

Consultation Questions

Confidentiality
<p>Responses to consultations may be made public on the internet or in a report. If you do not want your name and address to be shown on any documents we produce please indicate here</p> <p>If you do not want your response to be shown in any document we produce please indicate here</p>

Demographic questions:

Name	Swansea Council	
Are you responding as an individual or as an organisation?	Organisation	
Are you or your organisation based in Wales?	Yes	
If you are answering as an individual, do you identify as Welsh speaking?		
	No	
First half of postcode (4 digits)	SA1 3	

Please indicate which of these best represent you or your organisation (please select only one)	Farming	
	Forestry	
	Environmental	
	Veterinary	
	Tourism/Hospitality	
	Food and timber supply chains	
	Public Sector	X
	Private Sector	

	Third Sector	
	Trade Union/Representative	
	Research/Academia	
	Other	

If you have indicated that you are a farmer, please identify your main farm activity (please select only one).	Sheep	
	Beef	
	Dairy	
	Arable	
	Horticulture	
	Poultry	
	Mixed	
	Other	

Do you currently have rights to graze stock on a common?	Yes	
	No	X

Are you a tenant farmer?	Yes	
	No	X

Are you a BPS recipient?	Yes	
	No	X

If you are responding as an individual, what age bracket are you in?	Under 18	
	18-34	
	35-49	
	50-64	
	65+	

Are you currently a	Yes	
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participant in any agri-environment schemes?	No, but I have participated in agri-environment schemes in the past	
	No, I have never participated in any agri-environment schemes.	X

Framework

Q1. The Scheme will provide a long-term approach to support for our agricultural sector to respond to evolving challenges and changing needs, contributing to the Sustainable Land Management objectives. In your view, what may strengthen this support?

General:

Support would be strengthened by funding additional staff to provide specialist advice as needed to farmers and landowners on how to meet the 17 requirements of the scheme (as was the case with Tir Cymen and Tir Gofal).

Also, provision of advice in terms of how to contribute to wider local area strategies such as Nature Recovery Action Plan, the net zero carbon and 30x 30 Nature Recovery Targets, ecological resilience and connectivity enhancements, GI strategies, food security, etc.

Comments from AONB Team;

We welcome the statement in the consultation document that “*Support to deliver more for protected landscapes. These actions will be bespoke to the farm and surrounding area and will align with the special qualities of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty or a National Park,*”. In this regard the SFS needs to align with the purposes of AONBs (soon to be renamed National Landscapes in Wales) and National Parks. It also needs to be more consistent with Welsh Government policy approaches in relation planning, biodiversity, public rights of way, etc.

The purpose of the Gower AONB/National Landscape is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area, whilst also seeking to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities. The landscape of Gower has been shaped by farmers and land managers for generations and a significant portion of it continues to be farmed which is why a resilient and sustainable support system for farming is crucial for maintaining the character of the area.

The scheme needs to align with the work going on to support the agricultural sector within the designated landscapes of Wales such as Gower by securing long term integrated and collaborative ways of working. If this is to become reality then any

new scheme must be adequately resourced, both in terms of funding and staff, to deliver for farmers and land management now and into the future.

The reduction in the rural affairs budget is extremely disappointing, especially when consideration is given to the economic multiplier effect of funding delivered in rural communities (x7 for conservation capital works as one example). This undermines Welsh Government's ambition to deliver on sustainable policies, innovative strategies, and collaborative efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change, the loss of biodiversity, delivery of 30x30 targets, and tackling fuel and child poverty in rural communities.

Without adequate resources the SFS scheme will not be able to deliver on aspirations. There is no evidence of a relationship with land managers, being inclusive of ideas and experience from the people managing the land, or evidence of considering past agri-environment successes and failures.

The intentions of the scheme include improving environmental outcomes on farms, to in turn improve product quality. Such gains will differ throughout Wales' regions, but a common thread is the link between good quality food, people's eating choices, the cost and availability of fresh produce and the low understanding of the role of Welsh agriculture and its contribution to Welsh rural life, economy, and landscapes. Further information on this is available from the National Landscapes Association [National Landscapes - National Landscapes \(national-landscapes.org.uk\)](https://national-landscapes.org.uk).

A clearer explanation is needed of the intent of the Universal Actions and the contributions farmers will be making to net zero and nature recovery through the scheme. Livestock farming is essential if Wales is to deliver its contributions to net zero and to maintain several habitats of principal importance to Wales.

The Universal Actions can help farms to reduce livestock greenhouse gases in other ways, through diversifying pasture, maintaining, or introducing rotations, encouraging more efficient production systems, reducing imported and synthetic inputs, and increasing agricultural regenerative methods.

The scheme also needs to show the costs-benefits in terms of measured added value that maintaining a higher quality agriculture sector provides in Wales.

There are opportunities to align the Universal Actions (UA) and their implementation more strongly with other policy areas delivered by Welsh Government. There is, for

example, no specific emphasis on water management which appears to be a missed opportunity.

In terms of the exclusions for the 10% tree cover target, there is no recognition of Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land Grade 1,2 or 3a, despite Planning Policy Wales 12 and TAN 6 directing planning authorities that:

“Land in grades 1, 2 and 3a should only be developed if there is an overriding need for the development, and either previously developed land or land in lower agricultural grades is unavailable, or available lower grade land has an environmental value recognised by a landscape, wildlife, historic or archaeological designation which outweighs the agricultural considerations. If land in grades 1, 2 or 3a does need to be developed, and there is a choice between sites of different grades, development should be directed to land of the lowest grade.”

The final proposal should be assessed in a revised Integrated Impact Assessment that includes the principles for the Environmental Guidance Body for Wales, i.e. integration, precautionary, prevention, rectification at source, and polluter pays.

Universal Actions

Q2. There will be Universal requirements in the SFS to have woodland cover at least 10% of suitable land, and to manage a minimum of 10% of your farm for biodiversity.

a) What are your views on these requirements?

b) What support might you need to achieve them?

Comments from Natural Conservation Team:

- Generally, support the changes made to apply the 10% woodland cover rule to only plantable ground i.e. excluding good quality semi-natural habitat and Best and Most Valuable Agricultural Land. However, care needs to be given to how those habitats are identified, and by whom. Support should be available for farmers if they do not have the relevant knowledge. It is important that these semi-natural habitats are retained. Given that the best agricultural land must also be maintained, it limits the options for where planting can take place and highlights the weakness of a one size fits all approach.
- Hedgerows <3m wide should be included in the woodland cover count if individual trees and orchards can be included
- Where possible larger patches of habitat for biodiversity should be prioritised (from a biodiversity/connectivity perspective), rather than numerous smaller areas to meet the 10% goal. Obviously, this needs to be sensibly balanced with the production needs of the farm.

- It is possible that the double counting of the two rules i.e. where ground cover can count towards habitat and tree cover on the same area of land can count towards the woodland cover could incentivise tree planting on important grassland habitats that won't benefit from trees, i.e. wet meadows. This is another reason why mandatory entry needs to be removed.
- There are also climate and landscape character protection reasons why woodland cover is not appropriate/will not survive at certain locations
- Areas identified for tree planting should also consider how to maximise woodland/hedgerow connectivity and contribute to flood alleviation, including widening hedgerows where feasible to create species rich field margins. Also need to promote the use of native species and local provenance wherever possible.
- Need to prioritise protection of ancient woodlands, ancient hedgerows, and veteran trees

Comments from AONB Team:

The 10% woodland cover requirement is an arbitrary target that has been selected in response to Welsh Government planting targets without due consideration and understanding of land tenure and pragmatic information about growing trees in various systems and environments. This requirement currently lacks safeguards against inappropriate or detrimental planting being undertaken with numerous unintended consequences. Safeguards are required especially in our designated landscapes against such consequences.

There should be a combined total percentage target for woodland and habitat on holdings. This would accommodate fertile, improved ground in landscapes that genuinely cannot accommodate 10% tree cover regardless of changes in land-use. On Gower there are large areas where there is no chance of tree planting landscaping schemes surviving. Temporary habitat formation may yield more far biodiversity and be more palatable for land managers.

Tree planting should be an optional action with better regulation on what is planted where and at what densities due to concerns about inappropriate planting and impacts on access, historical environment, biodiversity, and landscape. This will also give support to those landowners who wish to increase tree cover with the likelihood of the investment being better maintained and cared for.

Another approach that could be adopted is Net Benefit gain for Biodiversity. For example, a 2-3% net gain would mean that new planting could be targeted to complement current habitats in a collaborative way instead of fragmenting the countryside with poorly managed un-connected blocks of woodland.

It would be better to increase woodland cover by a few percent with well positioned and maintained trees rather than having low uptake, or poorly thought-out sites and species that were then not maintained. This would enable consideration of individual landscape types to avoid adverse, unintended consequences. Input on individual landscapes would also help highlight opportunities e.g. the traditional landscape of Gower is a small-scale mosaic which could absorb much in the way of small-scale tree planting and extensive/widened hedgerows.

Planting trees on improved lowland ground is difficult. These land parcels have high economical value, versatility in production, and asking to plant trees when the forecasted decline in yields due to climate change predicts more volatility and uncertainties seems counter intuitive in sustainability. These areas are also typically the Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land. For lowland ground more scope should be offered alternatively to stimulate hedgerow restoration, especially those grubbed out in the last 10-20 years, and plant standard trees within those hedges. Wood pasture ought to be promoted within the scheme. This would improve landscape permeability and movement for wildlife, provide livestock shade and fodder, and provide a carbon sink along with water quality and quantity measures.

The tree planting requirement may bring further imbalance to the fragile upland economy and ecosystems of Mawr where agricultural units have very low amounts of improved or semi-improved ground that would be suitable for tree planting. It would also lead to the continued decline of cattle grazing from the uplands which are fundamental to conservation grazing and enhancing biodiversity through their grazing patterns.

Mandatory tree planting could lead to poor sites, species and specimens being planted, high failure rates or stunted growth and a high probability of the plantings being destroyed should scheme rules change thereby wasting public funds. There are also potential negative landscape, archaeological and conservation impacts depending on the type of planting introduced, on the existing habitat and landscape pattern. There are concerns in relation to lack of assurance in terms of native and local provenance of trees.

There should not be mandatory targets for planting in designated landscapes such as Gower where woodland planting may require environmental permits from Natural Resources Wales be required to be supported by visual impact, archaeological

assessment, and ecological impact assessments. Planting within Gower AONB should not lead to significant areas or blocks of inappropriate planting being undertaken as this may have significant landscape/seascape implications, and habitat or historic environment impacts.

It is recommended that:

- Farmers are encouraged to contact organisations such as the Nature-Friendly Farming Network and the Swansea Local Nature Partnership to help maximise the benefits of their actions for nature recovery
- Farmers should not be discouraged from using herbicides to control INNS (invasive non-native species) such as Japanese Knotweed, where no viable alternative exists
- Where a farm supports more than 10% habitat already, this should be rewarded through the scheme
- Shelterbelts should be planted to be diffuse rather than dense blocks and include a mixture of broadleaved species.
- Specific guidance is required in relation to the management, conservation, and succession planning for veteran and ancient trees.
- Guidance is needed on identifying the habitats present on a farm, to ensure that if tree planting is proposed for any of these, it is appropriate for that habitat type

Comments from Economic Regeneration Section:

Tree Cover:

A staggered approach to achieving the 10% tree cover would be more feasible. There are also grey areas that would need to be clarified before this action could gain a mainstream response and be deemed a workable model. For example, how would this be implemented on land not suitable for tree coverage (highland, coastal, etc.)?

Concern that a reduction in food production land could lead farmers to use more intensive techniques to make up their yield. There are also concerns that the actions will result in the loss of livestock. This is a counterproductive measure and instead, we should look at grazing and land management techniques to sustain or increase the numbers. This could include collaborative farming (sharing herds, grazing areas, buildings, and equipment) and government incentives to allow farmers to produce a more regenerative product.

Wales is famous for its Beef and Lamb, and a more intricate approach to raising its value within local and nationwide supply should be taken. If we can promote more

regenerative ways to farm, then this can increase the value and help boost a sustainable meat economy. We should also look at promoting Wales as a sustainable meat nation. Again, investing in local supply chains could incentivise the sale of meat products more locally, filling our towns with local produce and giving the farmer a fairer price overall.

We would recommend that the Universal Actions should be independently implemented for different farm types. A one-size-fits-all approach could be counterproductive for many farms. A more flexible approach that considers environment and land, food processes and supply could be more workable.

Habitat:

Support a healthier livestock and a more sustainable product, but this will have to be backed by investing in supply chain processes that can help farmers get a fairer price for the food they produce. Again, this should be assessed on a farm-by-farm basis; some farms will already have a large percentage of land dedicated to this. A fairer approach would be to give farms with less natural habitats more time to reach their goal. Time and cost should be considered when finalising the actions. We must factor in realistic and staggered goals that will incentivise and be economically viable for businesses.

Incentives should be made to increase fruit and veg growing in Wales. This would massively help with biodiversity and could be included within the 10% habitat goals. There are only 200 commercial fruit and veg farms registered in Wales, and we have witnessed a decrease in vegetable farming in the Swansea region. Again, a government-backed route-to-market scheme could help the promotion of Welsh fruit and vegetables in the economy. This should include distribution, retail, and promotion of this produce.

If these actions are to go ahead, then there will need to be consultations on working within the new environments and investment for routes to market for the integrated farming approach. This could be support and investment for new industries such as apple juice production or products such as woodland pork.

Timeline:

A phased approach could be better for those who are further away from the goals.

Q.3 Aside from the 10% woodland and habitat requirements, will the Universal Actions:

- a) Provide benefit for your farm business?**
- b) Provide an achievable set of actions paid for through the Universal Baseline Payment?**

Unable to comment from a local authority perspective

Q4. On-farm data reporting allows the Welsh Government to confirm actions are being undertaken and help you to make decisions about your farm. In your view, is the reporting requirement for the Universal Actions appropriate?

Comments from Economic Regeneration Section

This could be counterproductive for farmers. More red tape could disincentivise farmers to participate, and there could be concerns that data capture could trigger further regulations. There needs to be an incentive for younger generations to get into farming. There is a worry that more regulation and policy could push newcomers away from the industry.

Increased workload is again something that we would be cautious with. We are dealing with a very fragile industry that is both time and cash poor. We must take the most simple and effective route to collecting this data. We also feel that the audit process for this could be extensive, and investment could be better spent on building a stronger Welsh food system. To reach a more balanced opinion, farmers will need more information on how this could work.

Q5. The Stability Payment will provide additional support during the Transition Period. In your view, is this appropriate whilst the Optional and Collaborative Actions are being introduced?

Comments from Economic Regeneration Section

There are concerns that pre-investment into the scheme's requirements could be economically damaging to farm businesses. Could a staged approach be implemented to make this more economically viable? Also, more information is required on payments e.g. what if a farmer invests in all the measures but SFS payments are withheld?

Scheme Operation

Q6. We have proposed that applicants should have sole management responsibility for the land for 10 months and ensure completion of the Universal Actions for the full scheme year (12 months). In your view, is the 10-month period sufficient?

Unable to comment from a local authority perspective

Q7. We are proposing the use of a single carbon calculator for everyone in the Scheme. Do you agree and how might we best support you to complete this?

Comments from Economic Regeneration Section

Agree: Having a single carbon calculator will enable better monitoring, but will this align with other carbon reporting across Wales?

Appropriate guidance and support must be given to ensure that farmers are able to accurately record carbon calculations.

Q8. To ensure continued high standards on our farms, we have outlined a proportionate approach to controls and sanctions, including compliance with additional legislation as a condition of Scheme payment. Do you have any views on this approach?

Invasive Non-Native Species:

We welcome the proposal to include: 'Meet your legal responsibilities in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and Invasive Alien Species (Enforcement and Permitting Order) 2019 not to plant, or otherwise cause to grow, listed invasive non-native species.'

Biodiversity:

We suggest the inclusion of a Scheme Rule to include reference to ensuring compliance with biodiversity legislation, including but not limited to: the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016.

Public Rights of Way:

It is noted that the consideration is being given (page 61) to the introduction of an additional regulation into the scheme regarding the legal responsibilities of farmers relating to public rights of way (PRoW).

In 2016 Welsh local authority rights of way managers were advised by the Department for the Environment and Rural Affairs that cross compliance could not take place because of the lack of a national digital definitive map that local authorities were to compile and provide to Welsh Government. Without this, the Rural Inspectorate Wales Team indicated they would be unable to carry out inspections and enforcement of breaches, as PRoW depicted on Ordnance Survey maps differ from the local authority's definitive maps.

However, all Welsh local authorities maintain up to date digitized definitive maps, which are readily available online and can be supplied as required. The only Ordnance Survey maps available showing PRoW information are at 1:50,000 and 1:25,000 scales, and it is not practical to use these maps to determine the exact location of any PRoW.

The scheme must include an additional regulation referring to legal responsibilities in relation to PRoW on agricultural land. The additional rule relating to PRoW described in the consultation also requires some clarification. Presently farmers cannot meet their legal responsibilities to ensure PRoW are open, accessible, and safe without the local authorities also fulfilling their duties. For example, local authorities are responsible for the maintenance of nearly all bridges on PRoW.

Q9. Adopting the Welsh Government appeals process will provide an effective and efficient mechanism. Is there any reason we should deviate from this?

Appears to allow for a period of transition until any new scheme is established and could be reviewed at a later time.

Payment Methodology

Q10. We would like to know your views on the proposed approach to:

- a) the SFS universal baseline payment
- b) the SFS stability payment

Comments from Economic Regeneration Section

There are concerns that pre-investment into the scheme's requirements could be economically damaging to farm businesses. Could a staged approach be implemented to make this more economically viable? Also, more information is required on payments e.g. what if a farmer invests in all the measures but SFS payments are withheld?

Transition Period

Q.11. Farmers outside the Scheme may wish to access support for actions similar to those offered in the Optional and Collaborative Layers. In your view, should farmers within the Scheme receive priority support to undertake these actions?

Unable to comment on this – need a better understanding of influence of the scheme on the various industry sectors

Q12. What actions and support within the Optional and Collaborative layers do you believe should be prioritised?

Comments from Nature Conservation Team:

- Restore or plant new hedgerows
- Protect and manage ancient woodlands, hedgerows, and veteran trees
- Manage and enhance habitats through more tailored and bespoke site-specific actions (over and above the Habitat Maintenance Universal Action).
- Establish six-metre buffer strips alongside watercourses (to lower the risk of diffuse pollution, based on risk mapping data). Strips could include a mix of grasses, shrubs, and trees. Although a larger buffer would be welcomed.

Create additional ponds and scrapes where feasible, but recognising that a one size fits all approach does not suit all farms as highlighted by the emerging data on liver fluke and the animal health impacts of introducing such features

- Create leaky dams and re-wet suitable sites to slow the flow of water to reduce risk of flood. Although this should be less prescriptive and just refer to surface water management in general.
- Support to deliver more for protected landscapes. These actions will be bespoke to the farm and surrounding area and will align with the special qualities of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty or a National Park.

- Establish or adapt options which help people engage with and access the natural environment. This could include:
 - upgrading existing PRoW to multi-use paths
 - enhancing existing PRoW to make them more accessible
 - establishing joined-up and new access routes and trails
 - establishing new access

Comments from AONB Team:

- Manage and enhance habitats through site-specific actions over and above the Universal layer.
- Recognise light pollution reduction/ Dark Skies measures in place on Gower
- Support the management/eradication of INNS and other problem species
- Assist with the decarbonisation of farming operations
- Help people engage with and access the natural environment. Include strategically prioritised paths which are enhanced to enable wider use and better interpretation of surroundings.
- Upgrading existing PRoW

BPS

Q13. Do you agree with the proposed changes to BPS from 2025? This includes:

- a) The rate at which BPS payments are reduced.
- b) Closing the National Reserve to new entrants.
- c) Thresholds for capping.
- d) Restricting the transfer and lease of entitlements.

Unable to comment from a local authority perspective

Regulations

Q14. We would like to know your views on our proposed approach to secondary legislation, which will support BPS and the introduction of support schemes under the powers in the Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023.

Evidence

Q15. Economic analysis and modelling will conclude in 2024 and will provide evidence to inform the final decision on Scheme implementation by Welsh Ministers. We would like to know your views on the existing analysis and evidence required.

Monitoring & Evaluation

Q16. We would like to know your views on which information and evidence should be used to monitor and evaluate the Scheme.

Other

Q17. What, in your opinion, would be the likely effects of the SFS on the Welsh language? We are particularly interested in any likely effects on opportunities to use the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English. Do you think that there are opportunities to promote any positive effects? Do you think that there are opportunities to mitigate any adverse effects?

Q18. In your opinion, could the SFS be formulated or changed so as to:

- **have positive effects or more positive effects on using the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English; or**
- **mitigate any negative effects on using the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English?**

Q19. Do you have any additional comments on any aspect of the consultation document?

Comments from Economic Regeneration Section:

Farmers' mental health is mentioned numerous times in the impact assessment. It is integral that this is considered as one of the main priorities in phasing in any new regulations. Financial worries, sustaining generational family businesses with a proud heritage, and increased workloads can be detrimental to the welfare of rural business owners. Our RDP programme commissioned a study and film into rural mental health that highlighted the importance of this in rural communities. Stories of a Changing Landscape, a Farmer's Perspective. [Stories of a Changing Landscape, a Farmer's Perspective - YouTube](#)

AONB

We support the points raised by Tirweddau Cymru Landscapes Wales in their response to this consultation and for Gower specifically we add that:

- The issue of Common Land is important for Gower, where it makes up almost a quarter of the area. Without suitable support, the management of Gower's common land will decline further – leading to the loss of traditional habitat, and further environmental impacts.
- Much of Gower's farmland is coastal – limiting options for tree planting.

- Positively, Gower's traditional landscape is a small-scale mosaic, which could absorb much in the way of small-scale tree planting and extensive hedgerows.
- The work of the Gower Badger Project, in vaccinating local badger populations, appears to be having an effect on bTB rates– this project could provide a model for similar work across Wales.

Best Most Versatile Agriculture Land

The consultation document sets out the SFS source of support for farmers in Wales. The Scheme has been designed in the context of sustainable Land Management Objectives as set out in the Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023:

- To produce food in a sustainable manner
- To mitigate and adapt to climate change
- To maintain and enhance the resilience of ecosystems and the benefits they provide
- To conserve and enhance the countryside and cultural resources and promote public access to and engagement with them, and
- To sustain the Welsh language and promote and facilitate its use.

The land use planning system, via PPW and Future Wales, seeks to ensure that Best Most Versatile Agriculture (BMV) Land is protected as a finite resource for the future, unless there is an overriding need for the development. BMV land is often highly desirable for development and subject to development pressures. If the Welsh Government wishes to see BMV land protected, the SFS should provide incentives for farmers to retain the land in order to meet future food production targets.

Nature Recovery & Climate Change

From this paragraph it is assumed that farmers will undertake the Habitat Baseline Review themselves: *'We will provide advice to support your completion of the SAF, HBR1 and 2 and on the delivery of Scheme Actions.'* Therefore, appropriate guidance must be given in order to enable this and it would be helpful to know whether a preliminary ecological appraisal (PEA) would form part of this review, i.e. an assessment of the ecological features present or potentially present within a site and its surrounding area.

Unclear if 10% tree cover is included in the 10% habitat cover for biodiversity, but if they are separate, this would mean that trees and habitat collectively must occupy at least 20% of a farm. Clarification of this is required, as most farms do not have established woodland and potentially would have to create habitat as well as increase tree cover which would be inequitable.

- The inclusion of *'Reduce on farm emissions and maximise carbon sequestration'* and *'Protect and enhance the farm ecosystem'* in online training modules as part of UA2: Continuous Personal Development is welcomed and supported.

- The inclusion of UA3: Soil health planning is welcomed and supported.

- The inclusion of ‘*provide habitat value – plants selected for habitat, winter wildlife feed, or pollinator value*’ as an intention as part of UA4: Multispecies cover crop is welcomed and supported.
- The inclusion of ‘*wildlife habitats in and around fields to encourage predators and other insects that feed on crop pests*’ as part of UA5: Integrated Pest Management is welcomed and supported.
- The inclusion of UA6: Managing heavily modified peatland is welcomed and supported.
- The inclusion of UA7: Habitat maintenance is welcomed and supported.
- The inclusion of UA10: Ponds and scrapes is welcomed and supported. To create good wildlife ponds a lot of advice and support will be required. The guidance from Freshwater Habitats Trust should be followed to create clean water ponds. In areas of natural clay deposits no liners will be required, this creates better wildlife ponds but they don’t always hold water so this needs further thought.
- The inclusion of UA11: Hedgerow management is welcomed, however suggest that a good condition hedgerow should have minimum dimensions of greater than 2m x 1.5m (e.g. 3m x 2m) and should have a minimum number of species of more than 3 (e.g. 4 or 5). It should be noted however that this would have the potential to impact on public access rights and should be avoided wherever feasible. Otherwise, it could lead to a requirement to apply to formally divert routes, which would be costly, open to challenge and with no guarantee of success at Public Inquiry.
- The inclusion of UA12: Woodland maintenance is welcomed and supported, however as in Q2, good condition hedgerows should be included in the 10% target, particularly where additional tree planting is not suitable.
- Regarding UA14: Historic environment – maintenance and enhancement, the document states ‘*Further information and advice may be required from Cadw, Welsh Archaeological Trusts or other historic environment organisations.*’ This should also include Natural Resources Wales, or other statutory conservation organisations, due to the potential for protected species, e.g. bats, being present in historic structures.
- The inclusion of the aim: ‘*Fewer negative impacts on the environment, including on carbon footprint*’ within UA15: The Animal Health Improvement Cycle is welcomed and supported.

Common Land: reference to common land appears to be omitted from the scheme -

Invasive Non-Native Species

UA17 Good Farm Biosecurity has the main aim of reducing the risk of disease on the farm. However, it could also include measures to prevent the spread of Invasive Non-Native plant Species (INNS), since it is very easy to spread seeds and rhizomes of such plants during general farm operations. It is noted that INNS are mentioned elsewhere in the document but not in this chapter. INNS are not only present on farms in general but are also frequent on farms with land that includes

Common Land and designated sites. The Payment Methodology also includes Good Farm Biosecurity, but at present this doesn't include INNS management.

Pollution

UA3: Soil health planning contains measures linked to reducing pollution risk. However, given the recent assessment of over 60% of water bodies within assessed Special Area of Conservation (SAC) rivers failing to meet water quality targets for phosphorus. Whilst recognising there are a number of contributory factors including water treatment discharge it is suggested that the SFS should help to contribute towards nutrient management by including more actions, or potentially a stand-alone UA, to help reduce nutrient run-off from farms.


Public Rights of Way

The Sustainable Farming Scheme sets out how farmers will be rewarded for actions that align with the Sustainable Land Management (SLM) Objectives set out in The Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023, which includes conserving and enhancing the countryside and cultural resources and promoting public access to and engagement with them.

However, the Universal Actions in the SFS do not include any promotion of public access to the countryside. The 15 'sustainable land management outcomes' that will be delivered by each Universal Action includes the outcome:



Maintaining and enhancing public access to and engagement with the countryside and the historic environment.

The 6 Universal Actions in which this walking symbol  appears are:

- UA2: Continuous Personal Development
- UA9: Designated Site Management Plans
- UA11: Hedgerow management
- UA12: Woodland maintenance
- UA13: Create new woodland and agro-forestry
- UA14: Historic environment – maintenance and enhancement

However, there is no reference to public access in any of these Universal Actions, except in UA14 where there is a minor reference to opening paths by removing some of the surrounding vegetation. This gives the misleading impression that a number of the Universal Actions will maintain and enhance public access to the countryside, when they won't necessarily.

Public access to the countryside in Wales is a major part of the Welsh economy and helps to maintain the businesses of many farmers themselves. Whilst the gross value added of farming in Wales was £810 million (in 2022), the last study undertaken of the overall expenditure impact of walking activities in Wales (in 2009) estimated £275m of gross value added, almost all of which would have been in rural

farming communities. This does not include the positive economic impact of cycling and horse riding in Wales.

We therefore welcome the inclusion of *'Meet your legal responsibilities to ensure the Public Rights of Way (PRoW) network on your land is open, accessible, and safe for public use. You must also manage Open Access land appropriately as set out in the Countryside Rights of Way Act, 2000.'* Any improvements to the PRoW network must be undertaken in conjunction with the local authorities and possibly the user groups.

Additionally, there should be guidance for farmers to help avoid projects obstructing / causing additional work/cost to the PRoW network. Examples being, but not limited to:

- Not planting woodland over public access rights
 - Leaving appropriate distance when planting to allow public access rights to remain unhindered
 - Not digging ponds on, or to affect, public access rights
 - Not planting hedgerows on or across public access rights
- Consideration will need to be given as to whether hedgerow planting/widening could eventually obstruct public access rights, require greater maintenance for public access rights, account for ditch clearance, etc. Works that could lead to conflict with, and a requirement to divert, a PRoW should be avoided wherever possible

Other:

Support for the following five key asks identified by the Nature Friendly Farming Network (NFFN):

1. Provide a proper funding package for nature-friendly farming to adequately reward farmers for delivering genuinely sustainable land management alongside food and fibre production
2. Ensure that no farmer gets left behind by delivering all elements of the scheme by 2026 including optional and collaborative elements to support the most ambitious land management action
3. Follow the principle of the right tree in the right place for the right purpose to harness the benefits of integrating trees on farmland while avoiding trade-offs
4. Payments that deliver genuine outcomes through schemes that are more flexible, reward results and harness existing farmer knowledge
5. The right advice, guidance, and support for farm-level change through increased investment and capacity for face-to-face advisory services and farmer to farmer knowledge exchange