

## **HRLN 30 - Evidence from: Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management**

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Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

### **Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, yr Amgylchedd a Seilwaith | Climate Change, Environment, and Infrastructure Committee**

### **Atal a gwrthdroi colli natur erbyn 2030 | Halting and reversing the loss of nature by 2030**

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#### **1. Your views on the effectiveness of current policies / funds / statutory duties in halting and reversing the loss of nature by 2030.**

(We would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words).

Budgetary constraints hobble effectiveness. underfunding has – and continues to – significantly limit implementation, monitoring and enforcement of policies and duties. The latest proposed redundancies at NRW give further cause for concern [1]. If, as expected, NRW shed over 260 jobs and scale back their activities – including provision of guidance and advice to the government – to prioritise statutory duties, this will weaken its overall effectiveness and diminish its ability to fulfil broader obligations now and in the future (please see 3.1).

Local authorities (LAs) are struggling to monitor or enforce planning permission conditions. Without secure and dedicated funding, LAs have to work hard to source the money to appoint enforcement officers. Otherwise, enforcement is often necessarily informal, with checks occurring incidentally rather than systematically. Even in the event that funding is granted, usually there is very short notice and valued staff have already been forced to find alternatives. Funding can be generated through section 106 agreements or planning performance agreements, but then there is the challenge of finding someone suitably skilled and experienced in a diminishing pool of capacity (see 3.1). It has also been possible to make funding arrangements through the Community Infrastructure Levy; however, these can be complicated and time-consuming to set up, and are consequently rarely used.

Lack of maintenance budget limits LA's efforts to restore habitats. Even when LAs are in a position to restore habitats, e.g. meadows on former fields, lack of maintenance budget means that the cost of long-term management, e.g. annual cutting, cannot be met. Perversely, there is funding available to restore habitats but, without maintenance funding, this is not cost-effective, since accessing

funding for restoration necessitates that the habitat decline in quality to the point where it qualifies.

Lack of good guidance from government. While there is good, comprehensive guidance available, much of this has been produced by local authorities in response to a lack of relevant, up-to-date, national guidance. For example, many Technical Advice Notes (TANs) are outdated, having been established in a context that no longer reflects current realities. As a consequence, this supplementary guidance can be divergent across LAs. What LA ecologists often find is that policies are developed, but accompanying guidance is delayed or not issued at all. An example of this is the Section 6 Biodiversity Duty plans: some LAs produced plans before the guidance was issued. There is therefore some doubt regarding the WG proposal to, ‘...consider providing detailed statutory guidance...’ to Public Authorities in its response to the response to the consultation on Environmental Principles, Governance and Biodiversity Targets [2] (para 30).

## **2. Your views on the progress towards implementing the Biodiversity Deep Dive recommendations.**

(We would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words).

Local Nature Partnerships are key, yet overlooked. LNP have worked very well for supporting collaborative action for nature recovery at the local level and should be supported, yet these were not mentioned in the Welsh Government's Nature Positive White Paper. We are encouraged by the WG's response which acknowledges stakeholder support for the work of LNP and the need to avoid duplication (para 129).

Need for growth in capacity and skills is not being met. There is an ongoing capacity crisis in the ecological sector across the UK and Ireland, including in Wales, despite a clear case for cultivating the skills required to address the nature and climate crises [3]. Existing skills and capacity will be further diminished by cuts, including to NRW (see 3.1). In addition, there is an ongoing and urgent need to integrate the skills and expertise needed for nature recovery into the Net Zero Skills Strategy. Our members have found that actions for Net Zero can conflict with those for biodiversity in planning. For example, active travel routes are important, but there are examples of habitats, such as trees and hedgerows, being removed for their development; these routes are subsequently liable to flood. This links back to the broader need to ensure prioritisation and enforcement of existing policies and duties for halting and reversing biodiversity loss throughout the public sector.

NRW's Area Statements (AS) are inadequate. ASs were intended as a tool to implement the Welsh Government's overdue-for-update Natural Resources Policy,

but they are unsuitable in their current form and are not used in practice. In June 2023, CIEEM expressed concerns and offered recommendations for the AS in a letter to NRW's Head of Natural Resources Policy, Ruth Jenkins, [4] but have received no response.

Lack of independent advice to government. If cuts to NRW adversely affect provision of advice to government then this is likely to impact the ability of both to lead by example since independent, evidence-based, advice is crucial to performing best practice. If the proposed new environmental governance body is to become the principal statutory adviser to the government; it too will need adequate resources and expertise. Yet, current proposals suggest that it will be expected to do more than its Scottish equivalent – Environmental Standards Scotland – with a comparable budget and fewer staff [5].

Prioritising resources for nature in existing National Park (NP) legislation and in the designation criteria for new NPs is necessary, but has to be done at a UK level to be meaningful. There is a popular misunderstanding that NPs offer greater protection for nature. While there is potential for NP administrative bodies to do more, they are confronted by competing priorities and funding, as is the case for any public body. The Sandford Principle for NPs [6] represented progress, in its time, but is significantly limited in its application, as it requires the occurrence of irreconcilable conflicting interests – a criterion that is nearly impossible to determine and inherently reactive rather than proactive. Further progress has been made through the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, but these make only minor adjustments to a fundamentally flawed piece of UK legislation, in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, that has remained unchanged for three-quarters of a century. The broader programme of “protected sites” for biodiversity – whether within or outside of Protected Landscapes – is weak, in part because the safeguarding of biodiversity is not a priority for public funding at any governmental levels (please see 2.1 and 4.1) Furthermore, many designations focus on protection for specific species which then requires species-specific, rigid management when it might be more realistic to focus on ecosystem resilience and adaptive management.

### **3. Your views on current arrangements for monitoring biodiversity.**

(We would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words).

Monitoring standards and consistency will be lost with job cuts. To ensure standards and consistency, it is essential to have reliable skills and capacity supported by adequate funding, training, and succession planning. Lack of job security in the sector and associated skills attrition were major issues in the sector

even before NRW's announcement (see 1.1). For example, many Biodiversity Officers are employed on temporary contracts (six- or twelve-month terms), for which there is no guarantee of renewal owing to precarious funding. Biodiversity Officer roles offer a route – often the only viable one – into planning ecology. There is a severe shortage of planning ecologists and since the only way to learn is on the job, under mentorship of the few remaining ecologists, job precarity is driving a long-term decline in skills and capacity. The resulting high turnover undermines community trust, as relationships have to be repeatedly re-established with individuals and groups, including LNPs. This is despite the fact that for the cost of one Biodiversity Officer to support, LNPs return many times the value in terms of time and input from volunteers, enabling many things to happen that would otherwise require more public funding, e.g. this State of Nature report for Neath Port Talbot Local Nature Partnership (NPT LNP) [7]. Sharing skilled experts across authorities may provide temporary relief, but over-reliance on individuals can lead to resource fragility, as well as delays and unnecessary costs associated with training new staff. In conjunction with loss of skills, there is also a loss of familiarity and knowledge of the local area, and the network of contacts which take time and trust to establish.

Monitoring must be a statutory duty. The current reliance on voluntary efforts to track and report issues, such as the damage to ancient woodlands from inappropriate development, is untenable. Environmental NGOs are often compelled to perform these activities, even pay private consultancies for data, which places their limited resources under unnecessary strain, particularly as eNGO funding is precarious and heavily reliant on public donations. Making monitoring a statutory duty can ensure long-term consistency and help address the capacity crisis by acting as a driver for job creation. eNGO generation of data, including through Citizen Science projects, would still have an important role, particularly for monitoring of aspects of biodiversity that are overlooked by statutory monitoring (e.g. invertebrates), but also for public engagement. It is also important that eNGOs - and the public more generally - have full access to government monitoring data, both for the purposes of transparency, but also to enable independent verification and research.

Monitoring to inform effective action rather than simply to observe decline. For the output of monitoring efforts to be effective at halting and reversing loss of nature, it should be accompanied by an enforcement action plan, otherwise it is simply recording decline.

#### **4. Your views on new approaches needed to halt and reverse the loss of nature by 2030.**

(We would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words).

Overhaul existing funding structures and underlying economic models. These pose systemic and inherent threats to biodiversity and consistently harm the environment. The Green Book (2022)<sup>8</sup> is guidance issued by HM Treasury on how to appraise policies, programmes and projects. It involves the application of the Treasury's Five Case Model (5CM)<sup>9</sup> for developing business cases for capital and infrastructure projects. The environmental considerations are developed within the "Economic Case", with the guidance of the economic appraisal framing these as "Environmental Costs" and "Environmental Risks" under "Value for Money". On the latter, the guidance describes the risk as "...the nature of the project has a major impact on its adjacent area and there is a strong likelihood of objection from the general public". This denigrates the requirement for good evidence-based decision-making and the precautionary principle, whilst focusing on potentially ill-informed popular narrative. Furthermore, there is no reference to environmental resilience or investment. The flaws in this narrative are evident (see 2.1), entrench regressive actions, and are at odds with the proposals for the Environmental Principles and Biodiversity Bill.

Another feature of 5CM is the application of "Optimism Bias" for pricing projects and assessing cost-benefit analysis. The assumptions of price estimates early in the 5CM process may have a 60% Optimism Bias applied to factor in the true costs and likely uplift. As the true cost is revealed, the OB gets reduced, usually as the known price goes up. Conversely, estimates of environmental risk tend to be taken at face value and treated as 'known-knowns' that can be mitigated through, for example, exploring compensatory habitat. This suppresses understanding of ecosystem vulnerability and leaves little room for the large-scale ecosystems-thinking that is required. This might be somewhat counteracted by introducing an Optimism Bias for the environment, as well as for finance.

Establish targets for threat reduction, as well as for biodiversity. Establishing and measuring against targets for biodiversity is important, albeit more complex than for carbon. Reduction of threats<sup>10</sup> and avoidance of further harm is another important component to tackling nature loss, and may be achieved through more readily quantifiable metrics. Stopping further damage through threat reduction is also cost-effective; an example of a threat reduction action that is simple and reduces costs would be switching off the lights of public buildings – including schools – when not in use, thus reducing pressure on local wildlife, including glow worm populations. Wales Environment Link's 'Pathways to 2030: 10 Key Areas for Investment in Nature's Recovery in Wales' outlines a range of

actions to stop activities that are damaging to nature. Many threats cannot be dealt with on-site and will require integration of biodiversity as a priority and responsibility throughout the public sector.

Progress on Net Benefits for Biodiversity (NBB): The consultancy firm, Atkins, are in the process of developing criteria for NBB in collaboration with the Welsh Government and CIEEM. These will relate to the attributes of the DECCA framework, and adhere to the stepwise process as outlined in Planning Policy Wales 12. A Working Group is being established to progress these.

While this is in development, the guidance for Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) has been highlighted to us as highly useful for encouraging actions that align with SINC criteria and meet specific ecological standards.

Funding can be arranged through section 106 agreements, but these can also be time-consuming to establish and astute developers can turn negotiations to their advantage. They require a bond to be made before planning permission is issued, an aspect of negotiations that can be overlooked. These agreements tend to be made for bigger sites with an Ecological Steering Committee.

## **5. Do you have any other points you wish to raise within the scope of this inquiry?**

(We would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words).

Funding for nature must be seen as an investment, not a cost. Funding for nature should be perceived as an investment, with concomitant ecosystem services such as climate adaptation, food security, and increased flood resilience. A fundamental change is required across all government sectors so that biodiversity is prioritised in their budgets, similar to the approach taken for Net Zero. This will be cost-effective as investment in nature will lead to savings elsewhere, such as in healthcare, where exposure to nature can support mental and physical well-being and aid recovery from illness.

For the proposed principles and targets of the Environmental Principles and Biodiversity Bill to be effective, Welsh Ministers and Public Bodies must be subject to a strong duty to apply them. Ensuring they apply to all relevant current and future bodies will require both a set of criteria for – and a comprehensive list of – organisations. These should include bodies which operate UK-wide or cross-border in England and Wales, whose statutory activities have the potential to affect the environment or biodiversity, particularly those operating in farming, forestry, planning and infrastructure, flood and coastal erosion risk management, management of the public estate, water supply and wastewater treatment. Such organisation must include:

infrastructure bodies, including private companies, e.g. water utilities, energy

providers; development corporations, e.g. the National Infrastructure Commission for Wales, the Development Bank of Wales; port authorities and free ports, the latter of which present potential environmental biosecurity risks; risk management organisations, e.g. Network Rail; charities acting as public bodies. e.g. Canals and Rivers Trust; entities, including Cadw, which manage natural heritage, and; the Crown Estate (which encompasses large areas of terrestrial and marine habitat).

It is important to maintain an overarching objective to the Environmental Principles and Biodiversity Bill: we share concerns that the proposed headline target to 'halt the loss of nature by 2030 and restore by 2050', will be weakened. We acknowledge challenges to setting targets for biodiversity, particularly those based on historic baselines which may be impossible to meet – even undesirable if these undermine long-term ecological resilience. We also acknowledge the difficulty of 'measuring' biodiversity. However, it is important to have a statement of sufficient ambition to drive the urgent action needed to address the biodiversity crisis and meet our global commitments.

## References:

- [1] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c727p05p8dpo>
- [2] [https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2024-07/environmental-principles-governance-and-biodiversity-targets-white-paper-our-response\\_0.pdf](https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2024-07/environmental-principles-governance-and-biodiversity-targets-white-paper-our-response_0.pdf)
- [3] <https://cieem.net/cieem-and-lantra-publish-report-on-vocational-pathways-into-nature-based-green-jobs/>
- [4] <https://cieem.net/resource/cieem-letter-to-natural-resources-wales-regarding-area-statements/>
- [5] <https://www.brexitenvironment.co.uk/2024/04/08/late-mover-advantage/>
- [6] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandford\\_principle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandford_principle)
- [7] <https://www.naturenpt.cymru/state-of-nature>
- [8] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-green-book-appraisal-and-evaluation-in-central-government/the-green-book-2020>
- [9] [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66449468ae748c43d3793bb8/Project\\_Business\\_Case\\_2018.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66449468ae748c43d3793bb8/Project_Business_Case_2018.pdf)
- [10] <https://naturalresources.wales/evidence-and-data/research-and-reports/state-of-natural-resources-report-sonarr-for-wales-2020/power-bi-full-screens/sonarr2020-key-pressures/?lang=en>
- [11] <https://waleslink.org/pathways-to-2030-report/>

[12] <https://cieem.net/resource/cieem-briefing-welsh-governments-approach-to-net-benefits-for-biodiversity-and-the-decca-framework/>

[13] <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2024-07/planning-policy-wales-edition-12.pdf>