

# **“Unlocking the potential of the Welsh Uplands”**

## **Proposals of the National Assembly for Wales’ Rural Affairs Cross Party Group.**



### **1. Summary**

1.1 This paper offers a contribution by members of the Cross Party Group on Rural Affairs to develop a vision for the Uplands of Wales and help maintain the focus and momentum provided by the Rural Development Sub Committee’s report *“The Future of the Uplands in Wales”* and their subsequent proposals to the Upland Forum, to

*“... draw up a holistic vision for the Uplands which all stakeholders, including the Welsh Government, should sign up to as a basis for their own actions.’*

1.2 Whilst recognising the important contribution that the Upland Forum has already made in developing their management approach for the Welsh uplands, the Rural Affairs Cross Party Group (RACPG) believes that a number of additional issues should be incorporated into the core ambitions of this vision, to make it more complete and reflect the Minister’s desire to achieve the integrated and sustainable use of the natural resources in upland Wales.

1.3 By incorporating our proposals into the Forum’s existing approaches which aim to:

- Increase productivity in the uplands,
- Promote ecosystem services delivery
- Tailor and deliver a integrated Programme of Community Solutions which suit the Uplands,

1.4 The RACPG believes that its proposals will help increase the resilience and vibrancy of Wales’ uplands and provide a realistic focus for the additional £6m made available by the Minister to help halt the loss of wildlife and habitats in selected areas of Wales.

1.5 Collectively our supplementary measures will in turn help create a wider range of environmental, social and economic benefits for the local communities and for the wider public who use and enjoy these areas.

1.6 Our proposals relate to the following key themes

- **Creating wider opportunities for and adding value to current approaches**
- **Delivering a more holistic and integrated ambition.**
- **Promoting improved partnership working.**

**Given this context the Rural Affairs Cross Party Group therefore recommends that:**

- **“A Manifesto for the Uplands”** to build resilience and diversity into the natural and cultural resources of the uplands is prepared and endorsed by All Assembly Parties.
- This Manifesto recognises and markets the uplands as **Environmentally Favoured Areas** rather than *Less Favoured and Seriously Disadvantaged Areas*.
- All existing policy measures should be reviewed and combined to produce an integrated and overarching **“landscape approach”** to the management of the uplands which promotes an holistic and inclusive approach to the stewardship of these areas and recognises the “latent” economic and social opportunities the environment of the uplands offer.
- **Locally based Integrated Management Plans** (similar to those used as the foundation for the management of our Protected Landscapes) should be prepared, to ensure that systematic planning and co-operative use of all the uplands’ resource is achieved.
- **High Nature Value farming** focusing on the production of value added livestock and products, and which creates new market opportunities for higher quality farmland wildlife and more diverse landscapes, should be at the heart of a green upland renaissance
- **New collaborative partnership approaches** which unlock these opportunities must be supported.
- The uplands are recognised as **Environmentally Favoured Areas** and their assets acknowledged as critical for the success of tourism and leisure activities. Accordingly the management of the resources on which these business interest depend, is actively supported by these sectors.
- An **“Uplands’ Champion”** is appointed by the Welsh Government to deliver these and other initiatives

## 2. The justification for our proposals

2.1 The RACPG recognises that the long term stability and resilience of upland farming systems, the land management practices associated with these areas and the environment in which these activities take place, are all interconnected. All are highly dependent on healthy and functioning ecosystems in which the integrity of soils, water and biodiversity are all properly safeguarded and wherever possible enhanced.

2.2 Upland agricultural practices are also instrumental for the appearance and character of our landscapes and the extensive range of direct and indirect services these areas ultimately provide. Our most iconic landscapes are in the main, farmed and managed in ways which seek to integrate economic and conservation principles so that each supports each other and enables other activities such as tourism and recreation activities to thrive and create substantial economic value.

2.3 Despite understanding the benefits that an integration of approach and action provide, evidence reveals that the reality is different in our uplands and neither the economic or environmental status of these areas is as healthy as they should be.

2.4 A more refined “landscape management” approach<sup>1</sup> based on inclusive partnerships working is needed which achieves the integration and responsible stewardship of the natural and cultural assets of these area and links these to the creation of new economic opportunities which enhance the vibrancy of rural communities. Sensitive planning and creative land stewardship measures must therefore be more closely aligned as ultimately this is the only way that sustainable development of the uplands can be achieved.

2.5 A significant step forward would be to recognise the value and promote the benefits that High Nature Value (HNV) farming provide.

2.6 The encouragement of more bespoke systems of extensive grazing if appropriately managed have the potential not only to provide higher value products but also create opportunity markets for farmland wildlife and landscapes which are of a higher quality and more diverse. Habitats, in good condition as well as providing homes for nature also enable carbon in the form of peat and trees to be locked up, clean drinking water to be stored and risks of flooding to be reduced. The fact that over 70% of Wales’ water bodies still fail EU quality targets clearly shows that the present approaches to the management of the uplands is failing to achieve the necessary standards. Equally the loss, fragmentation and degradation of upland habitats and the species that they support have resulted in valuable habitats such as blanket bogs, (essential for carbon and water storage) being damaged and the landscape character of these areas deteriorating .

---

<sup>1</sup> The management approaches characterised by, but not limited to those found in our finest landscapes namely those of our National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Beauty, provide a template for the promotion of such integrated partnership approaches.

2.7 Similarly the current “maintain and support” approach to “the management of the uplands is equally unsustainable from an economic point of view. Despite farmers benefiting from the current upland headage payments in reality without this subsidy, the majority of upland farming would be uneconomic, farming structures would collapse and the landscape character of these areas would deteriorate. Regrettably under present circumstances, there appears to be no indication that this situation will improve.

2.8 Promoting High Nature Value Farms and rewarding the range of goods and services and hence the public benefits they provide, therefore creates an opportunity to place environment-friendly farming businesses at the heart of a green rural renaissance. Promoting low impact / added value approaches would it is contended provide demonstrable benefits to local communities and their economies and help enhance the environmental value and diversity of these upland environments.

2.8 To achieve this change, the image of the uplands needs to be transformed. Instead of these areas being labelled Less Favoured and Seriously Disadvantaged, they should be promoted as **Environmentally Favoured Areas**, places whose environmental assets require an increased rather than reduced amounts of investment to ensure that active management of their resources is achieved, (in particular to maintain the quality and productivity of their carbon, water and landscape resources).

2.9 A renewed and integrated approach of this kind would strengthen the business profile of upland farming and the quality of the products derived from these areas, prevent the undesirable consequences of land abandonment and halt the loss of environmental and cultural values associated with the uplands.

### 3. The way forward

3.1 If Wales’ upland environments, their farmers, communities and cultures are to thrive, a balance must be struck. The active management of the precious resources these areas contain in a long term and sustainable manner is essential if Wales is to meet its environmental obligations, halt the loss of wildlife and safeguard the very building blocks of farming – the upland soils and water resources.

3.2 The land management skills and expertise of upland farmers and others, provides the key to achieving this and must be harnessed and to tackle the technical complexities of managing the environmental and ecosystem services the uplands provide. The recreation of the wildlife and landscape diversity which existed 50 years ago should be the aim and progress towards it the bench mark for success.

3.3 To achieve this Policy and decision makers must work in partnership with land owners and environmental interests to create a collaborative approach to the all-inclusive management of the uplands.

3.4 Integrated Resource Management Plans similar to those in National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty provide a tried and well tested means by which this kind of

systematic and co-operative resource planning and its delivery on the ground through partnership working can be achieved. The production of these local Natural Resource Management Plans should likewise interface and guide a more comprehensive and refreshed rural planning policy approach so that collectively they can provide templates for shaping the future of all our uplands.

3.5 Because the uplands are a national enviro-economic asset, individuals, and organisations and in particular decision makers must work together, show leadership and enlightened action to ensure these areas remain environmentally secure, culturally distinctive and economically enriched.

3.6 The Welsh Government's proposal to appoint an Uplands Champion for Wales is therefore welcomed and it is hoped this person is provided with the opportunity to think and act creatively.

3.7 Equally to facilitate further discussion of these ideas in the Uplands Forum's forward work programme, it is suggested that increased representation on this Forum from the environmental NGO sector and wider business communities, should be accepted.

3.8 The Rural Affairs Cross Party Group would likewise welcome the opportunity to continue this dialogue with the Uplands Forum and the Minister to help shape these proposals still further.

September 2013