

Draft Minutes - Grassland and Heathland Ecosystem Group Meeting - 11<sup>th</sup> June 2013

Ty Capel, Bryncethin

Attendees

Helen Buckingham (Chair)	HB	NT
Jan Sherry	JS	NRW
Alys Morris	AM	WBP
Stuart Smith	SS	NRW
Sion Brackenbury	SB	Commons Vision
Ian Rugg	IR	WG
Arwel Williams	AW	WG
Gemma Bode	GB	GWT
Melanie Dodd	MD	CCBC
Emma Douglas	ED	PONT
Sinead Lynch	SL	BBCT

Apologies

Nick Somerfield	NS	FUW
Kyra Somerfield	KS	FUW
Julian Jones	JJ	WTW
Caroline Wilson	CW	SNPA
Jane Hodges	JH	PCNPA

**1. Minutes and Actions from previous meetings**

The minutes from the previous meeting were accepted as a true record of the meeting.

**2. Lowland Grassland and Heathland Group Work Plan 2012 - 2015**

Alys Morris provided an overview of the work plan produced for the Lowland Grassland and Heathland group, covering the period up until 2015. The work plan was produced by a sub group in an attempt to prioritise and areas of work and focus action. The current version has been provided to Welsh Government as part of the on-going development of the Wales Biodiversity Framework. The work plan will need to be kept under constant review and updated to reflect any changes brought about by NRW and the proposed Wales Biodiversity Strategy.

A number of additions/amendments were suggested, including holding land managers day, led by Bumblebee Conservation Trust, looking at options for commercial organisations to participate in biodiversity delivery outcomes, working with graziers associations and addressing issues around sustainability of on-going funding.

Sion Brackenbury noted that a number of grazing associations are now happy to provide training to non-agricultural practitioners, which is a significant development and needs to be considered by the group.

The timetable for the Wales Grazing Strategy (WGS) has been pushed back, following staffing changes in PONT. The current strategy is based on designated sites, some of which will be common land. It is important to highlight the need to focus on common land with the new manager of WGS. This may also be picked up through the new NRW N2K life project, which is likely to flag issues on common land.

**ACTION 1.** AE to update LGHEG Work plan to reflect changes in staffing, NRW etc.

**ACTION 2.** AE to add LBAP training etc. to work plan

### **3. South East Wales Local Wildlife Sites Project**

Melanie Dodd and Gemma Bode introduced the project the aim of which is to develop a regional Local Wildlife Sites project in south east Wales, aiming to encourage active management on non-statutory sites and improve habitat condition.

The project is in its development phase and currently has support from all 12 Local Authorities in the project area as well as the two Wildlife Trusts. The Wildlife Trusts will be submitting an application for REF funding on behalf of the project group. The project area encompasses a significant number of sites and it will not be feasible to cover all of them, therefore in the interim the main focus will be grassland and heathland sites, which are recognised as being among the most vulnerable. The long term aim will be to seek additional funding to allow the project to expand and cover additional sites, following completion of REF funding, via HLF etc. It is hoped in the long term the project can become self-sustaining with a Service Level Agreement (SLA) between each local authority and the Wildlife Trusts.

The project has significant potential to contribute to connectivity and improve ecosystem resilience. Cofnod have recently developed a Wales-wide SINC layer (currently covering 18 LAs) and this will be useful in demonstrating importance on non-statutory sites to connectivity etc. Jan Sherry noted that it will be interesting to look at the Wales-layer of non-statutory sites in relation to connectivity to explore how the two data sets complement each other.

The EIA Team within Welsh Government currently use 36+ datasets for EIA work however local knowledge is required to build a case. LBAPs or local sites projects could add significant value here and there is a need to emphasise this.

**ACTION 3.** AE to provide SINC layer to EIA team in WG (? via BARS)

**ACTION 4.** JS/AE to ensure that Phase 2 data and guidance on use is shared with Local Authorities and National Parks

**ACTION 5.** GB to share information on which sites in Monmouthshire are of SSSI quality with SS (NRW) and IR (WG)

**ACTION 6.** AE/HB to raise the status of the pan-Wales agreement with LRCs with Welsh Government.

#### **4. Article 17 Reporting Requirements**

Jan Sherry provided an overview of current Article 17 reporting requirements, which take place on a six yearly cycle and involves reporting on the Habitats Directive Annex 1 habitats. The latest reporting round has just been completed and the results are currently with JNCC for public consultation, the outputs will be published by JNCC/Defra shortly.

Reporting is hindered by a lack of monitoring data in the UK, particularly in the wider countryside. Welsh Government have responsibility for Habitats Directive monitoring and the duty has still not been transferred to NRW meaning it is unclear who's responsibility Habitats Directive monitoring is. Following on from earlier discussions around the importance of local sites it is hoped that SINC monitoring will contribute to the next round of Article 17 reporting, and could significantly improve knowledge of the condition of the wider countryside.

The current round of reporting has taken a significant amount of time from NRW (ex CCW) staff. Although following this work a better baseline has now been produced for all Annex 1 habitats. Among the habitats which are shown to have decreased are base rich molina grasslands, which have decreased significantly due to abandonment and habitat loss etc. For some habitats it has been difficult to determine trends due to a lack of data.

To address lack of data in the wider countryside pan-Wales monitoring outside of SSSIs is required, leading to the development of a Monitoring Strategy for Wales. BARS could potentially play a role in the next reporting round however guidance will need to be produced on the use of data held in BARS to ensure it is interpreted correctly.

**ACTION 7.** AE to discuss development of BARS guidance on data use with UK BARS Steering Group.

#### **5. Heather and Grass Burning – Progress Review**

Alys provided an update on progress to date with heather and grass burning issues. A meeting was held with representatives from CCW, NGOs, Welsh Government and the Fire and Rescue Service in 2011 to discuss issues around the Heather and Grass Burning Regulations and the on-going problems with illegal burns in Wales. Since this meeting some progress has been made around better communication of the regulations and training for farmers however little progress has been made in relation to data sharing and this needs to be addressed. A Conflict also remains around the aims of burning which need to be resolved.

The Wales Wildfire Forum no longer exists and the Wales Wildfire Strategy has made little progress. Welsh Government now has a new lead for burning issues, who sits within the Nature Conservation Team who could take the lead on these issue and ensure any work is WG led.

A paper could also be developed for the newly established Wales Biodiversity Strategy Board to try and secure high-level buy in from WG, NRW and the FRS, highlighting the fact that a significant number of SSSIs are in unfavourable condition due to burning.

<b>ACTION 8.</b> AE to discuss burning issues with Davey Martin and set up meeting to discuss.
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#### **6. Welsh Government Report on EIA work**

Ian Rugg and Arwel Williams (WG) provided an introduction to the Welsh Government work on implementation of the EIA (Agriculture) Regulations which have now been in force in Wales since 2002.

The EIA (Agriculture) Regulations are part of the wider EIA Directive, which is very broad and covers everything from Nuclear Power stations, to ski lifts, etc. The focus of the teams work is the Agriculture side of the Regulations – “Projects for the use of uncultivated and semi natural areas for intensive agricultural purposes.”

The link below is a full list of all parts of the broad European EIA Directive. This gives an idea of the range of separate parts of the Directive:

<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/eia/full-legal-text/85337.htm>

In Wales, the main components of the EIA Directive affecting farmland are the Agriculture, Planning and Forestry EIAs. Each of these is managed by a different body. Legally, it must be determined which applies and this largely depends on the purpose of the works. For the Agriculture EIA to apply, works **must** be for intensive agricultural purposes, even if semi-natural / uncultivated land. This is specified at EC level in the Directive and is not a Welsh interpretation or loophole. For the Regulations to apply, land concerned must be uncultivated or semi natural (i.e. contains less than 25-30% of improved agricultural species which are indicative of cultivation e.g. Perennial Ryegrass and/or White Clover) and proposed work must be a project to intensify the agricultural use of the land.

There is often a great deal of confusion about which EIA Regulations are being referred to and there is a need to be clear about what work is planned. For example, Glastir planting would fall under Forestry EIA. If it is not for agricultural intensification then not for the EIA (Agriculture) team.

There is currently a gap on agricultural land, where land is cleared months before use. Town and country planning should address these issues, however investigators often do not look into the history of a site. Attendees agreed this should be addressed through the upcoming Planning Bill. A Planning White Paper is expected by the end of 2013 and it will be important to ensure these issues are addressed.

It was emphasised that every report is investigated fully and feedback cannot always be provided while a case is being investigated and agreed that better communication to stakeholders should be undertaken to emphasise successes

At present it is difficult to breakdown loss to specific habitat although this would be useful moving forward.

**ACTION 9.** JS and SS to consider how EIA (Agriculture) Regs. Should be communicated internally in NRW

**ACTION 10.** AW and IR to explore opportunities to alter recording to enable breakdown of loss to specific habitat type and report back at next meeting.

**ACTION 11.** AE to draft communication to WBP Wider Partnership around enforcement of EIA (Agriculture) Regs. And explore opportunities for communications successes.

**To see the full report or for further information on application of the EIA (Agriculture) Regs. Please see the Welsh Government Paper, available on the WBP website shortly (<http://www.biodiversitywales.org.uk/en-GB/Lowland-Grassland--Heathland>)**

#### **7. Species Habitat Integration: Next Steps**

Jan updated attendees on progress with the species/habitat integration work which has attempted to identify species niches within habitats and develop management. Habitat requirements, including structure and management, and potential delivery mechanisms have been assessed by species, identifying common micro niches. The work is based on work completed by Natural England (NE) and NE have now taken this further and have been using for monitoring work and encouraging land managers to think more broadly.

A meeting is now required to take this work forward.

**ACTION 12.** AE to set up meeting to progress species/habitat integration work for lowland and upland heath in August/September.

#### **8. Feedback from Chough Workshop**

In May a Chough workshop was held in Llanerchaeron as a condition of the RSPB funding received from Welsh Government Ecosystem Resilience and Diversity (RED) Fund in ERD in 2012/13. The aim of the project was to;

1. Establish if there is a relationship between the extent of favourable habitat and chough breeding success using available Welsh data.
2. Establish the form of this relationship, in line with recent work in Brittany which established a relationship between the amount of short vegetation and chough productivity.
3. Produce guidelines on the amount of favourable habitat required by choughs to breed effectively, to inform habitat management of coastal sites e.g. Natura 2000 sites

Following the completion of the project, it was agreed that there were ongoing issues with chough management which need to be addressed, which should be picked up with the RSPB.

Ian noted that a DEFRA R&D Project (BD5001) is currently underway entitled '*Characterisation of soil structural degradation under grassland and development of measures to ameliorate its impact on biodiversity and other soil functions. - BD5001*'

<http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&Completed=0&ProjectID=16827>. The project still has some ongoing work and a compilation report will be produced later this year.

**ACTION 13.** RSPB to confirm who is the current representative on the LGHEG.

**ACTION 14.** AE and JS to write review of workshop highlighting, key points and emphasise need for RSPB to share data.

**ACTION 15.** AE to circulate chough guidance to LGHEG and ask for comment.

**ACTION 16.** AE to arrange meeting with Amy/Hilary. To discuss outputs of Chough workshop and any required actions.

## 9. Evidence Gaps/Academic Representation

The evidence gaps and research proposals submitted through WBP Groups, have now been collated and are available via the Wales Biodiversity Partnership website as a work in progress <http://www.biodiversitywales.org.uk/en-GB/WBP-Evidence-Gaps-Project>. The Research Project Proposals provide opportunities for the UK research community to meet priority evidence gaps raised by the environmental sector of Wales. The work is on-going and will be kept under constant review. As such it should be added to the agenda as a standing item.

The Group is currently without an academic representative and it was suggested that Gareth Griffiths from Aberystwyth University may be able to fill this role.

**ACTION 17.** AE to ask Gareth Griffiths if he can become academic representative on the LGHEG.

**ACTION 18.** AE to add chough back onto evidence gaps spread sheet.

## 10. AOB

Stuart Smith provided an update on the Saving our Magnificent Meadows (SOMM), which is now led by Plantlife. £500k has been allocated to the Welsh element of the project, assuming bid for development year is successful. In Wales the focus is on Ceredigion,

**ACTION 19.** HB to ask Trevor Dines and Sarah Mellor for a briefing on progress with SOMM

**ACTION 20.** SS to ask NRW west Region (Meryl?) to provide an update from their perspective.

Jan provided feedback on the recent LBAP workshop, held in Shrewsbury. The aim of which was to ensure that Local Biodiversity Partnerships are clearer in their role within the context of national priorities, strategies and policies in addition to their role of providing a focus for local biodiversity initiatives and enhancement of the natural environment. The event proved useful and workshops identified a number of actions where the LGHEG could assist LBAPs/LAs and the work plan will need to be update to reflect feedback.

Sion Brackenbury provided an update on the Commons Vision Biochar Project

**11. Date of Next Meeting**

A number of sub-group meetings will be required to take forward some of the work identified therefore no date was agreed. A meeting poll will be set up online to identify potential dates.