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Y Gweinidog Materion Gwledig a Gogledd Cymru, a'r Trefnydd
Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref: LG/Feb/2024ETRA

Paul Davies MS
Chair
Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee

1st February 2024

Dear Paul,

Thank you for your letter of 23 January, inviting written evidence to inform the Committee's inquiry into Farming Connect.

Please find enclosed.

Yours Sincerely,

Lesley Griffiths AS/MS
Y Gweinidog Materion Gwledig a Gogledd Cymru, a'r Trefnydd
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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee Inquiry: Farming Connect – written response to request for evidence from Minster for Rural Affairs, North Wales and Trefnydd – 5 February 2024

Context

You have asked me to share some specific information to support the work of the Committee, which I have provided below.

Welsh Government currently support farmers through several interventions including advice, guidance, training, and grants, with Farming Connect, a well-respected and well-recognised brand, the principal mechanism for delivering learning and development and knowledge sharing. The existing Farming Connect contract is delivered by Menter a Busnes and Lantra, which started on 1 April 2023 and runs until 31 March 2025.

I ask the Committee to note any future offering has the potential to be different to that currently available to ensure it remains fit for purpose for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. It may still be branded as Farming Connect, but I may equally decide to change the brand.

Our future offering will be designed to respond to the Sustainable Land Management objectives (SLM) set out in the Agriculture (Wales) Act and specifically introduction of the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS), as we transition away from the Basic Payment Scheme between 2025 and 2029.

However, it is important to note support will continue to be available in the future to all farmers, regardless of whether they apply for the SFS.

Procurement Framework

A Framework approach will be taken to the delivery of all future procured services, including the successor to Farming Connect. The first step is to put in place a suitable framework to support the needs of farmers, land managers and wider rural communities which aligns with SLM objectives and the introduction of the SFS. This is an ongoing process, which should be concluded in the coming months.

I would be happy to provide more details on the framework once published.

The expected timings of the tender process

My intention is for the tender exercise for the replacement contract to begin in June 2024, for all tender responses to be considered and scored by August, and for the selection and award of suppliers for the new contract(s) to be done by September.

When the new contractor/s will be in post

I want the new contract(s) to begin on 1 January 2025, to coincide with the start of the SFS

We are currently consulting on a proposal to use the Single Application Form for farmers to apply for the SFS Universal Baseline Payment, and retaining the current application window from March to 15 May that farmers are familiar with. This means the number of farmers participating in the first year of the scheme will not be known until May 2025.

Plans for transition between the current and future Farming Connect contracts.

My officials will ensure a seamless transition from the existing Farming Connect service under the old contract to the offering under the new contract.

As detailed above, the existing contracts end on 31 March 2025, but we intend to award the new contract(s) to begin three months earlier on 1 January 2025.

This is explicitly to ensure:

- no gap in support provision to farmers and the wider rural community;
- we have the time to transition farmers from one support provider to another;
- the new suppliers have the time to build their new offer (we would expect them to be ready on day one but recognise there is the potential for some initial challenges as they scale up quickly).

Details of the Welsh Government's plans for the new contract

Officials are currently developing the tender specification for the new contract. This can only be fully completed once the consultation period for the SFS finishes on 7th March and officials have considered the responses. The tender specification will need to reflect the final scheme design.

However, farmers can expect to receive as a minimum the same range of support on offer currently, albeit tailored in a different way to reflect the changing nature of support required for the agricultural sector.

I cannot pre-empt the exact details of the tender specification or what the new contract may look like, as this will be a competitive exercise. However, I can reassure the Committee that at the core of the specification will be not only the requirements of the SFS (once confirmed) but also the Sustainable Land Management objectives.

The budget available for the new contract will be determined as part of the Welsh Government budget for 2025/26.

How the Welsh Government expects Farming Connect to help implement the broad elements of the proposed SFS

I will prioritise support for farmers in understanding and delivering on the new requirements of them – which are still to be finalised – through the SFS. In the consultation document these include new requirements around Benchmarking, Continuous Professional Development, Soil and Plant Health, Habitat and Woodland Management as well as Animal Welfare, though these are included here as examples only and their inclusion (or anything else) are subject to the consultation.