

Grassland and Heathland Ecosystem Group Meeting - 22nd November 2012

National Trust Offices, Llanerchaeron

Attendees

Jan Sherry (Chair)	JS	CCW
Alys Edwards (Secretariat)	AE	WBP
Stuart Smith	SS	CCW
Sion Brackenbury	SB	Commons Vision
Charles Morgan	CM	PONT
Arwel Williams	AW	WG
Geraint Jones	GJ	PCNPA
Nick Sommerfield	NS	FUW
Kyra Somerfield	KS	FUW
Sinead Lynch	SL	BBCT
Gwen Potter	GP	NT
Richard Nelson	RN	NT

Apologies

Helen Buckingham	HB	NT
Dave Lamacraft	DL	RSPB
Julian Jones	JJ	WTW
Trevor Dines	TD	Plantlife
Caroline Wilson	CW	SNPA
Jane Hodges	JH	PCNPA
John Warren	JW	Aberystwyth University
Gareth Griffiths	GG	Aberystwyth University

1. Minutes and Actions from Previous Meeting

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

2. Project template development and next steps

The benefits of development of a project template were discussed. The aim of which is to provide guidance on the minimum set of information required to aid smaller NGOs/LBAPs in development of funding applications. A number of funding streams are currently underused in Wales such as WREN and SITA and production of best practice guidance or funding proforma may encourage uptake of these funds.

A number of options were suggested, including a peer review system for funding bids, which already takes place already in England and provision of advice in consultation with relevant group in advance of application being submitted. Progression of this work would also be beneficial to other WBP Wales-level groups

ACTION 1. JS and HB to discuss taking project template development work forward in consultation with Charles and Sion B.

3. Update on on-going projects/Priority Mapping Review

Jan Sherry provided background to the initial priority mapping work, which was completed a year ago. WBP Groups are committed to an annual review of these boundaries and there is a need to discuss whether areas identified are still relevant and review actions which have been undertaken to address issues raised.

ACTION 2. AE to circulate maps to all and collate any amendments following meeting

Charles Morgan provided an update on the Saving Our Magnificent Meadows (SOMM) project, which is part of a wider UK grasslands bid. Total project funding is £3.5m across the UK, with Wales receiving £600k. The project is now in its development year, which is due to finish in June 2013. Forty sites are currently being considered and work being undertaken consists of land owner liaison by consultants on privately owned statutory sites, and liaison work with NGOs with ownership of statutory sites by PONT. Additional work is being undertaken to establishing management requirements on each site.

Priority Areas

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ACTION 3. JS to arrange for priority mapping jpeg files to be sent to WG (Arwel Williams)

Looking at commons and improving boundaries to improve ecosystem resilience of those areas. Development of burning plans for commons.

Gower

Sion Brackenbury provided an update on work being undertaken on the Gower, where the Fire Service have been heavily involved in work and development of burning plans and priority areas.

Work is taking place nationally to develop burning plans. A Welsh Wildfire Strategy is also being developed across all three fire services and it is important that the group be involved in the development.

ACTION 4. SB to talk to Brian Harries (FRS), to get update on work being undertaken on the Gower and see if the group can help.

ACTION 5. SB to share work with fire plans on Gower and see if lessons can be shared with others areas.

ACTION 6. AE to find out what is being done in relation to development of the Wildfire Strategy for Wales and how the group can feed in.

ACTION 7. AE to speak to Dai Harries/Kathleen Carroll and discuss how we take burning issues forward. CCW actions agreed at previous meeting have been completed.

Marshy Grasslands of South Glamorgan

Not much work progressed in this area over the past twelve months. A workshop will be held with LBAPs in the area during June 2013.

ACTION 8. AE/SS to arrange marshy grassland workshop in summer 2013, to be hosted by Rhondda Cynon Taff (RCT) and see if any actions can be identified and progressed.

Llyn Peninsula Coastal Heath and Grasslands

A strong partnership is currently in place between CCW/National Trust/Gwynedd Council/AONB/RSPB and local landowners. However there have been problems on some sites such as Cilan.

Welsh Government ERD funding was secured to look at quality of chough habitat in nesting/feeding areas to identify problems, due to the significant decline in chough numbers in recent years.

Work has also been progressed on Anglesey looking at heathlands arising as alternative for straw for bedding. A significant number of farmers are now taking up the bedding resulting in the scale of the project being increased and demonstrating the proven economic benefits of cutting heathlands.

Gwent Grasslands

Melanie Dodd (Caerphilly CBC) is currently developing a funding bid for regional SINC project (SE Wales or Mid Valleys SINC). Swansea has also finished mapping/review of all their SINC sites in addition to connectivity mapping which has been completed.

ACTION 9. AE to get an update on Monmouthshire Natural Assets /Mid Valleys SINC project and provide update to Julia Korn for inclusion in CCWs work on the RDP.

ACTION 10. AE to speak to Deb Hill (Swansea CC) for further details on Swansea mapping project, and see if demonstration for LGHEG or urban group is possible.

ACTION 11. AE to draft update on all LA SINC projects for discussion at next meeting.

Gwydir Mines Calimianian Grasslands

Some extra survey work has been undertaken to assess issues however the area is in urgent need of management. Forestry issues need to be addressed as a priority.

Floodplain meadows of Radnor/Wrexham

Radnorshire Wildlife Trust (RWT) has a project underway focussed on restoration of floodplain meadows around Llandrindod. Wrexham's one existing site is now under more appropriate management however there has not been any restoration or recreation undertaken.

ACTION 12. AE to contact Julian Jones for an update on RWT floodplain meadow restoration project.

ACTION 13. SS to speak to Emma Broad (Wrexham Ecologist) and NWWT and see if there is any action which can be taken forward if funding became available.

Calcareous Grassland and Heathlands of North East Wales

Charles Morgan provided an update on PONTs work in the area. Some sites have been addressed through the Anglesey Grazing Animals Project (AGAP) and other have secured appropriate management through ERD funding.

ACTION 14. CM to send Stuart details of grassland site on the Great Orme.

Anglesey Coastal Heath and Grasslands

RSPB have secured WREN funding for work on Penrhyn Mawr.

20+ farmers are now involved in the AGAP scheme and marketing with farmers on Anglesey and Llyn has been well developed and could lead to the development of A Wales-wide conservation grazing strategy, including marketing case studies, different ways of delivering conservation grazing and possible communication with landowners. It was agreed that it would be useful to pull together case studies looking at different approaches to conservation grazing.

ACTION 15. ALL to consider maps and note any changes, including any urgent areas which need to be added in advance of next meeting.

ACTION 16. AE to add Outcome of Priority Mapping review to agenda for next meeting.

4. Evidence Gaps

Jan Sherry provided an update on the recent workshop held with academics and Welsh Government in Cardiff museum. The focus of the event was the introduction of new academic representatives on the WBP Wales-level groups and review of the evidence gaps provided by WBP groups. Comments against evidence gaps have been provided by Geoff Profitt (Swansea University) and Mike Bruford (Cardiff University) and there is now a need to reconsider and prioritise gaps and formulate research questions which can be picked up by universities across Wales. Some areas of work may need to be broken down into research 'chunks' and this should be considered as part of the review. Deadline for submission of this work is **20th December 2012**

Evidence Gap Identified	Comments	Research Question	Lead
Evidence lacking on whether grazing alone can reduce fire loads or whether some mechanical management is always required on lowland heathlands	<p>Fireload relationship to biomass?</p> <p>Possible focus on case studies on sample sites, looking at issues, constraints, opportunities.</p> <p>Comparative study of different types of sites/best practice informed by case studies (decision tree)</p> <p>Need list of potential sites where access is possible? Or seven students all looking at same question on different sites.</p>	On a range of sites, what is the relationship between biomass and grazing and grazing's ability to reduce biomass.	SB/JS
Evidence of impacts of long term application of high levels of fertilizer on grasslands.	Remove – realistic to achieve through academic research	N/A	N/A
Evidence of decline in BAP habitats.	Remove – realistic to achieve through academic research	N/A	N/A
Impact of change of ownership on land. Is the impact of changing land ownership on small scale farms and grade 3 land.	AW – lots of EIA reports are as a result of recent change of land ownership.		KS/AW
Suitable AES options for pollinators.	Rapid research review for pollinators plan is based on English research in relation to AES schemes. Additional Wales based research is required on best options for pollinators.		SL

	Distinct piece of species research would be welcome. Template for projects already exists in England.		
Long term monitoring of impact of burning on vegetation and soil (focus on uplands and inland lowland commons)	Amend wording to evidence of change. long term data sets in relation to this question do not exist. Bangor university did 3 year project on Berwyn. Potential for repeated project. GW – important to underpin legislation Heather and grass burning regs.		JS
Research into agricultural machinery and its applications for conservation management e.g. gorse cutting etc.	Cranford have done a lot of this work over the years. Need some sort of literature review to determine if this is needed.		CM
Re-vegetation of severely degraded heathland e.g. gorse dominated heath where ericoides are lost (inc from seed bank)	Already very short term project with Bangor university.		JS
Review of Agricultural colleges/course content with regarding to conservation management skills (i.e. grazing/burning etc.)	Unclear what the best route is to collect this type of data. Current split in agricultural skills and countryside mngt not been beneficial.		JS

- ACTION 17.** SB and JS to develop question 1 (above table) via email and provide update to AE
- ACTION 18.** SL to develop pollinators in greater detail and provide update to AE.
- ACTION 19.** AE to remove gaps 2 &3 as not realistic to achieve through academic research
- ACTION 20.** JS to work up question on long term impacts of burning in greater detail.
- ACTION 21.** JS to work up details of agricultural course content in more detail and feedback to TL
- ACTION 22.** AE to discuss progression of this work with Tracey Lovering and see if it is possible to extend this programme of work to include colleges in the future, to encourage more training in conservation based framing practices.
- ACTION 23.** AW to investigate where detail on agricultural course content may be held in Welsh Government.
- ACTION 24.** AE to circulate evidence gaps spread sheet to Plantlife and RSPB for comment and wider group.
- ACTION 25.** ALL to send comments on evidence gaps to AE by **14th December 2012**

Welsh Government (ADAS) are currently working on a project to develop best practice in relation to restoration of damaged habitat and are looking for examples of restoration/creation on lowland marshy grassland sites which have been ploughed/fertilised/re-seeded

- ACTION 26.** All to send details of restoration projects on marshy grassland sites to AW
- ACTION 27.** SS to send NE report on restoration of *Molinia* grasslands to AW

5. Phytophthora work.

Sion Brackenbury updated attendees on work on *phytophthora ramorum* in north Wales, where control has been successful. Evidence has shown that *vacinium* is largely being infected by infected larch rather than the other way round and *vacinium* can be impacted by other diseases, shown by evidence in Holland etc. Most prevalent in the south Wales valleys due to warm moist air rising up from the sea leading to ideal conditions for spread. Most of the infection is in larch and rhododendron.

- ACTION 28.** If 'strange' *vacinium* is identified ensure this is reported to Jan j.sherry@ccw.gov.uk or to Fera.

Attendees were also updated on the recent discovery of ash dieback *chalara* and the need to be vigilant and ensure decontamination is undertaken on site if identified.

6. Species/Habitat integration work

Jan Sherry 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.

The WBP Species Expert Group have completed initial work for heathland and woodland species and this work now needs to be rolled out across the remaining habitats. The current suggestion is that the SEG will focus initially on one habitat per group, enabling groups to develop associated management guidance, ensuring a strategic approach which can be varied site to site.

Jan has completed an initial review of the heathland work and the group now needs to decide how best to take this forward. WG are also interested in this work and have agreed that this should be developed for all remaining habitats, leading to the development of habitat management and/or pictorial guidance. Outputs could also be used to apply management across a suite of sites, ensuring the entire resource is not managed for one species, for example reducing grazing in one area and providing compensation in another (chough).

It was noted that this work could prove useful with regard to grant applications, demonstrating benefits to other species and impacts on others.

GP noted that transition habitats are extremely important and often meeting conditions which CCW insists upon would mean no transition habitat is left, suggesting a mismatch in guidance from CCW at Wales-level and local level, which needs to be addressed.

ACTION 29. JS to discuss CCW guidance on transitional habitats with regional colleagues and feedback.

ACTION 30. AE to contact NE for copy of pictorial guidance developed and circulate for info.

ACTION 31. HB to request that SEG focuses on marshy grassland as next habitat for LGHEG

ACTION 32. JS to circulate upland and lowland heathland table to all.

7. LGHEG Work Programme

The LGHEG work programme was circulated to attendees in advance of the meeting, an brief run through of work areas suggests that the majority of work has been completed/progressed as agreed however there is a need to review the document and identify leads to ensure progress is maintained and the work outlined is achievable given current time/budget constraints.

ACTION 33. AE to arrange sub-group meeting to review work programme (JS/SS/AE/HB)

A number of workshops have also been discussed for 2013 and progression of these can be discussed as part of the work programme review.

- Species habitat integration work will be later in 2013, depending on timescales of the SEG
- Chough workshop – Mid 2013

ACTION 34. JS to contact Dave L and confirm dates for chough grasslands workshop and location - Ceredigion/Pembs.

ACTION 35. SB to provide contact for commons groups and invite someone from group to attend the summer meeting to enable stronger links to be developed with these groups.

ACTION 36. CM to discuss Anglesey Best practice day with Hilary K and develop suggestions.

8. AOB

Stuart Smith informed attendees that the Grasslands Trust now in liquidation. Flagship reserve in Carmel woods in Carmarthenshire,

Sinead Lynch outlined her role as Wales Officer for the Bumblebee Conservation Trust (BBCT). The focus of which is to deliver grassland management, grassland restoration etc.

ACTION 37. Anyone interested in developing projects/advice to contact Sinead

9. Feedback from WBP Steering Group/Chairs Group

The main item of interest from the recent WBP Steering Groups and Chairs Group meetings is the Welsh Government proposal to revise the structure and governance of WBP and its constituent groups. The proposal is outlined in the WBP Steering Group paper, available here <http://www.biodiversitywales.org.uk/en-GB/Steering-Group-Meetings>

ACTION 38. AE to circulate Welsh Government paper to group, and collate feedback.

ACTION 39. ALL to provide comment by cop Thursday **20th December 2012**

10. Date of Next Meeting

It was suggested that the annual summer meeting and the south Wales Marshy Grassland workshop be held on consecutive days on the 12th/13th June 2013, location tbc