**Nature recovery and agricultural transitions: a role for land-use planning?**

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*The new agenda*

Nature recovery is increasingly regarded as *the* new paradigm shaping planning policy across the United Kingdom, providing an urgent focus for policy activity, spurred-on by declarations of ecological crisis and daily reporting on the breakdown of the natural environment. Agriculture can be regarded as being in the vanguard of this activity. Although subsidy-driven agricultural practices have been identified as a significant contributor to the problem of nature depletion, the farming sector also has the potential to be an equally significant contributor to nature recovery.

Britain’s farming sector has undergone a radical transition since the post-war period when our land use governance framework was set out in three key Acts of Parliament[[1]](#footnote-1). At that time, the scale and pace of change in farming practices was not to be known nor the extent to which the ‘siloing’ of different land uses and management practices across the farming landscape would become outmoded in relation to finding an appropriate balance between nature and food production (House of Lords, 2022). In the aftermath of wartime food scarcity, subsidies were introduced to help agricultural enterprises to maximise production and minimise the cost of food to the consumer. The increasingly obvious damage that this has brought to nature, through instances of habitat destruction, water and air pollution means that we are now set to financially support only those farmers willing transition to new practices that support ecological restoration under the nature recovery paradigm.

But what does this new paradigm mean for land-use planning in areas of agricultural production? We offer a few insights from the Bannau Brycheiniog National Park, formerly the Brecon Beacons (or simply Y Bannau). The Usk and Wye rivers on the eastern side of the national park have recently drawn attention to the need for agricultural practices to change to allow rivers across Wales and the UK to recover from unsafe nutrient levels. Although agriculture is seen as being largely responsible for the problem, settlements and new development have also been viewed as being both a significant contributor and also one of the potential solutions to the problem. As the local planning authority, the national park has had to act to support the restoration of waterways, adding additional scrutiny to planning approvals on new housing development from 2020 so as not to hinder the pace of recovery in water catchments found not meeting their critical limits for phosphates (Hatton-Ellis & Jones, 2021). It has also supported farmers to reduce additional nutrient loading into the rivers such as through structures to cover manure yards or slurry storage tanks.

*A strategic lacuna*

Although the ongoing problem with river nutrient levels bring welcome focus to planning’s potential role in mediating between the needs of nature and agriculture, it is perhaps the need for strategic land-use management at the catchment scale that the issue highlights. This, of course, is scarcely a singularly Welsh problem, but the Environment Act (Wales) 2016 raised expectations in newly introduced Area Statements that were intended to set out a land use vision, fed from above by evidence and policy direction set out in the State of Natural Resources Report (NRW, 2020), the Natural Resources Policy (Welsh Government, 2017), and the National Development Framework (Welsh Government, 2018a), as well as related sector-specific strategies and local development plans. The first wave of Area Statements have fallen somewhat short of delivering on this ambition. For planning authorities with landscape-scale nature recovery ambitions, the shortcomings of ‘larger-than-local’ land use coordination has been compounded by the continuation of siloed working practices across the different sectors engaged in rural land management.

The absence of planning oversight over some rural land activities can work against both nature recovery and the interests of local communities. Forestry has become a particular area of sensitivity, because of the recent surge in private sector woodland investment for carbon offsetting and the Welsh government’s ambition to bolster the forestry resource as a sustainable construction material (Welsh Government, 2018b). The conversion of productive agricultural land to woodland has, understandably, become a sensitive matter, particularly where viable hill farms become dismembered, with the land stripped from the built assets and converted to woodland and buildings sold-off. Through this process, farming-focused communities are becoming fragmented and dispersed (Gallent *et al*, 2023). The new woodland itself is often planted with fast-growing non-native species directed towards carbon sequestration and profit, within a voluntary carbon market described as the ‘wild west’ in a recent market report (Credit Suisse, 2022), rather with the potentially compatible aim of nature recovery in mind. Some communities have begun to mobilise in opposition to the threat to traditional farming. At Cwrt-y-Cadno, just outside of the national park in Carmarthenshire, there has been a well-documented backlash against proposals by Foresight Sustainable Forestry Company for largescale afforestation, almost three quarters of which would be non-native conifers (Financial Times, 2022). Concerns have also been raised at the prospect of similar schemes within the west of the national park (Gallent *et al,* 2023).

*Making progress regardless*

Despite the current weaknesses in strategic-level land-use coordination, planning does have some power to promote nature recovery in relation to agricultural land. Indeed, local development plans themselves are capable of setting a vision for nature recovery across an area, that takes account of competing land use needs. In principle, this would mean setting out proposals for nature recovery on rural land use much in the same way for regular development, and with the benefit of community consultation. However, few planning authorities have the resources to develop such plans, let alone joining them with neighbouring local authorities to create consistency of a bioregion, such a river catchment.

A number of local authorities and bodies have been active in developing joint policies to support local production and nature friendly farming practices through small-scale horticulture and community-supported agriculture (CSA). For example, Our Food 1200[[2]](#footnote-2) is an initiative established by the Conservation Farming Trust, supported by the National Park Authority and other public bodies, to secure 1200 hectares of farmland within the national park area, Monmouthshire and Powys for small-scale nature-friendly fruit and vegetable production. According to a recent report commissioned by the Trust (Terra Perma Geo, 2023) one of the key barriers to small-scale farming in the area is the lack of available and affordable rural housing for land workers. The National Park Authority has therefore begun working on joint supplementary planning guidance with Powys County Council around the provision of housing on small scale horticultural units in accordance national policy. There are several CSA delivery schemes within Y Bannau itself. Wales has also taken a lead in promoting small-scale sustainable agriculture and off-grid living using a permaculture approach through its flagship One Planet Living Policy, as distilled into TAN 6 (Welsh Government, 2010). Although the National Park currently has only one scheme under consideration, there is at least the planning policy support in place for those wishing to embrace this model of living and working.

Planning’s role in supporting ecologically positive practices in ‘mainstream’ agriculture remains an important area of policy development, nationally across Wales and the UK, as well as within Y Bannau. Planning authorities across the country are grappling with the question of how planning can make it easier for farmers ‘to do the right thing’ by nature, whilst trying to understand what the wider implications of policy changes could be. Regenerative agriculture – an umbrella term for farming practices focused on restoring the health of the soil with wider benefits for conservation, carbon sequestration, catchment management in mind (WEF, 2023; The Carbon Underground and Regenerative Agriculture Initiative, 2017) - has begun literally to change the landscape where it is practiced. Within Y Bannau, the Welsh Government has recently invested in its own regenerative farming venture, at Gilestone Farm, to create a regional centre of excellence for showcasing regenerative agricultural practices in lockstep with nature recovery and other aspects of small-scale sustainable production[[3]](#footnote-3). The Gilestone Farm proposals have not been without stiff opposition from those who view the idea of reducing the intensity of agriculture as undesirable, and potentially dangerous, given the shocks to the global food system experienced in recent years. The current absence of a national food strategy for Wales, to establish evidence-based food targets or a country-wide nature strategy establishing goals for nature recovery to inform a national spatial plan, means that specific areas of policy on agricultural land, notably the forthcoming Sustainable Farming Strategy, are operating in something of a strategic vacuum. As noted earlier, Local Development Plans are currently capable of creating land-use strategies for an area, including for nature recovery and permitted land use activities for agriculture, but rarely does an entire river catchment - or other equivalent bioregion - fall within a single local planning authority territory. Planning authorities do, of course, work collectively – informally and through formal agreements, but without the benefit of an over-arching vision or set of strategic goals to work towards.

Unfortunately, the present situation is that planning can sometimes be viewed as a brake on certain farmland nature recovery activities. For example, a farmer wishing to create a scrape on their farm to benefit endangered wading birds such as curlew or lapwing, would need to obtain planning permission for the operational development. In reality, approval would almost always be granted, and usually with minimal fuss or delay, but perceptions and perceived barriers do have practical impacts, and few farmers welcome an additional set of paperwork to add to their administrative burden. We also need to recognise the additional development-related impacts that nature friendly farming might have. Not all regenerative agriculture focussed farms will become visitor destinations such as Wild Ken Hill in Norfolk[[4]](#footnote-4), but at least some will use the transition to new farming and land management practices as the foundation for diversification activities. This could generate the need for additional on-site facilities such as for car parking, production or retail and. These would, in turn, involve planning approval and, therefore, public consultation. The Gilestone Farm experience, thus far, indicates that this would not necessarily be plain sailing, and this isn’t simply a matter of public hostility against the idea of new development. As with the Knepp Wildland project[[5]](#footnote-5) in West Sussex in its early days, many members of this farming-focussed community are doubtful about the notion of farmland being used for purposes other than food production. But the Knepp experience also suggests that attitudes soften over time, with familiarity of the regenerative concept – a model that can be promoted as a return to the farming practices of previous generations rather a radically new idea, and with growing confidence about the long-term financial viability of the approach. Although some farmers in Y Bannau quip that ‘you can’t go green if you’re in the red’, other farmers are embracing nature friendly farming practices including regenerative farming and rewilding to cut their losses and find an escape route from spiralling debts, as Isabella Tree’s account of the Knepp story so graphically depicts (Tree, 2019). In Wales, as in England, the new agricultural subsidies regime is set to create a fork in the round for the farming community – whether to ‘go green’ under the subsidy regime or to disregard government support and double-down on food production to make create a viable farm business whilst meeting no more than the regulatory baseline.

*Redefining ‘agriculture’?*

The above discussion returns us back to the foundational question of what planning’s role should be in relation to agricultural enterprises undergoing profound change, and how land-use planning should respond to the changes? Governments will need to tread cautiously on relaxing permitted development rights in relation to built infrastructure. Despite the now frequent protests in the farming press, regulatory oversight of facilities such slurry storage tanks can be a good thing for the local communities that would be affected by a poorly placed and designed structures. But what about the planning permission that is needed to create a scrape for curlews or lapwing? Perhaps it is time to start removing some of the planning barriers for nature recovery that farmers face, and perhaps to bring nature recovery and farming together in planning policy as it is in farming practice. Perhaps the term ‘agriculture’ itself needs to be redefined where it appears in statute, with a largesse that would encourage the sector to embrace positive ecological change?

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**Biographies**

**Dr Iqbal Hamiduddin** is an Associate Professor at the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London. His work focuses on community-scale land use planning, housing and transport issues confronting urban and rural communities. He has published widely on rural housing issues, including in Bannau Brycheiniog National Park, and recent completed a report on Agricultural Transitions as part of the RTPI’s Rural Planning in the 2020s project.

**Christopher O’Brien MRTPI** is a senior planning officer with Bannau Brycheiniog National Park Authority. Currently focussed on determining a wide-ranging array of planning applications, he has previously worked within the National Park on its new Management Plan (2023 – 2028): Dyfodol Y Bannau The Future and its First Replacement Local Development Plan. Having worked with the emerging Welsh legislative and Policy context for the last 20 years within Welsh Local Planning Authorities, the RSPB and Natural Resources Wales, Chris’ interest is within the opportunities for how the ‘planning’ system may learn from and influence practice within other marine / land-use / environmental decision making process and frameworks.

**Helen Lucocq MRTPI** is head of Policy and Strategy at Bannau Brycheiniog National Park Authority, where she has worked in policy development for the past 16 years.  Based in Brecon, Helen was recently named as one of the future generation’s commissioners top 100 changemakers for her approach and attitude to the power of policy making.  Helen has long championed collaborative policy development, recently this has expended to understand how natures voice gets incorporated into discussions, resulting in the much publicised 25 year Plan for Bannau Brycheiniog National Park, Y Bannau: The Future.  This holistic land use plan has been described as a bold collaborative vision for the future of this special place, drawn through art, poetry, story.  Helen hopes that this vision will allow Y Bannau’s replacement LDP to be bolder in its linking of land use, development and ecosystem service and function.

1. The Three Acts: Agriculture Act 1947; Town and Country Planning Act 1947; National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See: https://ourfood1200.wales/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. see: https://gilestonefarmproject.co.uk/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See: https://wildkenhill.co.uk [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://knepp.co.uk [↑](#footnote-ref-5)