

Snowdonia National Park Centre Plas Tan y Bwlch

Business Plan

2012 – 2015

DRAFT



**Plas Tan y Bwlch is the
Snowdonia National Park's
Environmental Study Centre.**

**This business plan sets out the
operational running and development
of the Centre between 2012 and 2015.**

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Summary

This Business Plan lays out the framework for the operation of Plas Tan y Bwlch for the next 3 year period. The Plan will be presented to the Snowdonia National Park Authority for approval and implementation.

A breakdown of the business carried out is given in the annual Trend Analysis, budgets are given in the annual budget book and targets are included as a part of the Authorities Corporate Work Plan. Further details covering the work of the Education Team and the delivery of courses is given in the Authorities Communication and Education Strategies.

In implementing the Business Plan the Centre will:

- offer superior facilities for courses, conferences and activities – maintaining the 3 star standard.
- offer excellent facilities to schools, colleges and universities.
- reduce the reliance on external grant funding
- increase usage of the Centre by all segments to maximise the use of the facilities and occupancy.
- be an exemplar of good practice in sustainability.
- reduce the Carbon Footprint of the Centre.
- develop special facilities to enable us to maintain or increase the number of school and socially deprived groups using the centre.
- maintain and develop the number and range of courses offered through the medium of Welsh.
- constantly review the marketing of the Centre and the development of electronic marketing and sales opportunity.
- develop the standard of accommodation and catering in line with customer expectations and demands.
- maintain and develop links with local community organisations.

1. Introduction

Plas Tan y Bwlch was originally built at the beginning of the 17th century as a home for the Evans and Griffiths families, who were subsequently succeeded by the Oakeley family, important quarry and land owners in the area.

Plas Tan y Bwlch stands above the river Dwyryd in the Vale of Ffestiniog in Gwynedd. It is ideally located in the heart of the Snowdonia National Park, with no part of Snowdonia being more than one hour's drive away. The Centre has strong links and a commitment to the local community with a number of local groups and societies holding meeting and events.

Since its establishment as a Study Centre in 1975, the Centre has enjoyed a national reputation in the field of environmental studies, and is unique in Wales for the range of courses and facilities it provides. The Centre won the Wales Tourist Board award for the best Specialist Activity Centre in 2003, was awarded Eco-Centre status in 2006 and the Customer Service Excellence Hallmark in 2009. The Snowdonia National Park is one of the best known destinations for visitors in the UK.

Plas Tan y Bwlch is monitored by a working group of the Snowdonia National Park Authority. The group is made up of 5 members of the Authority and two independent members and meets 3 times a year.

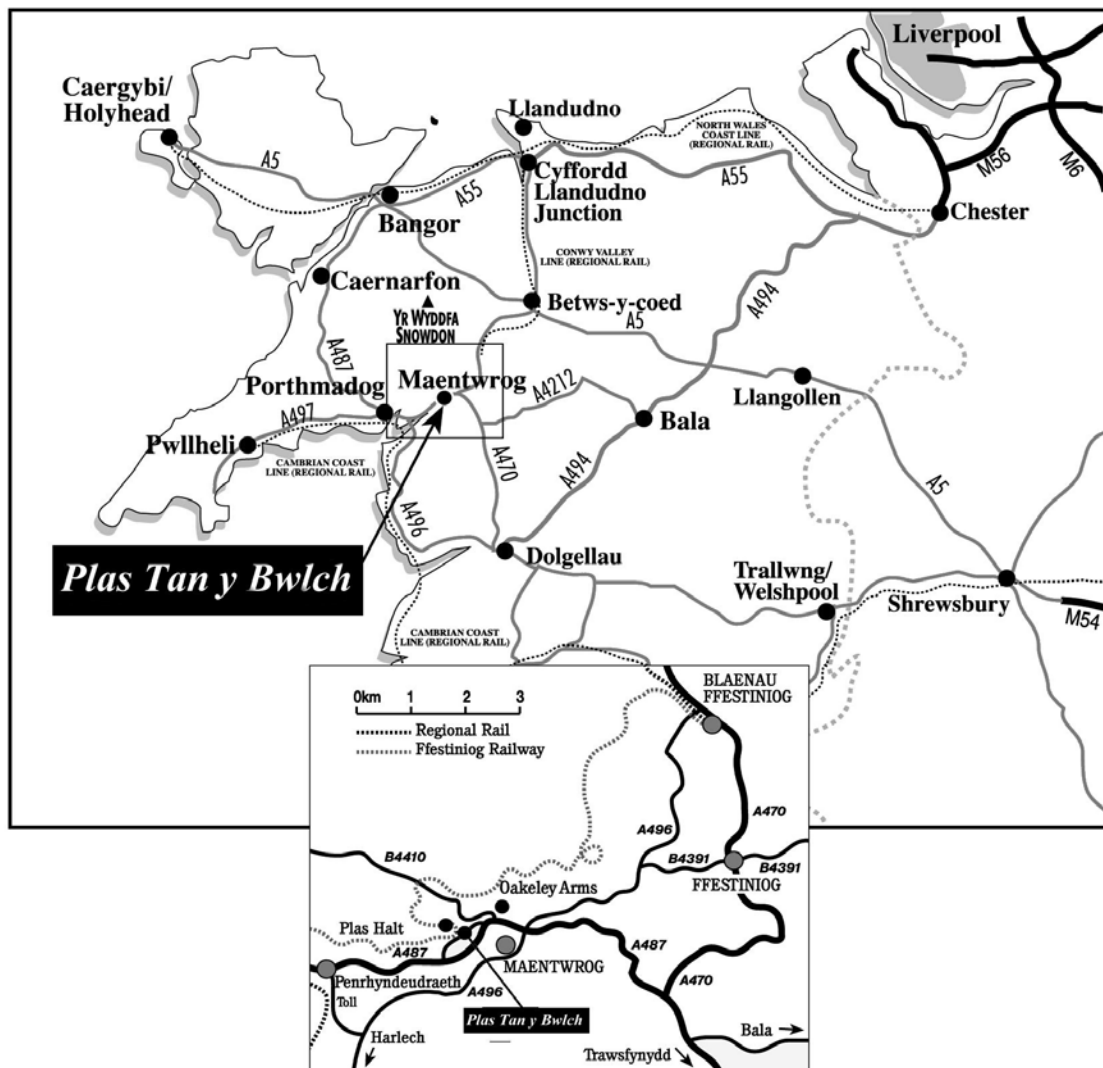
The Centre is the base of the Authority's Education Service which provides staff for the Educational courses. The management of the Plas and all its facilities is the responsibility of the Head of Business. The two sections - Education and Business - have to work closely to enable the Plas to fulfil its business functions.

The Centre has developed a range of excellent facilities for professional, educational and public courses, including a lecture theatre, lecture and seminar rooms, reference and resources library, fieldwork rooms, bar, lounges and high quality AV and IT equipment. The Centre is located within 100 acres of lakes, gardens and woodlands.

Course tutors include in-house staff as well as local, regional, national and international specialists.

Accommodation can be provided for 74 people in single and twin bedrooms.

2. Location



The Centre is located in the heart of the Snowdonia National Park making it the ideal venue for running courses and activities that use the Park as a resource. Improvements to the road network carried out in recent years and those planned for the future make the centre easily accessible from all parts of Wales, the UK and with Manchester and Liverpool Airports about two hours drive away, also from Europe and the rest of the World.

Public Transport links are generally good, with two National Rail stations less than 4 miles away. The Traws Cambria and National Express coach services both call at the end of the Centres drive.

3. Vision

National Dimension

The 1995 Environment Act sets out the statutory purposes of the National Park Authority as:

- Conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the National Park.
- Promote opportunities for the enjoyment and understanding of the special qualities of the area by the public.

In carrying out the above the Authority should also:

- Foster the economic and social well-being of the communities within the National Park.

The Authority

The Service Priorities for the Snowdonia National Park Authority are:

- ensure that the objectives in the Park Management Plan are delivered successfully by ourselves, our partners and our stakeholders in order to improve the state of the Park;
- ensure that the statutory planning function is adequately resourced and effectively managed in order to meet national policy, customer expectations and support sustainable communities;
- retaining property assets if they add value to the Authority and our core purposes that would otherwise not be provided;
- retaining Tourism Information Centres if they meet an identified need in accordance with the Communication Strategy;
- maintaining upland access paths; and
- maintaining access opportunities for all.

We envisage that we will be able to ensure the Authority achieves these Priority Work areas by providing the facilities for the Education Section to organise and deliver courses and training courses by maintaining the facilities including the gardens.

Plas Tan y Bwlch

- To be the premier study centre in Wales for Public and Professional training courses specialising in environmental issues and through the medium of Welsh and English
- As the only residential study centre owned by a National Park Authority in the UK Plas Tan y Bwlch should act as an exemplar in all it does.

- To offer high quality facilities, service and catering for all users of the Centre
- To be the premier location in Wales for the school / college courses we offer
- To continue to invest in new technology to enable the future presentation of courses and events electronically.
- To be a centre of excellence and exemplar of good environmental practices, maintaining Eco-Centre status
- To promote awareness of climate change and appropriate actions to be taken
- To be a centre to develop awareness of sustainable, environmentally friendly activities.
- To manage and maintain the gardens as an educational resource and place for peaceful relaxation.

4. Where are we now?

Structure

It appears to all users Plas Tan y Bwlch is run as a single entity. It is however run by two sections within the Authority namely the Plas Tan y Bwlch Business Section in the Corporate Services Directorate and the Education Section in the Land Management and Communication Directorate.

The Head of Business' main areas of responsibility are:

- Facilities
- Maintenance
- Catering and cleaning
- Business Administration and Finance
- Non-educational courses and activities and day meetings

The Head of Education's main areas of responsibility are:

- Educational Course Programming and Content
- Educational Grant Aid
- Interpretation

Along with the defined areas of responsibility shown above the two sections have joint responsibilities in the following:

- Marketing of activities and facilities
- Special events and Open Days
- General administration and staff support

Particularly on the subject of marketing, the promotion of the Centre's product must be tied in more formally to the communication and marketing strategy of the Authority. This area of work is outlined in more detail in the Marketing Strategy for the Centre.

Over recent years the National Park Authority has invested heavily in the facilities and building at Plas Tan y Bwlch

Together, both Head of Business and Head of Education posts are charged with providing facilities to enable the Service to arrange, run or host courses, events and day meetings for a variety of organisations.

For the purpose of this Business Plan the Business section and the Education section will be treated as one. For Plas Tan y Bwlch to continue to develop and improve and indeed to be able to carry out much of the activity it already does,

this joint working between the two sections will have to be maintained and developed.

Education Section Staff

The section comprises of The Head of Education and Communication, two Senior Lecturers and two Education Officers all of whom are based at Plas Tan y Bwlch. The staff plan, organise and run residential education courses based at the Centre and field trips and day courses. Further details of the work and activities of the section are given in the Authorities Education Strategy.

Plas Tan y Bwlch Business Section Staff

The role of the Business Section is to manage and service the facilities offered by the Centre. The section is managed by the Head of Business, who reports to the Director of Corporate Services. The Head of Business also has a very close working relationship with the Head of Education to facilitate the seamless smooth running of the centre and the courses and activities provided. The section is split into three main areas of work:

Administration – the administration team carry out the reception, clerical and financial duties, including handling of bookings, receiving payments and dealing with marketing of the Centre and activities. Administration and clerical support is given to the Lecturers and Education Officers.

Domestic Services - these staff provided the catering and cleaning functions essential to the Centre and are managed on a day-to-day basis by the Domestic Services Officer.

Facilities and Gardens – responsible for general maintenance and the upkeep of the house and gardens and grounds.

Corporate Standards

It is important that the Centre continues to undertake its work in a manner which is in keeping with the rules and regulations of the Snowdonia National Park Authority. The Centre will adhere stringently to corporate matters relating to Personnel, Finance, Audit, Information Technology, Administration and Legal Services.

Assumptions

When developing this Business Plan several assumptions have been made:

- That there will be no pressure to significantly reduce the level of subsidy received from the National Park Authority and that the Authority will continue to support the Centre
- That there will be no need for major capital investment in Plas Tan y Bwlch, capital investment may be available for some small projects.
- That there will be no major outside influences to affect the demand for the public and professional training courses we organise.
- That the National Curriculum will continue to give emphasis to residential experiences for primary schools, and that the 'A' level syllabus will be changing.
- That there will continue to be a demand from overseas operators and that external forces do not make our courses too expensive.

The Facilities

The Centre has a total of 33 bedrooms, 25 with en-suite facilities and 8 standard rooms. The total number of bed spaces is 47 in the en-suite rooms and 27 in the standard bedrooms giving a maximum capacity of 74. Three en-suite bedrooms are on the ground floor with one having special facilities for wheelchair access. In practice the majority of participants on courses and conferences require single occupancy bedrooms.

There are 5 meeting / seminar rooms; the Oakeley Room and Library in the main house are wood panelled and are furnished with tables and chairs for approximately 50 people in each room, wireless internet access is available in both rooms along with all the bedrooms in the main house. In the Stablau there is the main Lecture Theatre with seating for 100, a Computer Training Room with seating for 15 and 8 networked computers and a Resource Library. There is a Field Workroom located behind the stables which is often also used as a art studio. Each room is fitted with computer projection, screens and other equipment required for presentations and meetings. The Library and Lecture Theatre are fitted with simultaneous translation facilities. The two libraries in the Centre are reasonably well stocked, however they have lacked investment in recent years and are in need of updating.

Catering facilities are provided by our own in-house caterers. The dining room has seating for 72, when required for special events and conference dinners meals can be provided in the Oakeley Room or Library. There is a modern bar and a small shop.

The Centre has 2 17 seat mini-buses, and an 8 seat people carrier. There is car parking close to the Centre for 25 cars with additional space available in the gardens car park and small overflow car park on the Oakeley Arms drive.

During recent years the centre has worked on a programme of upgrading its facilities. Wherever and whenever possible this has used sustainable and / or low energy fittings. There is a programme of redecoration for the bedrooms and public areas to maintain the standard of the facilities.

Main areas of Activity

a) Public Courses

Public courses are organised in a wide range of topics covering a variety of subjects based on the environment along with a raft of courses on specialist subjects. Topics include Mountain Walking, Painting, Photography, Culture, Bird Watching, History, Industrial Archaeology and Crafts. Participants usually book on these courses as individuals or couples although occasionally a small group will block book spaces.

Public courses remain as one of our most significant sources of income and are very important to the ethos of Plas Tan y Bwlch Centre. They provide opportunities for life-long learning and are an excellent opportunity to provide knowledge of the Park and sustainability issues to the wider public.

b) Professional Training Courses

Professional Training courses are offered in a broad range of subject covering the environmental sector. They mainly cover the theory and practice associated with the management of habitats and features along with a series of courses associated with interpretation. The majority of participants are employed by local authorities or central government agencies.

The demand for and provision of such courses is well established and they provide a foundation for the enviable reputation which Plas Tan y Bwlch has established in this market. However, currently, their viability depends on continued grant support from CCW, and for training budgets in all local authorities to increase.

c) School, College and University Courses

Courses are organised for a wide range of schools, colleges and universities. These courses are generally tied to the syllabus of the class and are mainly environmentally based. A very successful programme of one night stay courses has been established for primary schools from within the National Park to supplement the long established courses for primary schools from Wales.

Courses are also arranged for 'A' level studies and for modules for degree and post-graduate college and university groups.

There is a case for fostering courses for schools, colleges and universities since here lie the customers of the future. It is also crucial that Plas fulfils this educational role in order to support the core objectives of the Snowdonia National Park Authority.

d) Centre arranged courses - U.K. & Overseas market

These courses are organised in a range of subjects similar to those in the Public Course programme, they are then tailored to the specific requirements of the group they are arranged for.

In this sector it is important to minimise the risks by working in partnership with a number of different companies. The strategy has been to reduce exposure to the volatile USA market by targeting business at a restricted number of weeks, in quieter periods. We have also developed a successful course using a German travel operator which promotes the course with 5 or 6 operators in Germany.

e) Independent residential groups

This segment has several well established users, such as the Welsh Philatelic Society, Cymru ar Byd, and Cymdeithas Brodwaith. These groups organise their own activities. Many have been visiting Plas for 30 years. Once established they tend to be easy to organise. There is potential to increase this segment, although there is a lot of competition in this market.

f) Residential Conferences

Currently this is a very limited market, with the majority of residential conference organised for the 'environmental' sector and usually for only one night. This market requires the highest level of facilities and we are competing directly with local hotels.

g) Day bookings

The Stablau and increased profile of Plas Tan y Bwlch has meant that we are well placed to develop this market despite the low population of our catchment area. The facilities need to be "positioned" in marketing terms as being accessible and affordable in a regional context. However accessible car parking remains a drawback.

h) Special Events

The centre has received approval to host special events and functions such as civil weddings and receptions, birthday and anniversary parties and other non-educational events. These will be undertaken at times when the centre would otherwise be empty so as not to impinge on the core business and aims of the centre.

A breakdown and analysis of income and participants in each of the main areas of activity is given in the annual Trend Analysis .

The margin between income and expenditure in each segment varies between a cost to the Authority for each participant on public, professional training and school/college courses to a surplus for each participant on Independent, Overseas Courses, Conferences and Day Meetings. The margin in each category is used by the centres management when deciding on the mix of business.

Aspirations

Financial – that the Centre sets a realistic budget, using forecasting and trend analysis and achieves it.

Staff Time – that staff time is utilised in the most efficient way to achieve the goals of the Authority and the targets set.

Centre Facilities – that best use is made of the Centre’s facilities, maximising capacity while maintaining the ethos of the Centre and providing an atmosphere conducive with learning.

Sustainability – to continue working towards being a centre of excellence and exemplar of good practice in all that we do.

Activities – to offer a wide range of courses and activities to a wide range of audiences in both Welsh and English.

Details of the specific targets are given in the Authority Corporate Work Programme.

Funding

The full breakdown of the budgets for the Centre are given in the annual budget book for the Authority. In 2012 the total income and expenditure is:

Income	Sales (Bar and Shop)	19,100
	Grants	30,000
	Fees and Charges	531,000
	Other	6,000
	Internal Recharges	36,160
Total Income		622,260
Expenditure Plas Business	Plas Business Employees	458,890
	Central Support	132,800
Expenditure Plas Business and Education		
	- Premises & Grounds	111,300
	- Transport Costs	28,380
	- Supplies and Services	232,310
	- VAT	63,000
	- Capital Charges	106,160
Total Expenditure		1,132,840
	Net Budget for Plas Business and Education	510,580

Some of the budgets shown above are for both the Plas Business Service and the Education Service. A precise breakdown per service has not been prepared due to the nature of integration of the services.

5. SWOT Analysis of Current Situation

Focus sessions were held with a wide range of staff, both face to face and electronically. Results of these, together with discussions with a range of interested parties produced the following.

Key Strengths [Internal]

- potential for strong co-working between Plas staff and expertise staff of the Authority
- location in an outstanding landscape and proximity of varied habitats, topography, heritage sites and issues for environmental management courses
- a building & gardens of historic value
- administration and catering staff who have an excellent reputation for a quality and caring service to visitors
- full bilingual facilities with an excellent reputation for courses taught in the medium of Welsh.
- the range of teaching rooms and facilities available at the Centre

Key Weaknesses

- remote from centres of population in the UK
- lack of single and en-suite accommodation
- the high maintenance cost of a grade II listed building
- lack of convenient car parking when there are residential groups and large numbers of day visitors at the centre
- lack of co-ordinated marketing under the branding of the SNPA

Key Opportunities

- to conform to and capitalise on WAG initiatives and prioritise laid out in policy documents
- very few comparable centres of excellence in the UK
- to expand culinary experiences and give a more varied choice of menu using local produce
- to develop our facilities to further demonstrate good practice in all aspects of sustainability
- to further develop the number and type of courses offered in the medium of Welsh

Key Threats [External]

- lack of external grant for professional training and capital projects
- imbalance of quality of current bedroom stock
- the possibility of new study centres developing in the area with full en-suite accommodation in addition to existing competition in the area
- an incident which has a significant negative public relations impact
- pressure from external public finance changes

6. WHERE WILL WE BE IN THREE YEARS TIME?

Principal Vision

The Centre will achieve the National Park Authority's purposes and objectives by:

In all that we do to work in an Inclusive way:

- To maintain and enhance our customer satisfaction levels.
- Develop courses and activities in Welsh and English to recognised standards in the environmental field, and that meet customer expectations and demand.
- Use in-house expertise from within the Authority to develop courses ensuring a high standard and quality is maintained.
- Maintain or improve on the quality of catering, using local quality suppliers whenever available and possible.
- Continue to develop the gardens and grounds to enhance the visitor experience and the education potential.
- To continue to develop the facilities, reducing the Carbon Footprint and as an exemplar of good practice.

7. How Will We Get There

We will meet the vision for the Centre by:

- Retaining the Customer Service Excellence hallmark, thus demonstrating our commitment to delivering high levels of customer service.

we will know we have achieved this when:

- We have Implemented any areas for improvement from the assessment reports and we continue to be awarded the hallmark

- Continue to develop, upgrade and refurbish the facilities for guests to maintain a high standard of decoration and furnishing enabling us to maintain or expand our occupancy levels.

we will know we have achieved this when:

- We maintain our customer satisfaction levels at above 95%
- We increase the bed occupancy levels by 2% each year

- Work with external organisations such as Natur in the development of training courses and accreditation systems.

we will know we have achieved this when:

- We have implemented the Authorities Education Strategy
- received accreditation of our training courses
- we have increased attendees from Wales on training courses by 5%

- Maintain and develop the provision of Professional Training and Education courses, and explore sources of new grant support for such provision.

we will know we have achieved this when:

we are successful in securing alternative sources of funding

- Expand on the links with other sections within the Authority to use in-house expertise in presenting courses.

we will know we have achieved this when:

the number of authority staff tutoring on our courses increases

- Encourage additional independent groups, conferences and special functions to use the Plas as a residential venue to occupy any available free space not taken by our core business.

we will know we have achieved this when:

- We have increased the number of independent groups by 4 per year

- To provide resources to continue to develop the gardens as a visitor attraction and an exemplar of good practice in wildlife gardening.

we will know we have achieved this when:

- We have Increased the number of day visitors to the gardens by 10% each year
- Complete the Hydro Electricity generation scheme to include interpretation and the background of the history of generation at Plas Tan y Bwlch.
we will know we have achieved this when:
 - We have decreased the amount of electricity taken from the grid by 70%
 - We have increased the amount of heating by electricity thus reducing the amount of gas used by 10%

Pricing

The Centre has adopted a pricing structure that has one price for all residential events and one for day meetings. Supplements and discounts are then applied to this base price depending on the type and length of the activity.

The highest level of discount is offered to the Blas ar Plas programme of courses for primary schools from within Snowdonia, with a decreasing level of discounts being given for other primary school groups, secondary schools and colleges and universities. Supplements are added to courses such as those for the American market where the services level and staff input is generally expected to be higher.

The Centre has the authority to offer additional discounts for certain activities. These would generally be for guaranteed repeat business, for large group bookings or those at times of years when the Centre is traditionally quiet.

When determining the price for a particular activity, as well as giving primary consideration to the budget requirements of the Authority, we also need to consider market forces. To enable us to do this we periodically review charges being made by similar establishments to ensure that the Centre does not either over or under charge. We will endeavour to charge the highest level of fees we can for a particular event or activity.

Special events such as private parties or weddings are costed on an individual basis depending on the requirements of the event and taking into account any additional staff time required to set up for the event.

Sustainability – looking forward

The Centre should be an exemplar of good practice in all that it does, this particularly relates to carbon reduction. During the life-time of this Business Plan

it is hoped that the scheme for the Plas to produce our own electricity from a small scale hydro-electricity scheme will be completed.

Whenever development or upgrading is carried out the Centre will use the most sustainable materials available. The programme to replace fittings with low energy type will continue.

Marketing and Promotion

At the heart of the process of developing an attractive and popular programme of courses lies the need to market the product effectively. The Snowdonia National Park recently developed a new Communications Strategy aimed at strengthening the way the Park communicates internally between departments, the way it presents its layers of information to the public, and also the way the Park is branded and identified. The branding aspect is heavily influenced by the 'Breathing Spaces' initiative which covers all national parks in the UK. Further detail is given in the Plas Tan y Bwlch Marketing Strategy.

Corporate

The Centre will continue to develop close working links with other departments within the Authority especially those which have a direct input into the development of the courses, facilities, grounds and woodlands, namely Ecology, Forestry, Property and Planning.

Whenever possible and practical the Centre will endeavour to use staff from within the Authority to lead / assist with the organisation of its courses. This will help to ensure that the courses offered reflect the Authorities own policies and practices.

Capital funding for Development Projects

This will be sourced as a part of the annual National Park bid to the Welsh Assembly together with any other available grant aid. Any major restoration and / or development projects stand apart as requiring significant partnership funding.

Developments of the building of Plas Tan y Bwlch are linked to the Authority Asset Management Plan. Development of the facilities within the Centre are detailed in this document and appendices with further detail given in the Action Plan associated with this document.

Starting from the 2012/13 financial year the Authority have committed to spending the savings made after the completion of the Hydro Electricity scheme to improve facilities at in the Centre. These will be allocated on an annual basis to meet the priority areas.

Supplementary Capital costs

Minibus replacement, IT equipment and extra or replacement equipment are bid for on an annual basis to the National Park Authority, if successful they then form part of Authority budgets. In recent years the Authority has provided additional capital funding for:

- new full access mini-bus
- refurbishment of the administration office
- replacement of kitchen extractor system

Grant Support

Grants will continue to be applied for from the Countryside Council for Wales to part fund the costs of the Professional Training Courses. We will however look at ways to reduce the reliance on grant support to run the programme of Training Courses.