

Cross Party Group for Biodiversity

Tuesday 18th February 2014, 6 - 7.30pm

Conference Room 24, Tŷ Hywel

Attendees

Nick Ramsay AM (NR)	Outgoing Chair
Llyr Huws Gruffydd AM (LG)	Incoming Chair
Alan Michie (AM)	Chair, Bee-friendly Monmouthshire
Andrew Whitehouse (AW)	Buglife
Angharad Evans (AE)	Coed Cadw/Woodland Trust
Caryn Le Roux (CLR)	Biodiversity Policy Team Leader, WG
Catrin Davies (CD)	Plaid Cymru Researcher
Chris Lea (CL)	Department for Natural Resources and Food
Clive Hurford (CH)	Natural Resources Wales
James Byrne (JB)	Wildlife Trusts Wales
Jerry Langford (JL)	Coed Cadw/Woodland Trust
Karen Whitfield (KW)	Wales Environment Link
Laura Cropper (LC)	RSPB Cymru
Lisa Laird (LL)	Representing David Melding AM
Lucie Taylor (LT)	Community Land Advisory Service
Matthew Sayer (MS)	Senior Policy Adviser, CSA for Wales
Nigel Ajax-Lewis (NAL)	Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales
Raoul Bhambral (RB)	Wales Environment Link
Rhian Jayne Power (RP)	WEFO
Roger Mathias (RM)	Farm Adviser, Penlan Farm
Rowan Flindall-Shayle (RFS)	Farm Adviser, Penlan Farm
Russel Hobson (RH)	Butterfly Conservation Wales, Chair of WEL
Russell George AM (RG)	Land Use & Biodiversity Working Group
Sinead Lynch (SL)	Assembly Member
Siobhan Wiltshire (SW)	Bumblebee Conservation Trust
Susan Evans (SE)	Welsh Government Planning Department
	Wales Environment Link

1. Welcome from the Chair, Nick Ramsay AM

NR welcomed members to the meeting and explained that, though he has enjoyed his time as Chair of the Cross Party Group for Biodiversity, he would be stepping down at this meeting.

2. AGM

NR explained that, due to new Cross Party Group rules, Groups now have to hold an Annual General Meeting where the Chair and Secretariat of the Group are nominated and confirmed. NR then asked first for nominations for Secretary. Raoul Bhambral from Wales Environment Link was confirmed as Secretary. NR then opened the floor to nominations for the role of Chair. JB nominated LG, this was supported by NR and was confirmed.

NR then concluded the AGM and handed over the Chair to LG for the rest of the meeting.

LG thanked NR for his work as Chair and expressed the hope that NR would remain an active member of the Group.

LG then introduced the theme of this meeting, pollinators, and introduced Russel Hobson, Chair of Wales Environment Link's Land Use and Biodiversity Working Group, to make some opening comments on the theme. LG asked for questions to be left until all the speakers had presented.

3. Introduction to Pollinators (Russel Hobson, Chair, WEL Land Use and Biodiversity Working Group)

RH explained that the purpose of this meeting is to give an overview of what pollinators are, what they do and what they need, and to provide practical examples of delivery on the ground. RH also referred to his role on the Pollinators' Taskforce, which is responsible for advising on Welsh Government strategy to provide a healthy and resilient ecosystem to support pollinators into the future.

RH introduced the first speaker, Sinead Lynch from the Bumblebee Conservation Trust.

4. Why should we be worried about bumblebees? (Sinead Lynch, Bumblebee Conservation Trust)

SL gave an overview of the ecology of bumblebees, including their lifecycle, necessary habitats and food needs. She demonstrated the importance of flowering plants in the wider countryside, especially those that flower over long periods of time. SL also explained that certain types of crop, like tomatoes, can only be pollinated by bees, and that hand pollination for many crops would be impractical, economically unfeasible, and in some cases impossible.

SL asked the group to remember the key fact that in the last 70 years or so, the UK has lost 97% of its wildflower meadows, the most important habitat for bumblebees.

5. Action for Pollinators: case studies (James Byrne, Wildlife Trusts Wales)

JB explained that, were we to lose our pollinators (not just bees, but moths, butterflies, beetles and other insects), it would cost around £1.8 billion to hand pollinate our crops and wild plants in the UK. In some parts of China, they are already having to rely on hand pollination, but such work would be seen as undesirable in the UK.

JB described the Monmouthshire Natural Assets Programme, which has been organised by Gwent Wildlife Trust. This used grant money to work with landowners to implement works that can't be funded by agri-environment schemes. Free surveys were given to landowners to identify which species they had on their land and how to protect and enhance them. Capital grants were given, and also training and education. The main focus was on grassland habitats, to encourage wild flowers and, therefore, pollinators. This scheme has been very successful and the Wildlife Trusts intend to build upon this across Wales. JB explained that there were also examples of similar Wildlife Trusts schemes around Wales.

6. Farming with Wildlife – Managing farmland for biodiversity and business (Roger Matthias and Rowan Flindall-Shayle, Burns Pet Nutrition)

RM and RFS work as Farming Advisers for Penlan Farm, which produces quality pet food ingredients for Burns Pet Nutrition, whilst also providing pollinator friendly habitat. The owner of Burns Pet Nutrition was interested in conservation, so he wanted to produce pet food ingredients whilst also making the farm a conservation centre, an education hub and an area that the public could access and enjoy and learn about nature.

The farm was previously an intensive dairy farm which, over time, has been returned to crop land. There is a small rare breeds herd, used for managing pasture, rather than for meat. The crop fields all have a permanent margin of 3-4 metres, and have been planted with white and red clover. The larger fields have been divided into smaller fields and more hedgerows have been put in, and there are areas set aside specifically for wildlife, including a field specifically for bees.

The farm aims to give farmers examples of what can be done on their own farm, accepting that most farms would not be able to implement everything that Penlan farm has, but showing that there are a range of things that can be incorporated into a commercial farm which can be good for wildlife.

In addition to attracting pollinators, the extra cover has also encouraged larger mammals to move to the area, including 3 breeding pairs of hares.

Also, the farm has begun to produce small amounts of Welsh meadow hay, which is popular with rabbit owners, and is a premium product. Recently a new farm trail has been opened for walkers, and there are other rights of way on the land. The farm is currently applying to enter Glastir.

7. Discussion

LG thanked all three speakers and opened the discussion by asking how RM sees this approach being mainstreamed.

RM explained they were trying to show the links between conservation work and commercial viability and demonstrate approaches that other landowners can take away and try on their land, such as reducing the size of fields, better hedge management etc.

RB asked how receptive other farms have been. RM said it is early days, but they have worked with intensive dairy farmers who were interested in using the corners of fields to increase species diversity. RM explained that they don't pretend to be a model that can necessarily be scaled up as a whole, but they aim to give examples of what can be done.

CL asked how we can be more creative in encouraging hay meadows. In an increasingly wet climate, this could cause issues with making hay as dry conditions are needed for harvesting.

RM explained that, if the right conditions do not materialise at the right time, wet hay can still be wrapped and fermented and used as a feed.

JB pointed out that the majority of farmers are in receipt of CAP payments, so these payments must be used to incentivise farmers to produce hay, amongst other measures to aid pollinators.

CL commented that Glastir and Farming Connect could also be used to encourage this.

LG commented that Welsh Government is receptive to the idea of this being taken forward via the RDP, but we need to see action on the ground and tease out the experience and turn these ideas into a viable economic model.

RH raised the point that we can get fixated on hay and silage, but this is just one way of helping pollinators. It is important to show there are lots of things that can be done, and then find out what works on each individual farm. It is also important to get farms to work together. One option is having a pasture that can be left as a meadow, which is only used to put sick animals on, as was done in the past. Also, it's not just farmers that have responsibility to do this. Community green space could be managed for pollinators also. It is not about pressurising one group to do everything – there is a shared responsibility to do this.

JB picked up on the commercial opportunities provided by farmers working cooperatively to produce niche products, which can be sold at higher prices, such as the meadow hay. There may also be opportunities using the Payments for Ecosystem Services model.

CH raised the issue of the increasing loss of arable farmland which has valuable marigold fields, which are important for bees. Many of these farms were in Tir Gofal, but have not made it into Glastir.

SL explained that their land is now in too favourable a condition for them to qualify. This means there is no incentive for them to maintain the land in this way.

JB and CH also pointed out the importance of this sort of land for birds and plants too.

LG suggested the possibility of members of the Cross Party Group inputting this information to the Glastir consultation.

Members of the group discussed local approaches to protecting declining bees. SL explained that local work is a major focus of her work, particularly on low input grasslands.

LG asked if organisations were engaging with local authorities in relation to their land, and grass verges.

Members around the room said that this is something they are engaging with.

RH commented on the importance of changing perceptions about flower areas being wasteland, and having approaches like rotating the mowing of grass verges, not doing it all at once. It is necessary to do things at different scales, both targeted work and more general work, to have a real impact.

LG noted the ban on neonicotinoid pesticides, but felt this is a one-dimensional approach and asked about the relative importance of the other reasons for declining bee populations, such as habitat loss and disease.

SL said that habitat loss is the key issue. In Wales, pesticides are less of an issue as there is less arable land. Isolation of populations due to lack of habitat connectivity is a major issue, which leaves colonies vulnerable when disease strikes.

LG also asked about the effects of climate change on bees. SL said that there has been some impact on native species, but the warmer climate is attracting new species. RH said that the climate envelope is still good for bees, but there is not enough habitat for them to travel between areas and between countries, so improving connectivity is important. RH also informed the group that the Pollinators Task Force will be responding to the Glastir consultation on this issue, and welcomes input.

JB highlighted the importance of pollinator-friendly public land and suggesting encouraging people to plant more herbs, which are also good for pollinators. Conwy Council were giving out edible planters, which were popular.

AW highlighted the importance of brownfield sites as niche habitats for wildflowers and insects, including pollinators. Such habitat is often important for rare species. Urban meadows can also be created, and may be a way of better engaging with the public on these issues.

The group briefly discussed opportunities such as Cardiff becoming a Sustainable Food City, to encourage community gardening and more herb planting, which could be undertaken in public areas, with local people encouraged to use the fresh herbs if they wish. Such initiatives would increase people's connection to the land, while also being good for pollinators.

RF informed the group of an initiative at Penlan farm that is sponsored by the big supermarkets to reconnect people with food and farmers. They will also be engaging with school groups. JB suggested it would be good for the Minister for Natural Resources and Food to go to this. CL agreed that the Minister would be interested in this.

RM reiterated Penlan Farm's purpose of integrating commercial farming with conservation. He hoped to interest more commercial experts in this endeavour and get them to help strengthen this view. Attendees were invited to visit the farm, particularly in the summer.

LG noted that knowledge transfer is a key proposal of the RDP and this is an important message to get across.

JL commented that Keep Wales Tidy is leading on a proposal for a hedgerow regeneration project, so members of the group could support this bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund. Also Woodland Trust is making available subsidised packs of trees that are good for pollinators, and they would be interested in working with other organisations that could add value to these packs. There is a good demand for them already, even though they haven't yet been heavily promoted. The packs contain around 100 trees.

LG thanked the group for attending and invited the members to put forward themes for the next meeting, and suggest these to the Secretary. The meeting was closed.