



Workshops to discuss the future of tree planting with Welsh farmers

Executive Summary

1. Background and research questions

- 1.1 The Welsh Government's aim is to support the planting of 180,000 hectares of trees by 2050 to meet Net Zero targets and achieve a wide range of environmental benefits. Given that approximately 85% of land in Wales¹ is under the ownership or management of farmers, increasing canopy cover requires a collaborative approach with landowners. The evidence base is increasingly recognising the deeper social and cultural barriers and opportunities that influence farmers' decision-making process, and the need to understand and address these in order to ensure the success of large-scale woodland creation². This research aims to provide insights on farmers' views and values in relation to tree planting more generally, rather than focusing on the specifics of any near-term scheme or policy. The work will help to build the evidence base in Wales to support broader government programme and policy development in relation to tree planting. More specifically, it starts discussions with the agricultural industry needed to initiate the [Trees and Timber Deep Dive](#) recommendation for a "call to arms" to promote and support a step change in tree planting and create an alliance for change, working with farmers, landowners, communities, and volunteers across Wales."
- 1.2. The research was intended to address the following research questions:
- a) How do farmers view the roles of farmers in 2050?
 - b) What are reasons for why they would/ would not plant trees? What land would farmers be willing to use for tree planting?

¹ Welsh Government (2022) [Farming Facts and Figures, Wales 2022](#)

² Demski, C. for BEIS (2021). [Net zero public engagement and participation: A research note](#)

- c) What are the characteristics of payment schemes that farmers would take up?
- d) What are the implications for the kinds of interventions that are likely to increase tree planting on agricultural land?

2. Methodology

- 2.1. The report presents insights from six visioning workshops and a pilot workshop held in seven locations across Wales in February and March 2023. There was an intentional decision to use a deliberative approach, given the recognised value of such methodologies for complex policy areas, where solutions need to be developed both with and for people and where delivering policy objectives requires major changes to day-to-day lives³.
- 2.2. Findings reflect the views of the farmers engaged with rather than the farming population more generally. They provide insight into the views and issues faced by farmers and a useful contribution to the wider evidence base of farmer views on tree planting.
- 2.3. The research was designed as part of a Social Science Policy Research Fellowship and delivered by Menter a Busnes (MaB). Participants for the workshops were recruited by MaB through online open calls on social media and through MaB and farming networks. Since the time allocated for recruitment was short, there was not a fixed quota for specific characteristics, but a wide range of characteristics were included in the sample. Eight farmers were recruited for a pilot focus group where the approach was tested and a further forty-seven farmers were recruited to take part in the refined workshops. Notes were taken during the workshop by a notetaker. The notes were analysed using thematic analysis⁴ and have been summarised in this report.
- 2.4. The workshops consisted of three parts:
 - (a) **Deliberation phase.** To introduce tree-planting goals and some of the known drivers of, and barriers to, on-farm tree planting. The intention was to ground individuals in the here and now and allow them to air views about the current context enabling them to better focus on the future in later phases.
 - (b) **Backcasting phase.** To look at what a future Net Zero Wales that has achieved its tree planting targets by 2050 might look like. The aim of this part was to create a space

³ Verfuwerth, C., Demski, C., Capstick, S., Whitmarsh, L., & Poortinga, W. (2023), 'A people-centred approach is needed to meet net zero goals', *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s4): 97–124. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s4.097>; Cherry, C.E., Capstick, S., Demski, C., Mellier, C., Stone, L. and Verfuwerth, C. (2021), [Citizens' climate assemblies: Understanding public deliberation for climate policy](#). Cardiff: *The Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations*.

⁴ See e.g. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). *Thematic analysis*. American Psychological Association.

that is detached from present-day tensions, and to identify characteristics of policies and other circumstances that have supported farmers in planting more trees.

(c) Feasibility & Desirability of Pathways. In the last step identified pathways to tree planting were deliberated in more depth to help to identify what is needed to encourage and support farmers to create woodland.

3. Findings

What are farmers' roles in 2050 in the view of farmers?

- 3.1 Two themes dominated across all workshops regarding the perceived role of farmers in the future. These were (1) the sentiment that a farmer's role in 2050 should still be to produce food for their community and for Wales and (2) the role farmers play as being at the heart of local communities – especially Welsh speaking communities. Food production was seen as important in increasing resilience in the face of global crises, including those resulting from climate change. Across workshops there was a perception that tree planting was competing with food production.
- 3.2 When thinking about what it would be like to be a farmer in 2050, participants hoped that more efficient food production (innovation and possibly a shift to the production of more food crops) would enable a better work-life balance; that farmers would have more agency and would be getting fairer prices for the food that they produce. They also aspired to a future where farming would be more valued by wider society. One of the most prominent challenges mentioned was the need to adapt to more extreme weather and participants were also very concerned that the younger generation were not encouraged to farm, due to the financial insecurity and perceived lack of respect for farmers.

What are reasons for why they would/ would not plant trees? What land would farmers be willing to use for tree planting?

- 3.3 The two main drivers for considering tree planting were the potential for a diversified income and to enhance or enable the primary objective of food production (e.g. by providing shelter belts, managing water courses, sequestering carbon etc.)
- 3.4 There were a number of factors which discouraged participants from planting trees. One was the perception that converting farmland to woodland would be irreversible and would minimise their ability to adapt in the future (this was exacerbated by wider beliefs including that woodland would not be subject to the same tax exemptions as agricultural land). Tree

planting was also seen by participants to compete with multiple, more immediate pressures faced by farmers such as meeting agricultural pollution regulations. Farmers' positions were also shaped by a range of wider perceived issues associated with woodland creation such as the view that well managed grassland sequestered carbon more effectively than trees and was less likely to lead to fires in extreme weather.

What are the characteristics of payment schemes that farmers would take up?

What are the implications for what kind of interventions are likely to have more impact in terms of increasing tree planting on agricultural land?

- 3.5 In discussing desires for the long-term support landscape, farmers emphasised the need for a trusting and collaborative relationship between the farmers and Welsh Government advisers/officials. They also called for a more long-term approach both in terms of financial support and encouraging agency to make long-term decisions (e.g. through advice on carbon calculators). Flexible schemes which enabled farmers to take gradual steps towards woodland creation and reflected the individual circumstances of the farm were favoured by participants.
- 3.6 Participants also highlighted the need to make information and advice more accessible to farmers, to build capability in relation to woodland planting and management within the agricultural industry more widely (so that farmers could be more confident in making the right decisions) and to ensure availability of trusted field officers with local knowledge.

4. Implications

- 4.1 Farmers engaged with saw themselves primarily as food producers. Therefore policies, communications and schemes which are designed to enhance and complement food production are likely to be more successful at engaging the farming population as a whole.
- 4.2 Participants' views set out their preference for tree planting which works with and is flexible to the existing farming system (e.g. provide shelter) but there was also an interest in tree planting if they could be assured it would generate an income. Enhancing understanding of how tree planting can support the diversification of farming income and improve existing farming systems could be beneficial.
- 4.3 Climate change was seen as an issue which would require farmers to adapt but was not always closely associated with tree planting. There may be value for policies and schemes in focusing more on the role of trees in supporting adaptation.
- 4.4 Participants raised concerns that the next generation is currently not incentivised to continue farming, for reasons which included both financial uncertainty and the perceived

lack of public respect for farmers. There may be opportunities to emphasise the long-term financial benefits of tree planting and how tree planting can help demonstrate to the public the role farmers play both in producing food and looking after the environment.

- 4.5 Farmers at the workshops did not feel confident in accessing and understanding information about tree planting and the support available to them. Discussion also suggested a need to build trust between the Welsh Government and farmers in relation to schemes. Initiatives which upskill farmers, for example through demonstrator farms and trusted, local advisors as well as adequate training for farmers and potential advisors could help to address these issues.
- 4.6 Some participants raised perceived issues associated with planting trees, some of which were based on misconceptions. There were also concerns raised that tree planting conflicted with other regulatory requirements. Addressing farmers' demand for more training on woodland planting and management provides the opportunity to discuss these complex issues and to provide evidence-based, applied advice.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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