

Janet Finch-Saunders MS
Chair of Petitions Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

3rd November 2020 *By e-mail*

Dear Ms Finch-Saunders,

Petition 05-945: The Climate Emergency and a National Forest for Wales

May I thank you for your further consideration of this petition and for inviting us to comment on your further exchange with the Minister. As the Minister notes, I continue to participate in direct discussions with her civil servants and with the Woodland Strategy Advisory Panel, especially around the development of the Wales National Forest, and the discussions led by NRW on woodland creation and green recovery.

This petition was primarily about the urgency needed in raising the rate of increase in our tree cover and using the Wales National Forest programme as an obvious vehicle for targeted urgent action and engagement around the dual climate nature crises. Could the Committee ask the Minister to consider if this can be aligned with Covid-19 green recovery and measures such as the National Nature Service proposed by the Environmental sector?

In our petition we called for 6 particular actions, and it feels appropriate to review progress with each of these, acknowledging the Minister's letters to your Committee and our wider discussions:-

1. An increase of 5,000 hectares per year in tree cover in urban areas, on farms, & in the uplands

We welcome the ambition to go beyond 95% emissions reduction by 2050 and we look forward to the extended guidance from the UK Committee on Climate Change, but I suggest that the key question is how we are going to go beyond the current Welsh Government target of 2,000ha per year, given even this is still a struggle with only a third of this in the pipeline?

It remains our view that the more ambitious tree cover increase target is desirable and achievable with the right incentives and strategy (120,000 ha+ by 2050, equivalent to 4,000 ha per year). We have suggested, and presented to WG and NRW, a multi-track strategy that could achieve this and more, but are yet to see any strategy or plan emerge from Government that considers this.

2. Tree cover that is at least 50% native broadleaf trees, best for biodiversity, & public well-being

We have not been reassured that, for many outcomes, the greater suitability of native tree cover has been sufficiently recognised. We agree that increases in plantation grown softwood timber is important, but the evidence is that other approaches including native broadleaved tree cover, agroforestry and urban tree planting can more substantially and efficiently deliver most biodiversity, well-being, water resource and carbon benefits. There is a need for a broad based strategy with public funds targeted at the most effective delivery of public goods.

3. Sustainable management of existing trees, forests, woodland & hedges, to protect them from damage & provide a mixed mosaic of habitat for wildlife & people.

I welcome the Minister's requirement that NRW ensure that interpretation of the UK Forest Standard (UKFS) is linked to the principles of the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources (SMNR). We think it vital that the opportunity is taken during the current review of UKFS to ensure that in Wales it is interpreted and applied in ways that meet the requirements of Welsh legislation and the sustainable development duty of Welsh Ministers.

I greatly welcome the restatement of the vital commitment to maintain UK Woodland Assurance Scheme (UKWAS) accreditation on the Welsh public forest estate.

4. New funding for farmers for 'Hedges & Edges' & traditional woodland pasture –agroforestry

We have not, as yet, seen any acknowledgement that new funding for farmers for 'Hedges & Edges' could assist in delivering half of Wales's tree cover targets, utilising less than four per cent of their land'. This mechanism could also ensure the foundation of a connected ecological network at a landscape scale. As part of our response to the Welsh Government's consultations on Sustainable Farming, we have submitted proposals for a Hedges and Edges scheme to support the use of trees on farms (agroforestry) and we thank you and your colleagues for their support of the Statement of Opinion in support of Agroforestry. We have had informal indications of interest in this proposal but nothing yet in terms of tangible commitments.

5. Funding for community tree nurseries, for people to be involved in finding sites, planting, & growing trees right across Wales

A key procurement question arising from the intention to substantially expand tree cover is the mechanism for planning and funding the necessary expansion in stock and supply, including of suitable Welsh provenance planting stock.

We acknowledge that there is some support for community and tree nursery activity under the Community Woodland Grant and the Forest Industry Recovery Scheme. We suggest there is further undeveloped potential here especially in aiding community engagement in the Wales National Forest and in urban planting projects, for example, through funding for community tree nurseries, local seed collections, outdoor class rooms, and community site appraisal. This also applies to urban communities working with country wide owners of agricultural land, identifying appropriate seed stock, appropriate tree cover sites and assisting with stock and planting.

6. A truly national & innovative 'National Forest for Wales'

We greatly welcome the opportunity to participate in the development of the Wales National Forest and the initial funding that has been put behind it. We believe it is a valuable concept that should spearhead a comprehensive tree cover plan and be on the leading edge of green recovery. We look forward to a fully developed and funded programme, which we hope will have cross party support.

Particular questions we suggest for further consideration include

- How to achieve community buy-in and the “social licence” for changing landscapes
- How will the NFW programme integrate with health and wellbeing, such as green prescribing?
- How the National Forest programme will interact with Area Statements to help deliver landscape scale natural flood management interventions, soil protection, habitat connectivity, biodiversity restoration and in mitigating extreme climate events.

Green Recovery and Manifestos for the Welsh Parliament Elections

I look forward to continuing this discussion with the political parties in the lead up to the Welsh Parliament elections next May, and especially in the context of the delivery of a green recovery.

Coed Cadw will shortly be confirming and publishing our manifesto “**The Roots and Branches of a Strong Green Recovery.**” We are focusing on calling for action in three areas, which encompass the points raised in our petition:-

1. **Make every town in Wales a Tree Town.**

Every local authority to assess and value existing tree cover and prepare a Tree and Woodland Strategy that delivers a minimum of 20% tree cover in all urban areas, and 30% in new developments, engaging local residents along the way.

2. **Support Agroforestry.**

Now is the time to use public funds to invest rapidly and substantially in the soil, habitat and green infrastructure of farms. We propose “Hedges and Edges” payments to improve and extend hedges, shelterbelts, stream side and field edge habitats – quick and easy ways for farmers to apply what’s best for their farm’s sustainability.

3. **Transform forestry.**

Let’s create a nature, climate and people friendly national natural asset, with the Wales National Forest programme providing a range of exemplar projects illustrating the range and breadth of sustainable woodland creation and management across all parts of Wales.

In the New Year, we will be encouraging voters to invite Members of the Senedd and candidates to consider their support for these proposals.

Would your Committee now be prepared to recommend a full Senedd debate? We would suggest a topic around how the Wales National Forest (as one of the policies in Future Wales 2040) could help set in motion a green recovery from Covid-19 and a engage business and communities in the mitigation of the dual climate and nature crisis

Yours sincerely



Natalie Buttriss
Director of Wales