

NFFN Cymru evidence on the role of Farming Connect to support the transition to, and the delivery of the SFS from 2025.

NFFN Cymru very much welcomes the Welsh Government's commitment to continue providing advice, guidance and training to farmers. Farming Connect can play an important role in helping farmers transition to and deliver the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS).

Benefits of Advice

- Advice can help farmers better understand schemes, increase participation and help change farmer's attitudes towards nature friendly farming, developing trust between the industry and Government.
- High quality advice can help farmers and land managers to follow best practice and to ascertain why management has or has not led to the desired outcome, thus improving the standard of schemes. When farmers understand *why* they are undertaking a certain action, they are more likely to take ownership of outcomes.
- Expert advice can help facilitate, coordinate and develop a better understanding of targeted and more complex landscape scale schemes.
- It can help incorporate and develop a greater understanding of how nature friendly farming can improve the farm business and productivity.

How should advice be given?

- Advice can be provided in a variety of different ways, tailored to the complexity of the management/ action/activity. Examples include;
 - Online resources/ handbooks/ guidance notes
 - One to one advice (advisor and farmer)
 - Group advice (advisor and many farmers e.g. for landscape scale working)
 - Peer to peer learning groups/ workshop
 - Farm demonstration events

What advice should be given?

- Advice should be available in relation to all the Sustainable Land Management (SLM) outcomes. As such it's imperative that farmers don't receive conflicting/ siloed advice, particularly in relation to economic and environmental outcomes. Advice should identify *win-win* scenarios where farm business economics and the environment benefits overlap.

For example, soil testing analysis is usually accompanied by recommendations to apply inputs in the form of artificial fertilizers or lime to improve soil health. This very much follows the mantra that the *solution is in a bag or in a bottle*. However these inputs are becoming increasingly expensive and are now unaffordable to many farmers. Rather than continue with this approach, we would urge Farming Connect to concentrate more on providing more holistic, nature-based solutions that deliver multiple benefits. Using soil health as an example, this might include increasing sward species diversity, effective grazing management or agroforestry.

- We believe that Farming Connect must increase the farm biodiversity advice currently on offer, particularly as the WG propose the introduction of a headline [nature positive target](#):

‘Reverse the decline in biodiversity with an improvement in the status of species and ecosystems by 2030 and their clear recovery by 2050’

To meet this target we must ramp up the provision of nature-friendly farming advice.

- Farming Connect can play a big role in helping to both understand and deliver the two SFS scheme rules. In relation to the requirement for 10% tree cover on farms, Farming Connect can demonstrate how to [effectively integrate trees on farms](#) in a way that delivers multiple benefits for biodiversity, climate, water management, efficiency and productivity gains, as well as creating [economic opportunities](#). This can help counter the narrative that pits agriculture against trees and the belief that we must choose between producing food or planting trees.
- In the same vein, Farming Connect can help demonstrate how nature-friendly farming and meeting the 10% habitat requirement can help [improve financial resilience](#) whilst also meeting our environmental obligations. This can help debunk the notion that creating or managing land for habitat means sacrificing food production, but rather forms an essential component of it.

Who should provide advice?

- We call for advisors to be independent and separate from the function of regulator. Advisers should not have a dual role, for example representing financially interested stakeholders, unless this does not conflict with the advice given.
- To avoid conflicting advice and unnecessary trade-offs between SLM outcomes, advisors should understand all aspects of agricultural sustainability.
- Farmer to farmer knowledge exchange is important as it looks beyond the theory and offers insight into the practicalities and challenges of land management interventions. We would encourage more farmer mentors that specialize in regenerative, nature-friendly farming systems. There are numerous farmers producing good quality nutritious food while working with nature and these need to be utilised more than the current status quo. Using professional advisors and consultants doesn't necessarily have to be the default approach.
- For the SFS collaborative element, a local, independent facilitator should be employed to facilitate collaborative working. Employment of appropriate individuals, sensitive to the needs of farmers is vital to assist in the delivery of collaborative schemes. This is an essential ingredient to the success of [results based agri-environment schemes in Ireland](#).
- We are concerned about the shortage of advisers and lack of knowledge in regard to offering ecological and biodiversity advice.

Demonstrating by doing

- We would encourage farming connect to develop demonstration farms that highlight how farms are meeting SLM objectives and outcomes i.e. being both profitable and nature friendly. This could be done by calculating the farm's [Maximum Sustainable Output](#). We also believe that Farming Connect should increase the amount of demonstration farms that meet the two scheme

rules hand in hand with food production. This can develop a greater understanding of how nature friendly farming can improve the farm business and productivity.

Attendance

- Some of our members have highlighted the low attendance for some Farming Connect events, particularly at discussion groups where attendance has been lower than 25% in some instances. It should be noted that this had nothing to do with the standard of the delivery organisations/facilitators. More work could be done to reach those farmers who are unaware of or disinterested in the Farming Connect programme.

Budget Concerns

- Whilst the SFS's ambition is commendable, the scheme needs to be adequately funded if we are to deliver on its objectives. The overall costs of meeting environmental priorities through land management in Wales are estimated at over £500m per annum. The Welsh Government's entire Rural Affairs budget for 2023-24 was around £480 million (which represents about 2% of the total budget). However the 2024-2025 Rural Affairs budget has seen a cut of £62m - a reduction of 13% from the previous financial year. The SFS is clearly under-budgeted. The level of funding, including for advice and guidance, must match the SFS's ambition.