

Welsh Government response to Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

The Welsh Government should ensure that participation in Glastir Advanced provides genuine improvement in agri-environmental practices and enhancements of the natural environment, and does not merely reinforce existing practice.

Partially Accept. In November 2014, the Welsh Government commissioned an independent panel to carry out an evaluation of a sample of existing Glastir Advanced contracts. The Glastir Advanced independent evaluation panel's recommendations were delivered to the Welsh Government officials in March. Furthermore, the Welsh Government is currently considering the initial findings of the Glastir Monitoring and Evaluation Programme into how Glastir can prioritise the areas that have the greatest potential to deliver results and to set ambitious targets that can be achieved through targeted interventions.

By May 2015 the Welsh Government expects to be in a position to improve Glastir Advanced by:

- Rationalising the Glastir objectives, so that sufficient interventions can be incorporated into contracts and meaningful benefits will accrue.
- Providing needs-specific training to Contract Managers, where these are identified in the report and accepted.
- Identifying what improvements could be made to documentation, guidance and maps to support Contract Managers to help deliver more effective contracts.

The Welsh Government will continue to work with partner organisations to further refine the Glastir Objective layers in order to increase the targeting of interventions under Glastir Advanced. Although European Commission regulations allow for maintenance payments for continuing with the current agricultural practices, the Welsh Government only supports activities that go beyond the RD baseline and the usual farming practices. Some farm businesses will be required to make less change than others. However, the Welsh Government believes that it is legitimate and good use of public funding to pay for interventions through Glastir Advanced that ensures the continued positive management of high value habitats where it is otherwise considered that there is a real risk of these being lost.

Recommendation 2:

The Welsh Government should consider further how it identifies and tackles poor practice in relation to water quality by using a range of interventions, including regulation and the payment – or withdrawal – of public funding.

Accept. There are a number of issues affecting water quality in Wales that have been identified by Natural Resources Wales (NRW) as part of their work in developing the second cycle River Basin Management Plans (RBMP) under the Water Framework Directive. NRW is currently consulting on the draft RBMP's and, over the summer, will finalise them prior to formally presenting them to the Minister in the autumn, ahead of their submission to the European Commission in December 2015.

Based on the evidence gathered by NRW in the development of the RBMP's, we will explore potential interventions that will bring about the necessary improvements in water quality. This could potentially involve changes to the regulatory system to ensure that it is flexible and incentivises improvements in land management practices. We are also working with NRW to review the effectiveness of their current provision of pollution prevention advice and enforcement procedures.

Under Cross Compliance, there are specific measures aimed at the protection of water quality, by reducing sedimentation, nitrate and phosphate loss to surface and ground water. Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC) 1 requires farmers to create buffer strips to prevent agricultural pollutants entering surface and ground water. GAEC 5 contains measures to prevent soil erosion and sedimentation of water courses. Farmers found to be in breach of these requirements will face a reduction in their Direct Payments. The Welsh Government is currently reviewing and updating the Code of Good Agricultural Practice (CoGAP) with the aim of improving the advice and guidance given to farmers on best practice and to minimise the risk of agricultural pollution.

Payments will also continue to be targeted in key catchments, through incentive schemes like Glastir and Sustainable Production Grants, where benefits to water quality can be achieved through activity that goes beyond regulatory and good practice baseline standards. These activities will be supported by a Nutrient Management Plan.

Knowledge transfer will continue to provide specialist advice to farmers on how to improve on-farm efficiencies, making best use of all inputs, reducing both the cost to the farmer and the risk of diffuse pollution. Reduced use of inorganic fertiliser will also contribute to the Welsh Government's goals on reducing green house gas emissions.

The Welsh Government is also looking at ways to engage the private sector and utility companies in Payment for Eco-system Services (PES), which can secure long-term, over 20 years, benefits for the environment, compared to Rural Development Programme support, which is limited to 7 year cycles.

Recommendation 3:

The Welsh Government should identify where water quality issues are arising from land maintained by Natural Resources Wales and report what remedial action the organisation is taking to ensure compliance with requirements under the Water Framework Directive.

Accept. As part of their work in developing the second cycle RBMP under the Water Framework Directive, NRW has identified the reasons for not achieving good ecological status in every water body in Wales. This includes land that is privately owned along with land maintained by NRW. Good status means that the water shows only a slight change from what would normally be expected under undisturbed conditions. The forthcoming RBMP's will include a programme of measures demonstrating how we aim to achieve 100% good ecological status by the end of the next cycle in 2021.

NRW has a programme of actions to target improvement works on the Welsh Government estate. This has been prioritised in line with the WFD results and where the greatest benefit can be delivered. The measures within these priority water bodies will be:

- Review the riparian management within the forest and ensure that it meets the UK Forestry Standards (UKFS) Guideline standards.
- Review the drainage system within the forest to ensure none of the artificial drainage runs directly into watercourses (where disconnection is not possible, such drains will need to be adopted as watercourses).
- Review the roadside drainage system to ensure none of the side drains run directly into watercourses.
- Review forest design plans (or develop Forest Resource Plans) and identify potential risks, such as civil engineering, clear-felling and restocking and implement ways to mitigate this and consider low impact silvicultural systems (LISS) where applicable.
- Where unavoidable forest operations could potentially have a significant water quality impact (e.g. felling to comply with a plant health order), ensure that all possible steps are taken to mitigate this.

In response to the risk of sedimentation from forest operations NRW are implementing mandatory Water Management Plans for all operations; these require an environmental risk assessment, regular water monitoring and details of mitigation in place to prevent sediment delivery to watercourses. Water Awareness Events have been conducted and more are planned for later this year. These are not only delivered on the Welsh Government Woodland Estate, but also to the wider forestry sector.

Recommendation 4:

The Welsh Government should undertake a formal evaluation of customer experiences of the online application process and make any changes necessary should this be found to be a barrier or disincentive to participation in the scheme.

Accept. The Welsh Government works closely with agricultural stakeholders including farmers when designing and revising new online applications to ensure they are intuitive and easy to use.

The Welsh Government will survey farmers who have completed the Single Application Form 2015 and the Glastir online applications to gather feedback on the application process and digital assistance. The Welsh Government will report its findings by autumn 2015 and make, where necessary, any changes to future applications.

Recommendation 5:

The Welsh Government should disaggregate the administrative costs associated with Glastir so the value for money of the scheme is clearly understood.

Accept. Rural Payments Wales is setting up systems to be able to apportion the administrative costs of working on various aspects of Glastir. RPW will report by autumn 2015 on the preliminary work done to date and the progress to date in recording the apportionment.

Recommendation 6:

The Welsh Government should ensure the various inspection regimes targeted at farmers by its agencies are aligned as far as possible and that data is shared between inspectorates to minimise disruption to farmers and maximise administrative efficiency.

Accept. The Welsh Government will continue to share data between inspectorates to ensure inspection regimes are aligned, where possible. This is through a combination of shared risk analysis data and ad-hoc referrals when appropriate. This is an established practice which has been in place since the introduction of Cross Compliance in 2005.

The Welsh Government will also discuss with Natural Resources Wales what further co-ordination can occur to reduce inspection burdens and administrative costs as part of their regular communications. The next meeting is planned for June 2015.

Recommendation 7:

The Welsh Government should report back to the Committee by autumn 2015 on the challenging, but realistic, targets it has set for the uptake of Glastir, including the budgets to which the targets are aligned.

Accept. The Welsh Government will provide the committee with the allocation of funding to each aspect of Glastir as well as list of the key indicators for the scheme and the delivery targets for these under the next RDP by autumn 2015.

Recommendation 8:

The Welsh Government should report to the Committee, or its successor, on its monitoring and evaluation work once it has progressed sufficiently and certainly by May 2016.

Partially accept. The current Monitoring and Evaluation programme reports annually on its findings. The Welsh Government will provide a synopsis of findings in these reports, to date, to the Committee following the publication of the final year baseline report. This is due to be received by the Welsh Government in summer 2016, so the synopsis report would be made available by autumn 2016.

