Cyswllt Amgylchedd Cymru | Wales Environment Link

Inquiry: Priorities for the Climate Change, Environment, Sustainability & Rural Affairs Committee

Friday 11th September 2026

Introduction

We welcome this inquiry and the opportunity to input into the Seventh Senedd's scrutiny work on climate and nature. Our network is made up of over thirty members, and we work to forge sector-wide consensus on issues. When WEL is invited to give evidence to previous committees, we canvas our members as to who is best placed and available to give evidence on behalf of the network, as well as their own organisation.

Our focus is the environment, and we currently have active Policy Groups working on sustainable land management/agriculture; biodiversity; marine; water quality and rivers; environmental governance; as well as inputting into Welsh Government budgets and coordinating the Nature Champion project with Senedd Members.

The causes of climate change and nature loss are inextricably linked. Healthy ecosystems protect us from climate change; sustainable development ensures we are eliminating unnecessary carbon emissions, preventing future ecosystem degradation and collapse.

Our wider priorities as a network are set out in:

- WEL Manifesto for 2026 Senedd elections.,
- Our Pathways to 2030 report: setting out estimated costings for interventions to meet our 2030 targets
- And more recently, the need for quick implementation of the Environmental (Principles, Governance & Biodiversity Targets) (Wales) Act 2026.

The environment is often taken for granted, despite it providing clean air, pollinators for our food, clean water, and the iconic landscapes that are the basis of Wales' tourism industry. Our Nature Rich Wales graphics (in English and in Welsh) highlight

how positive action on farms, in rivers and for our seas will give us a healthy environment, and our Nature Poor Wales graphics demonstrate the poor state we will get to – and in some areas, are already in – if we neglect our duty to take action.

Addressing climate change and the nature crisis requires a systemic response which takes a whole-of-Senedd and cross-Ministerial-portfolio approach. However, all committees have limited time, and therefore we have written this response with an eye to the most topical issues, legislative opportunities, and overlooked areas that can be tackled in the Senedd term.

What do you consider to be the main priorities or issues that the Committee should consider during the Seventh Senedd, and why?

The Welsh Government – and the rest of the UK – has committed to the Global Biodiversity Framework to meaningfully protect and manage 30% of our land, rivers and seas for nature. This must run through all threads of the Committee's work, or we will lose the opportunity to restore our ecosystems. It should also be a key delivery focus for the upcoming Climate and Nature Action Plan, which we'd welcome the Committee's ongoing scrutiny on.

Westminster's Environmental Audit Committee has recently been taking evidence on the impact of biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse on the UK's national security. This is an area where levers and impacts cross over devolved and reserved areas, and we'd welcome this Committee considering where it can work with or complement their inquiry, which could begin with a Senedd screening of the People's Emergency Briefing, which outlines the headline impacts on national security.

In terms of other areas of inquiry, we'd anticipate the following issues as being especially topical this term:

- **Wildfire mitigation and risk reduction** – sources of water for grass fires, which will increase with rising temperatures, will quickly become an issue in terms of healthy habitat management. Whilst it's appropriate that reservoirs, lakes and ponds are drained in emergency situations where there is a threat to human life, how we manage and restore those important habitats is crucial and needs

to not be overlooked. There is more information in this briefing on the role of wildfire-resilient landscapes.

- **Droughts –** development of an effective national plan for long-term drought management, considering the ecological impacts on habitats, farming, changes to water-intensive industrial processes and tackling leakage.
- **Climate-resilient farming** – as shown particularly powerfully this summer, Wales' climate is changing climate, and we need to ensure climate-resilient farming practice is embedded, and quickly (see more information in WWF Cymru-commissioned Farmlytics report: 'Extreme weather and its impact on farming viability in Wales' and Nature Friendly Farming Network report: 'The Weatherproof Farm').
- **Banning peat in horticulture** – Welsh Government pledged to implement a ban on the sale of peat-based compost in 2022 through UK regulations that have subsequently been delayed. There is still no peat sales ban in force in Wales and vulnerable peatland continues to be depleted. The Peat Free Partnership would be best placed to give evidence here.
- **National Park designation** – there are wide-ranging issues with National Park governance, particular since Campaign for National Parks' report revealed that only 6% of the total land area of National Parks in England & Wales are currently managed effectively for nature. WEL's manifesto calls for reform to their statutory purposes, duties and governance arrangements, including a new nature recovery and climate purpose.
- **Species reintroductions – particularly beavers:** Following The Beaver (Wales) Order 2026 passing in spring 2026, beavers have been made a protected species. This was followed by the establishment of the Wales Beaver Forum to guide development and delivery of a Wales Beaver Strategy. However, the last Forum meeting (in July) was cancelled and consequently progress has stalled. NRW are responsible for granting licences for managed reintroductions – a process which has been slow, lacking in clarity and transparency.
- **Nature-based solutions** – these are wide and varied, and are outlined in a high-level way here, but the role of nature in acting as solutions to disruptive weather events, i.e. trees as natural flow management; sustainable drainage to reduce surfacing flooding; and peatland and wetland being more resistant to wildfire spreading, would be a timely area of inquiry. This recent WWF report on natural flood management outlines key actions on how to embed this.

- **Nature finance** – Welsh Government work is ongoing to provide a system of governance for nature finance which could bring private capital in to boost public funds to restore nature in Wales. The Global Biodiversity Framework has a target to "substantially and progressively increase the level of financial resources from all sources" and it is important that private companies play their part under an effectively governed, high-integrity system of nature finance.

Rank your top three priorities. Please rank the issues you have identified above in order of priority, with 1 being the highest priority.

As a network, it's difficult to rank priorities, but we've suggested water reform; implementation of the Environmental Governance Act; and completing the Sustainable Farming Scheme's upper layers as most pertinent.

Water Reform

A Green Paper on water reform was published in February 2026 and responses are still being reviewed. These are complex proposals, outlined here by Afonydd Cymru and Senedd Research. As WEL's response sets out, our water assets (i.e. reservoirs, sewage system, wastewater treatment capacity) are now reaching the end of their life and need to be upgraded. These reforms must address all major sources of pollution, including agriculture, highways runoff, chemicals, microplastics and wastewater management. With England pushing ahead, there's a danger Wales could fall behind in progressing action on this important issue. We're also concerned that UK Government might not provide the Welsh Government with the additional resources needed to be able to resource a new economic regulator and National Systems Planner.

Water reform must deliver a governance system for Wales that embeds integrated catchment management across all elements of water. It needs to address cross-border river arrangements with UK Government; deliver the EU alignment promised in Plaid Cymru's manifesto and, most importantly, it must do this at pace if it is to deliver significant improvements in water industry performance in Wales.

Implementing the Environment (Principles, Governance & Biodiversity Targets) Act
This leaflet sets out the detail of three elements of governance needing to be scrutinised over the next 2-3 years. In summary: the Act received Royal Assent in April 2026, but the implementation of the Environmental Principles by Welsh Ministers (currently being consulted on), the establishment of the Office of Environmental Governance Wales (OEGW) and the biodiversity targets still need to be set.

The Senedd will see a draft Environmental Principles Statement by late 2026/early 2027 and will have an opportunity to make recommendations. The final Statement will need to be finalised and laid in the Senedd by 31st March 2027. It would be helpful for the Committee to ask the Minister how they plan to implement them into day-to-day policy making, and if it's a role for the Cabinet Secretary for Government Effectiveness to monitor how they are implemented across all Ministerial portfolios.

On the OEGW, Welsh Government needs to establish this by April 2028 (24 months after Royal Assent). This will be a key body in holding public authorities to account and ensuring they are implementing environmental law effectively.

Towards the end of this Senedd term, Wales and the rest of the UK will start reporting on progress towards our international 2030 nature targets (i.e. protecting and sustainably managing 30% of land, rivers and sea by 2030), and reporting will take place through the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC). It's important the Senedd take urgent steps to deliver against these targets.

Evaluating the SFS transition
The Sustainable Farming Scheme started in January 2026, and Welsh Government needs to help farmers transition to the ways of working that'll work best for both the sustainability of the farm and the environment. The Nature Friendly Farming Network have found that, when actively working in harmony with nature, farms see an average increase in farm profitability of 42%. WEL hopes the Committee can keep up scrutiny, particularly on:

- Welsh Government's process for developing the scheme, and how this covers all Sustainable Land Management (SLM) objectives;

- the Universal layer's delivery of SLM, including evidence of changed farm practices and environmental outcomes;
- the contribution of the Scheme to Wales's commitments and targets, including for nature, climate, access and sustainable food production;
- adequate resourcing of Optional and Collaborative layers necessary to secure SLM;
- farmers' progression from Universal to Optional/Collaborative layers, including drivers and constraints;
- the quality and availability of whole-farm advice and ecological advice through Farming Connect (as we recommend in our paper on an Advice Framework);
- and the resourcing and design of the Collaborative layer to enable effective partnerships between farmers and other stakeholders for landscape-scale delivery (also outlined in our paper on Landscape Habitat Packages).

Are there any other comments you would like to make about the Committee's priorities, its future work programme, or how it carries out its work?

Ways of working

Site visits are a powerful tool in understanding complex issues, and we'd be happy to facilitate canvassing our membership for appropriate places to visit to demonstrate issues on the ground.

Informal stakeholder roundtables are also welcome as a more casual avenue of engagement with the sector, so that MSs can hear from a variety of people and ask questions in the room as to what would be of most interest to them.

It's very helpful when committees put out a draft work plan publicly, even if this ends up changing, as it takes a long time for a network to consider all members' views for a collective paper, and would help us to prepare for any evidence. It would also be helpful – although I appreciate, often unavoidable – if committees (and indeed, Welsh Government) can try not to do a call for evidence that takes place only in the summer holidays and Christmas holidays, as it's harder to include all expert voices. If it can't be avoided, a longer window would be appreciated.

We understand that the Committee has already agreed to work that includes the following in the short term, which we have provided some brief comments on below.

Marine Protected Areas and aquaculture

We have been waiting for over 15 years for Welsh Government to designate and complete an ecologically coherent Marine Protected Area network. Despite a substantial area of Welsh seas being designated as Marine Protected Areas, most of these remain in unfavourable or unknown condition and therefore aren't meeting conditions for our 2030 targets. And in many instances, these protections are for small and now fragmented features, where there is no plan to increase or restore them further, or for highly mobile species such as porpoise - for which there is no monitoring or protection of their food sources in place. Many argue these designations are only effective on paper. This Environment Links UK report sets out how they must be managed, in order to meet the conditions of "effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures". We need action to implement protections and effective marine planning policy to ensure marine ecosystems remain intact.

Coal tip remediation

Former coal tip sites can be havens for biodiversity, particularly insects, and the original Law Commission report on regulating coal tip safety in Wales suggested an Ecological Taskforce to evaluate sites, but this has been overlooked since. Buglife and Glo i Natur – run by entomologist, Liam Olds – would be well placed to give evidence here. Even after restoration, these sites often cannot be developed, so creating natural spaces for biodiversity provides multiple benefits, including preserving the sites' heritage, providing an opportunity to tackle water quality impacts from tips, and creating abundant, natural space for the wellbeing of communities.

Food and drink packaging and waste

Litter is an issue for every part of publicly accessible land that our members manage; we endorse suggestions from Keep Wales Tidy and Marine Conservation Society's submissions on how to tackle this best.

We would particularly want to highlight the need to monitor the implementation of the Deposit Return Scheme, and the phase-in of glass in Wales. As the most dangerous material – harming everyone from dogs on walks, to wildlife, to people's tyres – we're pleased that Welsh Government has been courageous to keep it in plans (as is standard for DRS schemes in other countries). We have also identified an issue with agricultural plastic entering our rivers and would welcome scrutiny on whether this should be included in recycling targets in future.

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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