

Senedd Cymru
Pwyllgor yr Economi, Masnach a Materion Gwledig
Economi Gwyrdd
GE08
Ymateb gan: Friends of the Earth Cymru

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Welsh Parliament
Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee
Green Economy
GE08
Evidence from: Friends of the Earth Cymru



Dear Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee,

On behalf of Friends of the Earth Cymru I would like to submit this consultation response.

The scope of this consultation brief is large and wide ranging so we will be restricting ourselves to making some general points and also highlighting some hopefully innovative ideas from areas of work we are currently working on. These aren't meant as an exhaustive list of what we would like to see but we offer them as ideas of what might be possible if we simply looked at things slightly differently.

We feel there needs to be some more flexibility of thinking around some of these issues rather than an often somewhat closed reaction to suggestions and ideas.

General

As the realities of climate change and nature destruction have started to become more and more apparent, the need to start thinking differently in terms of how we live on a planet of finite resources, what we produce and consume, how we move around and how we think of communities and society has also started to change.

Off-shoring climate emissions (whereby countries who produce things that we consume, have higher climate emissions as a result) is a big issue that still isn't being dealt with, with enough urgency.

We feel there is a win-win here if we are willing to be innovative and forward thinking and look at how we can produce more of the things we need here, which would in turn help reduce slightly the emissions in other countries too.

Whilst the new public sector procurement strategy is a welcome addition, we still feel that there is another level at which we actively seek out ways to promote home grown businesses and industries which will be the ones providing the things we need to mitigate and adapt to climate change. This however requires a more thorough joined up approach and a more detailed forward planning exercise.

There are many obvious examples of 'green jobs' and the sectors which currently support them, so we aren't going to comment on these as they are well understood and in some cases, being acted on. Things like a more comprehensive home insulation retro fitting scheme(s) would support many more 'green jobs' as would something like a new tidal lagoon in Swansea Bay should that ever get the go ahead. As mentioned above, we will be restricting our observations this time to some more innovative and hopefully different ideas.

One thing we would like to highlight here however is the need for **timings** to be thought about in more detail. The recent examples of Tata Steel in Port Talbot and Ffos-y-fran opencast coal site in Merthyr do highlight the issue of us as a society moving away from some more traditional industries as we travel along a path to reduce our climate emissions. There is an absolute necessity here to think about the people employed in these industries and sectors and to have carefully thought through longer term plans in place for new jobs and training so that people have other similarly paid jobs to move into immediately in their communities and that there isn't any gap in employment which obviously leads to people being unable to pay their bills and provide for their families. This situation can't keep happening. All the relevant governments, bodies, businesses etc need to be thinking more long term and having a clear plan in place for each area so that things are thought about well in advance and proper plans are put in place.

Pensions

We know that we don't have enough money in Wales to pay for all the projects we would ideally like to see happening. That's just simply the nature of where we are as a small country with limited financial resources. We do however have 8 Local Government Pension Funds and the Wales Pension Partnership who are looking to invest more into infrastructure projects in Wales. Obviously their main role is to provide a safe pension for those who have paid into the funds but these pension funds do invest in infrastructure projects and we know they would like to invest in these sorts of projects in Wales rather than in other countries.

These projects do however need to be secure and offer a similar rate of return on investment to other investments but what is needed here is for a more over-arching strategic look at what sort of projects are good investments, which of these projects are planned in Wales and what is viable for these funds to invest in. Currently we have a situation whereby some proposals are too small to invest in etc. We have been working with all the various bodies involved to advocate for a more aligned Wales-wide approach to identifying long term local, regional and national schemes and how pension funds could invest in them.

This process would benefit from Welsh Government taking the lead and making sure all the relevant players come together to work out a strategic plan. It shouldn't be that difficult. In turn it would then lead to more green jobs being created in areas all around Wales.

Circular economy

Whilst a lot of good work is being done in Wales around the circular economy, we feel there are still some key opportunities left to be tackled. It is good to see initiatives such as Benthylg (Library of Things) and Repair Cafes being set up and supported and also local 'hubs/hwbs' which have different circular economy related organisations present.

We would advocate for a similar level of support for other types of related organisations and businesses. Community RePaint (<https://communityrepaint.org.uk/>) for instance provides an outlet whereby people can donate and collect half used tins of paint saving on landfill and climate emissions. Nappy Libraries (<https://wastesavers.co.uk/newport-nappy-library/>) exist in parts of Wales but not in many others. They operate to help new parents find suitable cloth nappies for their newborns rather than use disposable ones all the time. Both of these would make excellent additions to local circular economy hubs and would of course have many other associated benefits.

Another example is Toy Libraries. Sadly, there aren't many of these in Wales but they provide a valuable resource for parents with small children. As we know, toys can cost quite a lot and children do grow bored of them quite quickly so an enterprise that allows parents to borrow toys for a 2 or 3 week period is very valuable and does of course help with the cost of living crisis as well as helping reduce consumption somewhat. A nationwide network of these Toy Libraries would again provide a number of jobs/part time jobs in communities all around the country as well as helping families and communities.

These are just 3 examples of enterprises which could be supported to grow into all-Wales scale ones. Whilst they would only employ small numbers of people, they would be local jobs and they would also help communities become more sustainable. They could also be part of these local hubs.

Town centre regeneration

We feel that the above mentioned hubs/hwbs can be a key part of town centre regeneration plans. And the more enterprises involved in these hubs, the more-long term sustainable they become as they encourage more and different people into town centres.

Water use

Despite Wales having a high annual rainfall, the droughts of 2022 do show that we don't store enough water and that we use too much of it per person per day (<https://foe.cymru/80-litres-person-day>). Figures vary, but roughly, the average person in the UK uses around 150litres of water per day. That's a lot! Other places such as Brussels and Copenhagen for example have got their water use down to 95 and 100litres/per person per day respectively.

In an era where we know climate change science predicts that we will have more longer, hotter, drier summers, it would seem counter intuitive not to be doing everything we can to save water. Welsh Government do have some plans but they don't go nearly far enough.

There are other issues associated with water use of course. 'Water Poverty' affects huge numbers of people in Wales and Welsh Water / Dwr Cymru is one of the largest energy users in Wales.

A significant reduction in water use per person would help alleviate some of this water poverty and would also then help reduce our national energy use and associated climate emissions. There are of course many ways to do this but one of them will be around innovation, retrofitting houses to use less water, to use grey water and rainwater harvesting.

The blog linked above goes into more detail but an innovative focus on this issue would reap many rewards from safeguarding our water supplies to reducing household bills and reducing national climate emissions whilst at the same time creating many new jobs around Wales. We could really take advantage of the lack of technology around this issue to become first movers on a lot of new adaptations. The opportunities are massive!

This is a prime example of where some forward thinking and innovation could really address many issues at once. But it does need Welsh Government and others to realise the benefits of action rather than just saying they are doing everything they can.

Modular homes

The Solcer House in Bridgend (<https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/research/explore/find-a-project/view/solcer-house>) is an energy positive and low-cost house. It could be produced at scale for the Welsh housing market, in particular social housing, if the modular housing capacity was there in Wales. Some strategic thinking and investment here could set up (or support existing ones to expand) some different regional modular housing providers (some exist but are small scale) which could provide these energy positive houses for the Welsh market whilst at the same time as offering green jobs but also alleviating the pressure on existing tradespeople who are already over stretched.

Farming

We would like to introduce a new idea for consideration here. Namely the need for a new Welsh Wool Plan. The wool industry in Wales and indeed across the UK is struggling and has been struggling for a long time. We know that wool is often just ploughed back into fields, unused and therefore a lost income source for already hard-pressed farming families.

We also know there are a multitude of uses (both traditional and more innovative) for Welsh wool in Wales. We think a rounded and thought through Sustainable Farming Scheme should also include provisions for a new Welsh Wool Plan or Strategy. This would bring together people from all parts of the wool industry in Wales to examine all aspects of wool production to processing and then markets. These markets already exist (eg clothing, sustainable fashion, textiles, carpets, insulation etc etc) but the growth potential of these is huge. What is needed now is simply for all these people

and organisations, from farmers, farming unions, the wool industry and people who work with wool products, to come together to help draw up a new plan for how we can support the wool industry in Wales to provide the wool required for various Welsh businesses. This would be of enormous benefit to all parts of the wool industry in Wales. We have suggested this to Welsh Government but are still waiting for a response.

We also know that wool shearing and its associated industry already provides employment for many young Welsh and Welsh speaking people here in Wales. A thriving wool industry with many associated small and medium sized markets here in Wales and especially in rural parts of Wales would help to provide more longer-term sustainable jobs for young people who would like to remain in rural agricultural areas which would in turn then also help support our language.

We would request that Welsh Government convene a meeting of people involved in the wool industry in Wales in order to start the process of drawing up a new plan for Welsh Wool.

Hemp

Industrial hemp is a bit of a wonder plant, absorbing between 8 to 15 tonnes of CO2 per hectare (compared to trees which typically capture 2 to 6 tonnes of CO2 per hectare per year).

Hemp is also useful in rotational planting, helps prevent soil erosion and water loss and helps provide a valuable source of pollen for insects during the July - September period.

Hemp has many uses from textiles and paper to biochar, bioplastics and even construction insulation (hempcrete). It can also be grown on degraded and even contaminated land and can grow without the need for pesticides and fertilisers.

If we had the power over licensing in Wales then hemp could become a very valuable option for farmers seeking to diversify their crops should they wish. Given the huge range of uses of hemp, and with the help of Welsh Government's Innovation team, we could develop a range of uses (maybe even, with bioplastic possibilities, to produce some of the replacement products for the banned single use plastic items) for the product in Wales thereby creating new jobs across Wales in a variety of new industries and markets. A circular economy for hemp if you like.

Again, the opportunities here with this are potentially huge. What we need here is for Welsh Government to bring together all interested parties to start discussions and then to ask UK Government to devolve the necessary regulations.

Sustainable fashion

The worldwide clothing and fashion industry is responsible for around 10% of global climate emissions and has a range of other problems associated with it from wide scale pollution and enormous land and water use to often poor working conditions. The solutions are of course many and varied. There are quite a few things we can do in Wales, things that are Welsh specific and have benefits for families, communities, businesses and the environment. As part of the Sustainable Clothing and Textiles Cymru coalition, we have produced a report outlining many recommendations that could be done in Wales

(https://foe.cymru/sites/default/files/SCTC%20sustainable%20fashion%20report_English%20%283%29.pdf).

We could improve significantly the business support given to small sustainable fashion enterprises in Wales (please see report above for details), we could scale up community initiatives such as Play it

Again Sport (<https://www.playitagainsport.wales>) and we could innovate with the alternative textiles we use (wool and hemp mentioned above). All of these would help provide local jobs for local people in areas all around Wales as well as the other financial benefits to families and local economies. Again though, we need some more long-term strategic thinking to make it happen.

Food and soil resilience centre

We would like to raise the issue again of the need for a new Soil and Food Resilience Centre in Wales. This is an idea first mooted in Welsh Labour's Final Policy Document (2021). It was only a short point but indicated that Welsh Labour would seek to bring together existing expertise in Wales to form this new centre.

We feel this is an excellent idea as the possibilities this would give us in Wales are endless. We feel this would be a hugely important addition to a truly sustainable look at farming and soil health in Wales. We don't think this current SFS will deliver the same sort of overarching long term strategies that are needed so we would advocate for a new centre or group to also be set up which would then complement the SFS but provide that different longer-term focus.

We need to strategically plan where our food comes from, both now but also in 10, 20, 50+ years. This is after all one of the main issues we have to think about as a population and as a society. Farmers and the farming industry will be at the very heart of that. How can we make sure that our farming industry thrives in the short, medium and long term? What is the state of our soil health, what will it be like in future, how can we help provide the needs of Welsh people now and in future? Where does our fertiliser come from so that we aren't overly dependent on external sources and foreign countries which in turn raises the possibility of shortage of supply (or huge increase in prices) in times of crisis in these other countries (eg Ukraine). How can we seek to be more self-sufficient in our food supply (currently the UK is only around 60% self-sufficient - hardly an ideal state of affairs). What role do community food schemes have and how do local and community food strategies fit in? How can we develop a long-term sustainable farm to fork food strategy? What are future food needs? How does this help support farmers, farming families, agricultural areas, our language and our indigenous culture and heritage and the long-term jobs associated with all of that?

We feel that we have more than enough expertise in Wales with farmers, farming unions, local and community food groups, academics, soil experts etc to be able to bring together a new 'centre' to develop a more longer-term integrated plan for food and soil in Wales. At the moment we have a situation whereby different food strategies and plans are not joined up. This really needs to change if we are going to be able to have a longer term truly joined up strategy for what sorts of foods we are producing in Wales, what our soil health is, what impacts climate change is already having and will have in future. What are our water needs, our fertiliser needs etc and how all of this is likely to change in future. A new centre would help us bring everything together as well as planning ahead for future scenarios. This could be a truly ground-breaking world first.

A new Soil and Food Resilience Centre wouldn't have to be a new physical place. It might develop into that in time but could easily start out as a co-operation between relevant people and organisations in Wales.

We stress that this should be something that places farmers and farming communities at the centre of longer-term planning. By doing so, we would be helping to support farmers, rural economies and rural jobs for a very long time to come.

Tourism

Lastly, we feel there is scope for a more comprehensive look at the opportunities for sustainable tourism in Wales. Given the importance of the tourism sector to the Welsh economy and the existing knowledge and experience of sustainable tourism providers in Wales, a more strategic look at the opportunities would help support this sector and allow it to flourish. A new joint initiative with existing providers would help come up with a range of new initiatives to help the industry.

These green jobs would be spread across Wales again and would help rural and coastal communities retain young people who otherwise might be forced to leave their home areas to search for jobs elsewhere. This of course in turn then also helps protect our indigenous heritage, culture and language.

As mentioned at the start, these are just a few observations based on things we are currently working on. Some of these are actually quite quick wins if the level of interest and support are forthcoming from Welsh Government. All some of them need will be for the right people to be brought together to start relevant conversations. Others will need a bit more work and others are more far reaching and wide ranging and longer term in nature.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to feed in our thoughts to this consultation.

Bleddyn Lake on behalf of Friends of the Earth Cymru