



Welsh Government response

Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee's inquiry into Farming Connect report

As Cabinet Secretary with accountability for the performance and delivery for Farming Connect, I welcome the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee's inquiry into the Knowledge Transfer Programme.

I thank the Committee for undertaking this inquiry as laid out in its report which was published on 27 June 2024.

This document sets out the Welsh Government's response to the report's 6 conclusions and 1 recommendation.

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Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Newid Hinsawdd a Materion Gwledig

Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change & Rural Affairs

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1. Communicating future mission and role

Within this section, the ETRA Committee focused on how Farming Connect was supporting transition to the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS); funding; new entrants; and the use of demonstration farms.

The Committee made one conclusion and one recommendation within this section.

Recommendation 1

The Welsh Government should set out how it will better promote Farming Connect's role to support farmers in understanding how they can achieve the Sustainable Land Management objectives of the SFS. This should include considering stakeholders' suggestion to use demonstration or 'pilot' farms as part of Farming Connect's work.

Welsh Government Response: **Accept in principle**

1. The current Farming Connect contract was tendered in autumn 2022. The specification included several Welsh Government policies, including the Sustainable Land Management objectives as set out in the Agriculture Act 2023 and Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) objectives as they were known at the time (i.e. pre-consultation). As part of the procurement exercise Suppliers were asked to outline how they would deliver a Knowledge Transfer Programme (Farming Connect or "the Programme") to meet all policies and objectives.
2. The Programme has been mapped against the above. Each delivery campaign is assessed against its ability to promote a SLM and/or SFS objective, and how the intervention can improve a farmer's understanding.
3. In addition to setting out key Welsh Government policies, SLM and SFS objectives, the specification also included several requirements, i.e. specific deliverables which successful Suppliers had to deliver during the contract period. One of these requirements was the establishment of a network of demonstration Farms.
4. Known within the Programme as "**Our Farms**", the well-established network builds on the success of previous contracts.
5. The Our Farms network, with support from sector specific industry experts, have been trialling and implementing more efficient, sustainable and profitable ways of managing a farming business.

- 6.** The network includes 220 farms across Wales who are involved in different types of on-farm trials and projects focusing on innovation and new technologies to help them and other Welsh farms reach net zero by 2050, and to build both resilience and sustainability amid a changing climate.
- 7.** Across the 220 farms, the Programme has delivered 94 sustainable land management projects, with results and best practice shared, discussed and demonstrated during open days, case studies and publications to assist in the adoption and application of new innovations and best practice.
- 8.** The existence of an already well established demo network within the Programme is the reason why I have accepted the Committee's recommendation in principle.

Conclusion 1

The suggestion that Farming Connect is disengaged from the Welsh Government's policy goals and that communication between the two organisations is weak is concerning, particularly during this important transition period. There must be absolute clarity on what the new Farming Connect contract is intended to deliver and why, and the programme clearly needs to be better promoted.

- 9.** Farming Connect has a robust governance structure at its core. The structure includes a Programme Board ("the Board") chaired independently of Welsh Government, and membership from key farming and environmental organisations - both farming unions are represented along with farmers from the Farming Connect Farmer Steering Group, representation from the Horticulture sector, Agricultural Colleges, HCC, AHDB, YFC Wales, the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society and the Agriculture Industry Climate Change Forum. There is also representation at Welsh Government Deputy Director level from appropriate Climate Change and Rural Affairs Divisions.
- 10.** The Board provides overarching guidance and direction for the Programme whilst bringing together expertise from across the sectors and identifying and proactively promoting the research, knowledge and information delivered to meet the needs of the industry.
- 11.** Reporting to the Programme Board is the Policy Delivery Group (PDG). PDG is an internal Group with representation from across the Climate Change and Rural Affairs portfolio i.e. those that have contributed key Policy

objectives for inclusion in the contract specification. PDG, in consultation with the Board informs delivery.

- 12.** The Governance Structure ensures both industry and Welsh Government has an equal say in identifying the priorities under each of the Programme themes; Business, Land and Livestock, and agreeing the focus for key interventions included within the Programme.

2. Skills and expertise requirements

Within this section, the ETRA Committee focused on how Farming Connect used industry relevant research, the focus of intervention and integration with Forestry and woodland management.

The Committee made two conclusions within this section.

Conclusion 2

Although the SFS proposals are still in development, evidence from stakeholders shows some significant gaps in the current programme to help transition to the SFS, and support farmers with achieving the SLM objectives. There is certainly scope for much greater involvement of environmental NGOs and specialist expertise, including ecologists, biodiversity and horticulture experts and foresters, and securing this expertise must be prioritised during and after transition to the SFS. The role of farmers themselves as mentors and experts must be fully explored. Consideration needs to be given to how specialist information is shared with those managing the land including the scope for developing an information hub of resources that can clearly signpost to the latest up-to-date scientific evidence and advice.

- 13.** As set out previously in this response, the contract specification included several Welsh Government policies, including the Sustainable Land Management objectives and SFS objectives as they were known at the time (i.e. pre-consultation).
- 14.** The Programme has been mapped against the above with minimal gaps. Each delivery campaign is assessed against its ability to promote a SLM and/or SFS objective, and how the intervention can improve a farmer's understanding of both.
- 15.** To address the SLM/SFS objectives, the current Programme has also seen the introduction of new technical advice categories within the Farming Connect Advisory Service, including specific environmental categories such as agri-environmental, ecosystems services & biodiversity; Carbon advice; as well as timber advice, horticulture advice and organic production advice. The Programme has access to **486 advisors across all categories**.
- 16.** To date Farming Connect has supported over **10,880 instances of advice, 6815 from the specific environmental categories**.
- 17.** The Farming Connect Mentoring Programme provides farmers with access to industry leaders/innovators looking for tailored guidance and advice from their peers. Promoted online, direct communication with registered

businesses, at specific events and by Farming Connect Development Officers, the Mentors are able to share practical knowledge and expertise, giving support and guidance on their relevant topic.

- 18.** The Programme has also seen the introduction of new Mentors with expertise in Agroforestry, Conservation grazing, Grassland Management, Regenerative Farming, Water Quality, and Woodland Management.
- 19.** With a directory of **over 90 Mentors**, most full-time farmers, 'been there, done that' they develop relationships based on mutual trust and respect.
- 20.** To date **406 farmers** have secured access to the Mentoring programme thus far, **totalling 2499 hours**.
- 21.** The Programme also includes a Knowledge Exchange (KE) Hub, providing an interface between academics, advisory professionals, and farmers across Wales. The Hub translates the latest UK-wide and appropriate global research findings, re-purposing the scientific papers and practical know how to deliver accessible knowledge to farmers.

Conclusion 3

Evidence of limited inclusion of the forestry sector is concerning, particularly in light of the SLM objectives in the Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023 and the requirements on active farmers set out in the SFS proposals. Farming Connect must be much more inclusive of forestry and woodland management expertise. It must involve that sector as a third party in the development of training and support services and opportunities for continuous professional development for those managing Welsh agricultural land.

- 22.** The current Programme was established to support farmers only; it was never intended to provide support to the forestry industry. The decision was taken to avoid any duplication with Focus on Forestry First (FFF). Jointly funded by the Rural Development Programme and Welsh Government, FFF was established to raise the skills and competence of the trees and timber sector, working with businesses to identify their current and future training needs to support the delivery of Government Policy; the scheme ended in June 2023.
- 23.** Whilst the Programme doesn't support forestry businesses for the reasons set out above, interventions delivered through Farming Connect support farmers in all financial aspects of managing profitable woodlands, whether

they are considering woodland establishment, woodland management or are interested in developing their woodland business.

- 24.** For example, all the demonstration farms have had a woodland assessment to provide a baseline data of current hedgerow and woodland conditions, identifying opportunities to improve environmental performance of the farm business through woodland creation.
- 25.** Farming Connect Masterclasses showcase the opportunities and benefits trees offer on farm by incorporating trees into the farm landscape as multi-pronged approach to decarbonisation; carbon sequestration; improving soil health, water and air quality and shelter for livestock. Agroforestry has been promoted as an example of the benefits trees serve in meeting these objectives in a way that works for the farm business.
- 26.** The Farming Connect Advisory Service includes several “woodland” related technical categories including woodland management; diversification & added value; and timber processing & added value.
- 27.** The Programme has access to **12 woodland specialists**.
- 28.** Launched on 5 July, the Rural Affairs Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) is a procurement framework to which suppliers can apply under different categories. The intention is to include as many “suppliers” as possible to the DPS to ensure Welsh Government has access to the right expertise to deliver future support interventions, including environmental NGOs, ecologists, biodiversity and horticulture and forestry experts. Once they have joined, they are then eligible for any call-offs Welsh Government may publish using the DPS. It is our intention that all procured activity delivered by the Rural Affairs Directorate will use the DPS.
- 29.** The DPS will be particularly beneficial for the ongoing development of SFS, shortening the time needed to deliver procurements and allowing for a co-ordinated approach.

3. Eligibility and Access

Within this section, the ETRA Committee focused on the eligibility criteria for the current contract; difficulties accessing support online and access to Welsh medium services.

The Committee made one conclusion within this section.

Conclusion 4

Support for students and agricultural workers new to the industry is vital and prioritising this must form part of the new contract. Access and eligibility to Farming Connect needs to be reviewed urgently with a view to ensuring better access for new entrants and other groups currently excluded, including students. The Welsh Government needs to consider the needs of smallholders and horticulturalists in commissioning future services. There must be adequate provision of support services in the medium of Welsh, and perennial problems of digital exclusion must be prioritised. Engagement with agricultural colleges and other institutions must be a focus of the next Farming Connect programme, as well as building links with schools to promote the industry and the opportunities on offer.

- 30.** Whilst the Programme doesn't provide support for students specifically, the eligibility criteria does include Business partners, immediate family members (spouses/partners/sons/daughters) and employees on PAYE, all of which could also be students.
- 31.** Delivery of the Farming Connect Lifelong Learning & Development Programme is sub-contracted to several agricultural colleges across Wales with some able to provide students with three fully funded courses each as part of their Further Education College course.
- 32.** Farming Connect also makes the most relevant e-learning courses available to students and school children via "Hwb" free of charge.
- 33.** "Start to Farm" is a targeted package of support tailored to new entrants wanting to establish their own business or seeking a joint venture opportunity. The package includes guidance, mentoring, business, legal and financial advice to help meet set goals.
- 34.** Farming Connect provides a "matching service" or joint opportunities platform (JOP), matching established landowners wanting to step back or exit the industry with individuals wanting to gain a foothold in a farming business.

- 35.** Start to Farm provides a pathway of support to help both parties throughout the process, from finding out more about the initiative, supporting personal development, the search for a potential business partner, to helping establish a joint venture.
- 36.** Farming Connect also provides succession planning advice; support to start what can be a challenging conversation. Support includes, professional business, legal and financial advice as well as specialist facilitation.
- 37.** The aim is to encourage mobility within the industry whilst safeguarding the future of farm businesses.
- 38.** The first year of the current Programme has seen **398 individuals participate in Start to Farm (324 seekers and 74 providers)**.
- 39.** Both contractors are obligated to recognise and support the aims of Cymraeg 2050. Mentera (formerly Menter a Busnes) operates extensively through the medium of Welsh. 97% of their workforce are first language Welsh speakers, ensuring that all aspects of delivery is carried out in either Welsh or English depending on the customers preference.
- 40.** The Programme also ensures that content, both written and digital is provided in Welsh, and meets the Welsh Language Standards.
- 41.** Dedicated support is available on a regional basis, with Development Officers available to guide customers through the Programme, enabling customers to access the most relevant support provisions for their business. This includes support to navigate the online elements of the programme; Advisors and Training Providers also provide this support to customers.
- 42.** Through the Lifelong Learning and Development programme customers can also access a number of Information and Communication Technology courses for varying skills levels such as Making Tax Digital, Email Marketing, Social Media and Using Digital Tools.
- 43.** The Programme also works with customers in need of digital support including basic digital skills, access to a device and connectivity to identify places of support.

4. The Contract and Programme Structure

Within this section, the ETRA Committee focused on the length of the contract and evaluation of the Programme.

The Committee made one conclusion within this section.

Conclusion 5

Following EU-exit, some of the former mechanisms for scrutiny of agricultural support payments and services are no longer in place. This makes it even more important to have robust mechanisms for scrutiny of the public funds spent on supporting the agricultural industry, including the value for money and effectiveness of Farming Connect services. The Welsh Government should set out clearly how it intends to guarantee this accountability, and the Committee will then also need to consider its own scrutiny role. The Welsh Government should also respond to the matter of how the farming community, environmental NGOs, and all those active in the rural economy, are given a forum to express their views about farm advisory services, and to feed into future policy development.

- 44.** The Farming Connect Programme Board mentioned previously has several responsibilities. Aside from ensuring delivery meets the need of industry, advising on the suitability of the proposed delivery plans and campaigns and whether they provide farmers with the support needed to transition and deliver the proposed Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) requirements, the Board also identifies and monitors the key measurable outcomes and impact of the Programme.
- 45.** In addition to scrutiny by the Board, each Programme has been independently evaluated. As the previous Programme ran for over 7 years there was a mid-term evaluation completed in 2021 with a final evaluation completed earlier this year. The report, completed by Miller Research will be available shortly.
- 46.** Each evaluation is used to inform the next Programme, building on the success of interventions that have come before and removing those that haven't worked. For example, in 2019, Farming Connect underwent a refresh with the aim of making the Programme more accessible and outcome focused and to improve the customer journey. It included several key changes in relation to implementation, taking on board feedback from phase one of the interim evaluation of the KT&I Programme, as well as wider feedback from industry and internal discussions between the Welsh Government, and Suppliers.

- 47.** The Welsh Government recognises the value of engagement with stakeholders to maximise the opportunities for rural growth. We are actively engaged with a range of stakeholders on the ongoing development of the Sustainable Farming Scheme, and this will also be used to inform the development of the next Farming Connect offer.
- 48.** The Rural Development Board was directly linked with the EU Rural Development Programme, which has now ended. Given we are now delivering rural investment schemes, and will introduce the SFS Preparatory Phase next year, the nature of support for the sector has changed post-RDP.
- 49.** My commitment to engagement recognises that we will require appropriate governance around delivery of the SFS and I'm expecting further advice on this from officials as the programme of work is created.

5. Supporting mental health

Within this section, the ETRA Committee focused on the provision of mental health.

The Committee made one conclusion within this section.

Conclusion 6

Farming Connect has an important role in signposting to mental health support. Particularly in light of high levels of anxiety and disquiet in the sector about the challenges farmers face, and the uncertainty of the transition period the industry is in, the Welsh Government should ensure that there is a robust evaluation of whether Farming Connect services are sufficiently geared towards supporting mental health and reducing pressure rather than adding to it in any way. As far as possible within its remit, Farming Connect must identify and address the issues that are causing farmers the most anxiety and stress. Consideration should be given to how it can 'add value' to the existing specialist support services available for farmers and provide practical solutions to tackling the main drivers of stress. Recognising how much has changed for the sector since the last formal evaluation in 2021, the Welsh Government should also consider whether some independent evaluation and input would be helpful in achieving this important goal.

- 50.** I agree with the Committee's findings that Farming Connect should not replicate existing mental health provision. We are fortunate in Wales to have several support organisations delivering excellent services to the farming industry.
- 51.** I am keenly aware farmers continue to face many barriers including uncertainty, isolation and loneliness which can have a detrimental impact on mental well-being, and this is of great concern to me and the Welsh Government.
- 52.** The Welsh Government supports a number of important activities to aid mental health in rural communities. One such activity is the Wales Farm Support Group which brings together farming charities, to share knowledge and expertise providing a strong coordinated position on mental health support for the agriculture industry.
- 53.** The DPJ Foundation has been awarded a Bereavement Support Grant of £52,135 for the three-year period between 2021-24, to improve the provision of bereavement support to the agricultural community, with a 12-month extension until March 2025 agreed, which includes additional funding of £15,406.74.

- 54.** Alongside this, we are also working on a new 10-year Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, which aims to promote, support and empower people to improve their mental health and wellbeing, and be free from stigma and discrimination. Both strategies recognise the mental health needs of farmers and those working in agriculture.
- 55.** Also available to the rural community and farmers is the NHS “111 press 2”, a national phone line for people who require urgent mental health support. Available since November 2022, the Service provides an assessment of needs and telephoned based intervention to reduce distress. Where appropriate individuals can be referred to mental health services, given self-care advice or signposted to other support.
- 56.** However, it’s also important that we do what we can to reduce the pressure on farmers. That is why I am so pleased that the mental health charity, the DPJ Foundation has accepted my invitation to represent the farming charities on the new Sustainable Farming Scheme Ministerial Roundtable.