Report on community research findings in the three slate valleys

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Summary

In 2023, a group of community researchers in three slate valleys – Bro Ffestiniog, Nantlle and Ogwen - in North Wales designed and executed a research action to explore views of tourism in their communities and to open up conversations about how tourism could work better in the interests of those who live there.

This innovative programme was part of a UKRI-funded project – Dolennu – bringing together the community enterprises from the three valleys. The aim was to understand community need and capacity to further develop their approaches to community-led renewal in collaborative ways. Dolennu is focused on tourism, which is both the major, growing, export industry in this part of Wales and a source of complex challenges to liveability, sustainability and community for local people.

To better understand diverse attitudes to tourism as well as possible future directions, the project includes a focus on the potential of the recently-created Llwybr Llechi Eryri/ Slate Trail - which connects these and other communities - for developing community-led and community-benefitting tourism.

This report outlines the research undertaken by the community researchers and explores the findings from their work. The findings highlight the different experiences of tourism in these three valleys and a range of views about how tourism affects those who live there. While there is recognition of the visitor economy as (potentially) important in economic terms, the research shows that there is a clear interest in reshaping tourism so that it is more sustainable, more connected to and respectful of local history and culture, and provides more value to residents.

On that basis, it was not surprising that the Slate Trail was viewed in a very positive way as providing a high quality resource, embedded in the local landscape, history and culture, which can be enjoyed by visitors and local people alike. The research findings suggest that using the Slate Trail as a focus for community-led and community-benefitting tourism is something that should be further explored through research and development within the slate valleys.

Overall, the community researchers have demonstrated how this innovative form of investigation can provide relevant and useful insights, while also contributing to building capabilities within communities. The combination of reflection, creativity and enthusiasm that emerges from community research is an invaluable part of re-engineering a visitor economy that works much better for communities.

Introduction

In 2023, a group of community development organisation was jointly awarded project funding by the UKRI in the Community Research Networks Programme, supported by the Young Foundation. This project – 'Dolennu' - was given funding for 6 months (later extended for a further 6 months) up to summer 2024.

The project brings together social enterprises in the three valleys in the former slate mining area of Gwynedd in North Wales – Partneriaeth Ogwen in Bethesda, Siop Griffiths Cyf in Penygroes (Nantlle) and Cwmni Cymunedol Bro Ffestiniog in Blaenau Ffestiniog. These three organisations were already co-operating in a number of areas as part of the Dolan partnership and each has been establishing a model of community-led renewal and development. Their communities are within the Eryri National Park and are part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site (the Slate Landscapes of North Wales).

The project also has three partners to support the slate communities. Peoples' Economy works with communities across the UK, including providing training and facilitation for learning and research. Foundational Alliance Wales is a network organisation providing facilitation and support for social innovation in Wales. Foundational Economy Research (FERL) provides research expertise.

The main aim of the initial award was to develop a plan for building a shared understanding between the project partners about the local need and capacity for community research to support community-led renewal in local economies. A central part of this funded project has been to explore how community researchers can approach, find valuable insights and contribute to the issues and opportunities identified by the wider project team. The first step was for each of the three organisations to recruit researchers from the community. This was done in Spring 2023 through local social media and other outlets and networks.

A group of 13 researchers were recruited (three in each community, with two people sharing one of the roles in Ogwen). The idea was that the researchers could work in their respective communities as a group and also come together to share and learn. Three days of training were facilitated by Peoples' Economy and involving all of the project partners and, following the research in the communities, a further two days were used for the researchers to meet together and with other project team members to reflect, analyse and plan. Together, these facilitated days covered:

- understanding the research process, from developing questions, exploring methods, and exploring ethical issues around research
- development by each group of a pilot research exercise to be conducted in their community over the summer of 2023
- discussion of findings and analysis; consideration of how to share the findings of the research; identifying implications and priorities for further research.

Overall, the two 6-month initial phases were set up as an iterative process of training, planning, research, analysis and reflection, dissemination and further planning to lead into the next phase of the project.

The focus of the community research

The visitor economy – covering both those visiting for the day and those staying locally - is a major industry in these three valleys, providing employment and bringing spending into the area. However, the nature of tourism, the way it has developed locally and the impact on communities is the source of significant unease for residents. Concerns about tourism among local people often stem from the perceived imbalance between the benefits and costs of tourism development, as well as the potential impacts on their quality of life, environment, and sense of place. Tourism is also unevenly distributed, with large tourist attractions and some natural sites bringing in significant numbers of visitors to or through some places. Yet, in other places close by, there are far fewer tourists and communities benefit less from the potential of the visitor economy. The three communities in this project are in different parts of Eryri and experience tourism in distinctive ways.

As well as the shared cultural heritage of the slate industry and the Welsh language, the three communities are connected by a recently created walking trail Llwybr Llechi Eryri (Snowdonia Slate Trail) [1] which passes through the diverse slate landscape now recognised as a World Heritage Site. This provides a physical connection between the valleys in the form of an amenity that is of value to both local people and visitors. The Slate Trail also offers the potential for development of local activities and tourism that is more environmentally sustainable and reflects the importance of the rich cultural and natural heritage of the area. This is key for residents. By integrating local knowledge, values, and priorities into tourism initiatives, communities can ensure that tourism benefits are distributed more equitably and that their heritage is preserved responsibly and sustainably.

Starting from this broad project scope, the community researchers used one of the training days to discuss their specific focus, develop research questions and identify methods to explore the particular aspects of tourism relevant to their communities. This research design was also developed in relation to the various opportunities to engage with both communities and visitors via events taking place over the summer of 2023 as well as through community venues.

Each group developed a community-specific research plan as outlined below.

Group of researchers	What they wanted to find out	Where/how questions were asked
Bro Ffestiniog	1. In one word, why do you think people visit the area? 2. Where do you think should be shared / appreciated more within the area? 3. In your opinion to what extent does the area benefit from tourism? 4. How would you like to see tourism develop in the future?	Visitors and locals attending the Hongian Ffest https://www.facebook.com/HongianFfest/ - 19th, 20th, 21st May Responses on BROsocial media (https://www.instagram.com/brocast_ffestiniog/) Health and Social Care learners aged 16-18 from Coleg Meirion-Dwyfor, Dolgellau (13)

[1] https://snowdoniaslatetrail.org/

	5. Have you heard about the Slate Trail?	Visitors to the office at Cwmni Bro, Blaenau Ffestiniog
Nantlle	1. What three words would you use to describe tourism in this area now? 2. What do you think of the Slate Trail? 3. What ideas do you have to improve tourism?	Talked with people at various events/ locations: Marchnad Lleu market, Llond Bol, Be Nawni, Gwyl Cofio Cledwyn Used social media. Arranged a series of group meetings.
Ogwen	1. How would you describe tourism in this area? 2. What do you think of the Slate Trail? 3. What are your ideas for how tourism could be improved?	Talked with people at various events/ locations, including GwyrddNi.

What were the findings of the community research?

Powerful common themes emerged, especially in relation to the relevance of the Slate Trail as an attractive sustainable amenity for locals and visitors and, more broadly, the development of a visitor economy that can bring more benefits to communities. There were also distinctive findings from the three groups of community researchers. Each of the groups discovered interesting community-specific findings that together highlight the complexities around tourism as it currently is and how it could be developed. Below we elaborate on three key areas, showing how each group of researchers have contributed to these findings.

1. Tourism as it is now: a complicated story

Reasons for visiting
All three groups of researchers wanted to explore how people felt about tourism as it currently operates. As helpful context the Blaenau researchers also started by asking their respondents at Hongian Ffest - a climbing festival – to explain in only one word, why they thought people visited the area. The respondents were a mix of locals and visitors, and the answers are in Welsh and English but the language makes little difference to the reasons given.

The researchers produced a word cloud which highlights main reasons for visiting. These reflect the natural environment – 'mynyddoedd'/ 'mountains', 'scenery', 'prydferthwch'/ 'beauty' – as well as references to history and to various activities – climbing, motorbikes, adventure as well as attractions like Llechwedd/ Zipworld and the trên/ steam railway.

Responses on tourism

If these reasons for visiting seem quite clear, the views about tourism and its impacts on local communities are much more complex. Researchers in both Ogwen and Nantlle asked respondents to give three words to indicate how they felt about tourism. While many people gave much longer answers to this open and unpromoted question, what is obvious are the strong and mixed views about tourism as it is now. These conflicting views highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of tourism as an industry and its impacts on communities, economies, and environments.

The balance between positive or negative expressions was different in these two areas, probably reflecting the varying impact of visitors. In Ogwen there are many visitors who pass through Bethesda by car on their way up to the mountains, or who may stay nearby to visit major commercial attractions like Zip World. In these cases, Bethesda residents feel the negative effects of tourism in terms of traffic and shortage of housing while not benefitting from the tourist pound. In contrast, Nantlle valley is much quieter so that there was a much lesser degree of hostility to tourism and more interest expressed in attracting more visitors.

From the researchers' reflection workshop after the fieldwork, the community researchers noted that discussions about tourism had often taken place informally in the community, as well as in local media. Not surprisingly, most local people already had worked out views about tourism and seemed happy to share these. While this was an advantage because it elicited plenty of responses, it did in some cases mean that responses were quite polarised, with much dissatisfaction expressed, though often for different reasons.

Tourism as it is now in Ogwen

In Ogwen, 7 respondents (out of a total of around 80) used their short response to express strong positive views about tourism, such as 'great potential' or 'let's take advantage' while a much larger number, 36, gave a strong negative response, including comments on the specific impacts like traffic and parking:

‘llwyth o draffig’ (*load of traffic'*, '*too many cars'*, '*too many caravans'*, ‘problemau parcio’, (Parking problems) ‘By pass neb stopio yn Pesda’ (‘*By pass nobody stops in Bethesda'*)

Negative views also reflected the specific local impact of the growth of tourism accommodation serving visitors to a local privately-owned attraction. While respondents highlighted negative impacts of the spread of short-stay lets in the area, many of those who stayed in this accommodation did not visit Bethesda and so there was no benefit to local businesses.

‘air bnbs ymhobman’, (‘air bnbs everywhere), ‘AirBnB impacts our community’, ‘tai’ (‘housing’), ‘ymwelwyr zip world ddim yn dod ir pentref’ (zip world visitors don’t come to the village’), ‘dim digon o dwristiaid zip world yn dod i'r pentref’ (not enough zip world tourists coming to the village’)

Just as important were more general and strong responses about the nature of tourism in general:

‘Annheg’ (‘unfair’), ‘Echdynnol’ (‘extractive’), ‘exported profits’, ‘unsustainable’, ‘poen’ (‘pain’), ‘dinistrio’ (‘destructive’).

While some of the negativity reflects a general antipathy to tourism, more frequently the criticism of tourism as it is in Ogwen reflect a frustration at large numbers of visitors to the area producing little local benefit, partly perceived as due to a lack of facilities. In particular, respondents mentioned a lack of appealing shops and cafes in Bethesda, limited opening hours, a ‘scruffy’ (though ‘improving’) high street, poor public transport and not enough places to stop for those driving through.

‘tydi bethesda ddim yn ddeniadol i dwristiaid. dim byd ar y stryd fawr’ (‘Bethesda isn't attractive to tourists. nothing on the high street’)

‘dim digon o lefydd coffi a bwyd neis gormod o bobol yn dod am ddiwrnod a dim gwario mewn busnes lleol’ (‘not enough coffee places and nice food too many people coming for a day and no spending at a local business’)

One respondent wondered cautiously:

‘ddim yn siwr os ydi pobol Bethesda isho mwy o dwristiaeth’ (‘not sure if Bethesda people want more tourism’)

But others felt there was potential to change the experience of tourism for local people, as outlined later in this report.

Tourism as it is now in Nantlle

The Nantlle researchers also found very mixed views about tourism but the overall balance was quite different to that in Ogwen. While 10 provided negative responses, citing parking, rubbish, unfriendliness, or a more general ‘too many’, some 41 respondents provided short answers that were positive in tone about tourism. Some of these very positive responses probably came from visitors who answered the question from their perspective with various descriptors including:

'Da iawn' (very good'), 'beautiful', 'Gret', 'Cynaliadwy (ar hyn o bryd!)' ('sustainable (right now!)'), 'friendly', 'Gwyrdd, gweldig, Gymraeg' ('green, visible, Welsh'), 'Creoso, hardd, cymhleth' ('welcoming, beautiful, complex')

Responses from local people indicated that there were benefits to the community from tourism:

'Bendithiol i'r economi' ('blessing to the economy')

'Da cael nhw' ('good to have them')

'Tourism is good for the area'

'Cryf, positif, gobeithiol' ('strong, positive, hopeful')

With some answers highlighting more specific benefits from, or indeed necessity of, the tourist pound:

'Dod a pres i mewn, cymysgu efo pobl' ('bringing in cash, mixing with people')

'Dan ni'n deuddu meddwl bod twristiaeth yn useless, ond maent yn dod a pres i mewn i'r ardal' ('We tend to think of tourism as useless, but they're bringing cash into the area')

'Ddim yn gallu gwneud heb nhw' ('can't do without them')

'We need tourism to bring revenue to the area. Anything that can bring more is very welcome.'

In line with this theme were a further 10 or so responses to the question of 'how do you feel about tourism' that took the form of expressed views that there were 'not enough' visitors or that the valley was missing out in some way from not capturing enough of the tourist spend.

'Dim llawer yn ymwybodol o faint sydd gennym i gynnig - ond mae potensial' ('Not many are aware of how much we have to offer - but there is potential')

'Mae gan Penygroes lot i gynnig ond mae isio pres fynd i'r gymuned lleol' ('Penygroes has a lot to offer but the money needs to go to the local community')

'Virtually non-existent and not encouraged. Community losing out on lots'

'needs more. Great area to thrive'

While the responses collected by the Nantlle researchers are certainly far from negative overall, they reflect a degree of ambivalence or at least pragmatism about the existing and potential relation to tourism. There was also a sense that 'balance' needs to be maintained; locals don't want to be overrun like other areas are considered to be. But many respondents felt that it would be desirable to have access to more of the tourist spend, with a preference for more sustainable tourism and visitors who valued the nature and culture of the place.

The views captured by the community researchers in Ogwen and Nantlle may well reflect the different ways in which tourism has developed in these areas. Bethesda in Ogwen for example has been home to a privately owned tourist attraction for many years (Zip World) and more recently perhaps, has been questioning the benefits of this development and the impact that it has had on the community. In contrast, Nantlle is currently developing its visitor economy and is exploring the ways in which this can be done for the benefit of the community through responsible tourism practices that prioritise the well-being of the local community and the

environment. These differing approaches likely influence residents' perceptions of tourism in each area.

Bro Ffestiniog – who benefits from tourism?

As an effective complement to the open questions asked by Ogwen and Nantlle researchers, in Bro Ffestiniog participants in the research were asked 'in your opinion, to what extent does the area benefit from tourism?' and to choose a point on a ten-point scale from 'not at all' to 'heaps'. The researchers have aggregated these responses in a chart which also distinguishes between locals (lleol) and visitors (ymwelwyr).
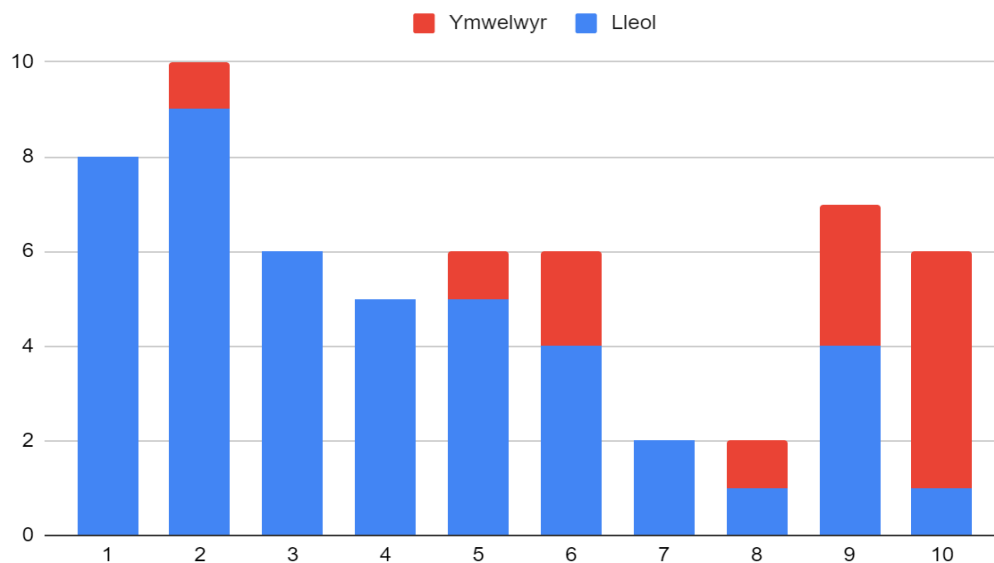
It is clear from the chart that the responses of local people were more weighted towards the lower end (less benefit to the area), while visitors were more likely to suggest a higher level of benefits from tourism. The more positive views of the visitors may reflect their own enjoyment of the area and the assumption that tourism must be good for the communities they visit (though a few visitors were much closer to locals in their negative response). Equally, some local respondents did see benefits, suggesting there is a mixed set of views, as was found in Ogwen and Nantlle.

These general dissatisfactions about tourism as it is now, as well as the ambivalence about wanting more of it (if only as a 'necessary evil'), suggest that there is a need to find out more about how people in these communities would like to see tourism develop or change and what kinds of benefits could be created. These findings also highlight the possibilities for using development of the visitor economy to create and improve amenities that local people can benefit from, while not damaging the natural, historical and cultural character of the slate valleys which is appreciated by locals and visitors alike. This highlighted a need to engage local communities in tourism planning, decision-making, and management processes to ensure their voices are heard, and their interests prioritised.

2. Views of tourism as it could/ should develop

Given the views that many respondents had expressed about the limited benefits from tourism as it currently operates, it was not surprising that there were many suggestions about how to develop tourism. 'Develop' tourism did not necessarily mean more tourists – though some respondents did explicitly suggest that there should be an increase in visitors, including some of the young respondents in Bro Ffestiniog and a few of those in Nantlle. In all three areas, reference was made to places like 'Llanberis' which was implied to be over-touristed and not seen as desirable or as a model

> 'Dim isio gor twristiaeth fel Llanberis' ('Don't want too many tourists like Llanberis'). (Bro Ffestiniog)

> 'Lot o botensial yma, ond angen peidio anelu i fod mor prysur ag ardal Llanberis/Ogwen, ac y problemau sy'n cysylltiedig efo hynna e.e. parcio, prisiau tai, sbwriel' ('Lots of potential here, but shouldn't aim to be as busy as the Llanberis/Ogwen area, and the problems associated with that e.g. parking, house prices, rubbish') (Nantlle).

The common thread was the idea of encouraging a different kind of tourism that was described variously as 'sustainable, 'eco', or 'local', which offered a different and richer experience both for visitors and local people.

> 'Gwneud y mwya o'r cyfoeth naturiol a gwneud iddo weithio i ni!' ('Make the most of the natural wealth and make it work for us!') (Nantlle)

> 'Twristiaeth cynaladwy!' ('sustainable tourism' (Nantlle)

> 'Gweledigaeth yn cysylltu'r gorffennol gyda'r presennol a'r dyfodol cynaladwy sensitif' ('Vision connecting the past with the present-day and sustainable future') (Ogwen)

> 'Cefnogwch yr eco a chynaliadwy, mae hyn yn bwysig i mi' (Support the eco and sustainable, this is important to me') (Bro Ffestiniog)

In this section we report some of the very many various suggestions made, focusing both on what could or should happen and on the principles and processes that are motivating these suggestions. Together these provide an interesting set of ideas for the development of tourism that could provide more benefits to communities in these three valleys, as well as enhancing the experience for visitors. The responses ranged from very specific – in relation to the need for a particular action, event or place - to the more philosophical – in relation to the values, principles and processes for developing tourism. To some extent the responses reflected specific issues or opportunities in each of the valleys, but there were also some strong common themes. These are outlined below.

Infrastructure – finding out, getting around…

The first common theme was to improve what could be considered as the infrastructures that make it easier to access the natural, historical and cultural attractions. The most commonly mentioned issue here was information about 'what is here' and 'how to find it', as well as more interpretation to help tourists understand and appreciate their visit. Some respondents in all three groups suggested a physical, staffed information centre would be of value.

> 'Canolfan gwybodaeth' ('information centre') (Nantlle)

> 'defnyddio yr hen safle SPAR fel canolfan gwybodaeth am yr ardal' ('Using the former SPAR site as an information centre for the area') (Ogwen)

> 'Efallai canolfan i dwristiaid gael gwybodaeth gyffredinol am hanes, diwylliant a gweithgareddau'r ardal' ('Maybe a centre for tourists to get a general knowledge of the area's history, culture and activities.') (Bro Ffestiniog)

Others mentioned boards and signs.

> 'Mi fysa yn dda cael byrddau gwybodaeth a'r hanes' ('I'd love to have information boards and the history') (Nantlle)

> 'mwy o gysylltiadau mwy o arwyddion' ('more links more signs') (Ogwen)

> 'Gwybodaeth am y Dyffryn a'r cyfleusterau. Mae yna hanes diddorol iawn i'r dyffryn yma' ('Information about the Valley and facilities. There is a very interesting history to this valley') (Nantlle).

Other aspects of infrastructure related to transport options and addressing parking. There was a general sense that more and better public transport options should be available, and various different suggestions about the tricky issue of parking.

> 'system parcio callach mwy o fwsys gwennol' ('smarter parking system more shuttle buses') (Ogwen)

> 'Meysedd parcio mewn llefydd well' ('car parks in better places') (Nantlle)

> 'Mwy o seilwaith, parcio' ('more infrastructure, parking') 'Pris teg am barcio' (fair price for parking') (Bro Ffestiniog)

> 'Fe fyddai'n syniad da i ddatblygu'r hen drac tren – a chael tren i redeg arno – er mwyn cael mwy o gysylltiad rhwng Zip World a stryd fawr Bethesda' ('It would be a good idea to develop the old train track – and have a train to run – to get more connected between Zip World and Bethesda high street') (Ogwen)

Amenities – things to do, places to go and stay…

There were many suggestions about the need for activities and facilities, including developing opportunities to capture visitors' spend. In all three areas, respondents suggested that more things to do would help to attract visitors into the towns, especially for families.

> 'Mwy yn y Dref iddyn nhw, mwy o siop a rhywbeth hwyl i deuluoedd' ('More in the Town for them, more shop and something fun for families') (Bro Ffestiniog)

> 'more things to do on a rainy day' (Ogwen)

'To get more attractions to get them coming in' (Nantlle).

There was also a call from several respondents for a wider range of shops, cafes, ice cream, local products for sale; and for shops and cafes to have longer opening hours so that visitors would be able to use them.

'Places to eat/drink' (Nantlle)

'Cyfle i twristiaid i brynu pethau lleol' ('tourists should have the opportunity to buy local things' (Nantlle)

'More independent shops and cafes' (Ogwen)

'caffis neis arall i bobl stopio ym Methesda a gwario yma' ('more nice cafes for people to stop in Bethesda and spend here') (Ogwen)

'Siopa lleol gyda gweithgareddau awyr agored yn dda wedi'u gwerthu neu eu benthyca' ('Local shopping with outdoor pursuits good sold or loaned' (Bro Ffestiniog)

'Siopau i fod ar agor pan ddaw twristiaid' ('shops to be open when tourists come') (Bro Ffestiniog)

As well as these general ideas, there were specific suggestions that reflected local culture more explicitly, including an artists' open studios event in Ogwen, more regular markets and events that provided opportunities for visitors to mix with local people and enjoy sharing cultural experiences.

'angen creu gwyliau sy'n rhoi profiad o ddiwylliant Dyffryn Ogwen (ymarferion y côr)' ('need to create festivals that give an experience of Dyffryn Ogwen culture (choir rehearsals)' (Ogwen)

'Parhau ag antur debyg i Hongian Fest' ('Continuing with adventure similar to Hongian Fest') (Bro Ffestiniog)

'Cynnig/rhannu'r iaith a diwylliant' ('Offer/share the language and culture') (Nantlle)

There were also suggestions in each of the valleys about creating more access to natural areas – such as opening up access to the Ogwen river from Bethesda high street or creating town trails – and providing more facilities or support for more energetic pursuits like cycling and hiking.

'More use should be made of Afon Ogwen – most people pass through Bethesda without knowing of it's existence. There should be benches placed in Cae Star where people could sit and enjoy the river.' (Ogwen)

'develop a heritage trail' (Ogwen)

'Gwnewch lwybr cerdded dolen o'r stryd i fyny at y Chwarel ac yn ôl tuag at y busnesau' ('Make a loop walking path from the street up to the quarry and back towards the businesses') (Bro Ffestiniog)

'Cynnig gwasanaeth Sherpa ar gyfer pobl cerdded Crib Nantlle, llwybrau llechi ayb' ('Sherpa service offer for people walking Nantlle Ridge, slate paths etc') (Nantlle)

'Organise led ponies to take people up to the Carneddau and camp there - this would give people an unique experience' (Ogwen)

'Ehangu a datblygu llwybrau beicio yn yr ardal + Antur Stiniog' ('Expanding and developing bike trails in the area + Antur Stiniog') (Bro Ffestiniog)

It is clear that some respondents had an ambitious vision of engaged visitors – the idea of attracting tourists interested in sharing the place, its nature and culture – and providing and signposting things for them. There was a sense of the 'right kind' of visitor from all of the groups: encouraging these people could be part of a different, more sustainable, culturally and historically engaged tourism. These suggestions about the kind of visitor and community experience that respondents seemed to highlight connects to the third theme explored below around *how* tourism could be developed.

The final part of the visitor puzzle was calls for more (and more varied) accommodation from low to high cost in Ogwen (which sees large numbers of visitors pass through Bethesda without stopping) and Nantlle (which has less tourist 'traffic'). One respondent suggested that Ogwen could become a 'hub' with accommodation and travel options. Accommodation was mentioned less often in Bro Ffestiniog, though there was an emphasis on cheaper options.

'Dim digon o lefydd i aros: hostel, BaB etc' ('Not enough places to stay: hostel, BnB etc' ('Nantlle)

'Mae wir angen mwy o lefydd i ymwelwyr aros yma - parc carafannau neu pebyll, gwesty moethus' ('We really need more places for visitors to stay here - caravan park or tents, luxury hotel') (Nantlle)

'Adnewyddu Douglas Arms fel gwesty yn lle ddefnyddio stoc tai lleol' ('Renovating Douglas Arms as a hotel instead of using local housing stock') (Ogwen)

'Safle campervans i aros dros nos' 'Campervans site to stay overnight'; 'Rugby Club campsite was brilliant, brings people into the town' (Ogwen)

'Darparu mwy o safleoedd gwersylla' ('provide more camping sites') (Bro Ffestiniog)

Principles/ process - community control and collaboration, fairness, community benefitting development…..

If the respondents had numerous ideas about what could be provided for visitors, many of them also had suggestions about the principles that should guide the development of tourism. These were expressed in different ways but a strong theme emerged about the importance of communities not only benefitting from tourism but also have involvement and agency in how this happens. This covered ideas like control, ownership and collaboration, both within and across communities. While a couple of respondents mentioned getting investment or grants from outside, there was a clear sense that local businesses and people could and should be at the centre of developing a different kind of tourism. There was some recognition that changing tourism to benefit local people involved adopting a holistic approach that prioritises community engagement, sustainable development, and equitable distribution of benefits. These views were particularly strong in the responses in Bro Ffestiniog (perhaps reflecting the success and visibility of community enterprise in the valley), though there were echoes in the other two groups.

'Mae angen i ni ddod at ein gilydd fel busnesau a thrigolion i weld sut y gallwn hyrwyddo'r ardal gyfan' ('We need to come together as both businesses and residents to see how we can promote the whole area') (Bro Ffestiniog)

'Y mae'r boblogaeth gyda'r 'tools' yn gallu gwneud cais am dwristiaeth fel bod y boblogaeth yn rheoli'r twristiaeth yn hytrach na twristaeth yn rheoli'r gymuned' ('The community with the 'tools' should be able to take decisions about tourism so that the community controls the tourism rather than the tourism controlling the community') (Bro Ffestiniog)

'Gan y gymuned er lles y gymuned' ('By the Community for the benefit of the community') (Bro Ffestiniog)

'Perchnogaeth gymunedol a mentrau sy'n cyflogi a chreu elw cymunedol' ('community ownership and enterprises that employ and generate community profits') (Ogwen)

'Local businesses could promote themselves better working together to benefit from e.g. trade coming from zip world' (Ogwen)

'Mwy o gydweithio hefo ardaloedd llechi ac atyniadau tebyg e.e. hosteli cymunedol' ('more collaboration with slate areas and similar attractions e.g. community hostels') (Nantlle)

'Busnesau a mentrau lleol i gydweithio' ('Local businesses and enterprises to collaborate') (Nantlle)

A strong theme in all three areas was the importance of better - not simply more – jobs. In Bro Ffestiniog and Ogwen this point was raised in relation to young people, while in Nantlle the idea of permanent jobs was highlighted. Respondents recognised that jobs in tourism often follow seasonal patterns, with peak seasons bringing higher demand for services and employment opportunities, while off-peak periods sometimes resulted in reduced hours for workers. It was widely recognised that seasonal employment led to income instability and uncertainty for those living in the areas.

'Cyfle cyfartal i bobl leol drwy gydol y flwyddyn ac nid yn yr haf yn unig e.e. swyddi' ('Equal opportunities for local people throughout the year and not just in the summer e.g. jobs') (Bro Ffestiniog)

'Swyddi mwy sefydlog o fewn twristiaeth' ('more stable jobs within tourism') (Bro Ffestiniog)

'Help retain young people by providing well paid jobs (not just hospitality!) e.g outdoor instructing, manufacturing – but crossing over with tourism – e.g. sea kayaking; bakeries; outdoor clothing' (Ogwen)

'Swyddi da gyda chyflog teg, trwy'r flwyddyn, i bobl lleol, yn lle swyddi tymhorol' ('Good jobs with fair pay, all year round, for local people, instead of seasonal jobs') (Nantlle)

'Sicrhau dyfodol a swyddi, ail-fuddsoddi yr arian, creu swyddi parhaol' ('Securing futures and jobs, reinvesting the money, creating permanent jobs') (Nantlle)

3. The Slate Trail as an opportunity for the three valleys

All three groups of community researchers wanted to include questions about the Slate Trail in their data collection, focusing on both awareness of the trail and views of those who had and had not yet used it. The groups devised different methods to elicit this information, and also collected information from a range of people and contexts. So, while the responses collected by the three groups cannot be directly compared, they can be put together to show an interesting picture about what people think about the trail now and how it could develop in the future.

Awareness of the trail
In terms of awareness, most people who participated in the research had heard of the slate trail: for example, the Bro Ffestiniog researchers found that two-thirds of those asked to put a piece of slate in a 'yes/no' box chose 'yes'. Similarly, asking the question across four different events or locations, the Nantlle researchers found that overall, 68% had heard of the trail. This proportion was even higher (79%) at a local event to celebrate the life of Cledwyn Jones which attracted local people with an interest in history, music and walking (Cofio Cledwyn).

However, from conversations around these 'yes/no' questions it was clear that while many people said that they had heard of the trail, some indicated that they did not know much about it:

> 'lle mae o?' ('where is it?) or 'Dwi eisiau gwybod mwy amdano!' ('I want to know more about it')

> 'Syniad gret, ddim wedi clywed am y llwybr o blaen' ('brilliant idea, haven't heard about it before')

These responses show the interest of local people, even when they had not yet used it themselves.

While there is high overall level of awareness, however, the research also suggested that this might not be the case for all groups. Bro Ffestiniog researchers found that in a group of local young people aged 16-18 only 15% had heard of the trail. This initial question served as a conversation opener, creating interest for some participants who wanted to know about the trail. For the Bro Ffestiniog researchers, this striking contrast between young people and the other groups they talked with suggests the importance of understanding differences within the community. It may also have implications for how to develop and share information about the trail with different groups.

Views of the trail: 'Mae'n BENDIGEDIG!' ('it's WONDERFUL')
To explore views of the Slate Trail the researchers used different questions to prompt responses about the trail now and in the future; they also attempted as far as possible to distinguish between those who had used it and those who had not, as well as identifying differences between local people and visitors.

From the various responses collected by the three groups of researchers, the views of the Slate Trail were a mix of extremely positive experiences - from those who mentioned or implied that they had used it - and enthusiastic curiosity – mainly from those who may have heard about the trail but not necessarily used it themselves. While there were plenty of suggestions about the Trail and how it could be improved, there were few negative comments beyond a few cautions

about how some parts are difficult to walk: 'gwlyb and creigiog' '(wet and rocky'); while one person told Ogwen researchers that it 'comes across a bit boring!'.

The positive responses given to researchers conveyed the enjoyment from walking some or all of the trail. For example,

> 'Mae'r llwybr llechi yn wych' ('the Slate Trail is great'),

> 'Really enjoyed walking it.'

> 'Wrth fy modd yn ei gerdded' ('love walking it').

> 'It's lovely and should be promoted more.'

One local respondent in Ogwen explained that they had spent nine days over the course of a year to complete it; while another said that

> 'y tridiau gorau i mi eu cael!' ('it's the best three days I've had').

As well as the enjoyment from the walking, some respondents highlighted the historical and cultural significance of the trail:

> 'Cryfhau ymwybyddiaeth o'n treftadaeth' ('Strengthening awareness of our heritage')

> 'Cefnogi fo, rhan o'n etifedd a'n hanes' ('Support it, part of our legacy and history')

It was also appreciated that it was 'nice to join the slate areas' and that it was:

> 'Gwych cael llwybrau o safon sy'n tywys pobl o amgylch hanes yr ardal' ('Great to have quality trails that guide people around the history of the area').

There were positive views of facilities that exist on the route, including mentions of the Eagles at Penmachno, Caffi Tan y Grisiau, or Croesor Café (which has now closed).

Some respondents who had not used the trail themselves were still enthusiastic but unsurprisingly felt that it was not well-known:

> 'Great idea but no-one knows about it.'

> 'Heb ei ddefnyddio, ydy pobl yn ymwybodol ohono?' ('Not used. Have people heard of it?').

Ideas for development of the trail
The researchers found no shortage of ideas about how the trail could be enhanced. The suggestions from responses to Ogwen and Nantlle researchers fell into three broad areas. These echo some of the suggestions about the development of tourism more generally, outlined in the previous section.

The first was to have more information about the route itself and how/ where it can be accessed with signs to help find it:

> 'Angen mwy o arwyddion cychwyn / ymuno hefo y llwybr llechi' ('need more start/ join signs with the slate trail).

There were some mixed views here, however. Some respondents in both Nantlle and Ogwen mentioned poor signage or information, others commented that it was easy to find the route:

> 'Digon o arwyddion i ddangos y ffordd' ('plenty of signs to find the way').

In Nantlle, several people noted that the signs were old and required updating. These divergent views about how easy it was to find the and walk the trail may reflect the fact that respondents (probably local in this case) are most familiar with different parts of the route; there may also be differences in the experience and expectations of walkers.

While there are already Welsh and English language versions of the slate trail guidebook and website with maps and information about each section - as well an opportunity to collect stamps along the route - these were all suggested as improvements that could be added. This suggests that not everyone was aware of how well the trail is already developed. The comments that 'more marketing and better promotion' about the trail as a whole, would be beneficial, might suggest that there is a perception that at present the trail is being under-used. Beyond information about accessing the trail and route findings, some respondents also highlighted the need for more information boards and interpretation whilst on the trail to help visitors understand the history, culture and natural landscape.

This is supported by the second group of suggestions which cover more facilities such as cafes on the trail, but also buses to access the trail, including to allow a return to the start point. One respondent in Ogwen observed that the lack of public transport made the stages quite long: 'angen mwy o fysiau i gysylltu'(needs more buses as links). The feedback workshop with the community researchers also highlighted the importance of developing more facilities – such as cafes - that can be shared by locals and tourists, and which would work to bring people together.

The third set of suggestions related to making it easier for visitors to arrange accommodation to walk the trail. One respondent in Ogwen mentioned that they completed the trail with a company that organised walking holidays: they had stayed in Bangor and were taken to the start point for each day's walk. Another suggested that 'it would be difficult for individuals to organise their own accommodation'. Several respondents in Nantlle, noted that the possibilities of providing services to make the trail more attractive to visitors:

> 'Gwasanaeth i gludo bagiau i bobl' ('Service to transport bags to people').

Researchers' reflections
In the third workshop, the community researchers in conversation with each other and the community development teams in each valley reflected on their findings about the trail. It was recognised that these generally very positive findings may reflect the characteristics of the local people and visitors who participated in the research and not necessarily typical of the communities as a whole. However, the overall view was clearly that the trail is a positive resource that had potential for development in a way that could engage and benefit communities.

There were several ideas about how the trail could raise awareness among tourists about the importance of responsible travel, cultural respect, and environmental conservation. The community researchers also felt that the trail could provide a sort of education about the three

areas that highlighted the cultural significance and ecological value of local destinations, fostering greater appreciation and care among visitors.

The research also suggested that the idea of the trail connecting communities in the slate valleys was something that could capture the interest and imagination of local people and that the benefits of this could be shared by those who lived there.

The notion of communitising the Slate Trail emerged from discussions i.e. getting the communities along the trail to work together to develop the trail and help to shape the benefits that can result. It was recognised that this would require some kind of organisation or organising, though much more work is needed to explore what form that could take. To some extent, the social, economic and environmental impact of the Trail would need to be monitored and evaluated so that the effectiveness of tourism interventions in achieving community development objectives could be explored.

It was also evident that in contrast with the very mixed views about tourism as it currently operates in the valleys as explored earlier in this report, the trail provides a compelling base to help develop a different kind of tourism. It could be an opportunity to build resilience and self-reliance within the three communities, by diversifying their economic base, reducing dependency on external sources of income, and strengthening social networks and collective agency. This could enable Bro Ffestiniog, Ogwen and Nantlle, to adapt to changing circumstances, overcome challenges, and develop strong intra and inter community collaborations.

Sharing the research findings

The community researchers have begun sharing their findings within their communities and are keen to continue and extend this. Community-based social media has been used in each valley, the Bro Ffestiniog researchers have written an article for a local newspaper and BROCast Ffestiniog is producing a short film. People's Economy will support the researchers in producing a media briefing that connects the three groups and there will also be opportunities to share their experiences with other community research groups supported by People's Economy.

This sharing is seen as part of an important ongoing conversation between the research teams and their communities to share research findings and the development of the project, as well as to gather feedback and ideas for future work. The researchers are aiming to explore use of different means of dissemination and communication, including creative media, physical presence, storytelling and timelines that can also make direct connections to the Slate Trail. Over time it may be possible to connect directly with local schools, community groups and businesses. It is recognised that the sustainability of the community research also depends on the willing engagement of the community and, in due course, the ability to recruit new researchers, as appropriate.

These findings have also fed into the broader project development activities. These include briefings produced by the Dolennu project team: 'Tourism in Gwynedd and Eryri' and the 'Business development plan for community-benefiting tourism in yr ardal llechi/ the slate district'.[2] The findings and reflections from this initial phase of community research are also

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[2] These documents are available at: https://www.foundationalalliance.wales/community-research-network.html

contributing to the ongoing plan for next steps for the three valleys to continue their collaboration around community benefitting tourism. This includes a workshop on community tourism on 18th April 2024 for local stakeholders, partners and network members which will showcase the community research and introduce the new development plan for community benefitting tourism.

Implications, the value of community research and next steps

The benefit of community research teams has been evident throughout this process. With tailored support, they have ensured that the research conducted has been respectful, inclusive, and perhaps most importantly, meaningful. This means that it has been able to meet the research objectives and do so in a way that keeps the community benefit at the centre, whilst encouraging partnerships and promoting collaboration between the different slate communities. Central to this is that communities have shared resources and engaged in a mutual learning process that could have long-term positive impacts.

In addition, the process has meant that there is proof in the concept, that involving community members as researchers provides opportunities for skills development and capacity building within the community. Through consultations and discussions with community members, the researchers contributed to the formulation of appropriate questions that were relevant and meaningful to the community. In short, community researchers can gain valuable research skills that can empower them to address local challenges independently, and arguably more successfully than those who have only a limited knowledge and understanding of those communities.

The community researchers have highlighted the strengths of this process below.

Why is community research so powerful?

The approach
- As a researcher, being able to understand community divides when it comes to interpreting data, and recognising underrepresented demographics
- It will enables communities to do what they want instead of being told what to do; and it will be sustainable only if it comes from the community
- There is agency in the process
- It's a lovely thing to be able to chat with people about possibilities
- It allows for continuous engagement - all on the journey, different factions and allows to tell, educate, gives balance
- A two-way process: educating and sharing on tourism as well as getting information/input from people
- It shows a different way of co-production
- It is possible to talk with local businesses in a different way - different conversations and what business support would should look like (not 'bacon bap' consultations!)
- Non-extractive as people hear back from what they put into and shared - what was done with that data and information
- Thinking outside the box
- Big companies can learn how to work with communities - because researchers have lived experiences of e.g. corporate companies who focus on hoarding all on their site, are transactional and 0-hrs contracts, as well as grounded companies like family-

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owned businesses who may for example choose to employ all year-round despite seasonal revenue and help local community and charities.

The methods and data
- The research doesn't have to fit into a box... all the messiness can be shared and open
- Going to people not asking them to come top you; this provides better understandings than canvassing people in the usual public meeting/consultation way you hear only the loudest voices and those already engaged in the issue; this canvasses a wider demographic and range of opinions
- Goes beyond what people think they're expected to say (e.g. focus groups) - instead of trying to give the 'right answer', they have the freedom to express their opinions (but this can also be a trap of a different kind - e.g. would people feel free to say they liked Zip World?)
- More nuanced data
- Ability to dig in deep as we know communities - how we frame meaningful questions to get meaningful answers e.g. setting up choices we know are relevant to people to elicit answers (e.g. during the first round research taking a step back to ask if people know about the slate trail if they were unsure)

To some extent, the community researchers have also been engaging in an ongoing process of evaluating their own work. For example, navigating the strengths and weaknesses of their approach and research methods, analysing their results collectively and changing their methodology accordingly. In addition, the community researchers have demonstrated the benefits and importance of local knowledge and in using local events to obtain their responses, often using creative and imaginative research methods. This type of data collection can be more effective and useful when trying to engage a cross section of the community and is something that more traditional research methods can fail to capture. Overall, the Slate Trail research has been imaginative whilst providing valuable insights into the cultural, social, and economic factors that influence community dynamics in the three areas. In addition, these methods have helped the researchers to interpret data in context.

In the future, this will carry considerable significance in shaping a thorough research approach for the Slate Trail, one that is firmly rooted in the lived experiences of these communities. It is also a process that has never been explored in these areas, where arguably, there is a clear need for change within the visitor economy. There are opportunities to make meaningful contributions to research, community development, and social justice, leveraging the community's unique insights, connections, and expertise to drive positive change. Going forward, this local knowledge will be invaluable when thinking about who uses the Slate Trail and how, what facilities are available along the way and how these can be best supported. It could also advocate for sustainable tourism projects more broadly that effectively benefit their communities and residents.