

FWP 07

Ymateb gan : Cymdeithas Cynnyrch Coedwigoedd y DU
Evidence from : UK Forest Products Association

1. The United Kingdom Forest Products Association (UKFPA) is the trade association that represents the technical and commercial interests of the domestic timber sector in Wales, Scotland and England. Although most Members of the Association are engaged in sawmilling and wood processing, Members' interests also include forest and woodland management, timber harvesting, timber transport, processing of sawmill products, the manufacture of a range of wood products, including sawn softwood and hardwood, fencing, gates and timber garden products, pallets and packaging, wood based panels and paperboard, all derived from the sustainably managed forests and woodlands of Wales, Scotland or England.
2. UKFPA welcomed the publication of the 'Woodlands for Wales strategy in 2009; it was considered to be well-balanced and it recognised the ability of forests and woodlands to deliver a range of valuable benefits. It was hoped that it would provide the basis for improvement and expansion of forests and woodlands in Wales. Importantly, the strategy recognised the ability of sustainably managed forests and woodlands to deliver economic, social and environmental benefits. Indeed, the practice of forestry has evolved over the years, so that today, forest management focusses on the delivery of multiple benefits.
3. From 1919 until 2013, the public forest estate in Wales was ably managed by Forestry Commission Wales. Its key objectives were to protect, improve and expand the forests and woodlands of Wales. During that time, the forests and woodlands were professionally managed and provided a significant and valuable legacy for future generations. The public forest estate came to be managed in accordance with internationally recognised standards of sustainable forest management, which has been demonstrated by independent certification.
4. From April 2013 the public forest estate in Wales has been managed by Natural Resources Wales, a newly created single environment body that was formed from the amalgamation of Forestry Commission Wales, the Countryside Council for Wales and the Environment Agency Wales. At the time the new body was proposed, many in the forestry sector in Wales expressed very serious concern that there was a risk that forestry could become the 'poor relation' within the new organisation. Sadly, that has proved to be the case; put plainly, from a forestry point of view, Natural Resources Wales has been little more than an unmitigated disaster and its continued

inadequacies have had a seriously negative impact on the business dependent on the public forest estate in Wales for their wood supplies.

5. We welcome the Committee's inquiry into forestry and woodland policy in Wales. We believe that it is very timely, as all is not well. Furthermore, we do not believe that the public forest estate in Wales is being managed in such a way that the potential for delivering valuable benefits for Wales is being maximised. There can be little doubt that Natural Resources Wales is now squandering the valuable legacy created by Forestry Commission Wales. This negatively impacts on the delivery of the Woodlands for Wales and related strategies. Just one example to be considered is the question of why Natural Resources Wales is apparently failing to promptly restock forest areas which have been harvested. This is leading to questions as to why NRW seems to be amassing a landbank. This does not accord with the principles of sustainable forest management.
6. Having a good forestry and woodland strategy is one thing, but having an effective delivery mechanism is another. It seems to us that there is a serious disconnect between the two in Wales. Urgent action is required to address this very serious shortcoming.
7. NRW appears to place little or no value in the expertise and knowledge of professional foresters, as is witnessed by the complete absence of any forestry expertise at a senior level within the organisation and a statement from its Chief Executive that it places greater importance on other, personal skills, than forestry knowledge amongst its senior staff.
8. Furthermore, NRW seems to be adopting an ever more short-term focus, which is completely at odds with the long-term nature of forestry.
9. The forestry and forest products sector in Wales is a vital component of the rural economy. Since the establishment of NRW we have had to bring our concerns about its performance to the attention of successive Ministers responsible for forestry in Wales. Sadly, for several years, and especially after Elin Jones' tenure as Minister for Rural Affairs, successive Ministers responsible for forestry in Wales have shown little interest in the sector, although more encouragingly, Lesley Griffiths has recently commenced a long overdue dialogue with the sector, which is welcomed if it leads to positive change and renewed focus on forestry in Wales. We are also concerned that civil servants may have been shielding Ministers from the truth about the state of forestry in Wales and NRW's poor performance. Our very serious concerns about the fitness for purpose of NRW, especially in terms of its stewardship and management of the public forest estate and its ability to deliver the Government's policies, not to mention their approach to customers and value for money for the public purse, persist.

10. There is much at stake, given the importance of the public forest estate in Wales as provider of multiple benefits, quite apart from its vital role as a major supplier of timber to wood processing businesses in Wales and beyond. There is undoubtedly an opportunity to bring about an improvement in the situation, which would be to the benefit of Wales. Current arrangements are not delivering the full range of benefits and doing nothing must not be an option, as it will simply lead to further deterioration of affairs and is to be avoided at all costs.
11. It is interesting to contrast the differing political situation relating to forestry in Wales and Scotland. In so many respects they represent opposite extremes; in Scotland the Government is extremely supportive of forestry and has recently increased its woodland creation target from 10,000 hectares per year, in a stepped approach, to 15,000 hectares per year by 2025, with an appropriate focus on commercial timber crops to sustain the wood processing sector and ensure the continued delivery of multiple benefits. It has recently conducted a review to examine opportunities for streamlining and accelerating the official approval process for woodland creation. Significant improvements are anticipated. By comparison, in Wales, quite apart from the abysmal performance of NRW, new planting levels, especially of commercial timber crops has been negligible and is a cause of very serious concern to business across the sector for whom continuity of wood supply is not only essential for business continuity, but continued investment too.
12. Members of UKFPA in Wales and beyond sincerely hope that action can be taken to address their concerns and ensure that Natural Resources Wales can be turned around, so that it becomes fit for purpose as an effective delivery mechanism for the Welsh Government's forestry and woodland policy and strategy. It is to be hoped that we can all look forward to a brighter future for forestry and forest products in Wales, but there is much work to be done if this is to be achieved.
13. We hope that the comments provided here will be of interest and assistance to the Committee. It is to be hoped that action will be taken to address these widely held concerns and that we can look forward to a renaissance of forestry in Wales and its continued success. The forestry and forest products sector is ready and willing to play its part.
14. As stated above, even where good policy and strategy exist, these will be of little value if the delivery mechanism is not fit for purpose, as is currently the case in Wales.