

Sustainability Committee

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The Environment Strategy for Wales

Evidence from Forestry Commission Wales to the National Assembly for Wales's Sustainability Committee Inquiry

Purpose

1. The purpose of this paper is to explain how Forestry Commission Wales has taken forward the Welsh Assembly Government's Environment Strategy since its launch in 2006.

Introduction

2. Forestry Commission Wales (FCW) has three main roles, all of which are relevant to the implementation of the Environment Strategy:

We help develop, advise and monitor the implementation of Welsh forestry policy on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government

We manage the Welsh Assembly Government's woodland estate of around 125,000 hectares to deliver Welsh forestry policy

We encourage delivery of Welsh Assembly Government forestry policy in the 60% of woodland in private ownership through a suite of regulation, incentives and partnership arrangements

Policy Development

3. We seconded part-time a member of staff to work as part of the core team that developed the Environment Strategy. Since the strategy's launch, we have actively participated in the Reference Group to help coordinate the implementation of the strategy more generally and specifically to report against the actions where we have defined responsibilities.

4. This close involvement has been beneficial in terms of helping us to take forward our policy development responsibilities in respect of Welsh forestry policy. Partly as a result of the publication of the Environment Strategy we identified a need to update the Welsh Assembly Government's strategy for woodlands and trees, Woodlands for Wales, to ensure it was compliant and aligned to the Environment Strategy. The One Wales Government confirmed this need and we were asked by the Minister for Rural Affairs to formally revise Woodlands for Wales in late 2007.

5. A consultation paper was developed and a number of propositions posed via a formal public consultation during 2008. Many of the propositions were seeking views on taking forward Environment Strategy outcomes through woodland management and the strategy was presented as a key driver using the following description:

6. The launch of the Wales Environment Strategy by the Welsh Assembly Government in 2006 - The Wales Environment Strategy recognises the value of woodland in delivering a wide spectrum of environmental benefits. These include its biodiversity value as one of our richest habitats supporting many iconic and important species; its cultural and heritage value; and the provision of 'ecosystem services', i.e. the benefits people obtain from natural ecosystems. The strategy lists several desired outcomes for 2026 that, where appropriate, should be reflected in the revised woodland strategy:

Climate change: Greenhouse gas emissions are reduced, consistent with Wales contributing fully to meeting UK-wide targets and in line with more specific Wales targets; Wales has improved resilience to climate change; and appropriate measures are in place to manage the risk of flooding from rivers (and surface water) and help adapt to climate change impacts.

Soil: Soil is managed to safeguard its ability to support plants and animals, store carbon and provide other important ecosystem services.

Biodiversity: The loss of biodiversity has been halted and we can see a definite recovery in the number, range and genetic diversity of species; sites of international, Welsh and local importance are in favourable condition to support the species and habitats for which they have been identified; and the wider environment is more favourable to biodiversity through appropriate management, reduced habitat fragmentation and increased extent and interconnectivity of habitats.

Landscape: The quality and diversity of the natural and historic character of our landscape is maintained and enhanced; actions are being taken to remediate contaminated sites for beneficial use where appropriate.

Access to green space: There is easy, equitable access to ample high quality green space; there is sustainable, widespread and equitable access to the countryside which recognises the need for a balance between tranquil areas and areas supporting larger numbers of people and a range of activities.

7. As a result, the following issues emerged as those key to the revision of Woodlands for Wales. All are either explicitly aligned to, or consistent with, the Environment Strategy:

Expanding Wales's native woodlands, improving the management of existing native woodlands and enhancing the native species within

Wales's conifer woodlands;

Protecting or enhancing the ecosystem services that woodlands can provide;

Adapting woodlands to climate change to produce resilient habitats that can deliver economic, social and environmental benefits;

Helping to mitigate climate change by greater production of timber (quality wood products as well as wood fuel);

An increased emphasis on protecting biodiversity, designated sites and ancient woodland, and on increasing the extent and interconnectivity of semi-natural habitats;

Creating and sustaining jobs, and stimulating enterprise and business growth, especially in rural communities and those in areas of high deprivation;

Access to trees and woodlands, especially in an urban context, and encouraging recreation by all for health and well being.

8. By contrast the original Woodlands for Wales strategy focused on delivering an enhanced range of goods and services from the current woodland resource without dealing explicitly with any changes to this resource that might be required (apart from a target for converting woodland to continuous cover forestry). The revised strategy has dealt clearly with the issues highlighted above and has also developed a more explicit vision for the size, character and location of Welsh woodlands - to deliver agreed objectives.

Implementation and Delivery

9. In anticipation and in parallel to the revision of Woodlands for Wales, FCW was participating in the preparation of the first action plan for the Environment strategy.

10. Implementation of Woodlands for Wales, by FCW and others over the next 50 years was identified as contributing to the delivery of the following Environment Strategy outcomes. Below each outcome is a brief summary of the implementing activity that FCW has been involved in either as a result of actions identified in the two Action plans or through our wider corporate activity:

Outcome No.7

11. Greenhouse gas emissions are minimised, consistent with Wales contributing fully to meeting UK-wide targets and in line with more specific targets that are under development

12. What's happened? - As well as promoting sustainable management of Welsh woodlands that contribute a net annual sink of 1430Kt CO₂e per annum (2007), we have been active in exploring and quantifying the benefits of expanding Wales's woodlands as a climate change mitigation measure. We have provided the results of model based research to inform the development of the Climate Change strategy, via the Land Use Climate Change Group. This work has been effectively linked to the delivery of a wider range of public benefits as described in Woodlands for Wales and has resulted in the Minister for Rural Affairs recent announcement aimed at achieving an additional 100,000 hectares of native and mixed woodland across Wales over the next 20 years, using Glastir support. If this is achieved then this new woodland could provide a peak of annual sink contribution of approximately 1689Kt CO₂e between 2050 and 2060.

13. In addition, FCW is delivering a range of measures aimed at optimising the annual greenhouse gas abatement from the management of the existing woodland resource with the delivery of a wider range of public benefits. What this means in practice is appropriate timber harvesting programmes to safeguard rural jobs, delivery of environmental benefits from woodland management along with the use of harvested wood products to substitute for fossil fuel use either through by material replacement or via wood energy.

Outcome No.8

14. Wales has improved resilience to the impacts of climate change. A clear flexible programme of measures is in place to enable Wales to respond and adapt to climate change

15. What's happened? - Woodlands for Wales places a huge emphasis on changing fundamentally the largely single species character of many Welsh forests, in part to enhance resilience against all the associated risks arising from a changing climate. This 'diversification' strategy is being adopted in all future replanting plans for the Assembly Government woodlands and incentive payments through Better woodlands for Wales are seeking to ensure the private woodland resource is similarly diversified.

16. In addition, FCW has been involved with a range of partners in promoting the use of new woodland and trees to help society adapt to a change of climate. These opportunities range from rural examples such as the tree planting work at the Pontbren project in Powys with all the resulting benefits of reducing water runoff to our work on developing a woodland and trees opportunities plan for the Heads of the Valleys Strategic Regeneration area. This plan identifies specific resilience opportunities in urban areas such as Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems incorporating trees and woodlands, along with street tree opportunities for shade, shelter and micro-climate benefits.

Outcome No.16

17. Soil is managed to safeguard its ability to support plants and animals, store carbon and provide other ecosystem services

18. What's happened? - The carbon flux modelling work referred to under outcome 7 has included science based assumptions

concerning carbon emissions associated with soil disturbance as a result of woodland management. This has enabled objective judgements to be made to identify where small carbon emissions are quickly abated by sequestration in above ground biomass compared to other more organic soil types where this abatement takes much longer to achieve.

19. There has been a particular focus on the approximately 12,000 hectares of plantation forest on deep peat sites. Woodlands for Wales indicates a clear direction towards restoration or a fundamental change in management of these sites to achieve non-intervention native woodland, if the peat resource is too modified to be restored to open ground habitat. Examples of where this work is already been taken forward include Penaran and Foel Boeth on the Migneint in Gwynedd where more than 100 hectares of plantation is in the process of being removed to restore blanket bog.

Outcome No.18

20. The use of alternative materials, secondary and recycled aggregates is maximised where possible in the construction industry

21. What's happened? - Woodlands for Wales takes the view that timber is the ultimate renewable resource with many potential uses, including substituting for many construction materials such as steel, concrete and plastic all of which rely heavily on fossil fuel use for their manufacture. Timber, in a range of configurations, also has the added benefit of 'locking up' carbon, for the length of the products life. There are also then opportunities for re-use and recycling before any locked up carbon is ultimately released, ideally through burning to create energy rather than through decomposition. FCW has been working in a number of ways to secure benefits from both the homegrown timber resource in this way but also through the increased use of sustainably produced timber from other countries. Examples include our focus on ensuring that harvesting from Welsh woodlands is sustainably managed and that the significant underused Welsh broadleaved resource is harnessed for wood energy through our management of the Wood Energy Business Scheme. In addition we have been instrumental in helping the Wales Forest Business Partnership become established to take forward more effective marketing of products from homegrown timber, so helping to 'pull' timber from previously under-managed woodlands.

Outcome No.19

22. The loss of biodiversity has been halted and we can see a definite recovery in the number, range and genetic diversity of species, including those species that need very specific conditions to survive

23. What's happened? - Woodlands for Wales focuses much of its emphasis on creating woodland ecosystems that provide a wider range of benefits, including biodiversity. It also acknowledges the importance of key woodland-based species.

24. As well as focusing our management efforts on achieving more resilient woodlands at a landscape scale to deliver a wider suite of ecosystem services FCW has also undertaken specific work to support the recovery of specific species such as dormouse (through implementing European Protected Species legislation), red squirrel and black grouse.

Outcome No.20

25. The wider environment is more favourable to biodiversity through appropriate management, reduced habitat fragmentation and increased extent and interconnectivity of habitats

26. What's happened? - As discussed in response to outcome 19, the focus of taking forward Woodlands for Wales has been on delivering benefits through changes to woodland ecosystems at a landscape scale. For instance, FCW is taking forward the ambition in Woodlands for Wales for an increased native woodland resource through an ambitious plan to restore all of the Plantations planted on Ancient woodland sites to native woodland through a prioritised series of management interventions to achieve best practice restoration. In addition we are aiming to create a further 1000 hectares of new native woodland by planting during the 3-year period 2009-12, as well as identifying suitable opportunities to use native species in our plans to diversify single-species plantations.

27. The importance of this landscape approach is assuming increasing recognition, not least through the recent development of the Natural Environment Framework concept as a way of potentially operationalising delivery of this outcome.

Outcome No.21

28. Sites of international, Welsh and local importance are in favourable condition to support the species and habitats for which they are identified.

29. What's happened? - Around 15,000 hectares of woodland is designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, with 11,000 hectares protected under the international suite of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). Just 9% of these woodland SACs are considered to be in favourable condition and a further 25% are in unfavourable but recovering condition. Since publication of the Environment Strategy, remedial action identified to help meet this specific outcome has been put in place directly for the Assembly Government woodland sites and indirectly through the Better Woodlands for Wales grant scheme for the remaining sites. Woodlands for Wales endorses this approach by promoting a healthy woodland ecosystems approach to woodland management and concentrates on bringing these designated woodland sites into favourable management with improvements in condition a consequence of these actions.

Outcome No.23

30. The quality and diversity of the natural and historic character of our landscape and seascape is maintained and enhanced

31. What's happened? - Woodlands for Wales, has identified as an outcome the need for woodland and trees to make a positive contribution to the special landscape character of Wales and to sites of heritage and cultural importance. This is informing decisions about woodland management, especially changes to the nature and character of woodland. For example the decision to convert a non-native plantation to a native woodland

Outcome No.24

32. The built environment is high quality and vibrant, reflecting local distinctiveness and supporting strong communities, which are actively engaged in the management of their local environment

33. What's happened? - The revision of Woodlands for Wales has brought more focus of the potential for trees and woodlands to bring a range of benefits in an urban context. FCW is taking this work forward by for the first time developing a corporate programme dedicated to this area of the strategy. In addition we have seconded an officer to work on developing a woodland and tree opportunity plan for the Heads of the Valleys Regeneration area, which has developed an action plan identifying a number of opportunities for trees to improve the quality of the built environment.

Outcome No.27

34. There is easy, equitable access to ample high quality green space

35. What's happened? - Woodlands for Wales identifies and promotes the benefits of woodlands for people, for communities, learning, health and well being and for local enterprise and establishes an outcome for 'More people (to) live healthier lives as a result of their use and enjoyment of woodlands'.

36. FCW has for many years provided access and recreation opportunities, and our developing corporate programmes focus on delivering both high quality visitor experiences and access to woodlands close to where people live, including in the urban environment.

Using an inclusive approach, ensuring that groups who have not visited woodlands at all or frequently in the past have an opportunity to do so, is a key element of our developing work.

37. Recent surveys have shown that the percentage of adults who say they have easy access to woodland without a car has increased from 59% to 63% between 2005 and 2009 1. The percentage of the population who have access to a woodland larger than 2 ha within 500m has increased from 16% to 17% between 2004 and 2009, while the percentage who have access to a woodland larger than 20ha within 4km has increased from 72% to 77% over the same time period 2, illustrating that woodlands have a key role to play in providing easy, equitable access to high quality green space.

1. FCW Public opinion of Forestry Survey 2. The Woodland Trust Space for People project

Outcome No.29

38. There is sustainable, widespread and equitable access to the countryside and coast, which recognises the need for a balance between tranquil areas and areas supporting larger numbers of people and a range of activities. Damaging access will be discouraged

39. What's happened? - Through the wholesale dedication of the freehold Assembly Government woodland estate for open access a significant access resource has been secured in perpetuity. However FCW activities in this area also contribute significantly to the wider 'portfolio of access opportunities with many kilometres of waymarked walking and horse trails, dedicated off-road cycling routes ranging from family trails to extreme downhill single-track mountain biking. In addition, FCW has developed its visitor centres as key destination hubs and this initiative has been mirrored in a number of centres based in privately owned woodlands.

Outcome No.35

40. The quality of groundwater, rivers, lakes and coastal waters is maintained and enhanced

41. What's happened? - Alongside the Environment Strategy, the Water Framework Directive is a key driver for many of the changes to the character and to a lesser degree the extent of Welsh woodlands set out in Woodlands for Wales. FCW has participated actively in the management planning process led by Environment Agency Wales (EAW) in respect of the directive. There has been an active partnership between FCW and EAW that has identified the joint tasks that need to be undertaken to enable woodland management to play its full role in improving the water quality of Wales's rivers and lakes. This initiative has received additional resources and FCW has hosted EAW staff to help with the practical delivery of key tasks.

42. In addition, FCW has been proactive in implementing the EAW supported Forests and Water Guidelines as well as in riparian habitat improvements through a number of programmes and EU funded initiatives.

Outcome No.36

43. Diffuse pollution is better understood and action is being taken to reduce and manage diffuse pollution

44. What's happened? - Woodlands for Wales sets as one of the 20 outcomes it seeks to deliver that 'new and existing woodlands contribute to water and soil management'. The development of Glastir offers a major opportunity to take this outcome forward through appropriate and well-designed new woodland creation to ensure that at an individual farm enterprise level diffuse pollution is minimised.

Conclusion

45. It is evident from this paper that the Environment Strategy for Wales has been one of the most significant influence in developing recent strategy for the land use that currently occupies 14% by land cover of Wales, via the revision of Woodlands for Wales and through the work of Forestry Commission Wales. Indeed the ability of woodlands to deliver many of the outcomes sought from the Environment strategy has led to the establishment in recent years of a broad consensus and more joined up working to increase woodland cover in Wales. This has been strongly endorsed by the Welsh Assembly Government through the Minister for Rural Affairs recent announcement to increase woodland cover by 100,000 hectares over the next 20 years, principally through Glastir.

46. The Strategy introduced 'ecosystem services' as an organising principle for considering and optimising the multiple public benefits that woodland can deliver and has enabled outcome level comparisons to begin to be made between different land uses and land management options. This has been of great significance to woodlands with their large suite of non-market benefits, alongside the more obvious market benefits.

47. Finally, FCW corporate programmes are now fully aligned to the delivery of Woodlands for Wales through our direct management of the Assembly Government woodlands and also through our regulation and influence over Wales's non-government owned woodlands. Much of the delivery is through the long-term management of change to woodland ecosystems and cannot be achieved overnight; but we can be confident that the Environment Strategy for Wales will have a significant influence over Welsh woodlands and trees in the coming years.

Forestry Commission Wales
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