

Wales Land Management Forum (WLMF) Minutes

Title of meeting:	Wales Land Management Forum (WLMF)
Location:	Microsoft Teams Meeting
Date of meeting:	24 th June 2024
Members present:	Professor Rhys Jones, NRW Board Member (Chair) Michelle Griffiths, NRW Dennis Matheson, TFA Angharad Davies, Wales YFC Rhys Jones, NRW Sarah Hetherington, NRW John Browne, NRW Rachel Lewis-Davies, NFU Cymru Robert South, Confor
Attendees present:	Rhodri Powell, NRW Suzanne Hearn, NRW
Apologies:	Ruth Jenkins, NRW Tim Kirk, Confor Gareth Parry, FUW Jon Goldsworthy, NRW Elaine Harrison, Confor Hedd Pugh, NFU Cymru Huwel Manley, NRW
Secretariat:	Bronwen Martin, NRW

Item 1. Introductions, Apologies and Declaration of Interest

1. Professor Rhys Jones (WLMF Chair) welcomed all to the meeting and noted apologies. Rhys welcomed Angharad Davies as the new Wales YFC representative. Robert Smith attended the meeting to represent Confor.
2. No declarations of interest were raised in respect of Agenda items to be considered.
3. The group were reminded that the meeting was being recorded for the purpose of capturing the minutes and the digital file will be deleted once the meeting minutes have been compiled.

Item 2. Minutes from the last meeting, actions & matters arising.

4. Once the meeting minutes have been reviewed and formally agreed they will be translated and published on the NRW website. The Group reviewed the minutes from the meeting held on 11th March 2024 and accepted them as a true record.
5. The group reviewed the outstanding actions and verbal updates were provided:

- Several outstanding actions regarding beavers.
- Liz Halliwell, NRW provided the following written update:

'The Minister for Climate Change indicated that a clearer policy position on beavers in Wales would be beneficial and NRW was asked to work with Welsh Government officials to prioritise a review of available evidence to inform the development of such a position. The intention was then to help form a policy framework and agreement on the role of beavers in ecosystem restoration in Wales and inform the position with regard to the protection of beavers in Wales.'

NRW has reviewed the available evidence on beavers, considering it in the context of the Welsh environment and the Welsh environmental policy and legal framework. This review considered the potential impacts of beavers in the Welsh environment and the Welsh environmental policy and legal framework. We have used the existing evidence reviews from England and Scotland to assess how they might apply to Wales and identified any evidence gaps.

We have concluded the work and provided this to Welsh Government. Welsh Government are considering next steps'.

- Sept AP 10: Rachel Lewis Davies, NFU Cymru to check whether they submitted a formal letter to NRW detailing concerns around the planning system preventing compliance with the Control of Agricultural Pollution Regulations and NRW's role as a statutory consultee.
- Rachel said the letter went to all Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) in Wales. It was quite a general letter, and it was very useful in unlocking meetings with LPAs at a local level.
- March AP01: Bronwen Martin to talk to colleagues about including broad information about the existence of the RAC on the NRW website.
- Information has been shared with NRW digital colleagues to publish on the external NRW website.

Item 3. River Restoration Programme

6. Suzanne Hearn and Rhodri Powell, NRW joined the meeting to provide an overview of the River Restoration Programme and a summary of some of the projects.
7. River Restoration is the restoration of natural river forms and processes that create and sustain physical habitats and species, thereby supporting resilient freshwater ecosystems. It involves taking an approach that accounts for interactions between the river corridor and the wider catchment.

8. Programme Vision: to restore rivers, floodplains and catchments for habitats, wildlife and the current and future generations. The programme will measure river restoration work across Wales with the aim of improving 200-1000km of river by 2030. Suzanne provided a summary of the types of restoration projects that are being delivered.
9. Rhodri provided an overview of some of the projects within the Physical Modifications (PhysMods) Project. The project objectives are:
 - To address physical modifications in rivers, the main reason for Not Achieving Good Status and to move WFD waterbodies towards good ecological status.
 - Directly supporting nature-based solutions in line with NRW's Section 6 Duty
 - Funded by Welsh Government's Nature & Climate Emergencies (NaCE) Fund
 - Manages the national large scale, complex and opportunity River Restoration Projects
10. A brief summary of the timeline was shared with the group. It will span around 5 years with an initial prioritisation workshop conducted in 2019 and delivery is anticipated from 2023-2025.
11. The prioritised locations are geographically dispersed across Wales. Rhodri provided an overview of some case studies including the work on the River Pelenna, Neath which has been delivered. Work on the Nant Dowlais is currently in development. This watercourse is failing due to fish passage issues and water quality issues and there are also pressures in terms of the barriers and sediment pressures. The Dowlais was historically straightened which has caused issues with disconnection from the floodplain and a very limited established habitat because of the lack of channel features. NRW have been working very closely with the tenant farmer and the landowners either side of the watercourse because the area is used for livestock. We've developed the solution reconnecting the Dowlais to its paleo channels (historical alignment). We're going to regrade the bed to improve connection with the floodplain, create some areas of backwater habitat and remove a culvert which is acting as a significant barrier to fish migration.
12. The Llandinam Gravels, River Severn is the largest project in the programme of works. The site is a nature reserve which is owned by Montgomery Wildlife Trust. It's an important site for exposed riverine gravel habitats which are important for invertebrates and provide opportunity for salmon and trout spawning. The section has been historically straightened with significant amounts of ongoing and unconsented dredging works, which have been conducted over the years. The surrounding area, the village of Llandinham, has suffered internal and external flooding in recent years as well. It is quite a complex project with a lot of moving issues. NRW have been working with Montgomery Wildlife Trust to develop a scheme to complement their ideas for the site and is going to be based on restarting natural processes. We're aiming to create small scrapes and install large woody material in the floodplain and in the channel. The modelling we've produced shows this is going to lead to the creation of a multi braided plan form of the river which will provide that important habitat for invertebrates and fish. We've also been working very closely with Powys County Council on this scheme, particularly around the flooding issues.
13. Robert South, Confor mentioned from the forestry point of view and the Welsh Woodland Creation Scheme, we're heavily regulated on how close we can go to water

courses by NRW, whereas in England they will pay for bank reinforcement, dappled shade and keeping rivers cool. Woodland Creation Schemes could actually benefit the rivers if they were designed with creating different habitats in mind. It's quite interesting that Wales has taken a very different view to England, where we're getting paid extra to create dappled shade or to reinforce riverbanks. The Welsh projects sound great but it's very different to the conversation in other regions. Michelle Griffiths, NRW said that is probably something for Welsh Government to consider (e.g., the opportunity, the types of schemes, the funding and promotion of schemes). Robert said in England, you're allowed to plant in riparian buffers if you're creating dapple shade for habitat, but if you do a certain species mix on appropriate sites, you also get paid extra for keeping rivers cool as an additional contribution. The whole funding process is very different, whereas in Wales a lot of our main rivers and tributaries are SSSI and the Forestry Team will generally push us back to at least 15-20 metres away from the watercourse for a Woodland Creation Scheme which is well beyond the UK Forestry Standard. The landowners are leaving this piece of untouched land which will ultimately become unmanaged and left to erode when we could actually use nature-based solutions to deliver multiple benefits whilst protecting the water course. Robert suggested that perhaps a wider conversation is needed within NRW. John Browne, NRW said comparisons with England are very different and one of the biggest differences is around our funding mechanisms. An NRW colleague (Ben Wilson) is very much aware of the Keeping Rivers Cool Project and is trying to emulate parts of that in Wales (particularly some of the mapping elements). However, Wales does not have the same degree of funding than England, which is the biggest single factor. The Wales Fisheries Forum is meeting on Thursday and one of their agenda items is around incentive schemes and they will be discussing that in terms of being aware of what is available elsewhere. Additionally, for certain types of rivers you can't plant within seven metres of the bank, and we have specific legislation in Wales to prevent that.

AP June 01: Michelle Griffiths to clarify the current Welsh position regarding planting trees next to rivers and report back to the WLMF.

14. Suzanne said within the river restoration projects, one of the key actions is to do with the corridor and tree planting. In several projects, trees are planted up to the bankside and then there is fencing to protect it and allow it to establish. Although this is a bit of a policy convergence that perhaps needs a bit of ironing out. Suzanne said her colleague Tristan Hatton-Ellis has been involved with guidance on tree planting on SSSIs.
15. Robert recalled experiences from the private sector when dealing with the NRW Woodland Creation Planning Team and the Forest Regulations Team. General consensus is whatever the UKFS distances are, it will always be at least double the distance, for example, if the UKFS says you can't plant within 10 metres, a Woodland Creation Scheme will push you to 20 metres. Wales is taking a very risk adverse approach to woodland creation at the moment. Robert mentioned that they are struggling with a number of their own schemes because they are next to rivers. These sites would benefit from being improved but the default setting from NRW is just a 'no' and you can't have a conversation. Therefore, we need more interaction between our organisations. Michelle agreed to clarify our position and report back to the WLMF. Michelle suggested that in the meantime, Robert could provide further information or specific examples that are particularly contradictory to NRW's position. We can then discuss that in a separate conversation.

AP June 02: Robert South, Confor to provide further information and specific examples regarding issues encountered when trying to plant trees next to watercourses.

16. Rachel said given that the overarching aim is reconnecting these water courses with the catchment, has there been a formal engagement process with farmers and landowners. Rachel recalled a previous Wales Water Management Forum presentation on plans for river restoration for a river in North Wales, but the external consultants appointed by NRW hadn't spoken to any of the farmers along the catchment. Suzanne said that Place colleagues lead on the collaboration, and it is done on a project-by-project basis. At the development stage, there's questions around would we collaborate or not, would it add a lot of costs to the brief and what are the time constraints. We have an annual cycle of funding that we're trying to spend, and we have collaborated on some of the plans. However, the Project Teams will also go out and meet up with stakeholders and involve them in the process. Going forward, it is the collaborative projects we really want to push, particularly with co-development in catchments (e.g., South East River Restoration Project). We really want to build on that, but we do not have a formal way of doing it at the moment. Rachel suggested that wherever any of these projects interact with farmers and landowners along a river, early conversations with those concerned has to be a key principle. There are concerns that plans are being developed without appropriate early discussions and NRW are more likely to get people on board by engaging early. Suzanne reminded the group that it takes years to get to the project delivery stage and NRW does work collaboratively with farmers and landowners and in many cases, they are very willing and supportive. Suzanne described the difference between the high-level plan and the individual project plan.
17. Dennis Matheson, TFA mentioned that the river Tanat runs through his rented farm. In the 1920s it was straightened and consequently, it no longer meanders. In times of big flood events, it overtopped the banks that were made, and the water would sit in the hollows and drain away slowly. About 30 years ago, the National Rivers Authority put some very large boulders in the river to create little pools for fish, which was successful. Then about 25 years ago, the National Rivers Authority wanted to use up their budget and asked if Dennis was interested in having 2000 metres of new fencing on either side of the river with drinking points to keep the livestock out. Dennis agreed as this would replace previous fences that had washed away. However, the landlord was very annoyed that Dennis hadn't got their permission, even though he had to replace fences under the tenancy agreement. The landlord was annoyed because it would make it more difficult for fishermen to get to the river and they had to install styles. Dennis said the National River Authority did not listen when he suggested that they should have put flood gates in where the meanders used to be so in times of flood, the water went above the bank by about a foot or more and leaves and debris got stuck in the netting which meant that the pressure of the water came up in fountains about 50 yards in the field on either side. This destabilised the entire area and large amounts of soil got washed down river. Therefore, collaboration with landowners and farmers is really important.

Dennis mentioned that locally, they are plagued by people coming to the river without permission. People walk across the land to get to the river, put their canoes in and go down river to the next bridge and take them out again. This disturbs the fish and flattens crops where they walk through. Dennis recalled a presentation at the National Access Forum discussing making access points compulsory on land. Generally,

farmers would be against this, as access to the river for people in canoes could go against trying to restore habitat and wildlife. Suzanne acknowledged Dennis' personal experiences. Every site and every project are different which is why it takes a really long time to get to the delivery element of the restoration work.

18. Rhys said it is a complicated landscape with a lot of different schemes and projects and asked about the overarching strategy or prioritisation. Suzanne said in the last year, we have taken the programme through the internal NRW Programme Management Office (PMO) process – the PMO exists to support the business across the entire scope of its project and programme management role. This has forced us to consider and reflect what are we doing with the projects and how we bring it all together. This work is ultimately about catchment planning, partnerships, integration and collaboration both internally and externally. Rhodri said the new PMO approach has helped to structure our projects, and the programme provides oversight of those individual projects so we're able to get a spatial view of where we're delivering more.
19. Robert said an awful lot of rivers pass through Welsh woodlands and suggested that the private forestry sector could help to deliver a lot of improvements if funding was available – they could provide the benefits at a lower cost for the taxpayer through better collaboration. The forestry industry is well suited to delivering similar projects, for example we've got the experience, access to machinery and the skill sets of working around water. Perhaps this should be a future conversation.
20. Rachel said it has been interesting to hear about NRW's internal engagement processes and suggested that a similar exercise on external engagement is incorporated to prioritise the people who are managing the land in these catchments because they need to be on board and taken on the journey.

Item 4. NRW Updates

21. Prior to the meeting, the WLMF Update Paper was circulated. Members are encouraged to review the document beforehand and come to the meeting with questions. Rhys acknowledged that a lot of time goes into producing the WLMF Update Paper and thanked those who have contributed.
 22. Rhys mentioned the update on the National Forest for Wales and suggested that it would be good to have a future presentation on that. This group would also probably be interested in hearing more about Natur am Byth and the role of land management in species recovery.
- AP June 03: Bronwen Martin, NRW to look into future presentations on the National Forest for Wales and Natur am Byth.***
23. Michelle reminded the group that during the pre-election period, substantive items cannot come forward from NRW but encouraged the group to continue to share their queries.
 24. Bronwen mentioned that the NRW stand at the Royal Welsh Agricultural Show will have a general theme around our work with communities. There will be some general activities on the stand that reflect our work. Exhibitions on the stand will include incident response, flood response, fly tipping and also an interaction with Sean the Sheep and the Countryside Code.

25. John mentioned a recent press release which documented a case in Gower where a landowner was prosecuted for illegally felling 8 hectares of ancient woodland. This is the first case of its kind in the UK where The Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA) was used.
26. Bronwen the NRW Forum Review which will include a stakeholder survey for members to complete. The survey is currently being developed and will be published using Citizen Space. Once finalised, a private link to the survey will be circulated to members so that they can engage with the process.
27. No further comments were made in respect of the written NRW updates.

Item 5. Updates from FUW / NFU Cymru / Wales YFC / Confor / CLA / TFA / Welsh Government

28. **FUW:** A representative was not present.

29. **NFU Cymru:** Rachel said last week, NFU Cymru did a campaign for Welsh Farming Week which was very busy and successful. It included live lessons in which we welcomed over 21,000 children from schools in Wales and showed them how farm to fork ice cream is made and how soft fruit is grown. On the Friday, we spent the day in Cardiff handing out quality Welsh food to people visiting the city.

Plans are under way for the Royal Welsh Agricultural Show. One of our seminars will have a regulation theme. Farmers are very concerned about the burden of regulation and it's putting them under a lot of stress and anxiety, in particular, compliance with the Control of Agricultural Pollution Regulations. On the Monday afternoon, there will be a seminar for our members.

In the Autumn, we have our annual Sustainable Farming Conference showcasing the economic, environmental, social and cultural contributions of farming in Wales. That's taking place on Thursday 12th September and will be located in mid Wales on a beef and sheep farm which also manages a large area of common land – the hosts are the Lewis family, Glanelan Farm in Rhayader. Rachel said she would circulate details when they're available.

30. **Wales YFC:** Angharad Davies provided a brief personal introduction. Wales YFC members have had a busy time with rallies and competitions. Wales YFC are quite busy working towards plans for the Royal Welsh Agricultural Show with competitions and different meetings to be hosted at the YFC building on the showground.

Our conference will be held in January 2020 in Glamorgan this year. The possible theme for the event will be looking at diversification on farms, although this has not been confirmed yet.

31. **Confor:** Robert said Confor will also be at the Royal Welsh Agricultural Show for the whole four days. A number of events are planned to include the traditional forestry lunch on the Tuesday and a forestry and farming breakfast on the Wednesday which is sponsored by Confor and the Velcourt Group but will be hosted in the CLA tent.

In terms of consultations, currently there is a UK Government consultation on the Emissions Trading Scheme and Future Nature-based Markets, which will have an

impact on Wales. Robert encouraged WLMF members to look at that consultation. If the current UK Emissions Trading Scheme is rolled into existing nature-based schemes such as the Woodland Carbon Code, that would have a huge financial impact for land owners, and woodland carbon values would increase hugely in a very short space of time, but it will likely open up other funding opportunities for the private sector.

Confor have also made a publicly available document regarding their views relating to the current UK General Election.

32. **CLA:** A representative was not present.

33. **TFA Cymru:** Dennis Matheson said TFA Cymru is very pleased that the Sustainable Farming Scheme roll out has been postponed for 12 months. We all want to try and resolve all the issues and to make sure it is available to every type of farmer in Wales. However, whether this can be done by 2026 is uncertain because we've already had six years of consultation, and the current proposals are not fit for purpose.

Dennis said he attended the World Environment Day event at the Senedd which was very interesting. There were several presentations, but it was very noticeable that there was no mention of food security – this seemed like a repeat of NRW roll out of their Corporate Plan last Autumn. Dennis said food security is a real issue and is going very high up the agenda in other discussions and suggested that NRW might be falling behind on this.

TFA Cymru will also be at the Royal Welsh Agricultural Show. There is no stand, but we hope to meet as many people as possible and to discuss the key issues for tenant farmers and agriculture in Wales.

34. **Welsh Government:** A representative was not present.

35. Rhys noted that a representative from Welsh Government doesn't seem to attend many WLMF meetings. Bronwen clarified that Vicky Jones has been invited to attend every meeting and has delegated to Andrew Chambers in the past. Michelle mentioned that Vicky Jones has a new role within Welsh Government but Welsh Government's presence in this forum is important. Views on membership and representatives can also be captured through the NRW Forum Review and the stakeholder survey.

Item 6. Any Other Business

36. The next meeting will be held on 9th September in-person at the Welsh Government Building in Aberystwyth – more details will follow shortly.

37. Rhys reminded the group that their participation in the forum is vital and that they should put forward potential agenda items and discussion topics. Currently, NRW is coming up with all of the ideas for agenda items, but members need to take ownership by contributing to the forward look.

38. No other business was raised.

Close meeting