WORKSHOP REPORT

17 October 2025 at the Wales Biodiversity Partnership Conference in Aberystwyth

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PRESENT

Megan Thorman – Y Dref Werdd, Blaenau Ffestiniog
Fran Blockley – The Wilderness Trust, Llanidloes
Liz Mutch – Llais y Goedwig
Jacinta Challinor – Coed Cadw / Woodland Trust
Michelle Delafield – Welsh Government Climate Change Division
Chris Jackson-Szczyrbowski – Small Woods Association
Mandy Marsh - CIEEM
Tom Cosson – Welsh Government Designated Landscapes
Rachel Willis – NRW South West Wales
Liz Hancocks – NRW central South Wales
Sean McHugh – Wales Biodiversity Partnership
Howard Davies
Richard Ninnes

PURPOSE OF THE WORKSHOP

I advertised the workshop as a place to share what is happening with strategic collaboration for nature around Wales and explore what is working, what is not working and how best to support delivery by local partnerships within coherent district, regional and Wales level plans and strategies.

The context for the workshop was an initiative in North Wales that has brought together the main public and third sector organisations delivering for nature to overcome the current fragmented and short-term approach that has arisen from an inadequate, short term, fragmented and competitive funding environment. The North Wales initiative is about joining up planning for nature across all players and interested parties, including farmers and landowners, and to collaborate to secure funding. This requires us to work out the best ways of supporting delivery on the ground, supporting project and landscape-scale partnerships and helping develop the capabilities of Local Nature Partnerships.

The workshop was productive, because it included people working across the range of roles from grass-roots and community development, through landscape-scale planning and Local Nature Partnerships to strategic and policy development within Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales. The issues raised were not new, but having them in the same conversation was new to me and, perhaps, to others in the room as well. The strong representation of people involved in grassroots and community development probably gave stronger and broader insights to the problems and inefficiencies of the current situation that we would have had without them.

OVERALL CONCLUSION

The long-term pipelines we need, to underpin long-term assurance of funding, depend on collaborations at all levels to identify and agree what is needed for nature and works for farmers, landowners and communities. Thus, a focus on developing long-term pipelines can be a unifying factor for collaboration within and across all scales within Wales.

Local delivery depends on support from national policies and programmes and it is efficient to combine some of the capacity and capability required at a regional level, in support of Local Nature Partnerships.

INSIGHTS – workshop outputs

Perspectives / Levels:

Wales can over-complicate things by creating too many layers for a small country. However, what exists now is necessary and we need to make sure it all joins up and enables action on the ground. At the workshop, we considered the following levels:

Projects, including partnership projects - delivering action on the ground.

Grass-roots and community development initiatives and enterprises - often individually small-scale, but they are also often integrated social, economic and environmental ventures.

Landscape-scale partnerships – Collaborative planning and delivery at catchment, mountain, farm cluster or other unit.

Local Nature Partnerships – For collaborative strategic planning and supporting action within their areas (National Park, National Landscape, Local Authority or cluster of Local Authorities).

Regional – Including regional organisations running regional programmes or supporting other projects and programmes in their area (e.g Corporate Joint Committees and NRW's Area teams). Also, regional-scale collaborations, such as the North Wales consortium and cross-border collaborations, such as 'Severn Wye Nature'.

All Wales – for example:

Designated landscapes have a Welsh Government policy, funding and monitoring oversight, including Ffermio Bro, and there is Tirweddau Cymru to faciliate collaboration between the designated landscapes.

Sustainble Farming Scheme.

The Wales Biodiversity Partnership, acting as an umbrella for Local Nature Partnerships.

Numerous national funding programmes, including competitive grant rounds, strategic funding and NRW programmes.

Continuity:

The short-term and changing focus of grant schemes is a well-known obstacle to the longer timescales needed to develop and sustain initiatives. However, we also noted that changes in policy and priorities and the often perceived slow pace of the public sector lead to a lack of faith in promises and strategies. An example included the heavy investment people made to engage with the Area Statement consultations, without feeling any visible follow through or benefit. Whilst that follow-through is happening, for example in the form of local landscape planning (RENs Resilient Ecological Networks) and through some Local Nature Partnerships, radio silence and the patchy and diverse nature of this early work mean the energy, insights and commitment to maintain collaborations is being lost in some parts of Wales.

Whilst plans and timescales can change for good or unavoidable reasons, an environment of more continuous dialogue and communications would help keep things moving and sustain trust and relationships.

Collaboration and coordination:

All participants are working in collaborative ways, some for delivery, others in support and planning roles and some in oversight and coordination roles. Nevertheless, few, if any people have an overview of activity in any area and very few people know who those people are.

Some Local Nature Partnerships are showing that they can have a successful role in generating that oversight and bringing people together to agree coordination around priorities (the purpose of the Nature Recovery Action Plans). With regional support from NRW, several Local Nature Partnerships in South Wales are demonstrating proof-of-concept in relation to their role in getting some overall shape to focus and prioritise amongst the proliferation of place and theme based collaborations operating in their districts.

Core resource and capabilities:

The short-term funding problem hinders development of core capacity for developing and sustaining relationships and long-term programmes. This is felt most acutely and existentially by smaller grass-roots and community development initiatives, but the larger organisations have also lost capacity to plan multiple programmes for the medium-term, let alone the long-term. Also, it sometimes feels as if larger organisations and those designing funding opportunities can easily overlook the need for smaller organisations to sustain a core function over longer timescales to really benefit the communities they serve.

Everyone needs a much more stable funding platform, from which to build capability, relationships and much longer-term pipelines of projects. Also, to cut through the huge inefficiency of the current short-term competitive funding model. *This was recognised by Alun Michael's administration and led to the 'Compact' he made with the third sector*.

Solutions include:

- Assured standards-based (non-competitive), long-term core funding (5 years plus), through contracts or grants, with the purpose of enabling grassroots and community development initiatives to fulfil their full potential and giving larger organisations the capacity to collaborate in development of long-term plans and put together and manage the much bigger and longer term pipelines necessary to secure the scale and long-term assurance of funding, largely from the private sector. Assurance of core capability also enables the larger organisations to engage fully in supporting smaller operations and enabling collective leadership of well-connected virtual teams amongst all the players operating in an area.

- A function of Local Nature Partnerships to make connections and support development of longer term forward plans and pipelines of programmes and projects – Operationalising their Nature Recovery Action Plans.

- The regional perspective to develop shared capabilities, especially to support development of big enough pipelines and funding packages.

- Help smaller operations feel part of a bigger team and strategy.

Capacity:

Workforce planning for nature and sustainable management of land and water, including farming, needs to be broad and consider the roles of all players, all the way up the scale of operations from farm advisory services, volunteer services and grassroots and community development people. It all needs resourcing and supporting. *Is Nature Service Wales looking at this breadth of need?*

Place-based or Horizontal funding:

The current funding model for smaller operations (e.g. grass roots and community development initiatives and farms) includes direct from funder (e.g. applications to Wales, UK or global funding sources) and via district or regional grant managers (e.g. Ffermio Bro and Places for Nature). Although not discussed at the workshop, it flags the need to pick the right model and ensure coherence when both are in play. For example, is it better for grassroots and community development initiatives to have core funding through a Wales programme or via a district or regional entity? It may be the former, with that entity then free to secure project funding from whatever sources it can, including via regional pipelines, and to be able to collaborate within a Local Nature Partnership independently of funding. This question will become more important with the larger amounts of private funding we hope to attract.

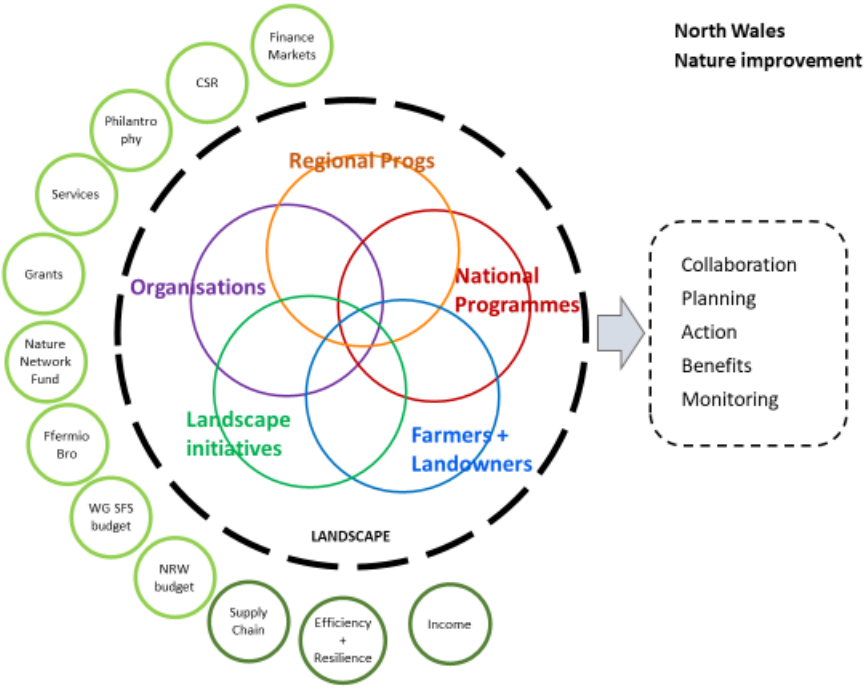
WEB LINKS

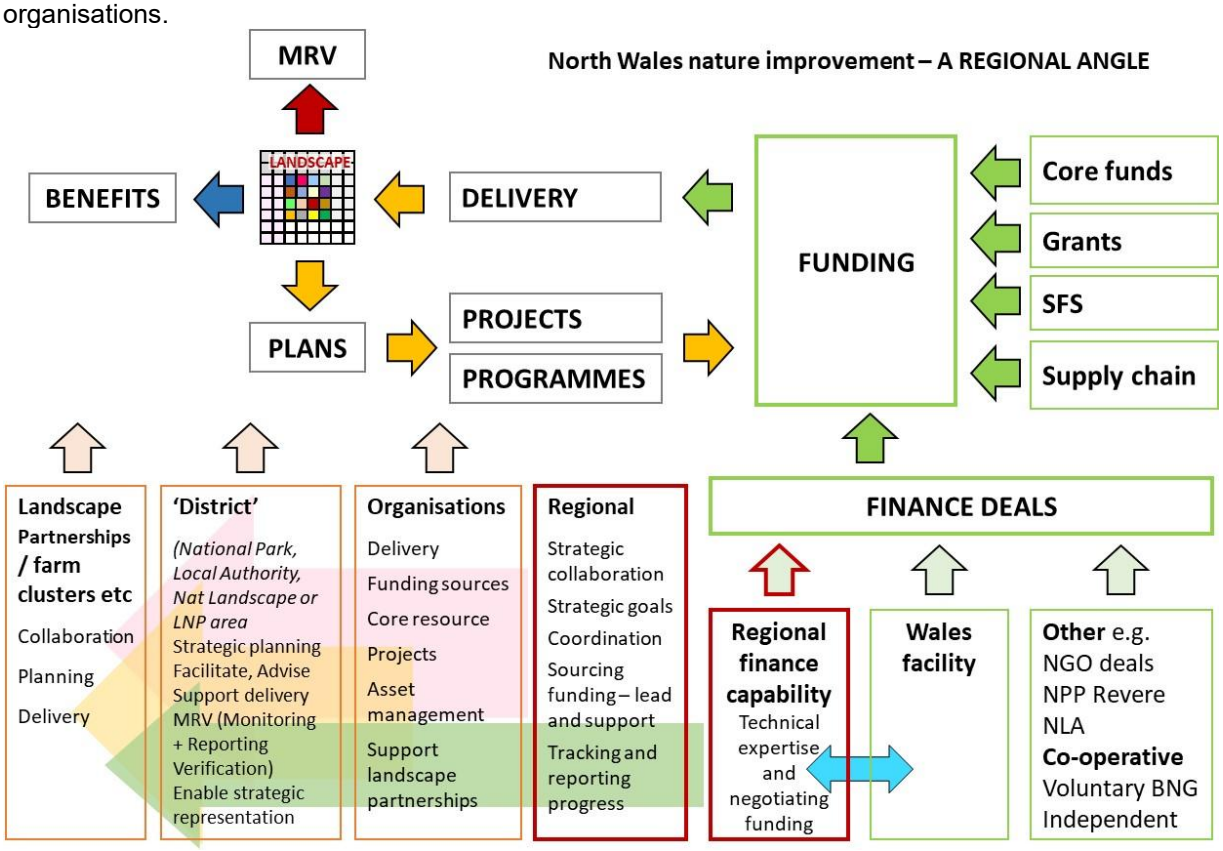
https://www.drefwerdd.cymru/en/home
http://thewildernesstrust.org/the-wilderness-trust/
https://llaisygoedwig.org.uk/
https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/about-us/where-we-work/wales/
https://www.smallwoods.org.uk/
https://cieem.net/

ILLUSTRATIONS

I showed these slides at the workshop to illustrate the need for regional capabilities to support collaborative planning and delivery at smaller scales.

Focus on supporting joined up planning and action at landscape-scale



Potential roles at different levels / perspectives

This model requires core funding to enable each perspective to fulfil its role, including the smallest organisations.