

Meeting note

Title of meeting:	National Access Forum for Wales Meeting No 78
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Date of meeting:	2 July 2024
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Time of meeting:	10:30-13:00
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Present:	Members and named representatives:
(*= deputising for named representative)	Geraint Davies, NRW Chair, Ruth Rourke, Deputy Chair (IPROW), Carys Drew, NRW Secretary, Dr Rosie Plummer NRW, Penny Hopkins (BDS), Helen Donnan (BHS), Eben Muse (BMC), Phil Stone (Canoe Wales), Charles de Winton (CLA), Adrian Walls (CSS Wales), Gwenda Owen, (Cycling UK) Scott Ashworth (Defence Estates), Barry Andrews (Disabled Ramblers), Jen Newman (Dŵr Cymru), David Evans, (Elan Valley), Dave Waterman (LARA), Ian Mabberley (LAFs), Beverley Penney (OSS), Mathew Williams (WSA), Rebecca Brough, (Ramblers Cymru), Andy Rowe (Sustrans), Catherine Williams (WATO), Fiona Clay-Poole, (WLGA), Peter Rutherford (Welsh NPA), Mathew Teasdale (YHA), Pam Bell (WoW), Ruth Jenkins (NRW), Bill Purvis (NRW), Jont Bulbeck (NRW), William Somerfield (WG), Sarah Smith (WG).
	Observers: Anthony Richards (Welsh NPA), Kate Ashbrook (OSS) <i>other observers attended but names are not recorded (on GDPR advice)</i>
	Speakers: Julia Mansbridge (NRW), Natalie Hall (NRW), Jen Newman (Dŵr Cymru), Gareth Ludkin (Campaign for National Parks),

Apologies:	Afonydd Cymru, Angling Cymru, Canal and River Trust, Countryside Alliance, FUW, Mountain Training Cymru, NFU, NT Cymru.
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1. Welcome and apologies.

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting, two member organisations had new representatives: Penny Hopkins for British Driving Society, and Mathew Teasdale for Youth Hostel Association. Apologies were noted.

2. River Basin Management Plans: Working Together (WT) consultation.

Julia Mansbridge, Specialist Advisor in NRW's Integrated Water Planning Team set out background information about River Basin Management Plans and the recently opened Working Together consultation.

River Basin Management Plans set out what is known about the rivers, lakes, canals, ground waters, estuaries and coastal waters of Wales. They cover what needs to be done to improve them and how. NRW has a duty to do them under the Water Framework Directive Regulations 2017. Several Documents make up the plans, the main summary documents for Wales (x3 – Western Wales, Dee, Severn (published jointly with EA), technical annex covering Wales, habitats regulation assessment and strategic environmental assessment. Background data is also provided for Wales and England online [Cyfoeth Naturiol Cymru \(naturalresourceswales.gov.uk\)](https://naturalresourceswales.gov.uk)

Julia set out the main areas of content of the plans: classification of water bodies, baseline status in each water body; statutory objectives for water bodies and the summary programme of objectives to achieve statutory objectives. She noted that the default statutory objective is to achieve good status by 2027 but this can be varied.

A map showing the 2021 classification of water body status was shared. The legal requirement is to achieve good by 2027. Nearly 40% are achieving this, whilst 60% are below this target and need to be improved. This represents a 3% improvement since 2015 and 8% since 2009. For the 60% not achieving good, the top 5 reasons are:

- Rural pollution e.g. sediment and nutrients from agriculture
- Physical modifications e.g. weirs, culverts
- Pollution from wastewater
- Pollution from towns, cities and transport
- Pollution from mines

Julia set out the Water Framework Directive's statutory objectives then went on to summarise the role and purpose of River Basin Management Plans, the need to plan for the next cycle of plans and to do this work collaboratively. Currently NRW is working on cycle 3 of the River Basin Management Plans which was published in 2021 and starting to plan for cycle 4 which starts in 2027.

Julia shared the timeline for cycle 4 starting with the Working Together consultation which was launched on 29th May and runs until 20 December 2024.

Members were encouraged to take part in the consultation [Working Together Consultation - Natural Resources Wales Citizen Space - Citizen Space \(cyfoethnaturiol.cymru\)](#) and to share with their networks.

Discussion

- When asked to provide more detail about rural pollution, it was explained that this is quite wide ranging and includes result of poor agricultural practice and forestry such as sediment, nutrients and pesticides.
- Noted that for cross border rivers, NRW works with the Environment Agency (EA), with the Dee River Basin Management Plan being led by NRW with input from EA and with EA leading on the Severn River Basin Management Plan with NRW input for planning the measures that are required.
- In response to a question about whether NRW includes buffers around forestry, Ruth Jenkins responded that the management of forestry on the Welsh Government Woodland estate is managed under the principles and guidance of the UK Woodland assurance scheme in addition using the evidence from the Water Framework Directive to support site management and forest design. Any specific incidents of failure are reported through self-reporting through NRW Environmental Management system. This is for both water quality and water quantity management; acidification is one issue associated with the way woodland can pick up pollutants but sedimentation from uncontrolled run off is the main area of management controlled through site and operation management as well as forest design.
- In response to question about Dŵr Cymru reservoirs, Julia confirmed that NRW work closely with Dŵr Cymru through their planning and will soon be working to understand the Ofwat determination for future planning.
- In response to request for comment regarding the Severn Valley Water management scheme, Natalie Hall, NRW responded that NRW are aware of the Severn Valley water management proposal. As well as working with EA in the developing the plans, NRW works with EA in implementing actions to address the issues identified in the plans. [Severn Valley Water Management Scheme - Environment Agency - Citizen Space \(environment-agency.gov.uk\)](#)
- Asked about the connection between the plans and what is happening to rivers, and how existing plans helped, or not, and how future plans and the planning process be adjusted in a way that supports good water quality in the future,
- Natalie Hall responded that an improvement has been seen through cycles of River basin planning with an increase in the number of water bodies that are a good status. She said that there is more to do, and some waters designated for habitats and species and bathing water need even more stringent standards than good status. There is always something to learn and the planning approach has been changed every cycle. NRW want to learn to ensure that they are even better and that actions that need to be taken are implemented. Have seen the establishment of the [Better River Quality Taskforce](#) working on actions needed to

address storm overflows with action plan visible on WG website which is being monitored, tracked and reported against, something to learn from that. Natalie also suggested that there is scope to make it easier to understand what others need to do, to act in a concerted way, how NRW present the evidence can help collaboration. This is the start of conversation and to do this in participation with others. The consultation is open for 6 months and NRW welcomes feedback and suggestions for improvement.

- It was noted that the bathing waters are specifically designated with quality standards attached to them and that there aren't quality standards associated with other recreational uses.
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3. Dŵr Cymru – creating hubs for health and wellbeing; engaging people with nature.

Jen Newman, Estates Manager based in the Elan Valley presented about the role of visitor attractions for Dŵr Cymru and its vision for hubs for health and wellbeing and engaging visitors with nature.

Dŵr Cymru is delivering these objectives primarily at main sites across Wales under the banner of 'Welsh Water Adventures'. It has five visitor attraction sites (Llyn Brenig, Elan Valley, Llandegfedd lake, Llys-y-Frân lake, Lisvane and Llanishen reservoir), and a small handful of community partnership sites, where they are working in partnership with stakeholders to provide greater level of access and recreation (Swiss Valley, Lliw, reservoir and Hereford Waterworks Museum). Jen described the partnership working at these three sites, including volunteers, water sports providers, and noted that the two sites in Wales had received access to water funding from WG.

Visitor attractions have an important role to play to deliver Dŵr Cymru's 2050 vision to be a business that uses its landholdings and other assets to maximise the well-being of its customers, encouraging healthy lifestyles and recreation, and supporting biodiversity and ecosystems. Visitor attractions are also helping deliver the wellbeing goals, by promoting a healthier, resilient and a more equal Wales.

It is also delivering biodiversity plan commitments, exploring the role of 'friends of' groups and community groups to adopt and help manage sites, such as the work being delivered at the partnership sites and to engage the public with the natural environment.

Dŵr Cymru are regulated by Ofwat, and visitor attractions have measures of success. Jen shared relevant targets such as visitor numbers and opening new visitor centres. Last year had a highest recording of over 1million visitors at sites across Wales, with the increase largely due to Llys-y-Fran in 2021 and opening of brand new site at Lisvane and Llanishen 2023 which have led the way in improving visitor experience including development of new websites, better bilingual interpretation and providing new activities, most notably access to water.

Dŵr Cymru also recognised that staffed visitor attraction sites can offer opportunities for access to water. Llandegfedd site has been at the forefront of this for many years offering wide range of water-based activities for all abilities. It is done by balancing

access and recreation wants of visitors whilst also managing the reservoir as a drinking water supply and designated SSSI for overwintering wildfowl which is not always easy. In 2020 Llandegfedd successfully led an open water swimming pilot and following that a programme, in response to customer demand have since developed an authorized access to water policy. This is being explored in designated locations where it is appropriate to do so (e.g. no hidden machinery, draw offs, having good infrastructure in place and is regulated under supervision of fully trained team).

The policy has allowed Dŵr Cymru to expand its open water swimming offer, in 2023 this was delivered at three sites. Lisvane and Llanishen have recorded 3,000 people in open water swimming sessions and over 300 people inducted for cold water dipping, also providing 600 free sessions for children with Swim Wales and RNLI swim SAFE initiative, in the first week of school summer holidays. All open water swimming venues have to be accredited by Swim Wales SAFE (Safe Aquatic Facilities Endorsement). Planning to enable open water swimming at Llyn Brenig in 2024 for the first time.

SAFE Cymru accreditation is developed by Swim Wales in partnership with Wales Triathlon and Jen provided further details about this noting that it is designed around competitive swimming. Jen explained that whilst this had enabled Dŵr Cymru to unlock access, guidance documents can be restrictive around wetsuits and water temperature which has created barrier for cold water dippers. As such Dŵr Cymru had commissioned Dr Cliff Nelson, former head of water safety at Royal Life Saving Society who is currently advisor to HSE to develop a health and safety management system to review wetsuit policy and update risk assessment and employee assistance programme to help staff undertake relevant training for dippers. Following this pilot, they can now enable cold water dipping at three sites and hosted a major event at Llys-y-fran and are planning to apply to designate a site as an inland bathing water site later this year.

Having demonstrated the wide range of activities at visitor sites, hubs for health and wellbeing across Wales, Jen then focussed on the site she manages at Elan Valley an area of 72 square miles, 1% Wales, 18,000Ha an International Dark Sky Park and home to Celtic rainforest, some of the rarest habitats in the UK.

In Elan Valley Dŵr Cymru is working closely with local and national organisations to improve access and recreation offer, working with Sustrans and British Cycling especially on NCN route Elan Valley trail, and a mountain bike downhill skills loop. Working with British Driving Society and BHS and developing work with Powys Ramblers to explore nature following designated trails.

As part of biodiversity action plans also striving to support nature, also gives opportunity to provide public engagement with the natural environment – this is happening through strategic partnerships (in partnership sites) pooling resources and expertise and helps leverage towards external funding towards vital nature conservation projects e.g. Osprey and The Woodland Investment Grant.

Celtic Rainforests are rich in biodiversity and Elan woodlands are identified as most important in Europe. Through TWIG project opportunity to strengthen access to nature offer, e.g. Celtic rainforest festival, engaging local artists and business. Further Dŵr

Cymru TWIG projects are helping towards aspiration to join National Forest of Wales – making the forest accessible to everyone. Jen went on to share future plans as part of the Elan Valley Lakes Mid Wales Growth deal – a £21.7million investment in the Elan Valley – which would allow introduction and expansion access to water offer and land-based activities within redundant sawmill site.

Jen finished by noting that Dŵr Cymru have aspirations to designate bathing water at sites and looked forward to providing further updates in future.

Discussion

- When asked about whether other sites and facilities are being made available to paddlers more generally, Jen said Dŵr Cymru are trying to work towards visitor attractions where there is infrastructure on site e.g. visitor centres. Water bodies are reservoirs, man-made structures but there are hidden dangers underneath them, trying to open up responsibility where there are trained staff on site. Looking especially through the Mid Wales Growth project are looking to expand but have to do this carefully as a drinking water catchment. Working with colleagues and doing regular testing and sampling. In other sites looking at more partnership sites elsewhere in north Wales.
- Adrian Walls explained some challenges and opportunities at Llyn Brenig – where two reservoirs Alwen and Brenig. Brenig has the access spine road, have problems with the road and some users and lack of care of drivers. New windfarm going in on freehold land, understand that there will be need for a hall road coming in, so this is an opportunity for another route. Alwen is very family friendly route and could be improved – is this being investigated. Reforming the LAF with Conwy and it would be good to have Dŵr Cymru along to LAF meeting as the area is important for the region. Jen noted that it can be difficult to meet everyone's needs with different constraints and there is a need to work closely with stakeholders. Jen offered to pick this up with site managers and include as written contribution for the next meeting and follow up with Adrian.
- Canoe Wales have been working with Dŵr Cymru for a number of years. Flagged that there are a few issues in terms of cost-of-living crisis. All land-based activities on sites are generally free but all water-based activities there is a cost, and this can be cost prohibitive to some people. Large number of reservoirs allow fishing and fishing from boats, but no control of those boats on site, will not however allow wider use for canoeing or kayaking, although fishing is allowed from boats.
- Jen aware of cost-of-living crisis, have staff on site, but need to cover costs and have visitor attractions that are sustainable. Have looked at how competitive and can make further enquiries about that. In terms of boats, it relates to water quality, fishing boats are just for those reservoirs and not going into any other water bodies. There are issues around invasive species and there are biological controls around introducing other boats into reservoirs, where water activities do take place these boats and paddleboards are just for that site.
- Noted that in the Access to Water sub-group one key ask was for Dŵr Cymru to review policy on allowing access. So pleased to hear that this has been developed and to expand access and take pressure off other water courses.

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- In response to a question Jen noted that the Monk's Trod in Elan Valley is an emotive issue. Dŵr Cymru is landowner and Elan Valley Trust is a tenant. There was a separate issue at the Devils' Gulch blocking the National Cycle Network route. Powys CC sought levelling up funding, but in the interim Dŵr Cymru was advised by Ofwat that money could be used to sort out the issue and route is now opened. The levelling up funding has since been announced and Powys CC have suggested that the funding is redirected onto the Monk's Trod which has reopened the conversation. There have been a number of temporary Traffic Regulation Orders and now looking for a permanent solution. Powys CC are still in consultation stage and Dŵr Cymru are due to meet with them next month.
 - BHS welcome thoughts to improve for carriage drivers and horse riders. Is there any indication of timeline and how these opportunities will be publicised. Jen will be looking at how to improve surface sustainably on certain routes and engage with Powys CC.
 - Interesting to hear the approach to risk (and thus less public access) compared to Scottish Water where it copes with the statutory right of access to most freshwater across Scotland, including urban areas around, e.g. Glasgow and Edinburgh.
 - In response to question about whether there are plans to move away from booking paid for session to free sessions. Jen noted that Dŵr Cymru are new to the process and still working on access to water policy, have responsibility for those who enter the water and need staff on site and there are overheads which means this is not free but Jen said she will take that feedback back and raise with visitor attraction managers about looking at cost of living and review of prices.
 - Interesting to hear about how those sites are developing. Where there are water quality issues and Dŵr Cymru knows that there is recreational use of water, what will the organisation do? E.g. Aberteifi. Serious issue about sewage management.
 - Jen noted that as a company know that not where we want to be. In terms of water quality where they have access to water, they are doing important sampling for that E. coli etc and sampling is done at least monthly and are drinking water quality, when there are issues e.g. blue green algae and there is work looking at control of this. There will always be constraints but hope that this is being done in partnership with water quality and risk team.

4. Written contributions

A series of updates were included from NRW, email addresses for individual contributors and members encouraged to contact direct for any questions.

Ramblers Cymru requested updates in relation to Cabinet Secretary and also whether NRW are involved in Sustainable Farming Scheme development.

Sarah Smith WG, noted that WG officials recently met with the Cabinet Secretary, and provided update in relation to access reform and work done over the last few years. He has asked for further briefings, and this will be done over the summer. Sarah confirmed that he had not yet made any decisions on the access reform programme and his priorities going forward.

Ruth Jenkins noted that access had been included as part of NRW's submission to the SFS consultation. This area hasn't yet been discussed in the Ministerial round table meetings, but NRW is on that group and supporting WG staff in that respect. It has come up within other meetings within the development of the scheme. The high-profile conversations around the scheme have focussed on making sure that it delivers against all the objects in the Agricultural Act, but NRW will endeavour to see that access stays on the agenda.

The Chair noted that Huw Irranca-Davies, Cabinet Secretary has said he will be happy to talk to the National Access Forum. Sarah noted that he has portfolio responsibility for access as well as SFS, and WG officials are making sure access is noted there.

5. Forward look and future meeting themes

Carys Drew had shared the Forward look paper with members in advance. This is to share the work behind the scenes to plan future meetings item topics and themes. It draws previous feedback from members.

Members were encouraged to contribute to developing this working document, providing ideas for topics and order of priority and timing.

Discussion

Transport for Recreation would be a really good topic to look at and could be very timely e.g. in context of new National Park and care needed in not just driving motor traffic and looking at how people access. Noted that experience from Bannau Brycheiniog National Park may be a useful example to include.

Adrian Walls, CSS Wales said he was having a number of meetings with Network Rail and Transport for Wales, about a fairly large programme to improve frequency, flow and ultimately electrification of North Wales line. Some of these pressures will be put onto the other parts of the Welsh rail network, where it deals with at grade crossings of public right of way. He asked whether there is opportunity to invite Network Rail to present their case for the changes they want. From one point of view these are beneficial to wider society but may ultimately lead to some local issues with usability of the local network. Adrian offered to share contacts which Carys would follow up.

Suggestion that it would be good to have the landowner liability discussion a bit sooner than planned as this would link well with ongoing SFS discussions and the need for more advice and information for all to feed into issues.

Carys was thanked for producing the Forward Look which was seen as very useful.

6. NRW Forum Review

Carys Drew noted that members had received email from Bronwen Martin (20th June) explaining that NRW has issued a review of all Forums that NRW engage with and

facilitate. There will be a survey coming out over the summer to get members' views and members are encouraged to respond.

Discussion

Comment that NAFW is voluntary but not statutory and that it is a useful opportunity to talk on a national level with various organisations.

Action: 78.1 Members to respond the NRW Forum Review survey when available.

7. Application for NAFW membership – Campaign for National Parks

Gareth Ludkin, Senior Policy Officer, Campaign for National Parks gave a presentation to apply for membership of the Forum.

Campaign for National Parks is the independent voice for national parks, with its history grounded in campaigning for greater access to the countryside.

Founded in 1936 to campaign for the first establishment for national parks, and for the purposes and protection of national parks. As a charity the purposes have evolved, championing the purposes of national parks and public interest and is independent of government and the national park authorities.

Proud of MOSAIC programme a 15-year programme 2001-2016 in England and Wales has had a lasting impact on diversity and inclusion, projects focussed on looking to connect people who have never experienced national parks with the countryside, keen to revisit this work.

Advocating for change at the national level at Westminster and Senedd. In Wales CNP is part of the Outdoor Alliance, Wales Environment Link. Support the work of other members in the Forum who are also part of the Campaign for National Parks council of around 40 groups.

Gareth's role is relatively new with a specific focus on Welsh policy other areas of work include being an active supporter of Dartmoor backpack campaign legal case remains ongoing, engaged with right to roam and pushing for an extension to right to backpack in more national parks alongside a night under the stars for all children as part of national curriculum.

Generally, consider themselves a critical friend of national park authorities working closely with 'friends of' societies and other related partners.

Work on new national park proposals, keenly involved and interested. Chair Wales Environment Link working group on the new national park and in regular discussion with the NRW team leading that work and will engage the consultation process as much as possible.

Charity objectives are connecting more people to the CNP cause, holding Government and public bodies to account. Gareth shared the Campaign's mission to inspire action for wilder inclusive national parks. As part of this mission three core campaigning programmes are better, equal and more and he detailed the actions that are undertaken under these and went on to highlight key points from the Campaigns' manifesto.

Whilst the charity has always worked in Wales, with Gareth now based and working in Wales this provides benefit to meet people and solidify relationships and build partnerships. He closed by sharing a timeline of the charity's development.

Discussion

- Peter Rutherford raised some concerns and questions about how some ideas such as right to backpack could be applied in practice. He suggested that national parks are already inclusive and to note that national parks have statutory duties.
- Backpack camping policy statement have consulted with national park societies. Gareth noted that they are not advocating for a blanket approach but rather a case-by-case basis and this is an area for further consideration. In terms of inclusivity in many cases national parks are very inclusive but there is a large portion of society that don't know what a national park is. The ability to access them is mixed. There is a youth advisory group as part of campaigning that advise about their understanding. The Campaign for National Parks recognise the purposes of national parks and are strong defenders of the purposes and, recognising the Sandford principle and the importance of protecting natural beauty and the environment but also recognising the need to allow access and recreation to those spaces. They would like to see an update of the purposes to recognise the climate and nature emergencies. Do recognise the work that has been done and inclusive action and would like to work with national parks and other organisations to encourage and improve that.

Observers were asked to leave the room whilst the membership application was considered.

Members were reminded of the purpose of discussion about membership application as set out in the Terms of Reference.

Following discussions and comments from members the meeting reached consensus to accept Campaign for National Parks application to join the Forum.

Action: 78.2 Secretary to advise Gareth Ludkin that Campaign for National Parks to join NAFW had been successful.

8. Closing remarks - Chair

Geraint Davies, Chair closed the meeting thanking everyone for their contributions and the interesting presentations and apologised for the technical issues experienced.
