



WALES POLICY GROUP

BRITISH ECOLOGICAL SOCIETY BES Wales Policy Group Inaugural meeting

13th November, Cardiff University, 1200-1400.

The meeting began with brief introductions from the organisers on the work of the BES policy team, the growth of the BES Scottish Policy group, and the Evidence Gaps programme (BEAN). After introductions and lunch, attendees split into four groups to discuss the following questions. Responses are summarised below.

Summary

- Stronger links are needed between policymakers, academics, NGOs and businesses
- A greater understanding is needed as to how these different stakeholders work to address policy issues
- Events that can bring together these parties to hold a discussion in a neutral space would be beneficial; in addition to drawing in participants from across Wales, which will involve holding events across Wales.
- The BES WPG could, with appropriate aims and events, help to forge these links and improve the development and implementation of ecological policy in Wales

The BES and WPG chairs will consider the suggestions put forward by the attendees and generate a plan for the group's activities over the next year.

What role should the BES Wales Policy Group (BES WPG) play in supporting improved collaboration between ecologists and policymakers in Wales?

Forging new relationships

Contributions from attendees indicated that the BES WPG could provide a useful forum for facilitating communication between policymakers, academics and representatives from NGOs and allowing working relationships to be developed and maintained. It was also highlighted that the working group could play a role in promoting the importance of ecology to the Welsh Government, and helping ecologists in Wales to understand how they might influence policy.

Focus on expertise

Themed events were suggested, although it was also stated that the group's remit should be broad, not focussed on taxa specific issues, and should respond to the needs of Natural Resources Wales (NRW)/the Welsh Government, as well as considering other policy drivers. It was suggested that

policymakers could raise topics on which they were looking for input, and that this could potentially then lead to co-production (different parties working together to develop evidence informed policy).

Additional suggestions included:

- The WPG could provide a neutral space for different organisations or sectors to provide workshops and discussions
- A list of members, with their areas of expertise was mentioned as a potentially useful resource to develop
- The WPG could help to promote the importance of training for young ecologists, and of long term biodiversity monitoring programmes in Wales

Potential outputs

It was suggested that the BES WPG could:

- Produce materials such as consultation responses
- Contribute to the next State of Natural Resources Report (SoNaRR)
- Advise on the operationalisation of policies, should the membership have the expertise
- Help identify and fill knowledge gaps within ecological policy areas
- Provide resources to policymakers such as case studies

The importance of forging links and collaborations with commercial ecology organisations such as the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) was noted, as this would allow engagement with stakeholders and access to applied research opportunities.

What format should the group take to ensure it is beneficial and effective across Wales?

Encompassing the whole of Wales

A range of options was tabled to ensure the BES WPG was effective across Wales, and across the sector. This included ensuring that events happen in, or are accessible to communities from North, South, Mid and inland Wales. To achieve this, it was suggested that the location of the meetings could rotate. The importance of addressing local issues, getting involved with local authorities and engaging with stakeholders was highlighted, with regional meeting suggested as a way to do this.

Use of technology

Webinars were tabled as a way to allow those from further afield to join conversations. Webinars allow questions to be typed and responses to be collated after the fact, although the possibility of technological issues hampering meetings was raised. It was mentioned that CIEEM run training on webinars that may be of use.

The potential of meetings on the same subject happening in different locations was raised, with a video-link at the end allowing comparison of outcomes. Bangor and Aberystwyth were identified as potential venues due to having good video conference facilities and ecological expertise. It was emphasised that events should be recorded and made available online afterwards to enable those who could not attend to watch later.

Timing and logistics

The timing and format of meetings was also discussed; it was stated that it could be helpful to frame meetings as 'part of the day job' and that, therefore, lunch time or 4pm start might be appropriate times. This may also help to accommodate those with childcare commitments.

It was suggested that meetings could happen 2/3 times a year, or quarterly. The possibility of 'piggybacking' on other events, such as Platform for Wales and the National Parks ecologists workshops was put forward as a way to increase participation and impact.

What are the main barriers in engaging policymakers and the academic community in Wales?

Practical

It was highlighted that the ecological community in Wales is quite geographically fragmented, and that many people may not have the resources or time to travel to meetings with policymakers. There was also a suggestion that academics may feel overwhelmed by the wide range of policies they could potentially contribute to, and it was suggested the WPG may need to focus efforts on a few topics to be effective. It was raised that access to privately owned data could be hindering the efforts of policymakers and academics when trying to formulate evidence informed policy. Therefore, should the WPG facilitate a discussion on how to overcome these barriers?

Need to bridge the gap

Participants largely agreed that academics may not know how to engage with policymakers and NGOs, or how to make initial contact and then communicate appropriately, and vice versa. Those who are engaging with policy may be 'overloaded' as people tend to rely on existing personal contacts, and there is not yet clear a mechanism to forge new contacts. The WPG could provide an ideal networking platform to help bridge this gap.

It was also highlighted that there is not only a communication gap, but an understanding gap, in that many in both academia and policy do not understand the priorities and needs of the other. For instance, it was noted that the differences between policy documents, which tend to have an agenda, and academic papers, which may not, can be daunting to those attempting to collaborate.

What topics and issues would you like to see the Wales Policy Group cover?

Sustainability and Resilience

Sustainability and resilience were two themes that emerged repeatedly from participants, with potential themes for meetings including

- Marine management (including fisheries)
- Coastal resilience
- Flood management
- Land management (including farming)
- Rewilding
- Invasive species
- Climate change
- Pollution
- Impacts of tourism

- Health and well-being

It was highlighted that sound, shared definitions of terms like resilience and sustainability need to be developed and understood by policymakers, academics, NGOs and businesses. To help share such definitions, inter-disciplinary events bringing together marine, freshwater and terrestrial specialists (for example), would be beneficial.

Linking in to strategic and government priorities

The need to respond to the priorities of government was emphasised by participants, including the impact of Brexit. It was suggested that the BES WPG could input to the next SoNaRR report, and could potentially also feed in to the assessment of the effectiveness and connectivity of Natural Resource Plans. Natural Resource plans were also suggested as a resource to help target specific themes for meetings.

Process-based themes for events were suggested, such as how the Welsh Government accesses, synthesises and uses evidence. The gap between legislation and implementation was also proposed as a potential theme, and understanding the implications of the new Welsh legislation e.g. the Environment Act and the Well-being of Future Generations Act. Scenario planning was identified as an area the BES WPG might be able to feed into.

Geographically focussed events

It was identified that specific events dealing with different locations in Wales could be held, for instance, on the ecologically important Welsh heartlands. Cross-border events, in which Welsh and English policies were compared, were also suggested as potentially useful, particularly for areas that share a border with England.

Next Steps

- The WPG will aim to hold two meetings in 2018. September and November have been identified as potential months.
- The WPG, currently has two co-Chairs but an aim of 2018 will be to set up a Committee to help with arranging event and raising the profile of the WPG.
- Set up social media presence
- Grow the WPG mailing list.