

# Sustainable Steps Wales – Action Grants and Egin Grants



**Case Study - Down to Zero**  
**November 2025**

# 1. The Organisation

Down to Zero is a not-for-profit Community Benefit Society established by Cynon Taf Housing Association in 2022 as a subsidiary company. Down to Zero aims to support community led environmental activities that help tackle climate change.



# 2. The Project

Cynon Taf Community Housing Association was awarded £334,999 over 4 years (March 2023 – March 2027) from the Sustainable Steps Wales (SSW) – Action Grants programme. The total project cost is anticipated to be £699,833, with the match funding coming from the Housing Association and from other sources.

Down to Zero set out to engage local communities and citizens in the climate change agenda. The project's aims are to reduce, avoid and sequester carbon through working with local people on land and then share the learning as far and as wide as possible. The project has 4 key outcomes.

**Outcome 1:** By the end of each year, to have reduced/sequestered carbon emissions by around 189 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents (CO<sub>2</sub>e), totalling over 500 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents over the life of the project.

**Outcome 2:** By the end of year 4 to have worked and engaged with over 150 people of all ages through land-based carbon capture activities, behaviour change education and climate change workshops and voluntary opportunities.

**Outcome 3:** To share learning locally, nationally, and internationally as part of the project work and through partnerships.

**Outcome 4:** By the end of year 3/4 to have developed a local food and flower system which limits import mileage and promotes environmentally friendly green circular economies.

The SSW - Action Grant is being used for:

- salary costs of 2 full-time posts of Project Manager (existing) and a Green Development Officer (new).
- project delivery and management costs.
- purchase of land near Aberdare, equipment, (including Biochar Kiln, Thermo Aerobic Carbon Processor (TACP) Unit) and an electric vehicle.

### 3. Progress to Date

By the end of Year 2 (March 2025), Down to Zero had recorded the following outcomes.

#### Reducing/ Sequestering Carbon

- Purchase 11 hectares of land near Aberdare known as Cwmbach Wetlands.

The SSW- Action Grant funded part of the purchase price with a substantial amount of match funding coming from the Pen y Cymoedd Wind Farm Community Fund. The project estimates that over 10,000 tons of CO<sub>2</sub>e has been safeguarded which has been stored within its soil and biomass.



*Cwmbach Wetlands*

#### Engaging Individuals and Organisations

- 330+ individuals engaged with the project.

More than 75% of these individuals in Year 1 and between 51% and 75% of individuals in Year 2 were new to climate conversations.



29 volunteers participated in Year 1 and 34 in Year 2, with over 7000 volunteer hours being recorded in Year 2.

- Sustainable Living and Skills Courses

Down to Zero has delivered sessions on topics such as orchard planting, introduction to beekeeping, carbon sequestrations in habitats, seasonal cooking, biochar/charcoal production and many other practical skills such as vegan cooking, preserve-making, and woodwork.

Feedback from participants has been positive.

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***“I loved volunteering with Down to Zero. I loved doing the bees. Mam has bought me a greenhouse now so I can grow vegetables at home” Young Volunteer.***

***“After the beekeeping course, I went and bought a beehive. It’s something I’ve always wanted to do but never had the confidence”. Beekeeping Course Participant.***

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- 20+ organisations engaged with the project.

Between 51% and 75% of organisations engaged in the project in Year 1 and Year 2 were new to climate conversations.

Down to Zero works closely with a growing network of organisations including the Men’s Shed in Pontyclun and the Cwm Taf Youth Justice Service. Through the latter, the project has engaged with children and young people who are identified as at risk. The young people who have volunteered with the project have increased their skills, confidence and wellbeing with some going into further education. These young people at risk/disadvantage may not have had the opportunity to participate in climate action.

## Sharing Learning

- Networks

Down to Zero has supported a variety of organisations through the Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) Climate Action Network and has helped the network to develop a Theory of Change and an Action Plan. The project has worked with the RCT Food Network to develop a more



sustainable and low carbon local food network and has supported the development of RCT's Sustainable Food Strategy, Taith Bwyd 2025-2030

Down to Zero has supported Cynon Taf Community Housing Group to develop a Full Carbon Savings Strategy and has supported behaviour change throughout the organisation at both delivery and strategic level.

- Awards and recognition

Down to Zero has received recognition for its work through the winning of a variety of awards including:

- The Social Farms and Gardens Community Land Management Awards for work at the Pontyclun and Mountain Ash sites.
- Social Business Wales and Cwmpas "One to Watch" Award in the Welsh Social Enterprise Awards 2024.

### **A Local Food and Flower System**

- Community Growing

Down to Zero has developed about 1.54 hectares of land for community led food growing with 0.81 hectares developed at Pontyclun and a further 0.73 at Mountain Ash. In partnership with Coalfield Flower Farm, the project has developed just 0.8 hectares of land for community involvement in flower farming.

The sites include 4 large scale polytunnels with large rainwater harvesting systems and drip lines, numerous outdoors beds, a community orchard and beehives. 250 hedge and orchard trees have been planted on the sites.

The sites provide year-round sustainable food growing and opportunities for local people to get involved in sustainable land-based climate action. A processing kitchen for food and honey has been developed.

- Llys Bocs

Llys Bocs a sustainable vegetable box subscription service. The SSW- Action Grant paid for the purchase of the electric vehicle.



In 2024-25 the initiative delivered 350 boxes across the County to 63 different customers. 15 sustainable food boxes were delivered to Cynon Taf Tenants in crisis, and 25 sustainable food boxes were delivered to Pontypridd Foodbank as part of Down to Zero's Fresh Veg Christmas Initiative. Pontypridd Foodbank distributed boxes to local families in need and cooked Christmas dinners for those on their own or in food crisis over the holiday period.

### Job Creation

Down to Zero employs 4 Full Time Equivalent posts and used 2 freelancers on 2024-25. Job creation is an important element of the project.

## 4. The Language of Climate Conversations

### Identifying language and communication barriers

Down to Zero acknowledges that engaging people in climate change conversations is extremely difficult, especially for those facing challenging circumstances in their lives.

People often struggle with the cost-of-living crisis, food poverty, poverty, or are living extremely busy and complex lives. Climate conversations can feel remote and not relevant to people's lives.

Other barriers include lack of confidence and lack of opportunity to engage in climate conversations.

### How the project addressed the barriers

The project has developed a way of working called "incidental climate change" that engages local people and supports behaviour change through "incidental climate conversations". The term has been coined from best practice Welsh/bilingual education of incidental Welsh. Incidental Welsh is where Welsh is integrated and used unconsciously/subconsciously in everyday conversations that



would otherwise be monolingual, this approach subtly exposes people who would otherwise hear little Welsh and can often support educational interest and development in the subject.

Incidental climate conversations often occur during practical activities and start with the everyday benefits of an activity rather than focussing on its climate positive credentials. Some project staff at the learning event called this approach “finding a way in” to describes the way in which incidental climate conversations happen on the back of other activities.

Conversations have been held around the benefits of no-dig, composting, waste minimisation, local produce, local wood for carbon storage, lower food miles, benefits of pollinators for tree growth and more. Climate conversations have been introduced by explaining in practical sessions, “this is why we do this”, to prioritise the non-climate benefits. For example, “we do this to improve the vegetables produced, as well as being a climate friendly approach”. Making conversations relevant to people’s lives such as improving the world for grandchildren is also important.

Down to Zero has observed that the approach supports knowledge and improves the confidence of people engaged.



Down to Zero invited Social Farms and Gardens Camau Gwyrdd Champions (community growing groups) to an event at the Down to Zero site in Pontyclun, in September 2024. This event put the approach of incidental climate change into practice through a site visit. It provided an opportunity for community growing groups to discuss climate change within the context of learning about the growing activities on the site.



## Successes in climate conversations

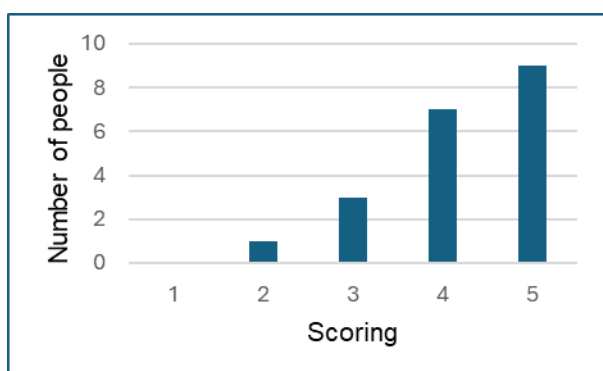
Down to Zero collected data via surveys and feedback from local people, staff members and partner organisations to understand to what extent their approach, including the way in which they use language, has been successful.

People participating in the project were asked following their participation to rank on a scale of 1-5 against the following statements.

- I know more about climate friendly land practices and environmental sustainability.
- I feel inspired to do or learn more about biodiversity, environmental sustainability and tackling climate change.

The figures below, although only based on a small number of participants, show an increased knowledge and a desire to do and learn more. These figures were reported in Down to Zeo's first Annual Report, (2023/2024)

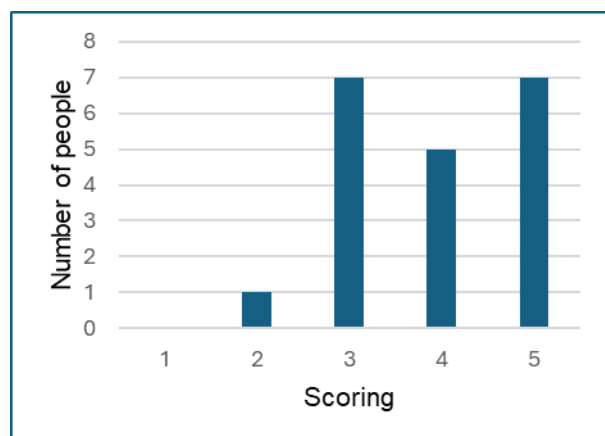
Figure 1: Increased knowledge of climate friendly land practices and environmental sustainability



20 respondents. Average score 4.2.



Figure 2: Increased knowledge about climate friendly land practices and environmental sustainability.



20 respondents. Average response 3.9

People feel that the project has had a positive impact on their lives.

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*"A super project with clear and numerous benefits to the local community which also contributes to tackling climate change. I have already learned a huge amount through my participation. I really enjoy every hour I spend at down to Zero! It's one of the highlights of my week." Gareth.*

*Regular volunteer.*

*"The work I've done with the project has given a new lease of life that's helped focus my mental health and given me the chance to learn new skills, learning about how much we waste as a society and how bad it is for the environment. With our project we are trying to save as much as we can for future generations."*

*Dave Regular volunteer and community member.*

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### Challenges in climate conversations

Down to Zero staff have been aware that organisations as well as project participants are not always aware of the terminology used in climate conversations.

The following quote is from a staff member.

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*"I have had the opportunity to be involved with an innovative project that has challenged me to learn about nature-based solutions to climate change on a local basis. I have been mentored by Tom who has encouraged me to stretch my strategic understanding and expand my network to learn and work collaboratively to find solutions to climate change. It has been a fruitful experience in my career and has reinforced my intention to do what I can to reduce the impact of Climate Change."*

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Harvesting Local Produce

## 5. Key Learning

The key learning about language and communication from the Down to Zero project can be summarised as follows.

- **Provide opportunities for conversations.** The activities at the project sites provide opportunities for people to engage with climate conversations. It provides people with opportunities to ask questions.
- An **action-based approach** makes climate conversations relevant to people's lives.
- **Incidental climate conversations** are a way of introducing climate aspects by discussing, "this is why we do this" and by making climate awareness part of day-to-day life with positive benefits for families.



## About Sustainable Steps Wales - Action and Egin Grants

Sustainable Steps Wales is delivered by The National Lottery Community Fund and supported with money from the Dormant Assets Scheme. Action Grants and Egin Grants are two of the four Sustainable Steps Wales programmes. They support The National Lottery Community Fund's commitment in Wales to:

- create a sustainable future
- reach new audiences who want to take action on climate change.

**Egin Grants** (2023–2030) aim to help community groups to take action on climate change and live in a more sustainable way. Funding is available for up to £15,000. It is open to groups that receive support from the [Sustainable Steps Wales – Egin Mentoring Service](#).

**Action Grants** (2022–2028) aim to address climate change in communities and help people live in a more sustainable way. Funding has been awarded to 14 projects, ranging from £10,001 to £350,000. You can find out more about [Egin Grants](#) and [Action Grants](#) on the Fund's website.

### About the evaluation

Severn Wye Energy Agency, with Liz Bickerton Consulting, was appointed by The National Lottery Community Fund in 2022 to evaluate the Sustainable Steps Wales – Action Grants and Egin Grants programmes. The evaluation team aims to generate programme-wide learning and evidence of impact, focusing on how the grants engage new people and groups in climate action, motivate behaviour change, and reduce carbon emissions. The evaluation will run until 2027.

### About this case study

This is one of three project case studies from research that explored language and communication barriers when engaging communities on climate change, and how projects have worked to overcome them. The methods and findings are summarised in the Insight Report #2 “Net Zero – Net What?”.