

Farming Connect: WEL evidence to ETRA Committee

February 2024

Introduction

We are pleased to see a role for Farming Connect in providing advice for the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS). The advisory service has a pivotal role to play in the successful uptake of the scheme. Advice should be seen as an investment in the capacity of farmers rather than an onerous cost to government, so it is a concern that this year's Rural Affairs budget to prepare the sector ahead of the launch of the SFS has been cut.

It is essential that advisers have relevant expertise in the issues on which they provide advice. We would welcome a new Farming Connect service that is designed around the Sustainable Land Management (SLM) objectives and scheme characteristics, fills key skills gaps and allows it to provide integrated advice that would support catchment and nature-based solutions. It also strikes us that filling these skills gaps presents opportunities for important rural and green jobs creation in Wales, which would merit investment.

We suggest that collaborative engagement with eNGOs and nature friendly farming groups is required to help Farming Connect access the skills, knowledge and experience required to design and deliver the quality and quantity of advice that will be required to help farmers undertake SFS actions for the farm ecosystem, particularly for habitat creation and management.

Service Design

WEL members would like to see the Knowledge Transfer, Innovation and Advisory Services Programme re-designed around SLM objectives and SFS actions. The 2021 [Evaluation of the Knowledge Transfer, Innovation and Advisory Services Programme](#) recommended a need "to clarify and focus Farming Connect's strategic priorities" and that "more could be done to package, integrate and communicate the offer

more effectively". As part of the 2021 evaluation, a review of 26 farm advice programmes (UK, Europe and international) found that almost half of these programmes were designed to address the need to work towards environmental regulations and sustainable farming practices. Empirical comparison with Farming Connect is not available, but the overarching objective of Farming Connect is to increase the emphasis on business-focused behaviour and efficiency improvements, and therefore improve the profitability, competitiveness, resilience and sustainability of farm, forestry and food businesses and, by extension, promote the economic growth and development of rural areas. The 2021 evaluation recommended that Farming Connect should consider strengthening and promoting its offer towards environmental public goods.

We suggest that Farming Connect demo farms could help facilitate best practice for the successful delivery of the SFS, with opportunities for peer-to-peer learning. Efficiencies could also be achieved through delivering advice to clusters of farmers within a locality, which could be delivered as hybrid sessions. This could helpfully lay the ground for and facilitate uptake of collaborative actions that could be supported through the Scheme.

Skills and Expertise Gaps

WEL members are concerned that there are some key gaps in expertise within Farming Connect. Our discussions with them have also highlighted that they are aware of this, and that there is a shortage of advisers that meet their eligibility requirements to provide advice. We suggest that Farming Connect undertake a skills and knowledge audit as part of the next tender round for the Farming Connect programme, assessing against SLM objectives and SFS actions to identify applicant skills gaps and identify where there are gaps in expert advice provision.

The 2021 Evaluation of the Knowledge Transfer, Innovation and Advisory Services Programme indicated that the programme would focus its efforts on farmers who want to change, rather than seeking a wider reach for the programme. If the SLM objectives are to be delivered, particularly for environmental goals, a gap in the provision of advice must be filled, with in-person advice reaching those farmers who are unaware of or disinterested in the Farming Connect programme.

WEL members are particularly concerned that there is a gap in relation to ecological advice. One example our members have given us is from working with farmers and independent consultants that have been trying to develop hedgerow management plans through Farming Connect. Consultants shared their views with the Woodland Trust citing issues with long delays in Farming Connect producing plans, not producing plans that have been promised and producing plans in a format that is not fit for purpose in terms of implementation on the ground. With the increasing need for bespoke advice on hedgerow and tree management through the SFS, this skill/capacity needs to be urgently addressed.

For many years Farming Connect, and many others, have been able to rely on Coed Cymru for farm woodland management advice. This is no longer an option as they now only provide woodland creation advice. This leaves a big gap in the provision of advice on the management of existing farm woodlands, especially for non-commercial outcomes, which conservation charities are trying to cover, with some difficulty. The Woodland Trust has reported receiving more enquires on the management of small farm woodlands recently.

There is concern that if farmers are expected to pay for future woodland management advice from receipts from felling and selling timber, this risks over-felling, with site and soil damage and marginalisation of the many other non-income generating outcomes that farm woodlands can provide – including livestock welfare, wildlife, water management and public access.

The Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) has also told us that they have been in contact with the National Hedgelaying Society, who report a high demand for advice and labour in relation to hedgelaying. However, there is currently a UK-wide shortage of accredited hedgelayers. Good hedge management will be an important part of the Sustainable Farming Scheme. Gaps in specific advice, such as on woodland and hedges, are also applicable to other areas of species and habitat management, such as species-rich grassland management.

Farming Connect also needs the expertise and flexibility to provide integrated advice to farms to enable catchment and nature-based solutions to support activities like flood management, peatland restoration, species-rich grassland management and to

connect habitat and create wildlife corridors.¹ We recommend Farming Connect works closely with knowledgeable third parties (including environmental NGOs) to develop the capacity to deliver high quality advice and guidance in the most effective ways. One way to do this is to engage with the [Farm Wildlife](#) partnership to access the range of advice that they provide.

Following a WEL meeting with Farming Connect last year, The Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) has tried to support them to increase the number of ecologists that they can access to provide advice. Farming Connect invited CIEEM members to apply to be on their framework of practising ecologists, particularly if they had specialisms in habitat and species restoration relevant to a farmed landscape. Whilst this approach was welcome, the Sell2Wales headline descriptor was “Farming Connect Framework: Expertise, Software Development, Analysis, Marketing/ Communication, Events and Admin Support”. This does not immediately stand out as relevant to ecologists and may have generated only modest interest from key professional environmental sectors.

CIEEM also received feedback that the application was not easy to complete; questions were obscure and did not appear to have direct relevance to the work of ecological consultants. CIEEM would be happy to work with Farming Connect on more suitable wording in any future frameworks.

Farming Connect needs to bring proposals for development and/or delivery support from third-party trainers and bodies to fill identified skills gaps. They should also produce training and advice standards for the SFS and expand the list of third-party trainers and bodies approved to deliver them, including setting out how they will work with third sector organisations that could help them fill gaps in expertise and advice. It is also crucial for the integrity of the service that Farming Connect advice is independent and there is transparency over where advice comes from. Advice must be impartial and based on science and current best sustainable farming practice that will ensure long term benefits for the environment in Wales.

¹ <https://www.biodiversity.ox.ac.uk/publications/nbsi-wwf-rspb-report-on-nature-based-solutions-in-uk-climate-adaptation-policy/>

Supporting Research and Best Practice

We suggest there is a role for Farming Connect in supporting farmer-led collaborative research, as these opportunities are no longer available through EU-funded programmes in Wales. It's also critical that Farming Connect advice keeps up with the latest research, best practice, and scientific evidence. Many other European countries are now researching how agriculture can transition to take up agroecological farming systems to address the climate emergency, biodiversity loss and improve public health. This approach is currently neglected by mainstream UK research organisations. This contrasts with the significant resources put into the research and development of technological approaches to improving productivity under a model of sustainable intensification.

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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