

Lesley Griffiths AM  
Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs  
Welsh Government

16 October 2017

Dear Lesley,

**Branching Out: a new ambition for woodland policies**

Thank you for your response to the Committee's report. I am grateful for the way you engaged the Committee during the course of this inquiry.

Although the Committee felt that your response was generally positive, members agreed that I should write to you to seek further information on several matters you raise in your response.

**Recommendation 1:** The Welsh Government must, as a matter of urgency, refresh its woodland strategy with the aim of significantly increasing planting rates. The refreshed strategy must include long term targets for woodland cover and must incorporate commercial forestry.

***Welsh Government response: Accept in Principle***

The Committee is pleased that this recommendation has been accepted in principle and that there will be a review of the strategy in 2018. However, one of the key messages in our report was the severe lack of new woodland creation in Wales. It is extremely unlikely that the Welsh Government will meet its target of 100,000ha of new woodland creation for 2010-2030 without a fundamental change in approach.

In the first 6 years to which this target applies (2010-16), Wales created just 3,500ha of new woodland. To meet your target of 100,000ha of new woodland creation, Wales will need to create 96,500ha during the last 14 years of the scheme. Continuing in the same vein is not an option.

What do you intend to do differently to address the significant planting shortfall you face?



**Recommendation 2:** The Welsh Government must address the barriers to increasing planting, in particular by:

- Aligning the regulatory and funding processes, and providing additional guidance and support to applicants.
- Examining the potential for adopting a presumption of approval for applications in areas identified by the Woodland Opportunities Map as having a high suitability for woodland.
- Making the Woodland Opportunities Map more user-friendly to a range of different user groups, and linking it in with the land use planning system.

**Welsh Government response: Accept in Principle**

In your response, you state that the Welsh Government is working closely with NRW to improve alignment of regulatory processes, in particular, the Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) (England and Wales) Regulations 1999 (as amended) with the Glastir Woodland Creation application process, to facilitate the successful progression of woodland creation proposals. Please provide details of any assessment you have made of the impact this work will have on improving planting rates. Could you also tell us when this work, and the work on improving the application process, will be completed?

Your response indicates that you are aiming to use the Woodland Opportunities Map to provide applicants with more certainty about whether a proposal is likely to be approved. Could you provide the Committee with further information on this work, including when it will be completed, and details of any assessments you have made of the impact it will have on increasing planting rates?

The Committee recommended that there should be a presumption of approval for applications in areas identified by the Map as having a high suitability for woodland. Please provide the Committee with details of any assessment you have made of the potential benefits or risks arising from this approach.

**Recommendation 3:** The Welsh Government must specify how it will use trees and woodlands as a nature-based solution to flooding, and facilitate expansion of the Woodland Carbon Code.

**Welsh Government response: Accept in Principle**

Please provide further detail of the actions you are taking, or are intending to take, to expand use of the Woodland Carbon Code and addressing barriers to uptake.



In your response, you say that you will consider whether registration with the Code should be a requirement in certain circumstances. The Committee would be grateful for an update on your latest thinking on this issue.

**Recommendation 4:** The Welsh Government must commit to ensuring a minimum of 20% urban tree canopy cover, to be addressed through Local Well-being Plans and Area Statements.

**Welsh Government response:** *Decline*

The Committee is disappointed that this recommendation has been rejected. Setting an *overall* target for urban canopy cover in Wales would not impinge on local decision making and would serve as a useful tool to drive forward work in this area. This approach would be consistent with that taken by Welsh Government in many policy areas. Indeed, you have introduced an overall target for woodland creation in Wales. In response to this letter, can you consider whether you would be prepared to introduce such an overall target for urban canopy cover?

You go on to state that you consider that some form of location-specific indicator of achievement should be available to those drawing up Local Well-being Plans. Please provide an estimate of when this work will be completed and further information on how the indicator is being developed.

**Recommendation 5:** Woodlands can be an effective tool for regeneration and engaging local communities. The Welsh Government must harness this and, as a starting point, should:

- Increase support to community woodland groups.
- Assess the potential of developing a National Forest Company to help regenerate the south Wales valleys.
- Ensure that woodland education is incorporated into education policies.

**Welsh Government response:** *Accept in Principle*

In relation to funding for community groups, your response says that the priorities for future funding will align more closely with the priorities of the Natural Resources Policy. Can you provide the Committee with an assessment you have made of the impact this may have on support for community woodland groups?

Please provide the Committee with an update on the work to explore the development of a Valleys Landscape Park.



**Recommendation 6:** The Welsh Government must extend and better manage access to public woodlands, especially for marginalised groups. NRW should examine options for recovering costs from user groups for certain recreational activities in the woodlands it manages.

**Welsh Government response: *Accept in Principle***

In your response, you say that you have reservations about charging for recreational activities because of the potential barrier, especially for marginalised groups.

The Committee was careful in its use of language and did not recommend charging for use. Recovering costs, perhaps through licensing, from user groups engaging in specified activities in certain areas, such as noisy or high-speed activities, would reduce illegal use of woodlands elsewhere. Please provide the Committee with any assessment you have made of the potential impact of this approach and the evidence that supports your decision not to pursue this proposal.

**Recommendation 7:** The Welsh Government should clarify its timetable for bringing forward proposals on access reform.

**Welsh Government response: *Accept in Principle***

The Committee accepts that it may not be possible at this stage to give a detailed timetable for the next steps, but we would welcome an indication from you of the broad milestones for this work.

Given that the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources consultation closed on 30 September, we would be grateful if you could provide an oral update on the details of the next steps during the debate on the Committee report.

**Recommendation 8:** The Welsh Government must address the constraints on the commercial forestry sector, in particular by:

- Facilitating coniferous woodland creation and commercial operations on both public and private land.
- Promoting to the farming community the commercial and other benefits of planting trees on agricultural land, and enabling farmers to do this through additional, simple and flexible grant payments.
- Providing and promoting training in forestry, woodland management and woodland planning.

**Welsh Government response: *Accept***



Could you provide details of any assessment you have made of the impact of the work of the Co-operative Forest Planning scheme?

In your response, you say that “forest industries must also do more to work collaboratively with landowners, NRW and regulators to make the investments on which their industry relies. The scale of investment required to meet future needs is significant and public and private sectors will need to work together to make it happen.” Can you provide details of any actions you are taking to advance this issue?

Can you provide details of any specific work that has been undertaken by the Welsh Government to promote to the farming community the commercial and other benefits of planting trees on agricultural land?

Training and the promotion of training was a key issue for stakeholders who contributed to the inquiry. Are you satisfied that the actions you outlined in your response are sufficient to address those concerns?

**Recommendation 9:** The potential for growth in the commercial forestry sector should be actively supported by Welsh Government. In particular it should:

- Agree with the forestry sector ambitious targets for Wales to become increasingly self-sufficient in timber production and less reliant on imports.
- Consider changing the building regulations to promote the use of timber in construction.

**Welsh Government response: *Accept in Principle***

Your response says that you are working with the construction industry to increase the use of timber in construction. You say that “early evidence” indicates that changing custom and practice and procurement practices offer greater scope to see progress, compared to changing building regulations or planning guidance. The Committee would be grateful if you could share this evidence with us.

Could you also provide the Committee with any assessment you have made of the potential impact of your preferred approach and set out the actions you will take to encourage the changes in custom and practice and procurement practices to which you refer?

**Recommendation 10:** The Welsh Government should reintroduce the Glastir Woodland Management Scheme and ensure that planting meets the UK Woodland Assurance Standard.

**Welsh Government response: *Accept in Principle***



Could you provide the Committee with an update on your progress in exploring opportunities to re-prioritise resources to allow for the limited opening of the Glastir Woodland Management Scheme?

**Recommendation 11:** The Welsh Government must work with stakeholders to ensure its tree health strategy demonstrates the lessons learnt from the outbreaks of Ash Dieback and Larch Disease.

**Welsh Government response: Accept**

Can you provide the Committee with an estimate of when the review of the functions and membership of the Tree and Plant Health Steering Group will be completed? The Committee would be grateful if you could inform us of the outcomes of that review once it is complete.

**Recommendation 12:** The Welsh Government must improve delivery of the Woodlands for Wales strategy, in particular by:

- Addressing the barriers to woodland creation as a matter of urgency.
- Revising the strategy by early 2018, and specifying how it will support and be supported by the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, and the Natural Resources Policy.
- Improving the transparency and power of Woodland Strategy Advisory Panel to drive the strategy forwards.

**Welsh Government response: Accept in Principle**

Your response does not address the final part of the Committee's recommendation. Given that your response states that the advisory panel's role is to support the Welsh Ministers' development of forestry policy, do you have any plans to address the concerns raised by stakeholders during the inquiry about a lack of transparency and clarity about the panel's role and work?

**Recommendation 13:** As recommended in the Committee's report on the future of land management in Wales, the Welsh Government must ensure that future funding should be based on sustainable outcomes. This approach could be supported by innovative methods such as Payments for Ecosystem Services and pension fund investment in green infrastructure.

**Welsh Government response: Accept**

The Committee would be grateful if you could share the final report of the Glastir Monitoring and Evaluation Programme as soon as it is available.



The Committee has asked the Business Committee to schedule a Plenary debate on the Committee's report on 13 December. I would be grateful if you could respond to this letter by 27 November, so that your response can inform the Plenary debate.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mike Hedges". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'M'.

**Mike Hedges AM**

**Chair of Climate Change, Rural Affairs and Environment Committee**



Hannah Blythyn AC/AM  
Gweinidog yr Amgylchedd  
Minister for Environment



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref: MA-P/HB/4222/17

Mike Hedges, AM  
Chair of Climate Change, Rural Affairs and Environment  
Committee

23 November 2017

Dear Mike,

**Branching Out: a new ambition for woodland policies**

Thank you for your letter to Lesley Griffiths dated 16 October 2017 in which you seek further information on several matters in relation to the Welsh Government's response to your report of the inquiry, *Branching Out*. Responsibility for forestry has now passed to me which is why I am replying. I note that the Business Committee has scheduled a Plenary debate about the report. Therefore, I feel it will be more appropriate for your additional questions to be considered during the debate.

I trust you agree this proposal will be a more constructive basis on which to take forward discussions.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Hannah Blythyn". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Hannah Blythyn AC/AM  
Gweinidog yr Amgylchedd  
Minister for Environment

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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.



Hannah Blythyn AM  
Minister for Environment

24 November 2017

Dear Hannah,

**Branching out: a new ambition for woodland policy**

Thank you for your letter of 23 November, in which you say you will not provide the written information requested by the Committee.

I trust you agree that Assembly Committees must be provided with appropriate information in order to fulfil their scrutiny function effectively. My letter of 16 October requested clarification of several aspects of the Welsh Government's response to the Committee's report. The Committee believes it would be appropriate and constructive to have that information in writing in advance of the Plenary debate on 13 December.

I would be grateful if you could provide the information as requested in my letter of 16 October, which is included as an Annexe for your convenience.

Yours sincerely,



Mike Hedges AM  
Chair of the Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs



Hannah Blythyn AC/AM  
Gweinidog yr Amgylchedd  
Minister for Environment



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref: MA-P/HB/4222/17

Mike Hedges, AM  
Chair  
Climate Change, Rural Affairs and Environment Committee

5 December 2017

Dear Mike,

Thank you for your letter dated 24 November 2017 in which you request further written information from Welsh Government on the Climate Change Committee's report, *Branching Out*.

The Department for Energy, Planning and Rural Affairs stands ready to provide any information, as and when requested by the Committee. However, as the Committee debate in the chamber on this subject is occurring soon, I feel that on this occasion it is appropriate to follow normal procedure, and provide further information, clarifications and detail, verbally as part of that debate.

I look forward to the debate on 13 December, as there is substantial consensus between the Committee and the Welsh Government on this very important issue.

Yours sincerely,

Hannah Blythyn AC/AM  
Gweinidog yr Amgylchedd  
Minister for Environment

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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.

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