

# Sustainability Committee

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## **Inquiry into Biodiversity - Evidence paper prepared by the Welsh Assembly Government for the National Assembly for Wales Sustainability Committee**

### **Background**

The Sustainability Committee is currently undertaking an inquiry into Biodiversity in Wales. In its letter of 22 July, the Committee called for written evidence around a number of questions to explore why Wales fell short of its 2010 targets to halt the loss of biodiversity.

This paper provides the Welsh Assembly Government's response to the Committee's questions. It also outlines the policy approach, and the range of actions aimed at protecting and enhancing biodiversity, which are supported by the Assembly Government.

This statement should be read in conjunction with the Cabinet Statement made by the Minister for Environment, Sustainability and Housing on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2010. For convenience, that statement is provided as an annex to this evidence.

### **What delivery mechanisms were in place to achieve the 2010 targets?**

The Environment Strategy for Wales and Action Plan sets out the Welsh Assembly Government's vision for the environment over the next 20 years of a Welsh environment that is clean, healthy, biologically diverse and valued by the people of Wales. It focuses on key environmental themes of: addressing climate change; sustainable resource use; distinctive biodiversity; landscapes and seascapes; the local environment and environmental hazards.

A second Environment Strategy Action Plan for 2008 – 2011 was structured to set out planned progress on priority work to deliver the Environment Strategy. The Plan focused on a small number of key areas of activity and builds on the significant work that has been undertaken to progress the Environment Strategy since May 2006. The Minister reports annually against the targets and the latest report was launched on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2010.

The Plan has four key purposes:

To drive action to deliver a better environment;

Promote partnership working with all key stakeholders and partners;

Encourage engagement with people, so that everyone can understand, and benefit from, our natural environment; and

Deliver progress on achieving environmental improvements, across the board.

The Environment Strategy we launched back in 2006 takes a 20 year approach, programme running until 2026. It responds to these issues using the principles of sustainable development. Dealing with them over the long term so that we consider the needs of future generations.

For similar reasons the Environment Strategy Action Plan runs over a three year period, from 2008 to 2011. This allows us and our partners to focus on activities beyond a one year period of commitment.

The Action Plan also straddles the period of office of two Assembly Governments ensuring continuity of the actions. Delivery is more likely to be achieved if there is a programme of work running into a new administration. The Environment Strategy Wales and its associated Action Plans form the main mechanism for delivery of biodiversity action in Wales.

Habitat and species conservation is managed through the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UKBAP). In Wales, implementation of the UKBAP is co-ordinated by the Wales Biodiversity Partnership (WBP). The Partnership's Steering Group meets three times a year, bringing together organisations involved in biodiversity conservation in Wales. The Partnership provides advice to the Welsh Assembly Government on biodiversity matters and co-ordinates Wales-level biodiversity actions associated with the Environment Strategy and the UKBAP. It also provides a leadership role for Local Biodiversity Action Plan Partnerships and supports decision making on priorities for biodiversity action in Wales.

All Environment Strategy actions related to biodiversity are recorded on the Biodiversity Action Reporting System (BARS). Local Biodiversity Action Plan partnerships have used BARS since 2004. Lead Partners, including Countryside Council for Wales (CCW), reported on BARS for the 2005 UK BAP report and are currently improving and increasing their use of BARS throughout Wales. Since 2007 CCW Species Challenge Fund grants require recipients to use BARS; this is being rolled out to all other CCW and Assembly biodiversity action grants and is in line with the approach of other UK grant awarding bodies.

Local Record Centres (LRCs) are part of a wider network of organisations working under the umbrella of the National Biodiversity Network. In September 2007 Wales became the first country in the UK to achieve complete coverage.

Section 40(1) of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 places a duty to conserve biodiversity on public bodies. Local authorities are a key target group for implementation of this duty but it also affects a wide range of other bodies including fire, police, health and transport authorities etc.

Welsh Assembly Government Officials have worked with the Countryside Council for Wales, Defra, Natural England, the Local Government Association, Wales Environment Link and others to develop guidance to support public authorities in complying with this duty. Since 2006 each local authority and national park has been encouraged to appoint a cabinet level 'biodiversity champion'. All authorities now have one. Biodiversity checklists and workshop materials were also developed by the WBP, and are a useful resource for public organisations involved in activities which have the potential to impact on biodiversity.

In Wales, most local authorities and national parks employ one or more ecological specialists to provide advice to planning, highways and other departments and many have service level agreements in place with the Local Record Centre. These roles directly support the making of appropriate decisions, reducing the risk of legal challenge and adverse impacts on biodiversity and the wider environment.

Technical Advice Note 5 'Nature Conservation', published September 2009, supports this work through providing advice to local authorities about how the land use planning system should contribute to protecting and enhancing biodiversity and geological conservation. A successful and well attended TAN 5 training programme was rolled out earlier this year (jointly funded by the Assembly Government and CCW) to ensure that Authorities appreciate their key role and responsibilities in delivering the Assembly Government's nature conservation policy.

The designation of the network of UK protected sites has been a key delivery vehicle for addressing habitat and species loss. In Wales, these protected areas are the backbone of nature conservation work on land and at sea.

Much of the network has been identified as being of international or national importance for habitats and species. These biodiversity 'hot spots' received protection from the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Conservation of (Natural Habitats, Etc) Regulations 1994. Both sets of legislation included licensing regimes in respect of species and consent procedures with regard to habitats. The provisions and delivery of this body of legislation has been amended and strengthened progressively over the years. The work on "A Living Wales" will be considering the future role and direction of designations alongside other regulatory and management measures.

The Sustainable Land Management scheme Tir Gofal, introduced in 1999 has a total of 417,725 hectares under positive management, of which 198,480 hectares is identified as Biodiversity Action Plan habitat, under restoration, management or creation management. In addition 435km of hedgerows are under positive management. It is also worth noting that the area of land farmed organically has increased to nearly 10%.

Reducing the use of chemical pesticides and inorganic fertilisers together with the sympathetic management of habitats and the preservation of mixed farming is providing numerous benefits. Managing hedgerows, field margins and non-cropped areas has led to greater floral diversity and provided more sheltering habitat for a wide range of species. In particular, these measures have helped maintain habitat for wild birds and insects and sustained a range of key native flora.

In all, the Assembly Government has invested over £35 million for biodiversity related action under agri-environment schemes in 2009/10. Additionally, CCW spends £2.1 million approx. per year on management agreements with landowners and managers, to help conserve and improve important habitat areas. Further funding is also available for biodiversity gain under the Rural Development Plan for Wales; and investment under other programmes such as River Basin Management Plans and EU Convergence fund, including CCW's Communities and Nature Programme make important contributions.

Glas Tir - the new land management scheme for Wales will build on this legacy, as well as emphasising the importance of ecosystem services, chiefly through the water and carbon cycles.

### **Why did these fail to deliver?**

Internationally, and here in Wales, there has been a great deal of positive progress on conserving and enhancing biodiversity. Despite this work, the target to halt biodiversity loss has not been achieved. Rather than being clearly attributable to a lack of effort or resource, the current situation may have arisen because the existing regimes do not look at the system and the environment as a whole, focusing instead on small area conservation.

Until recently parts of the environment were considered separately rather than managed as integrated and co-dependant systems. The focus has been on protecting rare or interesting species and habitats, and individual pressures in these areas received discrete and uncoordinated responses. This way of managing and conserving the environment has not met the 2010 targets, and found limited support from constituencies of interest whose activities impact on nature. Allied to this piecemeal approach to nature conservation, is a lack of recognition of the societal value of the natural systems that land and water provide, making it difficult to recognise and reward those who manage the land and sea positively.

The UKBAP, BARS and LRCs have all contributed to the UK's and Wales' progress towards the significant reduction of biodiversity loss called for by the Convention on Biodiversity. However, despite the availability of such comprehensive planning and recording infrastructure, the UK and every other signatory to the Convention have not achieved the biodiversity targets. In accordance with its leadership function, the WBP has already reviewed reasons why it considers the targets were missed in Wales. It identified the following three major issues:

big projects (with no apparent connection to biodiversity) have failed to incorporate biodiversity or ecosystem gains or have

inadvertently caused damage to biodiversity or ecosystems,

small actions (such as concreting over gardens and reducing the water table), which in themselves would not have been a problem have aggregated to cause an adverse effect,

government and the conservation sector has failed to fully understand and/or communicate effectively about the real value and importance of nature.

In other words, the main reason for failure to meet the targets is not insufficiency of conservation action itself but a lack of incorporation of such actions into everything else that we do.

Arguably, the network of protected sites in Wales also raises difficulties with halting biodiversity loss. Designated areas provide an essentially static approach to nature conservation, at odds with an increasingly dynamic environment, due in part to climate change. Most biodiversity also exists outside these sites so we are missing the importance of looking at wider ecosystems.

Protected sites, permitting systems and public engagement will continue to have a central role in biodiversity conservation and enhancement activities but it will be necessary to re-think how they are used. Carefully reviewing current arrangements will allow the design of more agile systems, which will maximise the benefits to nature while minimising bureaucratic burdens.

Previous underachievement and the future increase in pressures add up to a compelling case for improvement. In order to get the best environmental and economic outcomes, Wales must radically re-think how it manages and protects its living environment. An ecosystem-based approach incorporating the integrated, sustainable management of land, water and living resources appears to be a realistic way forward. This approach is being incorporated into the development of "A Living Wales".

"A Living Wales", the consultation on principles and approach to a Natural Environment Framework issued on 15 September. It seeks a new contract between environmental managers and regulators, industry and commerce, and the public. Every sector, every age group, every community needs to make the preservation of our 'life support system' our number one priority. In doing this, Wales can reflect its deep historical and cultural links to the natural environment. A distinctively Welsh approach, based on the best scientific evidence and latest thinking from around the world could be identified. Wales could be the first country to put this new approach into practice.

### **Is the current approach to dealing with climate change mitigation and adaptation in Wales sufficiently integrated with policies for biodiversity?**

Even before the additional effects of climate change, are factored in, biodiversity faces a complex range of challenges. The impact of climate change on the natural environment is likely to be significant as habitats change in response to temperature variation and species come under threat and are forced to move. It may not be possible to assist all vulnerable species and habitats with adaptation, but building up resilience in the wider environment will be important in maximising that adaptation potential.

One of the main threats to biodiversity and conservation sites in Wales is that of climate change. Many of the underlying causes of climate change also underpin the loss of biodiversity. A healthy biodiversity resource plays a critical role in coping with climate change. Effects of climate change will have higher impact in areas where biodiversity is already under stress. Healthy eco-systems have more potential to adapt to climate change and ensure continued provision of critical ecosystems services such as crop pollination. Biodiversity will need help to adapt to climate change impacts but, crucially, it is also a significant weapon in the battle to limit the effects of climate change.

The Wales Environment Strategy integrates our approach to addressing biodiversity loss through implementation of the NERC Biodiversity Duty. All contributors to the strategy are asked to report on delivery of the duty and a wide range of government departments have begun to improve biodiversity protection within their policy areas. Examples of such government action are included in the attached Cabinet Statement.

The Spatial Plan Area groups have an important role in taking forward the "Environment Strategy and its Action Plans. They are translating the Environment Strategy into specific priorities for each Spatial Plan area, setting out how they will be delivered and monitoring progress. The development of the concept of a networked environment region in South East Wales illustrates this. The intention is to improve and connect the environmental infrastructure of the city-region as a foundation for "social and economic development.

'Woodlands for Wales' is the revised Welsh Assembly Government forest strategy published in 2009. Responding to climate change is one of its main strategic themes. The strategy highlights the importance of adapting to climate change by increasing woodlands' resilience to the potential effects of climate change. It also outlines the advantages of using woodlands to aid with flood risk management and their advantages for biodiversity in urban areas.

The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to contributing towards establishing an ecologically coherent UK network of effectively managed Marine Protected Areas. This network will comprise of European marine sites - Special Protection Areas, Special Areas of Conservation and Marine Conservation Zones, which can be designated using new powers under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. The aim is that the Marine Protected Area network maintains and improves biodiversity and contributes towards ecosystem recovery and resilience.

Developing an evidence base to support the integration of biodiversity and climate change mitigation measures is another vital activity for the Welsh Assembly Government. Together with the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW), WAG co-funds the MONARCH project, which is studying the impacts of climate change on biodiversity. As a result of this research, CCW plans to produce a list of habitats and

species most vulnerable to climate change, as well as a number of proposals to support them.

In co-operation with CCW, Environment Agency (EA) Wales and Forestry Commission, maps and data on ecosystem services are being drawn together as part of the work on the new Framework. This will provide an important resource for planning and project development. CCW, EA Wales, Forestry Commission, local authorities and voluntary sector are also working on a risk register of invasive species. This information can be used by Assembly Departments and other agencies involved with protecting plant and animal health, in addition to conserving indigenous biodiversity.

Wales' **Climate Change Strategy** was published in October 2010. The strategy integrates our approach to addressing vulnerability to climate change with biodiversity through an The Climate Change Strategy Adaptation Plan that will:

Continue to develop our understanding of the effects of climate change on biodiversity and work to address them,

Ensure that marine spatial planning, its implementation and monitoring, considers the impacts of climate change on marine and coastal ecosystems and species,

Support and encourage land managers to adapt to the effects of climate change,

Improve woodland resilience to climate change.

**Sustainable Development** is the central organising principle of the Welsh Assembly Government. This means that we will:

Promote long term economic, social and environmental wellbeing by:

Reducing resource use in line with our aspirations for a smaller ecological footprint; and

Promoting social justice and equality of opportunity

Action around biodiversity will be based upon this approach of which there are three key components:

**Long-termism:** ensuring that all decisions promote the long term, sustainable wellbeing of people and communities, and do not promote short term fixes that will continue to lock us into unsustainable patterns and lifestyles;

**Integration:** ensuring that all decisions take full account of, and where possible fully integrate, the various social, economic and environmental outcomes that are being sought; and

**Involvement:** engaging with, and involving, the people and communities that will be affected by these decisions, so that working in partnership for sustainable development becomes part and parcel of the way we work.

All of the above projects and examples of collaborative working are being incorporated into the Natural Environment Framework. Its development reflects the challenge posed by climate change to an essentially static approach to environmental protection. It acknowledges that the conditions, which sustain existing ecosystems, are changing and that significant northward movement of marine life is already evident, as seas gradually warm. It recognises that on land, it is likely that marginal areas will be unable to retain current species or habitats. The framework also accepts that climate change will throw into sharp relief the cost of flooding, water supply, wild fires and food security – all of which are dependent on the health, resilience and effective management of our ecosystems.

### **What examples of good practice are there elsewhere in the UK and internationally that Wales can learn from?**

In terms of habitats, Sweden's fully revamped series of Natura sites was accepted by the European Commission as leading the way to allow designation of modified sites and site systems across Europe. This approach and evidence from other countries will be assessed as part of work to develop the Natural Environment Framework.

In addition to the Natura 2000 Network, there are other sources of inspiration and good practice available such as the EU INTERREG and the LIFE+ Programmes. Evidence of successful work under these programmes and feedback from this inquiry will be incorporated directly into the Natural Environment Framework.

Wales is undoubtedly ahead of other countries in its development of "A Living Wales", but there is still much we can learn from other countries and regions. On a species level, WAG is keen to explore the experience of successful management and the general desirability of reintroducing or attracting locally extinct species. For example, since the reintroduction of beavers from Norway to Sweden in 1922, reintroduction initiatives and natural spread have re-established beavers in 24 of the 29 European States within their former range.

Britain, Portugal, Italy and the southern Balkan states are the only countries, which have not re-established wild populations although a trial reintroduction is underway in Scotland and one is being considered in England.

### **What are the implications of emerging targets for 2020 and beyond?**

The Welsh Assembly Government acknowledges that a fresh approach is required if Wales is to achieve future biodiversity targets.

These range from the demands of the Wales Environment Strategy to the outcomes of the Nagoya Conference and EU Environment Ministers' commitment to the following new 2020 target:

""to halt the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystem services in the EU by 2020, and restore them, insofar as feasible while stepping up the EU contribution to averting global biodiversity loss.""

EU Environment Ministers also adopted a new long-term vision that:

""By 2050 EU biodiversity and the goods and services it provides – its natural capital – are protected, valued and appropriately restored for biodiversity's intrinsic value and for their contribution to human wellbeing and economic prosperity so that catastrophic changes caused by the loss of biodiversity are avoided.""

Facilitating successful delivery against this range of biodiversity targets is a key part of the development of the New Natural Environment Framework. Work is proceeding in the context of these desirable outcomes, targets and the Assembly's commitment to sustainable development in its widest sense. The launch of the consultation exercise "A Living Wales" follows the January announcement of the development of the Natural Environment Framework for Wales. The consultation recognises that demands on the environment are increasing due to factors such as climate change and human activity. It accepts that progress in many areas of the environment has been positive but that the overall health of environmental systems still appears to be fragile and that much work remains to be done.

"A Living Wales" sets out the principles by which Wales proposes to change its approach to environmental management to ensure the environment continues to be healthy and resilient. It is also the first major step in tackling how we fell short of our biodiversity goals and ensuring that we learn from the current situation. The consultation explains how we seek to maximise the positive impacts for environment, economy, society and wellbeing, and understand and shape the drivers for future change.

The ultimate success of any new approach such as "A Living Wales" will depend on finding positive opportunities for those who manage our lands and waters so that they can profit from all the benefits that can be realised in terms of food, development, fuel and the underlying health of the ecosystem. Capturing the value of the environment for society and rewarding those who manage it positively will be a key indicator of success and will demonstrate that the right balance has been achieved.

In the light of these issues, "A Living Wales" will begin the process of reviewing the appropriateness of our interventions, reflecting on where the greatest risks and opportunities lie and managing for long-term outcomes rather than narrower impacts. The current version of the consultation document is available at the following [link](#)

It is supplemented on line by a variety of other background material – including the narrative document, a definitions document and a selection of case studies.

**Jane Davidson AM, Minister for Environment, Sustainability and Housing**