14 Nov** – Caerphilly Woodland Trust
- **18 Nov** – Equine Therapy Centre
- **20 & 28 Nov** – Newport County Council, Twmps Nature Recovery Group, Newport Yemeni Community Association
- **21 Nov** – Gwent Wildlife Trust
- **24 Nov** – Caerphilly Parent Network
- **4 & 26 Nov** – Community Volunteers Wales, Dewi Sant Flying Start Risca

This covers:

- 9 Nature & Wellbeing Hubs
- 5 local authorities
- 11 environmental and wellbeing partners
- Multiple Flying Start settings
- Several highly diverse community groups
- Parents, caregivers and local residents

When combined with four years of engagement involving **80+ community groups and 200+ partner organisations**, the project is rooted in deep, representative community participation.

6. Community involvement in design and delivery

Starting with Nature Gwent is built on community co-production. Families and community partners are not passive recipients, they are co-designers and leaders at every stage. We are seeking a project Development Grant of £25,000 to support in-depth consultation and coproduction.

We will undertake:

- **Regional consultation**
- **Three in-depth co-production programmes** (Newport, Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent)
- **Targeted engagement with underrepresented groups**
- **Sessions involving 60–70 caregivers, 70+ preschool children, 20 early years practitioners**
- **Partnership engagement with hubs and community groups**

We will work with groups including pregnant women, young parents, foster and kinship carers, BAME communities, neurodivergent families, families with disabled children, unpaid carers, Flying Start families and Welsh-medium groups.

Consultation methods:

- Group discussions, surveys, online tools
- Pushchair walks, outdoor tastings, nature play sessions
- Bilingual engagement with interpretation where needed
- Creative child-led methods: drawings, sensory play, observation, storytelling

This ensures real accessibility and cultural relevance

7. Co-production with early years practitioners

We will run:

- A consultation survey for Flying Start managers
- Workshops with practitioners across the three primary areas
- A skills audit to identify needs (biodiversity knowledge, outdoor-first aid, sensory-inclusive practice, etc.)

These sessions explore barriers, local examples of good practice, capacity issues and opportunities for joint delivery.

8. Community partners and hubs in co-production

Meetings with hubs and community partners explore:

- Their hosting capacity
- Needs for greenspace improvements
- Opportunities for co-delivery

- Family engagement patterns
- Joint celebrations and events

This creates a network of interconnected hubs responding to local community culture and needs.

9. Community involvement during delivery

a) Starting with Nature Champions

Parents and caregivers will be supported to take active roles as champions assisting with sessions, supporting outreach and acting as local ambassadors. They will receive training and ongoing support.

b) Co-designed sessions

All activities - outdoor play programmes, sensory trails, pram walks, nature events, will be shaped by families, with continuous feedback loops and piloting.

c) Community-led greenspace improvements

Families will help plan, design and create:

- Wildflower areas
- Bug hotels
- Sensory trails
- Allotments
- Murals and interpretation boards
- Seating and signage

These improvements build ownership and pride.

d) Community engagement events

Events will bring residents, volunteers, children and families together for conservation tasks, nature celebrations and intergenerational activities.

10. Building on community strengths

The project values and amplifies community expertise.

a) Valuing lived experience

Parents and caregivers - young parents, BAME families, foster carers, disabled parents, carers, neurodivergent families offer vital insights. These shape:

- Locations
- Accessibility features
- Session themes
- Cultural approaches
- Outreach and communication

b) Strengthening local organisations

Community assets become stronger through:

- Increased footfall
- Capacity-building training
- Access to co-delivery opportunities
- Resources for local improvements

c) Skills building

The project will support skills in:

- Outdoor nature facilitation
- Biodiversity awareness
- Creative arts
- Sensory-inclusive activity design
- Volunteer conservation
- Community organising

11. Reaching underrepresented groups

Starting with Nature Gwent is designed to reach:

- Low-income and Flying Start families
- BAME communities
- Disabled children and caregivers
- Neurodivergent families
- Young parents
- Unpaid carers
- Foster and kinship carers
- Families with perinatal mental health challenges
- Welsh-medium families
- Families with English as an additional language

Barrier-aware design includes:

- Transport support
- Pram-friendly routes
- Sensory-inclusive approaches

- Bilingual materials
- Cultural relevance
- Flexible timings
- Confidence-building support

Trusted spaces

Sessions will take place in familiar community settings, increasing reach and trust.

Culturally relevant engagement

- Fully bilingual provision
- Minority-language interpretation where needed
- Partnerships with cultural groups
- Storytelling and crafts reflecting different nature traditions
- Outreach via established local networks

12. Ongoing community involvement

Throughout the six-year project, families will continue to shape delivery through:

- Participatory evaluation (creative tools, nature diaries, reflective walks)
- Family engagement events
- Regular hub partnership meetings
- Annual greenspace planning and review
- Continuous adaptation based on lived experience

Our evaluation partner will embed inclusive monitoring processes ensuring all voices, including those least heard, inform ongoing project development.

Starting with Nature Gwent is a deeply co-produced initiative built on years of partnership, community insight, lived experience and local expertise. It engages families, practitioners and community organisations as equal partners in design and delivery, ensuring the project is inclusive, culturally relevant and community-owned. Through continuous collaboration, co-design and participatory evaluation, the project will remain responsive to community needs and strengths throughout its six-year life and beyond.