Cyswllt Amgylchedd Cymru | Wales Environment Link

A Framework for Nature Advice in the Sustainable Farming Scheme

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Summary

The Sustainable Farming Scheme transition requires a change in the design and delivery of Welsh Government's farm advice services. If Wales is to meet its objectives under the Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023 and help deliver for nature, public-funded farm advice programmes should:

- seek and facilitate opportunities for progression from Universal to Optional / Collaborative layers
- aim to maximise co-benefits across the four Sustainable Land Management (SLM) objectives, taking a whole-farm approach
- deliver the right advice in the right place and in the right format, including aligning advice to 'Landscape Packages' of SFS Optional and Collaborative actions
- implement a Code of Practice for public-funded farm advice and training, and an agroecological farm advisor competency and training framework

To deliver these objectives, we propose a set of key features for the Rural Payments Wales (RPW) Online SFS portal and the next Farming Connect contract. These would integrate farm-level data, highlight risks and opportunities, suggest targeted actions, and link to further support, with both digital and advisor-led formats. Farming Connect would provide one-to-one advice, whole-farm planning, case studies, peer-to-peer learning, and accredited training to ensure advisors are skilled in agroecology, systems thinking, and local priorities for habitats and species. A new Code of Practice would set standards of conduct, compliance, and charging, and a competency pathway would professionalise the wider advisory sector through accredited training.

Why a fresh approach is needed

Welsh Government's investment in the Optional and Collaborative layers is at risk
The SFS Universal layer will establish much of the SLM information baseline for participating farms (e.g. soil test results, habitat mapping, carbon calculator reports, animal health plans). However, without effective interpretation and follow-up support, the Universal layer's records and plans are likely to be under-utilised, with a risk that the SFS will be seen as landing farmers with significantly more paperwork without any tangible benefit.

Currently, no clear digital or advisory pathway has been proposed to help farmers turn Universal outputs into whole-farm plans or to help move them into the Optional and Collaborative layers of the SFS. Without this in place, the return on Welsh Government's investment in the scheme as a whole, and the Optional and Collaborative layers in particular, is unlikely to be judged adequate.

➔ **Recommendation:** the SFS advice programme should seek and facilitate opportunities for progression from Universal to Optional/Collaborative layers.

Farm advice is currently silo-ed
Farm advice in Wales is currently available from multiple providers, including Welsh Government's Farming Connect programme and specialist agricultural consultants. Advisory services across all providers tend to specialise, with most advice focused on productivity. Where offered, advice relating to nature and environmental sustainability tends to be presented as something desirable but secondary or optional; an "add-on" to the primary goal of production. Advice on public access and associated co-benefits is notably absent from existing advice provision. This is an area where understanding is limited and the potential solutions and benefits are not widely understood, so advice would be particularly beneficial to helping farms achieve their baseline compliance duties, as well as improve access for the public more generally.

A fragmented approach to the provision of advice is unlikely to help farmers interpret the full suite of farm information generated by the Universal layer, or to navigate the potential synergies and trade-offs in context, with a likelihood that where SLM issues

are acted upon, this occurs in silos. This approach is also likely to miss opportunities to strengthen the delivery of SLM co-benefits and minimise trade-offs between SLM objectives. Farmers also report confusion and fatigue due to overlapping guidance and schemes.

Much of the advice that is pro-actively offered to farmers and growers is provided for 'free' by agro-chemical input company agronomists. Company agronomists may give good advice, but ultimately depend on making a sale. Sustainable farming does not necessarily require inputs that can be sold at a profit. In many cases, a knowledge-intensive, nature-friendly and public access-positive system does not require inputs that can be purchased, and this results in a block in the provision of advice to nature-friendly farmers. Furthermore, as farms shift from traditional agro-chemicals to regenerative approaches, a profit-driven industry of 'regenerative inputs' is emerging. Truly impartial, system-focused advice is likely to remain scarce.

Evidence shows that farmers make better, longer-term decisions when advice is joined up across soil, water, biodiversity, carbon, productivity, and community impacts[1]. Advisory models should connect environmental, community and productivity objectives through practical, whole-farm decision-making. The number of farm advisers in Wales that work in a nature-centred way remains quite limited and certainly not well documented, but successful programmes elsewhere show what can be achieved and point the way towards practical solutions. For example, Soil Association Scotland has co-developed a whole-farm planning framework with farmers and crofters and delivers a knowledge-exchange programme, "Planning for Change: A Whole Farm Approach"[2] to help them implement the Scottish Government's Whole Farm Plan audits.

A whole-farm approach will maximise co-benefits across the four SLM objectives at the farm level by equipping farmers and advisors to interpret and act on Universal layer outputs in an integrated manner, and by encouraging and enabling greater movement from Universal to Optional/Collaborative layers.

[1] Soil Association Exchange (2024) 'From Data to Decisions' report
[2] Soil Association Scotland, Whole Farm Planning

➔ **Recommendation:** the SFS advice programme should aim to help farmers maximise co-benefits across the four SLM objectives, taking a whole-farm approach.

Targeted action in the right places and in the right format is essential for nature recovery

The SFS Universal layer includes farm-scale targets and actions to maintain existing habitats and create new temporary habitats in the most agriculturally improved farmland. While this is welcome, it will not be enough the restore nature or even halt its decline; and neither will the free choice approach to the delivery of Optional actions. The Wales National Trends and Glastir Evaluation report (2025) produced by the ERAMMP concluded that "a different approach to pay for more transformational actions (i.e. not paying for the status quo) with more targeting to increase cost-benefit outcomes may be needed if environmental and cultural outcomes are to be an objective of payment schemes going forward."[3]

We believe the SFS has the potential to support all farmers across Wales to increase the abundance of widespread but declining species. This could be achieved by paying farmers to implement 'Landscape Habitat Packages' of Optional layer actions that provide the right mix of locally relevant habitats, enabling nature to thrive once more. The Welsh Government has attempted this approach in the past[4] and the inclusion of Landscape Packages in the SFS would represent an evolution of policy. We set out more on this proposal in this paper.

To achieve this, SFS farm advice must align closely with the spatially targeted approach embedded in scheme design. Farmers require tailored guidance to implement actions that are ecologically relevant to their specific locations, ensuring that resources are directed toward interventions that deliver measurable benefits for nature. Advisers will need to be familiar with the Landscape Packages and the technical requirements of the targeted habitats and species within their localities.

To be effective, advice must not only be technically sound and locally relevant but also accessible and usable by every farmer. Farmers vary in digital skills, business

[3] Report 105. Wales National Trends and Glastir Evaluation.pdf
[4] Glastir Entry – Technical guidance 2015

scale and learning preferences, so advice should be available in multiple formats to suit different contexts.

➔ **Recommendation:** the SFS advice programme should deliver the right advice in the right place and in the right format, including aligning advice to Landscape Packages of SFS Optional and Collaborative actions.

Public-funded farm advice is often regarded as a cost burden, not an investment in success

During the development of the SFS, farming stakeholders raised concerns that farm advice would be a cost burden to the SFS and farmer alike, diverting public funds away from farm payments and instead benefiting an unregulated 'army of advisers.' Stakeholders also suggested that advice provided by environmental NGOs could lack balance or practical grounding. There is a need to ensure that public-funded advice is professional, fair, and delivered in accordance with the SLM framework. Transparent standards, a Code of Practice and competency frameworks are needed to provide safeguards and demonstrate best value.

The Farm Wildlife partnership is in the process of developing a Future-Ready Farm Wildlife Training package for advisors with The Wildlife Trust. This training package is based on the CIEEM and Plantlife competencies framework and aims to level up the advisory skill force; providing a structured programme to train existing farm consultants into becoming competent and accredited environmental advisors. Findings from this work may provide timely and relevant evidence towards the development of professional, transparent and fair standards in public funded advice.

➔ **Recommendation:** Welsh Government should develop a Code of Practice for public-funded farm advice and training and an agroecological farm advisor competency and training framework.

Making it happen

Further details of our proposals are presented in the table below.

Objective	Detail
1. Seek and facilitate opportunities for progression from Universal to Optional / Collaborative layers	*1.1 RPW Online SFS portal/dashboard* • Visualise Universal layer data relating to the farm (e.g. soil health, habitat mapping, Greenhouse Gas footprint, public access routes), drawing on proven models available within the commercial sector • Provide connectivity for third party farm software to allow farmers to embed shared metrics into SFS delivery and monitoring and to avoid duplication of data entry • Highlight key opportunities or risks within each Universal Action data set • Suggest indicative actions based on farm type and environmental condition. • Signpost to relevant Optional and Collaborative layer actions or Farming Connect support and knowledge exchange. • Offer digital and advisor-supported formats tailored to farm size and capacity. *1.2 Farming Connect contract requirements* • Provide one-to-one support for farmers. For example, 'SLM Planning Clinics' could interpret their baseline compliance, Universal action reports, advise on whole-farm plans and flag eligibility and readiness for Optional layer actions • Provide case studies showing farmer progression from Universal to Optional layers
2. Aim to maximise co-benefits across the four SLM objectives,	*2.1 RPW Online SFS portal/dashboard* • Develop Optional layer action for "whole-farm planning" and associated Optional layer Continual Professional Development (CPD) module

taking a whole farm approach	*2.2 Farming Connect contract requirements* • Advice, training, and knowledge exchange materials should show how the topic links to the wider SLM objectives, highlighting both potential co-benefits and trade-offs. • Expand support for peer-to-peer learning, linking Farming Connect groups with agroecological and systems-thinking specialists • To ensure high-quality, consistent advice which reflects the complexity of farm systems and the SLM objectives, introduce a requirement that Farming Connect advisers and sub-contractors must either belong to an approved professional body or complete accredited agroecology modules such as whole-farm planning, soil health, agroforestry integration and biodiversity economics (via Farming Connect advisory training or other recognised providers). The Farming Connect training for advisors and sub-contractors would: • Focus on interpreting Universal layer outputs across SLM objectives • Support delivery of Optional layer action for "whole-farm planning" and an associated Optional layer CPD module • Explore trade-offs and co-benefits between actions (e.g. tree planting and livestock productivity, slurry storage infrastructure and soil health) • Use case studies to demonstrate integrated delivery
3. Deliver the right advice in the right place and in the right	*3.1* See "*1.1 RPW Online SFS portal/dashboard*" above regarding targeted Optional / Collaborative actions

format, including aligning advice to 'Landscape Packages' of SFS Optional and Collaborative actions	• Use evidence from field trials, including those generated by eNGOs, to develop SFS requirements and knowledge exchange materials *3.2 Farming Connect contract requirements* • Advice, training, and knowledge exchange materials should be designed to support the delivery of Landscape Packages in a given locality • Provide one-to-one support for farmers through 'cluster groups' within Landscape Package areas • Provide case studies showing farmer-implementation of Landscape Packages • It is vital that high-quality, consistent advice reflects the Landscape Packages. Introduce a requirement that Farming Connect advisers and sub-contractors must complete accredited training modules (via Farming Connect advisory training or other recognised providers) in the target habitats, species, and associated management requirements, and approaches, including traditional management practices and other approaches that allow natural processes to create dynamic landscapes. • Identify a network of approved specialists, co-ordinated via local nature partnerships, on whom advisors can draw to align work on key habitats/species with strategic biodiversity priorities • Use formats suited to farm size, enterprise type, and capacity, ensuring that smaller or more remote farms are not excluded. • Advice, whether digital or face-to-face, is aligned and quality-assured so farmers receive clear, coherent messages.
4(a). Introduce a Code of Practice for public-funded	*4.1 Introduce a Code of Practice setting out standards of conduct, compliance expectations, and agreed charging levels for providers delivering public-funded advice and training.*

farm advice and training	Following a stakeholder mapping and engagement exercise, develop the following through stakeholder consultation and piloting: • Standards of Conduct: impartiality, transparency, evidence-based advice, farmer-centred approach • SLM Integration: requirement that all advice links to relevant SLM objectives and highlights trade-offs and co-benefits • Compliance Expectations: adherence to Welsh Government priorities, data protection, record-keeping and reporting • Charging Framework: agreed maximum daily/hourly rates, transparency in costings, and consistent rules for publicly funded advice • CPD: mandatory SLM training modules and periodic refreshers
4(b). Develop a farm advisor competency and training framework to embed whole-farm and agroecological knowledge and advice	*4.1 Commission a competency and training pathway for advisors to embed whole-farm and agroecological knowledge and advice, accredited by recognised bodies (e.g. BASIS, Lantra, and academic institutions), with content co-designed by stakeholders (NRW, academic partners, advisory organisations, and farmers)*

Wales Environment Link (WEL) is a network of environmental, countryside and heritage Non-Governmental Organisations in Wales. WEL is a respected intermediary body connecting the government and the environmental NGO sector. Our vision is a thriving Welsh environment for future generations.

This paper represents the consensus view of a group of WEL members working in this specialist area. Members may also produce information individually in order to raise more detailed issues that are important to their particular organisation.



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