

Wales Land Management Forum (WLMF) Minutes

Title of meeting:	Wales Land Management Forum (WLMF)
Location:	MS Teams Meeting
Date of meeting:	9 th December 2024
Members present:	Prof. Rhys A. Jones (Chair), NRW Board Member Ruth Jenkins, NRW Huwel Manley, NRW Michelle Griffiths, NRW Elen G. Richards, NRW Sarah Hetherington, NRW Dr Rosie Plummer, NRW Board Member Gareth Parry, FUW Fraser McAuley, CLA Elaine Heckley, Confor Hedd Pugh, NFU Cymru Dennis Matheson, TFA
Other attendees:	Naomi Matthiessen, Welsh Government Stacey Delbridge, NRW Gail Merriman, Welsh Government Ann Burgoyne, Welsh Government Chris Tucker, NRW Mel Meaden, NRW Iwan Parry, Tilhill Iwan Lloyd Williams Professor John Healey Maria Wilding Sarah Wymer Heidi Pawlin, NRW
Apologies:	Rachel Lewis-Davies, NFU Cymru Jon Goldsworthy, NRW John Browne, NRW Tim Kirk, Confor Angharad Davies, Wales YFC
Secretariat:	Bronwen Martin, NRW

Item 1. Introductions, Apologies and Declaration of Interest

1. Professor Rhys Jones (WLMF Chair) welcomed all to the meeting and noted apologies. Rhys mentioned that this meeting has a broad 'forestry' theme and welcomed members

of the Forestry Regional Advisory Committee (RAC) and guest presenters to the meeting.

2. No declarations of interest were raised in respect of Agenda items to be considered.

Item 2. Minutes from the last meeting, actions & matters arising.

3. Once the meeting minutes have been reviewed and formally agreed they will be translated and published on the NRW website. The Group reviewed the minutes from the meeting held on 9th September 2024 and accepted them as a true record.
4. The group reviewed the outstanding actions and verbal updates were provided.

Item 3. National Forest for Wales

5. Stacey Delbridge, NRW joined the meeting to provide an overview and update regarding the National Forest for Wales. The National Forest for Wales is about being part of something unique for the people of Wales. Building the National Forest for Wales network will:
 - improve the environment.
 - create economic opportunity.
 - help communities to connect with and appreciate the woodlands that surround them.
6. Having National Forest for Wales Status gives woodlands:
 - recognition as an exemplary woodland
 - an opportunity to be a long-lasting legacy for future generations.
 - the chance to be a member of the National Forest for Wales Network
7. Stacey discussed the National Forest outcomes, showed some photos of various sites, described the network, outlined ongoing public communication and the Team structure and summarised the application process and reasons for joining the National Forest.
8. Dennis Matheson, TFA asked about the National Forest funding. Stacey confirmed that it is funded by Welsh Government.
9. Iwan Lloyd-Williams, Confor asked about the annual budget for the National Forest for Wales. Stacey said she would need to double check the annual budget with the Programme Manager in Welsh Government and get back to Iwan. Iwan asked why only half of the Welsh Government Woodland Estate (WGWE) is currently included in the National Forest for Wales. Stacey explained that when the National Forest was launched in March 2020, the original National Forest Wales sites were brought in as exemplar sites, which met all of the six outcomes. Another phase of woodland blocks was brought in November 2022. We currently have 26 woodland blocks in the National Forest Wales network which are being phased in as they meet the outcomes and demonstrate that they are exemplar National Forest for Wales sites. We're hoping to have another phase of WGWE sites come in next year, and the aspiration is to have the whole of the WGWE come into the National Forest in due course.

10. Gareth Parry, FUW said it would be interesting to know which portfolio within Welsh Government that the budget is coming from. Naomi confirmed that the funding for the National Forest comes from the Climate and Rural Affairs Budget.
11. John Healey recalled the criteria by which applications from individual woodland owners are judged, and one could take that as being synonymous with the overall objectives for the programme. John asked about the longer-term vision and what success will look like. Stacey said the aspiration was set out by the previous First Minister to have a National Forest for Wales network that spreads the length and breadth of Wales which provides a strong ecosystem and woodland resource for Wales. The outcomes are multi purpose and look at woodlands for economic, environmental and for benefits for people. We're currently going through a mid term evaluation of the National Forest, looking at how the National Forest is developed and delivered in the future.
12. Rhys said it seems like it is a largely a responsive scheme where people enquire about joining. In terms of the longer-term vision and strategy, how will gaps be identified. Stacey said the team are looking at opportunities and as the National Forest for Wales grows, we can start to see where those gaps are and where those possible linkages are. We use maps to plot potential perspective sites and there are about 200 sites (not including those 55 already part of the network) that we're talking to and working with to try and bring them into the network in the future. The team are looking at opportunities, going out and speaking to a wide variety of woodland owners and also attending different events to promote the National Forest.
13. Fraser McAuley, CLA recalled some of the feedback from those who have joined the network and asked about any drawbacks and what can be done to overcome them. Stacey said the key challenge with bringing more National Forest Wales sites into the network is around the woodland management plan. Not everybody's got an active woodland management plan even if they are actively managing their woodlands. This element has played a role in delaying us getting more sites in, but we are making steps in terms of helping to unlock those woodland management plans.
14. Naomi Matthiessen, Welsh Government said it's an interesting stage to influence how the National Forest develops in the future. We are trying to become more strategic with how we use the National Forest in Wales and examples in England show that you really can do that in a regional way. This is a useful lever for engaging at that regional community level. Examples have shown how important that regional level facilitation is to get engagement, benefits and outcomes that you want from that woodland. Its an exciting time as we move forward into this next phase of the National Forest and input from this group on how we can develop and improve it will be really useful.
15. Elaine Heckley, Confor said we really struggle with the NRW Management Plans. A lot of the forests in Wales aren't currently under Woodland Management Plans because they're quite hard to do when applying to be in the National Forest. Elaine asked if they are following the NRW Forest Management Plan or using a different management plan, what is the criteria, who is assessing them and how many professional foresters are in your team. Stacey said the current guidance for the National Forest Wales Management Plans is guided by UKFS. We're not a verifier, our role is promoting the National Forest and engaging people to join the network. Management plans is an area we have identified a need to develop (e.g. a good template). Elaine noted that there are different templates in development and that it is important to be joined up.

Item 4. Sustainable Farming Scheme: Forestry

16. Naomi Matthiessen, Welsh Government provided a presentation discussing the forestry related elements of the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS). The presentation included a general update on the overall Scheme, an overview of Universal Action 11 Hedgerow Management, Universal Action 12 Woodland Maintenance and Universal Action 13 Tree Planting and Hedgerow Creation Opportunity Plan and summary of the next steps.
17. John asked about the evidence collated and analysed by the Carbon Sequestration Review panel and whether they identified any economically and technically viable alternatives to increase planting of trees, not least fast-growing trees as a means of meeting farm scale, landscape level or national net zero targets. Naomi said the Carbon Sequestration Panel did identify several additional options for sequestering carbon on farms which could be considered at the Optional level not Universal level – further work is needed to develop them and potentially bring them into the scheme in the future. The key point was the panel didn't find anything that could be applied at that Universal layer that was suitable for every single farm in Wales.
18. Hedd Pugh, NFU Cymru mentioned that they had put the scheme across to their members at their recent NFU Cymru Roadshow. Feedback from their members suggests there are still some concerns about the Scheme, especially related to the 10% habitat target and what is or isn't included in that (e.g. stone walls etc.). However, the overall perception of the Scheme is generally a lot better than it was six months ago.
19. Fraser said there has been cautious optimism from CLA members when they recently shared information at the Winter Fair. There's still a way to go in terms of budgets and payment rates, which is a big sticking point.
20. Gareth mentioned similar feedback received from FUW members. Members are starting to ask technical questions that we still cannot answer as the detail is not there yet.
21. Dennis mentioned that tenants were exempted from having to have the 10% trees some time ago, but that's now overruled by the removal of that requirement. We are very pleased that Welsh Government has said that if any of the Universal Actions cannot be done by tenants by virtue of clauses in their agreement, they won't have to do them. This isn't an overall exemption from all Universal Action for tenants, it's going to be decided on an individual basis, which would seem sensible.
22. Naomi welcomed the feedback from the group and any further feedback from stakeholders. Naomi recognised the devil is in the detail and Welsh Government really want to continue the collaborative approach to finalising the Scheme details. Naomi welcomed a follow up conversation with Dennis regarding tenancy and grants.
23. The group discussed the opportunity around a Land Use Strategy for Wales particularly regarding tree planting, productive land for food production and safeguarding habitats

and the environment. It was noted that it will be interesting to see the outcome of the work being produced for England.

AP December 02: Bronwen Martin, NRW to circulate a copy of Sustainable Farming Scheme presentation.

Item 5. Timber Industry Strategy

24. Gail Merriman and Ann Burgoyne, Welsh Government joined the meeting to provide a presentation on the development of the Timber Industrial Strategy (and associated Skills Plan) and to highlight the upcoming consultation.
25. The Timber Industry Strategy will set out commitments to the sector, which has a crucial role to play in the environmental and economic future of Wales. The strategy is looking across the whole supply chain, from forest nurseries through to the end use of timber. Within this the strategy, there will be a forestry and timber sector skills plan. The consultation on the proposals will open on the 31st January 2025, for 12 weeks. Welsh Government will be running stakeholder engagement events throughout that period and the publication of the final version of a strategy will be ready before the Royal Welsh Agricultural Show in the summer of 2025. The aim of this exercise is to grow the value of the sector in Wales and move towards higher value timber products being produced in Wales. A Working Group has been set up to support Welsh Government with this work, some of which are represented in this meeting.
26. Ann mentioned that the aim of the Forestry and Timber Skills Plan is to support the Timber Industry Strategy to use wood for higher value purposes, specifically timber in construction and to have a skilled workforce within the forestry and timber sectors.
27. The group discussed the opportunity of integrating different initiatives by looking across the supply chain through to the use of the end product. Naomi noted that the Timber Industry Strategy has been a really good example of where really significant efforts have been made to try and bring in all of those different interests together and take a strategic overview.
28. Gail reminded the group that there will be a programme of stakeholder engagement events that will run during the 12 weeks of the open consultation. Welsh Government would really value input and advice and welcomed the group to participate in the consultation process.
29. Gareth asked if the agriculture industry was represented in the Working Group. Gail said the group didn't have these types of representatives, it was a very small working group that was created after the Timber and Trees Deep Dive. However, we would welcome feedback during the consultation and upcoming stakeholder engagement events, particularly around revenue proposals and how best to support farmers on income generation opportunities.

AP December 03: Bronwen Martin, NRW to circulate a copy of the Timber Industry Strategy presentation.

Item 6. Deer and Grey Squirrel Management in Wales

30. Chris Tucker, NRW provided an update on deer and grey squirrel management in Wales.

31. There are 5 species of deer in the wild in Wales –

- Native:
 - Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus*)
 - Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*)
- Naturalised:
 - Fallow Deer (*Dama dama*)
- Non-native:
 - Sika deer (*Cervus nippon*)
 - Muntjac (*Muntiacus reevesi*)

32. Welsh Government's Strategy for Wild Deer Management in Wales was published in 2011 with the vision "Wales benefits from its wild deer population in balance with the natural, social and economic environment." An action plan was subsequently developed in 2018.

33. Deer impacts the delivery of outcomes of the Woodlands for Wales Strategy, agriculture and rural development, delivery of biodiversity commitments and woodland creation for carbon sequestration. Agriculture, forestry and other woodlands may also suffer economic impacts from deer. There is also likely to be an increase in deer vehicle collisions in both rural and urban areas.

34. In areas where deer are present, deer management measures should be developed and implemented as part of a management plan, with the aim that deer browsing does not prevent regeneration of trees or the development of resilient forests; ideally this will be in co-operation with neighbours or as part of a Deer Management Group.

35. Grey squirrels are a non-native species and have been around for about 120 years. They are classified as invasive non-native species or an invasive alien species. They are very widespread (cover 95% of Wales), and a conservative population estimate is 283, 000 and increasing. Chris showed a distribution map from the UK Squirrel Accord which indicated that grey squirrel is present across Wales, except Anglesey. In mid Wales and Clocaenog, both grey and red squirrels are present.

36. Chris highlighted some impacts of grey squirrels including:

- Damage to trees and biodiversity
- Bark stripping of hardwood trees, between ages of 15-40 years
 - Kills trees.
 - reduces timber quality.
 - Reduces tree species diversity and therefore woodland biodiversity.
 - Reduces carbon sequestration and therefore climate change mitigation.
- Specific impacts on native Red Squirrels
 - Competition in native woodlands
 - Transmission of Squirrelpox virus and other diseases to red squirrels
- Damage to loft insulation and wiring

37. Current management includes three focal sites for Red Squirrel Conservation where they manage grey squirrels to reduce impacts on red squirrel populations. Forestry sectors also manage grey squirrels to reduce impacts on hardwood timber production.

Potential future management might include immunocontraception – UK Squirrel Accord and APHA development project. Modelling indicates effectiveness alongside other control. Consideration of the future delivery of grey squirrel management includes Wales Squirrel Forum, awareness, training, availability of immunocontraception, resources/ funding, coordinated approach for Landscape scale management and possibly the Sustainable Farming Scheme.

38. Naomi noted her interest in having a follow up meeting with Chris about deer and grey squirrel management and what more Welsh Government could do. Chris welcomed the group to contact him for any further discussions on deer or squirrels.
39. Elaine asked whether there has been a review of the Deer Strategy Action Plan from 2018. Chris said the Deer Strategy had an action plan when it was first launched which was subsequently reviewed in 2018. The group agreed that another future review of the Deer Strategy would be useful.
40. Elaine asked about the barriers of setting up a thriving venison market in Wales. Chris said a lot of venison goes to the game dealers who are generally based in England. Perhaps some of the final product comes back to Wales, but we can't track it. This is something that we're aware of in terms of being able to market it as a product from Wales. One of the key issues is that the price for venison is not very high. Some people are finding it difficult to manage deer in woodlands because there's less of a market than there used to be. Elaine suggested the need for better marketing and promotion through things like 'Taste Wales' – perhaps this needs some further thought and is an opportunity for partnership working.
41. Elaine mentioned that currently there is no grant funding available to help manage grey squirrels in Wales and asked if green financing could be considered as a possible solution. Rhys mentioned that Welsh Government are reflecting on sustainable finance and green finance, perhaps there may be some movement on that front in the future.
42. Dennis recalled the UK Government used to pay a headage payment on squirrel tails as a control method, however that finished a long time ago. Dennis mentioned the local Estate previously had forestry staff which conducted grey poking to manage numbers, which was very successful, but they do not employ staff now. The Vincent Wildlife Trust had a project to reintroduce pine martens into mid Wales and they are the main predator of grey squirrels. Dennis was unsure of the status of that project and whether it has progressed. Additionally, in Canada grey squirrel is a delicacy – perhaps there is an opportunity here. Regarding venison, there should be better marketing in Wales as it's the best form of low cholesterol meat. Some say it's cheap in shops but in the butchers it's very expensive. Chris said the price that you get per kilo when you sell it to a game dealer is not very high, but when you see it in the shops it's quite expensive.
43. The group discussed the importance of a system of management to achieve multiple benefits and positive outcomes. Bringing partnerships together will also help support wider landscape scale management.
44. Rosie Plummer, NRW Board Member asked if any modelling has been done to look at the impact and development of the species. We know that squirrels for example are less active in isolated patches that are disconnected from greater woodland. Chris said increasing connectivity makes it easier for species to move around the landscape. We've looked at various things to try and establish the extent of damage, both direct

damage and economic damage. There are many factors to consider such as availability of food, which would vary from site to site and throughout the year. Chris mentioned the role of training courses and citizen science for recording damage created by deer and grey squirrel.

AP December 04: Bronwen Martin, NRW to circulate a copy of the Deer and Grey Squirrel Management presentation.

Item 7. Confor Presentations

45. Iwan Parry provided a presentation on a case study of woodland creation on a farm in Carmarthenshire. This is a mixed upland farm with around 250 acres (101 hectares), it originally had 800 sheep and 60 cows. In the 1980s and 1990s the farm benefited from different grants which enabled those working on the farm to carry out improvements whilst generating an income. Iwan noted that, unfortunately, the farm could not support three families, so the sons moved away for work. As the parents were getting older and struggled to make the farm profitable, in 1991 the one son came back to the farm and took out a mortgage to purchase the farm. However, in doing so, he needed to increase stock numbers to try and make the farm profitable.
46. As part of the process of developing his farm venture, in 1997 the farmer saw an opportunity. The farmer planted a bracken bank using a grant support (12 hectares with Douglas fir and Sitka spruce). It didn't cost the farmer anything and he'd already considered that land unproductive anyway. The farmer has just submitted a felling licence for thinning this woodland he planted in 1997 which will start to generate an income for him and in the meantime, he did receive 10 years of Farm Woodland Premium Scheme payment (old scheme).
47. The farmer struggled to make the farm profitable and found himself working extremely long hours and generating low-income levels. This forced him to go into contracting and reduce the sheep and cattle numbers so that he could generate an income to pay off the mortgage, but also to try and make his family more financially stable.
48. In 2010, the farmer decided to go organic, which allowed him to reduce his stock numbers further and release more time for contracting. In 2023, he looked into planting parts of the farm through the Glastir Woodland Creation Scheme to generate income whilst not needing the dedication of his own time and efforts. He planted 37 hectares of the farm, leaving 52 hectares to keep farming and only with sheep. The Glastir Woodland Creation Scheme itself planted and fenced the 37 hectares at no cost to him. It generates an income of £20,000 a year for 12 years (total £240k). He'd expect to start generating timber income from years 15 onwards with the new improved varieties of trees. He has registered the woodland planting scheme for carbon through the Carbon Code and he has an estimated income £180k in year 2 if he decides to sell the carbon credits – tax free. Although, he doesn't have to sell his carbon straight away; he could allow that carbon to accumulate.
49. Iwan explained that we are often told that the grants received by those planting woodlands in Wales goes to those outside of Wales, but actually those benefiting from these grants are 99% of the time local people. In this case study, the local community and economy benefitted from the grant aid including local contractors, managers, nurseries, fencing materials etc.

50. New woodland also provides opportunities for farmers to diversify and develop new income streams. New woodlands will alleviate flooding, sequester carbon, create habitats, produce timber for building homes and supply the timber trade in Wales.
51. A key ingredient to any successful woodland creation project is professional advice, before you embark on the project to seek professional advice and get facts and figures, have a clear plan including a financial forecast. Engage a Forest Management company to deliver the scheme and make sure that it's managed long term, including squirrel control, deer management etc. We have a responsibility to present the facts to landowners so that they can decide if it's a good opportunity for them – Farming Unions, Farming Connect, Forestry Representatives, Regulators, Welsh Government etc. Iwan suggested that the Regulator also needs to change its approach to land available for tree planting – habitats need to be assessed and not just dismissed.

AP December 05: Bronwen Martin, NRW to circulate a copy of the farm woodland creation case study presentation.

52. Iwan Lloyd-Williams provided a presentation about how the public sector work with NRW in supplying the mills in Wales. Iwan spoke about UK forestry statistics and statistics relevant to Wales, how the private timber sector purchases timber from the Welsh Government Woodland Estate (WGWE) through NRW and then described what the win-win situation could look like for both Welsh Government and NRW.
53. There is 3.2 million hectares of woodland within the UK, just under 10% of that is in Wales, with about 312,000 hectares. Of that, 37% is in public sector and 63% is in the private sector. But on the flip side in Wales, 77% of the coniferous Welsh cover is from the WGWE and 26% from the private sector.
54. Timber from the public estate is certified and most sawmills are required to purchase a minimum of 75% of the timber from certified woodlands in order to meet their certification requirements. As country we're the second highest net importer of forest products with over 82% of our timber imported from outside of the UK.
55. There is a healthy processing industry in Wales and throughout the UK because there is 2.9 million cubes of sawn wood produced each year within the United Kingdom. Iwan described the different products made from this timber.
56. The market uses around 9.1 million cubic metres of timber from UK forests. Currently, 57% of this volume is from private sector woodlands. As an industry, we're always battling perception and it's good to remind ourselves of the importance of the industry here in Wales. Iwan summarised the many benefits of modern forestry in Wales including economy, carbon, jobs, farming, reducing flood risk, places to roam and homes for wildlife.
57. Iwan described the timber purchasing process. Timber can be offered to the market by forest managers such as Tilhill or it can be negotiated directly with the woodland owners. They can be standard sales with tenders going direct to suitable companies or online negotiation parcels and have long term agreements. When it comes to NRW, there is a timber marketing plan with four sales per year and those are esales where those registered are able to bid.

58. Contractors are the bread and butter for everything we do. Iwan provided an overview of the tasks involved in the process from harvesting, bringing the timber to roadside and transporting it direct to the sawmills. Having the correct resources in place with the right experience and competence is crucial and there's many considerations when it comes to purchasing timber, for example safety, environment, wildlife, facilities, contractors availability/resources and market demands/fluctuations.
59. We can all do better as an industry to ensure a prosperous future. For this to be a reality, those working within the industry need to understand the importance of the timber industry when it comes to sustainable forest management. Unfortunately, this isn't always the case. Talking to foresters and contract managers, management of forestry and woodlands for timber production is often very low on the agenda. Income generated from timber sales helps support the wider benefits of the WGWE collaboration with the private sector – it would also help improve mills within Wales. The processing industry are able to invest within the infrastructure in Wales, if the volume was available, this would not only support the Welsh economy but also decrease the timber travel miles. There's also an opportunity to increase revenue. Currently the volume offered to the market from the WGWE is at the bottom of the range. Continuity of volume to the market would provide reassurance to both the processing and contracting elements of the industry, without whom there would be no industry in Wales. Contractors are the backbone of what we do, and we need to provide consistent volume to allow them to make informed decisions regarding investments, not only for machinery but in people as well. Iwan mentioned the importance of training and educating the next generation of those working with the industry.
60. The group discussed breaking down barriers to woodland creation. Perhaps the Sustainable Farming Scheme will provide a flexible approach for farmers to consider planting more trees.

AP December 06: Bronwen Martin, NRW to circulate a copy of the presentation regarding how the public forestry sector work with NRW.

61. Gareth was keen to understand if the bank had any view on the direction of the farm business described in the case study. Iwan mentioned that the bank did not have any issues. The farming business was difficult, and the farmer was able to provide security of income for defined periods because of the changes he made, but also in terms of longer-term timber production which can be quantified.
62. The group discussed the work of contractors and the importance of meeting requirements (e.g. health and safety). If you're not happy with a certain purchaser or contractor, you should not let them bid because by them bidding and purchasing timber and not working safely, you're not giving the good contractors or the good purchasers an opportunity to fill their mills.
63. Rhys thanked all of the guest speakers and the group for this really valuable discussion. It has been a very interesting session on forestry and woodlands.

Item 8. Any Other Business

64. A specific Forestry RAC meeting will be arranged in the new year (date TBC).

- 65. The next WLMF meeting will likely be held in March 2025 (date TBC).
- 66. Rhys reminded the group that their participation in the forum is vital and that they should put forward potential agenda items and discussion topics.
- 67. Rhys thanked the group for their input and wished everyone a restful Christmas and a Happy New Year.
- 68. No other business was raised.

Close meeting