

# Farming Connect

June 2024



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# Farming Connect

June 2024



# About the Committee

The Committee was established on 23 June 2021. Its remit can be found at:  
[www.senedd.wales/SeneddEconomy](http://www.senedd.wales/SeneddEconomy)

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Current Committee membership:



**Committee Chair:  
Paul Davies MS**  
Welsh Conservatives



**Hefin David MS**  
Welsh Labour



**Luke Fletcher MS**  
Plaid Cymru



**Samuel Kurtz MS**  
Welsh Conservatives



**Vikki Howells MS**  
Welsh Labour



**Jenny Rathbone MS**  
Welsh Labour

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The following Member was also a member of the Committee during this inquiry:



**Buffy Williams MS**  
Welsh Labour

# Contents

<b>Chair’s foreword .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Conclusions and Recommendations .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>8</b>
Background .....	8
Committee Scrutiny.....	10
<b>2. Communicating future mission and role .....</b>	<b>11</b>
Supporting transition to the SFS.....	13
Funding .....	14
New entrants.....	15
Demonstration Farms.....	17
<b>3. Skills and expertise requirements.....</b>	<b>18</b>
Research.....	19
Integration with Forestry and woodland management.....	20
<b>4. Eligibility and Access .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>5. The Contract and Programme Structure.....</b>	<b>26</b>
Formal evaluation of Farming Connect .....	27
<b>6. Supporting mental health.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Annex 1: List of oral evidence sessions. ....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Annex 2: List of written evidence .....</b>	<b>31</b>
Additional Information.....	31

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## Chair's foreword

Following significant post-Brexit policy changes stakeholders feel there should be more scrutiny of Farming Connect, and analysis and input from stakeholders.

The Farming Connect programme is generally held in high regard, but gaps have been identified in the support to transition to the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS), including skills gaps. Our one-day inquiry also concluded that the Welsh Government has 'missed a trick' in not helping Farming Connect to communicate the direction and rationale for its agricultural policy much better.

Whatever replaces the current Farming Connect programme must be fit for the future, focusing on encouraging and supporting new entrants, widening access to include agricultural students and offering a welcoming environment to all those interested in working in sustainable land management (SLM). Attention must be given to bringing in the right expertise to help meet the SLM objectives of the new Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023. The forestry sector needs to be made a full partner in this, and the wealth of expertise in Wales around ecology, biodiversity and nature recovery should be harnessed to help farm businesses thrive. Demonstration farms and mentoring are among proposals to help communicate what is needed from farmers and why, including the benefits.

Questions were raised about how this work is funded in light of budgetary pressures on public funds available for agricultural support in Wales. The new contract must offer value for money, avoid duplication, and instil confidence for the future. Farmers are facing tough challenges and there is uncertainty and disquiet in the industry - Farming Connect must also continue its important role in supporting and protecting farmers' mental health. Scrutiny of the new contract will be important and the Committee stands ready to play its part.



**Paul Davies MS**

Chair

## Conclusions and Recommendations

**Conclusion 1.** The suggestion that Farming Connect is disengaged from the Welsh Government’s policy goals and that communication between the two organisations is weak is concerning, particularly during this important transition period. There must be absolute clarity on what the new Farming Connect contract is intended to deliver and why, and the programme clearly needs to be better promoted. .... Page 17

**Conclusion 2.** Although the SFS proposals are still in development, evidence from stakeholders shows some significant gaps in the current programme to help transition to the SFS, and support farmers with achieving the SLM objectives. There is certainly scope for much greater involvement of environmental NGOs and specialist expertise, including ecologists, biodiversity and horticulture experts and foresters, and securing this expertise must be prioritised during and after transition to the SFS. The role of farmers themselves as mentors and experts must be fully explored. Consideration needs to be given to how specialist information is shared with those managing the land, including the scope for developing an information hub of resources that can clearly signpost to the latest up-to-date scientific evidence and advice..... Page 22

**Conclusion 3.** Evidence of limited inclusion of the forestry sector is concerning, particularly in light of the SLM objectives in the Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023 and the requirements on active farmers set out in the SFS proposals. Farming Connect must be much more inclusive of forestry and woodland management expertise. It must involve that sector as a third party in the development of training and support services and opportunities for continuous professional development for those managing Welsh agricultural land..... Page 22

**Conclusion 4.** Support for students and agricultural workers new to the industry is vital and prioritising this must form part of the new contract. Access and eligibility to Farming Connect needs to be reviewed urgently with a view to ensuring better access for new entrants and other groups currently excluded, including students. The Welsh Government needs to consider the needs of smallholders and horticulturalists in commissioning future services. There must be adequate provision of support services in the medium of Welsh, and perennial problems of digital exclusion must be prioritised. Engagement with agricultural colleges and other institutions must be a focus of the next Farming Connect programme, as well as building links with schools to promote the industry and the opportunities on offer..... Page 24

**Conclusion 5.** Following EU-exit, some of the former mechanisms for scrutiny of agricultural support payments and services are no longer in place. This makes it even more important to have robust mechanisms for scrutiny of the public funds spent on supporting the agricultural industry, including the value for money and effectiveness of Farming Connect services. The Welsh Government should set out clearly how it intends to guarantee this accountability, and the Committee will then also need to consider its own scrutiny role. The Welsh Government should also respond to the matter of how the farming community, environmental NGOs, and all those active in the rural economy, are given a forum to express their views about farm advisory services, and to feed into future policy development.

.....Page27

**Conclusion 6.** Farming Connect has an important role in signposting to mental health support. Particularly in light of high levels of anxiety and disquiet in the sector about the challenges farmers face, and the uncertainty of the transition period the industry is in, the Welsh Government should ensure that there is a robust evaluation of whether Farming Connect services are sufficiently geared towards supporting mental health and reducing pressure rather than adding to it in any way. As far as possible within its remit, Farming Connect must identify and address the issues that are causing farmers the most anxiety and stress.

Consideration should be given to how it can ‘add value’ to the existing specialist support services available for farmers, and provide practical solutions to tackling the main drivers of stress. Recognising how much has changed for the sector since the last formal evaluation in 2021, the Welsh Government should also consider whether some independent evaluation and input would be helpful in achieving this important goal.....Page 29

**Recommendation 1.** The Welsh Government should set out how it will better promote Farming Connect’s role to support farmers in understanding how they can achieve the Sustainable Land Management objectives of the SFS. This should include considering stakeholders’ suggestion to use demonstration or ‘pilot’ farms as part of Farming Connect’s work..... Page 17



## 1. Introduction

The Committee held a one-day inquiry on Farming Connect on 22 February 2024. It focused on preparedness and capacity to deliver future services required under the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) from 2026, and to support farmers during the transition.

- 1.** Farming Connect is the Welsh Government's programme for delivering a coordinated package of knowledge transfer, innovation and advisory services for farming and forestry businesses. It was originally set up under the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 and has been providing support 'to improve resilience and promote transformational change in agriculture, forestry and rural communities'.
- 2.** Following EU-exit the Welsh Government announced £22.9m for Farming Connect for 2023-2025, to support transition to the proposed SFS, which was due to be introduced in 2025 but has since been delayed until 2026. A two-year successor programme was being planned to support SFS delivery. Farming Connect is delivered by contractors, with contract tendering expected to start in June 2024 and contract(s) awarded by September 2024. The Welsh Government has said it will learn from and adapt the current model "to make sure farmers can be confident they will receive the advice, guidance and support they need."<sup>1</sup>

### Background

- 3.** The Welsh Government manages the contract and supports the contractors to ensure delivery is consistent with its policies and targets. The governance structure includes a Programme Board providing strategic direction which has an independent chair, and members representing various stakeholders.
- 4.** Farmers and foresters voluntarily register for Farming Connect. Since the programme started in 2015 a total of 27,799 individuals have registered, representing 13,085 businesses. Once registered, participants have access to various services, some of which are fully funded or subsidised. The current

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<sup>1</sup> Written evidence

Knowledge Transfer Programme for 2023-2025<sup>2</sup> includes seven separate programmes, already aligned with the Sustainable Land Management (SLM) Objectives set out in the Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023. Programme outcomes, described by the Welsh Government, include tailored business support, increased efficiency, benchmarking performance, identifying areas for improvement, professional development, understanding latest innovations in technology, and sharing best practice.

**5.** The outline proposals for the SFS published in July 2022 set out a number of functions for Farming Connect under the new scheme, including to support:

- farmer registration;
- the Sustainability Review;
- farmers to undertake the universal and optional actions; and
- applications (where farmers confirm how actions will be completed).

**6.** However, the latest SFS consultation which closed on 7 March 2024 did not detail exactly how Farming Connect would support farmers in relation to the 17 Universal Actions set out – for example requirements for an ‘annual training cycle’ under UA2 – Continuous Personal Development, or to complete the carbon assessment required in the first year of joining the scheme. NFU Cymru said ““We are somewhat surprised, at this late stage, at the lack of clarity and detailed proposals for Farming Connect post 2025.”<sup>3</sup>

**7.** After the one-day inquiry, on 14 May 2024, the new Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs announced<sup>4</sup> that introduction of the SFS scheme would be delayed to 2026. The 2024-2025 preparatory phase offers an opportunity for Farming Connect to work with farmers to help transition and develop its offer for 2026, to help implement the scheme when it is introduced.

**8.** Written evidence from current contract holders, Menter a Busnes and Lantra, highlighted how the current programme relates to the SFS proposals. Lantra described a recent shift in focus to help the industry transition, e.g. new offers on peatland restoration, soil and water management, maintenance of ponds and wetlands as well as animal welfare workshops.

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<sup>2</sup> [Farming Connect\\_2023\\_0.pdf \(gov.wales\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> Written evidence

<sup>4</sup> [Written Statement: Future of Farming in Wales \(14 May 2024\) | GOV.WALES](#)

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## Committee Scrutiny

**9.** When Members met stakeholders at the Royal Welsh Show in July 2022 to discuss the proposed SFS the stakeholders said Farming Connect must be fit for purpose to deliver on the various responsibilities, given the new and ambitious approach to farm support. Feedback from the SFS co-design exercise also questioned whether there would be sufficient scheme advisers with the skills to support farmers.

**10.** In 2023 the Committee agreed to look in more detail at Farming Connect and how it will support implementation of the SFS. The tender process for the new contract, and ongoing consultation on the SFS, were factors in the timing of this work. The Committee decided to initially seek evidence from a range of farming and environmental stakeholders, and then seek oral evidence from those delivering the contract once the tendering process was complete.

**11.** The Committee appreciated that the current contract holders would not want to prejudice any future bid they might be planning to make. However, to inform its work, Lantra and Menter a Busnes were given the opportunity to provide written evidence on their views and experience around the current operation, especially including interactions with farmers, anything that hindered their work and anything they would like to see changed in the next round of tendering.

**12.** The Committee is grateful to all those who gave evidence. Written evidence was received from both Lantra and Menter a Busnes, as well as from the farming unions FUW and NFU Cymru, the Nature Friendly Farming Network (NFFN), Wales Environment Link (WEL), Confor and the Welsh Government. On 22 February oral evidence was taken from the Wales Federation of Young Farmers Clubs (Wales YFC), Farmers Union of Wales (FUW), NFU Cymru, NFFN, Confor and WEL.

## 2. Communicating future mission and role

**13.** A 2021 independent evaluation<sup>5</sup> of the delivery and impact of Farming Connect concluded that it had performed well and was trusted and respected by the sector, although NFU Cymru highlighted that this evaluation was carried out while farmers were being supported by the Basic Payment Scheme.<sup>6</sup> In oral evidence the farming unions and Wales YFC agreed it is well known and respected and has delivered real benefits. NFFN said that farmers in other parts of the UK were ‘quite jealous and envious’ of what was on offer in Wales, but that there were barriers to more farmers engaging with it, including older farmers more ‘stuck in their ways’.<sup>7</sup>

**14.** FUW and NFFN noted the level of engagement will vary depending on factors including the farmer’s age and the type of business they operate, but stakeholders giving oral evidence agreed Farming Connect would definitely benefit from further promotion. Elaine Harrison of Confor described “a desert of information,”<sup>8</sup> and said that more integration was needed between farming, foresters and wider land management. Hywel Morgan of NFFN said:

*“I think we’re at a critical moment now in agriculture and with the SFS proposals. I think more presence in the marketplace, maybe ... to try and get people involved ... The older population are just stuck in their ways a bit more and I think we’re at a critical point. We need to push and emphasise that there’s change happening, and there’s change needed, and Farming Connect are the ones that should be promoting this...”<sup>9</sup>*

**15.** The Committee heard quite diverse evidence from different stakeholders about what the future role of Farming Connect should be and how it fits with other support available to farmers in Wales. Although face-to-face support is important, NFU Cymru felt that Farming Connect should be streamlined and not take a disproportionate amount of resource out of the rural affairs budget. NFFN, Confor and WEL all emphasised the need for more Farming Connect services to help the transition to the SFS, such as demonstration farms.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.wales/evaluation-knowledge-transfer-innovation-and-advisory-services-programme-final-report>

<sup>6</sup> Written evidence

<sup>7</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 134

<sup>8</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 140

<sup>9</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 142

**16.** Particularly in light of these divergent views on future remit and functions, Welsh Government must set out the mission and role very clearly. Evidence from WEL and NFFN stressed the importance of Welsh Government providing more clarity about what it wanted Farming Connect to deliver and why. Members were told by NFFN that communication between the Welsh Government and Farming Connect was not good enough and there was a lack of understanding by Farming Connect about the Welsh Government’s policy goals and plans for rural Wales. Hywel Morgan said:

*“... they need to meet often and explain to each other what’s happening on the ground, what farmers are doing, what they want. And the Government needs to explain why they want to do it, and in stakeholder groups, cross-party groups, just to have an understanding. It’s all about the ‘why’.”<sup>10</sup>*

**17.** There must be a clear understanding of the roles of Farming Connect and the Farm Liaison Service when farmers transition to a new type of agricultural support payments. NFU Cymru’s written evidence suggested Farming Connect should provide complementary support to farmers to the wider advisory and support network, avoiding duplication. It named the farming unions, the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB), Hybu Cig Cymru (HCC), Farm Liaison Service, agriculture suppliers, banks, accountants, and solicitors as other players.

**18.** NFU Cymru highlighted the importance of the Farm Liaison Service and is “disappointed that Welsh Government continues to downplay the role of FLS [Farm Liaison Service] in the implementation of future Schemes”<sup>11</sup>. In Committee Abi Reader of NFU Cymru pointed out that Farming Connect had had no involvement in CAP budget support:

*“Traditionally, that service has been filled by the farm liaison services, which have been highly respected. And what you get with that delivery is you would phone up your farm liaison officer, and they will organise a meeting with you and help you fill out your respective paperwork, or deal with your appeals, or whatever it may be. Farming Connect is a very different organisation, where they will recognise there’s a need in an*

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<sup>10</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 223

<sup>11</sup> Written evidence

*area, you will express your interest and they will organise for an expert to come and speak to you.”<sup>12</sup>*

**19.** Abi Reader went on to question the value for money of Farming Connect offering a higher level of advice than that needed and supplied by the Farm Liaison Service. She also highlighted legal issues – noting that sometimes the advice provided to farmers had turned out to be wrong:

*“We can certainly draw attention to some examples that have come from members where they’ve been in touch with supposed experts, who’ve given them advice, and it’s been the wrong advice and they’ve fallen foul of their water quality regulations.”<sup>13</sup>*

## Supporting transition to the SFS

**20.** While Lantra’s written evidence gave examples of programme activities focused on the SFS,<sup>14</sup> FUW said that “many areas of the proposed options within the SFS” were not included in the current programme.<sup>15</sup> FUW emphasised that farmers have little experience in online training, recording key performance indicators (KPIs) or soil testing, and said some time will be needed to set up a new Farming Connect programme and find the relevant expertise for SFS support.

**21.** NFU Cymru said farmers will need support to both apply for the SFS and meet all the scheme obligations, including digitally excluded farmers. It noted there could be a significant uplift in the number requiring support, so the capacity of Farming Connect merits consideration. However the union also emphasised that advice and guidance services should not be used as compensation for “an overly complex scheme design”.<sup>16</sup>

**22.** In oral evidence, Gareth Parry of FUW told Members that the help provided specifically for the transition was “questionable”, but the farming unions and Wales YFC also acknowledged it was probably a bit early to assess at this stage.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 23

<sup>13</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 24

<sup>14</sup> Written evidence

<sup>15</sup> Written evidence

<sup>16</sup> Written evidence

<sup>17</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraphs 64-67

## Funding

**23.** Several stakeholders highlighted that the level of funding, including for advice and guidance, must match the SFS's ambition. Menter a Busnes said financial security is needed to allow contracts to be awarded for a minimum of 3 years and preferably for 5 years, as project activity needs to be planned in advance.

**24.** NFU Cymru stated that despite the significant and increasing investment of public funds over twenty years, evidencing impact and value for money of the Farming Connect programme remains "challenging". It highlighted the programme received almost £46.5m during the 2014-20 RDP, an uplift of 50% from the previous RDP (2007-13). NFU Cymru believes the Welsh Government must properly evaluate the current online training offer provided by Farming Connect before "investing significant sums in the future programme".<sup>18</sup>

**25.** In oral evidence, Gareth Parry of FUW noted the significant funding that Menter a Busnes receives compared to the difficulty farmers have in accessing small grants due to budget constraints. Abi Reader of NFU Cymru stressed that farmers having to seek funded help from Farming Connect to produce the nutrient management plans required by The Water Resources (Control of Agricultural Pollution) (Wales) Regulations 2021 "makes no sense".<sup>19</sup>

**26.** While the farming unions are concerned about resource going to advisory services, rather than farmers, FUW said there were concerns about bureaucracy to achieve the Universal Actions in the new SFS scheme, and how much farmers would be able to do without support.<sup>20</sup> Dominic Hampton Smith of Wales YFC said:

*"I think Farming Connect could be a really key tool for those that do enter the scheme to certainly enhance their understanding of carbon audits and the environmental schemes that are currently proposed. So, I think we do need to be very careful not to move too far away from that and leaving people to their own devices."<sup>21</sup>*

**27.** WEL's written evidence said Farming Connect should consider strengthening its offer towards environmental public goods. However, Wales YFC also noted that,

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<sup>18</sup> Written evidence

<sup>19</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 69

<sup>20</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraphs 73-76

<sup>21</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 76

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while acknowledging Farming Connect's role in promoting environmental schemes it would be important not to deviate too much from its role in provision relating to 'farm skills'.<sup>22</sup>

**28.** NFU Cymru believes advice and guidance provision should be prioritised for the 'Optional' and 'Collaborative' action layers of the SFS which are expected to be more complex, bespoke contracts.<sup>23</sup> NFFN said advice should identify win-win scenarios where farm business economics and environmental benefits overlap.<sup>24</sup>

**29.** Arfon Williams of WEL said there had been a lack of investment in explaining the need for a transition in farming, to restore the ecosystems we rely on:

*"... that's the role that is now facing farming, and that's the role that we're asking of farming. But I don't think anyone has actually sat farming down collectively and said, 'Right, this is what we now need you to do and why.'"*<sup>25</sup>

**30.** Hywel Morgan of NFFN agreed that Welsh Government and Farming Connect had unfortunately "missed a trick" in not having the conversation with farmers sooner:

*"We're at a stage now where we're seeing all these protests et cetera, and farmers getting angry, because nobody has actually explained to them and helped them with this transition."*<sup>26</sup>

## New entrants

**31.** Support for new entrants and a focus on succession is considered vital and urgent. Hywel Morgan of NFFN said:

*"Unless we do something quick, we won't have anybody to manage the land and farm the land anyway and produce food. And new entrants altogether, the price of land is obviously the big issue for new entrants, but share farming, which might need tweaking, is a good system within the current Farming Connect. It probably needs tweaking and more emphasis on*

<sup>22</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 26

<sup>23</sup> Written evidence

<sup>24</sup> Written evidence

<sup>25</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 166

<sup>26</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 168



*who gets the payments rather than the landowner. But succession is the key.”<sup>27</sup>*

**32.** Dominic Hampton Smith of Wales YFC said Farming Connect had a vital role in encouraging new entrants and much more promotion work was needed:

*“... pushing the fact that there are a lot of opportunities within agriculture, is only a good thing. I think that we should be looking to try and progress in that area and really bring people in. Farming can sometimes be seen as a bit of a horrible job—24/7, every day, you’re out working, day or night, wet or warm. So, getting past that, I think, is going to be tricky, but I do think it’s something Farming Connect could certainly help push along with, and to really show that agriculture is key.”<sup>28</sup>*

**33.** Lantra’s response to the Committee highlighted the importance of Farming Connect promoting agriculture, horticulture and forestry as a “rewarding and a professional career of choice”, noting the current careers work being delivered by Lantra for Scottish Government.<sup>29</sup>

**34.** Elaine Harrison of Confor also stressed the importance of access for younger people in light of the ageing workforce in the sector. She said it needed to be more welcoming and there were currently barriers to access so people could learn and collaborate.<sup>30</sup>

**35.** FUW said there was a role to promote Farming Connect’s joint venture programme further, which had brought “some really good successes”. Gareth Parry said “given potential barriers for tenants receiving equal support through the SFS in future, then that might be a new avenue for new entrants to come into the industry.”<sup>31</sup>

**36.** NFU Cymru however questioned whether supporting new entrants should be the job of Farming Connect or should come from a different funding pot, with Farming Connect focusing on strengthening existing farm businesses to be fit for the future, pointing to the prediction of future job losses.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 205

<sup>28</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 102

<sup>29</sup> Written evidence

<sup>30</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 148

<sup>31</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 107

<sup>32</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 104

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## Demonstration Farms

**37.** The importance of demonstration farms was stressed – to take away farmers’ nervousness about the incoming SFS changes and show how production and habitat management can work together. Hywel Morgan of NFFN explained:

*“... so farmers can go and have a look at what exactly do they mean by certain outcomes, certain universal actions, so we can see it on the ground, and get an understanding of how it looks, how it will work for my farm at home.”<sup>33</sup>*

**38.** He went on:

*“... the farmers need a vision of what Government policy wants from us and what society is asking of us. And it isn’t food production against nature. As farmers, food production is our priority, but also nature is a priority for their business as well. So, without both, neither wins.”<sup>34</sup>*

**39.** Arfon Williams of WEL said these farms were very effective in getting messages across: “get the show-and-tell examples up and running, because those are the things that I think really resonate with farmers.”<sup>35</sup> Hywel Morgan also said that demonstration or pilot farms would not necessarily just be about focusing on success but also learning more by failure, for example in trialling new technologies.<sup>36</sup>

**Conclusion 1.** The suggestion that Farming Connect is disengaged from the Welsh Government’s policy goals and that communication between the two organisations is weak is concerning, particularly during this important transition period. There must be absolute clarity on what the new Farming Connect contract is intended to deliver and why, and the programme clearly needs to be better promoted.

**Recommendation 1.** The Welsh Government should set out how it will better promote Farming Connect’s role to support farmers in understanding how they can achieve the Sustainable Land Management objectives of the SFS. This should include considering stakeholders’ suggestion to use demonstration or ‘pilot’ farms as part of Farming Connect’s work.

<sup>33</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 163

<sup>34</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraphs 189

<sup>35</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraphs 186

<sup>36</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraphs 200

### 3. Skills and expertise requirements

**40.** NFU Cymru said that Farming Connect was useful as a portal to help farmers access the right people to provide advice and expertise. Wales YFC agreed it cut out research time to help potential new entrants access the right people to help them. In terms of keeping up-to-date, Abi Reader said there were good examples of developments in areas such as cow foot health, but other areas needed better engagement and focus and a less arms-length approach.

**41.** When asked which areas should be focused on, NFU Cymru said carbon efficiency was important, how to achieve net zero in a way that is sustainable for the Welsh rural economy, and keeping up to speed with the latest science, but Abi Reader also said infrastructure investment was as important as advice.

**42.** NFFN was generally happy with the Farming Connect offer, but said more could be done to support smallholders and horticulturalists, and that advisers could be more focused on nature-friendly farming and forestry, with more discussion groups and consultants with awareness of the new SFS policy direction.<sup>37</sup>

**43.** Wales Environment Link (WEL) called for a skills audit to identify “which parties, individuals and organisations” needed to be brought in to provide the knowledge and skills needed to deliver the sustainable land management objectives of the SFS. WEL and NFFN called for more biodiversity specialists and ecologists. Hywel Morgan of NFFN said either skilled ecologists or mentors were needed due to the specialist topic area, to help farmers know if their land or habitat was scheme-ready.<sup>38</sup>

**44.** WEL suggested engagement with environmental NGOs to help Farming Connect access the skills and knowledge to design advice, particularly for the habitat creation elements of the SFS. It said one way to do this is to engage with the Farm Wildlife partnership to access its advice. It said Farming Connect should expand the list of third-party trainers to fill skills gaps.<sup>39</sup> NFFN pointed out that Plantlife are very knowledgeable, and the National Parks have their own ecology teams.

**45.** Arfon Williams told Members that the Chartered Institute of Ecological and Environmental Management (CIEEM) had been talking to Farming Connect about

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<sup>37</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraphs 149-151

<sup>38</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraphs 179

<sup>39</sup> Written evidence

how to improve the numbers of ecologists, but thought the process was “very much weighted towards recruiting the types of skills that Farming Connect currently needs, currently wants, which is very much based on a kind of productionist agenda.”<sup>40</sup>

**46.** NFU Cymru called for the Welsh Government to recognise that many farmers are well qualified and often “better qualified and experienced than the advisers sent out”.<sup>41</sup> It therefore says a process by which farmers’ prior learning can be recognised is vital. NFFN also pointed out that using professional advisers and consultants doesn’t necessarily have to be the default approach, and supports promotion of farmer mentors i.e. those undertaking good practice to pass on advice to other farmers.

**47.** NFFN said employing appropriate individuals, sensitive to the needs of farmers, is vital to assist in the delivery of collaborative schemes, and this has been an essential ingredient to the success of results based agri-environment schemes in Ireland.<sup>42</sup> Hywel Morgan described the mentoring going on in Farming Connect as “a fantastic service” that should be pushed, and to get more farmers willing to share their experiences.<sup>43</sup>

**48.** Ramblers Cymru highlighted that Farming Connect does not offer support to landowners in understanding public access and public rights of way, including societal benefits, their rights, responsibilities and liabilities. It says this is an opportunity to educate landowners, saying access responsibilities “are often left unfulfilled”.<sup>44</sup>

## Research

**49.** Farming Connect must keep up to date with scientific evidence and keep farmers informed of relevant information to help them innovate, for example to scale up regenerative farming. WEL’s written evidence suggested a role for Farming Connect to support farmer-led collaborative research, as these opportunities are no longer available through EU-funded programmes.<sup>45</sup>

**50.** Arfon Williams of WEL described keeping up to date with developments as “a massive challenge” that would be a difficult task for Farming Connect, and

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<sup>40</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 146

<sup>41</sup> Written evidence

<sup>42</sup> Written evidence

<sup>43</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 190

<sup>44</sup> Written evidence

<sup>45</sup> Written evidence

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suggested there was probably a role for Welsh Government in ensuring an integrated approach to providing a hub of information in one place.

**51.** When asked whether the R&D function should be core to the future role, as opposed to this being the job of higher education institutions, Arfon Williams explained:

*“Farming Connect have got a really good role in perhaps helping those ground-based, farmer-based collaborations to take this stuff and trial it on the ground, to learn through doing. I think that would involve academia, like IBERS and Bangor... That was there within the CAP provision. We had that ability to test this sort of stuff...having Farming Connect enabling that development and understanding of this—what does regenerative farming actually look like in Wales, how do we implement it and how do we derive the benefits from that—we’ll only get to grips with that when we’re actually piloting it and trialling it.”<sup>46</sup>*

**52.** Arfon Williams said that there was an important role for environmental NGOs to provide support and expertise, pointing to projects like the RSPB’s work at Lake Vyrnwy and peatland restoration, which was “very specialist stuff”.<sup>47</sup>

## **Integration with Forestry and woodland management**

**53.** With the introduction of the Sustainable Land Management objectives in the SFS proposals, including targets for tree planting and managing other woodland habitat, farmers will need more support in terms of woodland management. Elaine Harrison of Confor did not agree that Farming Connect was well known and respected among foresters, and said forestry and woodland management was a missing element of the programme:

*“... it hasn’t been an inclusive entity, allowing, say, all woodland planners to be involved to be able to support farmers; it’s only been a certain percentage. So, a lot of people have been disengaged from it, and haven’t been able to support the farming sector. There is a limited amount of woodland management and forestry on the books, so it seems to be a tiny*

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<sup>46</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraphs 161

<sup>47</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 196

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*area that has been allowed to be explored with Farming Connect.”<sup>48</sup>*

**54.** Confor questioned whether Farming Connect needed a complete rebrand: “is farming the right word?” given the importance of including forestry and woodland and habitat management as well as food production. On this point, the Minister’s evidence to the Committee said:

*“I ask the Committee to note any future offering has the potential to be different to that currently available to ensure it remains fit for purpose for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. It may still be branded as Farming Connect, but I may equally decide to change the brand.”<sup>49</sup>*

**55.** Confor stressed the importance of activities to support continuing professional development (CPD) and knowledge exchange, including through online learning and podcasts as well as face-to-face events. Elaine Harrison said it was about professionalising the sector, to help people “make informed decisions about their business and to make these businesses thrive and to futureproof.”<sup>50</sup> Confor wants to support CPD elements of woodland programmes and said access to forest research was important for evidence-based practice. Confor say farmers will need to have access to woodland advisers, noting there are 20-30 professional foresters registered with NRW, and the Institute of Chartered Foresters also has a register.<sup>51</sup>

**56.** Confor subsequently provided supplementary evidence<sup>52</sup> outlining the multiple woodland modules it considers are required – not just one – and mentoring that should be made available under Farming Connect in future. The evidence stated that:

*“All registered woodland planners should have access within the mentoring scheme to support farmers and not be bound by a procurement process. These are professional foresters and registered with NRW. A cut of the money will then not go to a third-party making management plans uneconomically viable for the forester’s time and preventing farmers having access to*

<sup>48</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 132

<sup>49</sup> Written evidence

<sup>50</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 182

<sup>51</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 192

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<https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s145816/Additional%20evidence%20paper%20from%20Confor%20-%2029%20February%202024.pdf>

*this opportunity. Confor is keen to ensure that an unbiased approach can be undertaken.”<sup>53</sup>*

**Conclusion 2.** Although the SFS proposals are still in development, evidence from stakeholders shows some significant gaps in the current programme to help transition to the SFS, and support farmers with achieving the SLM objectives. There is certainly scope for much greater involvement of environmental NGOs and specialist expertise, including ecologists, biodiversity and horticulture experts and foresters, and securing this expertise must be prioritised during and after transition to the SFS. The role of farmers themselves as mentors and experts must be fully explored. Consideration needs to be given to how specialist information is shared with those managing the land, including the scope for developing an information hub of resources that can clearly signpost to the latest up-to-date scientific evidence and advice.

**Conclusion 3.** Evidence of limited inclusion of the forestry sector is concerning, particularly in light of the SLM objectives in the Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023 and the requirements on active farmers set out in the SFS proposals. Farming Connect must be much more inclusive of forestry and woodland management expertise. It must involve that sector as a third party in the development of training and support services and opportunities for continuous professional development for those managing Welsh agricultural land.

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<sup>53</sup> Supplementary written evidence

## 4. Eligibility and Access

**57.** FUW stated that although Farming Connect is open to all, there is a perception that some elements are limited to small groups, and members have reported difficulties with accessing various services.<sup>54</sup>

**58.** The Welsh Government says eligibility criteria for 2023-25 have been broadened from previous programmes to include more farmers and foresters with smaller holdings, new categories of self-employed contractors and food businesses. FUW said that the likelihood, under the SFS proposals as they stand, of fewer farmers entering the SFS would make it important to ensure that those outside the scheme can still receive advice, support and training from Farming Connect.<sup>55</sup> This point was supported by other stakeholders.

**59.** Menter a Busnes and Lantra both highlighted the revised eligibility criteria excludes students, limiting the programme's ability to support the next generation of farmers - 662 students were supported between 2015 - 2023.<sup>56</sup> There was a strong view from stakeholders that agricultural students should be eligible, and that Farming Connect should be helping new entrants into farming.

**60.** Gareth Parry of FUW noted there was no additional financial support in the current SFS proposals for new and young entrants, and said:

*"... any avenue, really, that we can follow to try and support our new and young entrants even before they make that step onto the ladder, so when they're doing their agricultural and land-based training courses, then by all means we'd support their inclusion."<sup>57</sup>*

**61.** Dominic Hampton-Smith of the Wales YFC described Farming Connect as a "massive stepping stone" to helping him get ahead as a "wanna be first generation farmer", saying that support needed to be available from agricultural college onwards.<sup>58</sup> Abi Reader of NFU Cymru also described her personal experience of a young agricultural worker having difficulty in accessing Farming Connect schemes.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Written evidence

<sup>55</sup> Written evidence

<sup>56</sup> Written evidence

<sup>57</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 33

<sup>58</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 39

<sup>59</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 41



**62.** Arfon Williams of WEL said there was a need to form a more effective working relationship with agricultural colleges and institutions across Wales, particularly in light of the increasing challenges for future land managers, not just for food but also climate change, environmental security and biodiversity restoration.<sup>60</sup>

**63.** NFFN also wanted to see the scheme available to horticulturalists and those farming on smaller holdings of less than 3 hectares.<sup>61</sup>

**64.** Dominic Hampton-Smith of Wales YFC said the ability to access Welsh medium services, training and support was an issue to consider for all farmers, including those coming into the industry, not just for those in traditionally Welsh-speaking areas.<sup>62</sup> Hywel Morgan of NFFN said:

*“most advisers should be bilingual, because it’s surprising how many people just feel comfortable speaking in Welsh and struggle to speak in English. So, that’s an important part. And diversity is important, as well, and to encourage all sorts of religious backgrounds as well. I think, moving forward, we have to be more open minded and encompass and welcome everybody on board.”<sup>63</sup>*

**65.** FUW stressed the problems of online access - both due to difficulties with digital connectivity because of rural broadband issues, or the ability to navigate and access support via the website.<sup>64</sup> WEL saw a role for Farming Connect in providing the skills and the ability to access support by digital means.

**66.** Gareth Parry of FUW also highlighted the importance of area officers and face-to-face engagement for those in ‘hard to reach’ areas.<sup>65</sup>

**Conclusion 4.** Support for students and agricultural workers new to the industry is vital and prioritising this must form part of the new contract. Access and eligibility to Farming Connect needs to be reviewed urgently with a view to ensuring better access for new entrants and other groups currently excluded, including students. The Welsh Government needs to consider the needs of smallholders and horticulturalists in commissioning future services. There must be adequate provision of support services in the medium of Welsh, and perennial

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<sup>60</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 152

<sup>61</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 151

<sup>62</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 50

<sup>63</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 154

<sup>64</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 43-45

<sup>65</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 28

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problems of digital exclusion must be prioritised. Engagement with agricultural colleges and other institutions must be a focus of the next Farming Connect programme, as well as building links with schools to promote the industry and the opportunities on offer.

## 5. The Contract and Programme Structure

**67.** There was strong agreement from stakeholders that a contract length of two years was too short given the long-term nature of farming, and that a five year contract with regular reviews built in, was more appropriate. Abi Reader of NFU Cymru said:

*“... Looking at longer term contracts can give quite a bit of benefit, as long as there are checks and balances in place, so that if it appears that it needs to go off in another direction, then it can. But, yes, some more long-term stability is always welcome.”<sup>66</sup>*

**68.** Hywel Morgan of NFFN also made the point that staff training and retention was impacted by a shorter contract.

**69.** Menter a Busnes highlighted that the 2015-23 contract was structured into three programmes, while the 2023-25 contract offers seven. It said dividing the contract into too many small-scale programmes increases management costs and risks duplication and lack of coordination.<sup>67</sup>

**70.** Arfon Williams representing WEL said there was scope to broaden out the programme, and it needed to be redesigned around the Sustainable Land Management objectives and encompass more of the environmental side of sustainable land management. He noted a recommendation from the 2021 evaluation of Farming Connect was that “lots of other similar programmes running elsewhere in Europe were doing a lot more for the environment.”<sup>68</sup>

**71.** Arfon Williams also said there needed to be some sequencing done as part of the forward planning for the new contract:

*“... I think Farming Connect needs to think about that kind of sequencing as well: what should it be focusing on initially in order to have that conversation with farming?”<sup>69</sup>*

**72.** Welsh Government must give careful consideration to these issues for the contract to support the SFS, with the most recent SFS proposals consulted on having set out a total of 17 Universal Actions.

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<sup>66</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 61

<sup>67</sup> Written evidence

<sup>68</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 158

<sup>69</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 185

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## Formal evaluation of Farming Connect

**73.** Members asked the farming unions and Wales YFC about whether a more formal evaluation approach was needed in future to take on board the views of the industry. It was agreed there was a need, and noted that access to Ministers could be a problem, and time that was made available tended to be focused on priority issues such as farm support payments and bovine TB. FUW noted the previous Welsh Government's 2020 proposal for a Rural Development Advisory Board, to focus on the future of rural development in Wales and funding priorities, had not been progressed.

**Conclusion 5.** Following EU-exit, some of the former mechanisms for scrutiny of agricultural support payments and services are no longer in place. This makes it even more important to have robust mechanisms for scrutiny of the public funds spent on supporting the agricultural industry, including the value for money and effectiveness of Farming Connect services. The Welsh Government should set out clearly how it intends to guarantee this accountability, and the Committee will then also need to consider its own scrutiny role. The Welsh Government should also respond to the matter of how the farming community, environmental NGOs, and all those active in the rural economy, are given a forum to express their views about farm advisory services, and to feed into future policy development.

## 6. Supporting mental health

**74.** The Minister's response to the Committee's questions about Farming Connect highlighted its role in promoting awareness of mental health care in rural communities and tackling stigma. It said Farming Connect and other SFS delivery staff will continue to receive mental health first aid training.

**75.** Farming Connect should not replicate existing good mental health provision, but must have good working relationships with mental health charities to help farmers to find the right support quickly. FUW wanted to see closer working relationships between Farming Connect and mental health charities, in particular signposting to support.<sup>70</sup>

**76.** Abi Reader of NFU Cymru said the current mental health issues for farmers were a result of evolving regulations and post-Brexit disruption. She said it was a specialist task that should not be a role for Farming Connect beyond signposting people – mental health support should be coming from a different pot, and with specialist expertise to deal with deep issues beyond the scope of that organisation.<sup>71</sup>

**77.** Hywel Morgan of NFFN said Wales was fortunate in having some good mental health charities available, but stressed the importance of reducing the pressure on farmers in the first place, and providing opportunities to talk about non-farming issues to help reduce work stress:

*"... the first thing I'd say is to look at what Farming Connect are currently doing, and is any of that creating mental health issues, because there's a lot of peer pressure, and there are a lot of expectations from farmers. Are we pushing farmers to do more than they physically can, both mentally and physically? ... some of these discussion groups don't have to be focused on precision grazing or, I don't know, key performance indicators; maybe just a day out to the races or something like that would be enough sometimes—just down time. There's too much pressure. It's all about work, work, work and sometimes down time is all that's needed..."<sup>72</sup>*

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<sup>70</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 107

<sup>71</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 109

<sup>72</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 212

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**78.** WEL's evidence recognised that farmers' wellbeing and the provision of emotional support was "paramount"; that identifying the drivers for anxiety and stress was important, and Farming Connect could have a role in finding practical solutions to address these.<sup>73</sup>

**Conclusion 6.** Farming Connect has an important role in signposting to mental health support. Particularly in light of high levels of anxiety and disquiet in the sector about the challenges farmers face, and the uncertainty of the transition period the industry is in, the Welsh Government should ensure that there is a robust evaluation of whether Farming Connect services are sufficiently geared towards supporting mental health and reducing pressure rather than adding to it in any way. As far as possible within its remit, Farming Connect must identify and address the issues that are causing farmers the most anxiety and stress. Consideration should be given to how it can 'add value' to the existing specialist support services available for farmers, and provide practical solutions to tackling the main drivers of stress. Recognising how much has changed for the sector since the last formal evaluation in 2021, the Welsh Government should also consider whether some independent evaluation and input would be helpful in achieving this important goal.

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<sup>73</sup> Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 February 2024, Paragraph 214

## Annex 1: List of oral evidence sessions.

The following witnesses provided oral evidence to the committee. The transcript can be viewed on the [Committee's website](#).

Date	Name and Organisation
22 February 2024	<p><b>Dominic Hampson-Smith, Rural Affairs Vice Chairman,</b> Wales Federation of Young Farmers Clubs (Wales YFC)</p> <p><b>Gareth Parry, Deputy Head of Policy,</b> Farmers' Union of Wales (FUW)</p> <p><b>Abi Reader, Deputy President,</b> National Farmers' Union Cymru (NFU)</p> <p><b>Arfon Williams, Head of Land and Sea Policy for RSPB Cymru,</b> representing Wales Environment Link (WEL)</p> <p><b>Elaine Harrison, National Manager for Wales,</b> Confor</p> <p><b>Hywel Morgan, Chair,</b> Nature-Friendly Farming Network (NFFN)</p>

## Annex 2: List of written evidence

The following people and organisations provided written evidence to the Committee which can be viewed on the [Committee's website](#).

Date	Organisation
<b>22 February 2024</b>	Evidence paper – Farmers' Union of Wales (FUW), Item 3
<b>22 February 2024</b>	Evidence paper – National Farmers Union Cymru (NFU Cymru), Item 3
<b>22 February 2024</b>	Additional information – Lantra, Item 3
<b>22 February 2024</b>	Additional information – Menter a Busnes, Item 3
<b>22 February 2024</b>	Evidence paper – Nature Friendly Farming Network, Item 4
<b>22 February 2024</b>	Evidence paper – Confor, Item 4
<b>22 February 2024</b>	Evidence paper – Wales Environment Link (WEL), Item 4

### Additional Information

Title	Date
Confor – supplementary evidence after 22 February meeting	29 February 2024
Email from Ramblers Cymru	5 February 2024
Letter to the Chair from the Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd	1 February 2024
Letter from the Chair to Lantra regarding Farming Connect	23 January 2024
Letter from the Chair to Menter a Busnes regarding Farming Connect	23 January 2024
Letter from the Chair to Welsh Government regarding Farming Connect	23 January 2024