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Rewilding in the British policy landscape. A qualitative analysis of policy documents related to rewilding

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ABSTRACT

UK parliamentary research recognises rewilding as an opportunity to fulfil national habitat restoration commitments. Nevertheless, there is a current lack of analysis concerning the policy landscape in Britain. To address this gap, we employ qualitative document analysis to assess how rewilding features in national policy documents in Britain. Using a structured search strategy to identify national policy documents from Scotland, England and Wales, we carry out inductive qualitative document analysis to inform a comparative study of the three nations. We find that despite a growing level of public interest in rewilding, and a proliferation of projects, rewilding remains poorly articulated in national policies. Definitional challenges and the impact of controversial rewilding practices influence if and how rewilding terminology features. We examine how different forms of engagement with rewilding at national level reflect divergent policy visions. We consider how the current level of policy engagement may influence the future implementation of rewilding in Britain and propose potential directions for future research in this field.


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Introduction

After the failure to meet the Aichi Biodiversity targets during the United Nations Decade on Biodiversity 2011–2020 (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2020), leaders met at the Fifteenth Conference of the Parties (COP15) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to agree a new set of targets as part of the CBD post-2020 framework. Collective action at all scales is required if global objectives are to be achieved, particularly in the context of the dual crises of climate change and biodiversity loss (Palmer, 2022), and governments of the UK must consider how best to respond to meet their commitments. Following the ‘neoliberal turn’ in nature management (Adams et al., 2013) and the verdict that ‘more, bigger, better and joined’ action is needed for nature (Lawton, 2010), the focus of conservation thinking in the UK has turned towards landscape-scale strategies including ecological networks, connectivity, and nature recovery (Smith et al., 2022). Failure of traditional site-based conservation to deliver sufficient biodiversity outcomes has led to calls for a new conservation narrative that emphasises optimism, technology and a more people-centred vision (Louder & Wyborn, 2020). ‘Rewilding’ fosters such a hopeful and forward-looking narrative (Jepson, 2019) and is increasingly acknowledged in the academic literature as a complementary tool for achieving biodiversity ambitions (Dunn-Capper et al., 2023; Svenning, 2020). Rewilding is identified in UK parliamentary research as an opportunity to meet habitat restoration commitments (Wentworth & Alison, 2016), and recent analysis has explored its potential to support net zero ambitions (Mercer & Gregg, 2023). However, a lack of guidance in public policy may be limiting broader implementation (Pettorelli et al., 2018). Policy analysis has been identified as a key direction for future rewilding research (Massenberg et al., 2022), but a detailed comparative review of policies across British nations is, to our knowledge, so far lacking. To address this gap, this paper presents a qualitative analysis of policy documents to investigate if and how rewilding features in British public policy. Our research questions are as follows:

- 1) How does rewilding feature in public policy documents for the three nations of Britain?
- 2) What commonalities or distinctions are there across the three nations of Britain?

First, we provide a brief overview of research on rewilding and how it is situated in the wider policy contexts of Scotland, England, and Wales. Following this, we introduce our method of qualitative content analysis of national policy documentation. Building on existing debate on the scope of rewilding in Scottish policy, as reported by Brown et al. (2011) in this journal, we then consider if and how understandings of rewilding differ between the three nations and the implications of the current policy environment for rewilding practice.

General background

Terminology

Although a relatively new and contentious concept, rewilding has captured the public’s imagination in a way that terms such as ecological conservation or restoration have not

(Jørgensen, 2015). Its flexible nature means it is a term applied across contexts, appealing to multiple interests, and reaching different audiences. It is an umbrella term (Schulte to Bühne et al., 2022), and the distinction between rewilding and restoration remains unclear (du Toit & Pettorelli, 2019; Pettorelli et al., 2018). The concepts of restoration and rewilding exhibit both differences and commonalities. They are components of diverse conservation strategies, complementing other activities within the broader context of environmental management (Dempsey, 2021a; Gann et al., 2019). For the purposes of this research, we understand rewilding as being based on key principles laid out by the IUCN Rewilding Thematic Group; these are summarised as restoring natural processes to rebuild resilient, self-sustaining natural ecosystems requiring no or minimum-intervention management (IUCN CEM, 2021). We also note that nations in some instances are developing their own rewilding definition (Waylen & Marshall, 2023). We therefore recognise that understandings of rewilding are underpinned by broad values and knowledge(s) and thus approach rewilding as a ‘cluster concept’, where we: ‘... consider conceptualising rewilding in such a way that we can accommodate varieties of its usages and allow comparison across these varieties without ballooning the concept to meaninglessness’. Gammon (2018, p. 339). Using the lens of environmental philosophy, this approach allows for discussion, interrogation, and reflection of concepts whose boundaries are not easy to define (Gammon, 2017).

Rewilding and policy in Britain

In the mostly densely populated countries of Britain, the practicalities of achieving rewilding at scale have resulted in differing interpretations of rewilding, where human intervention is accepted to enable it to operate alongside other land uses (Thomas, 2022b). As rewilding is variously interpreted (Carver et al., 2021), rewilding practice is influenced by a range of policies spanning fields including biodiversity, agriculture, land management, forestry, planning, landscapes and protected areas, net zero and climate change. Of these, the policy areas of agriculture, forestry and fisheries, the environment and planning are devolved, meaning that governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland develop their own policies on these matters, and the UK Government and Parliament examines English policy in the same areas.¹

Despite an increase in self-described rewilding projects in Britain, researchers have remarked on a lack of policy, guidance, and legislation (Jones & Comfort, 2019; Pettorelli et al., 2018) at a time when the UK’s exit from the EU and the resulting changes in regulation and policy are impacting different land use sectors (Brand, 2021). At delivery level, there is evidence that government bodies in some nations are engaging with rewilding, though this is not true of Wales, which reflects a general avoidance of the term in the context of Welsh landscapes (Woodland Trust, 2020). In England, a 2009 Natural England report (Chesterton, 2009) investigated the environmental impacts of land management, including the withdrawal of management, or ‘rewilding’. More recently, following consultation (Natural England, 2020), Natural England is developing guidance on how rewilding should be dealt with in the Biodiversity Metric, and has provided a case study demonstrating how rewilding can provide biodiversity units for a biodiversity net gain project (Natural England, 2023). NatureScot has commissioned research to identify lessons from large-scale restoration and rewilding projects (Underwood et al., 2021) and describes large-scale nature restoration and rewilding as ‘solutions for our

times' (NatureScot, 2023b). It has also produced guidance on nature finance opportunities for land managers, which recognises rewilding as new source of private finance for the stewardship of land, water and nature in Scotland (NatureScot, 2023a).

Reintroducing species to restore natural processes is a core principle of rewilding as defined by the IUCN (IUCN CEM, 2021). Government guidance on species reintroduction is more established than rewilding specific guidance, perhaps explained by the ability of species-specific concerns to 'force' the policy process (Ward & Prior, 2020), bringing the attention of policy makers to a problem which needs solving. There is extensive guidance on beaver reintroduction in Scotland (Gaywood et al., 2015; National Species Reintroduction Forum, 2014), and England has a newly created 'Species Reintroduction Taskforce' (England Species Reintroductions Taskforce – GOV.UK, 2023). However, it is notable that the term rewilding is absent in these documents and in the taskforce terms of reference.

In the next section, the literature reviewed documents some of the variety of rewilding approaches which are emerging in the political, social and cultural contexts of Scotland, England and Wales. Our research then builds on this body of work, by analysing and comparing the representation of rewilding in national policy in Britain.

Scottish policy landscape

While the Scottish Highlands have previously been the focus of rewilding interest due to lower population density, ascribed wilderness qualities and the structure of land ownership (Sandom & Macdonald, 2015), rewilding has gained traction across Scotland. Led primarily by private landowners and NGOs, a diversity of approaches has emerged reflecting different understandings of autonomy, restoration, and wildness within cultural landscapes (Deary & Warren, 2019). It has been recognised both for its economic benefits, such as development of nature-based tourism, and for the mutual opportunities around combining rewilding with existing land uses, such as forestry (Dandy & Wynne-Jones, 2019). Its potential as a conservation strategy was recognised in 2011, though inclusion of the term in government policy was recommended for wider conservation implementation (Brown et al., 2011). In 2023, a definition of rewilding for Scotland's public sector was published after being commissioned by the Scottish Government. While not official policy, it is closely associated with the policy-making agenda and will act as a reference point for future rewilding policy development (Waylen & Marshall, 2023). The definition is broadly aligned with the principles laid out by the IUCN CEM Rewilding Thematic Group (IUCN CEM, 2021): 'Rewilding means enabling nature's recovery ... by processes that engage and ideally benefit local communities' (Waylen & Marshall, 2023, p. viii). It is notable that the definition recognises the contentious nature of the term and the subsequent need in some circumstances to: 'use other terminology in order to more clearly and less contentiously communicate intentions or expectations' (Waylen & Marshall, 2023, p. 40).

The publication of this rewilding definition sits within the wider Scottish policy context of land reform and securing an environmentally and socially just transition. The explicit inclusion of local community benefits in the rewilding definition reflects political interests around creating a more diverse pattern of land ownership in Scotland. Social and economic decision-making power in relation to land use is a pertinent issue, and despite policies designed to increase community ownership of

land and land assets, the country continues to display highly concentrated land ownership (Glenn et al., 2019). There is growing attention around the unequal impacts of land investment for purposes such as rewilding, restoration and carbon offsetting (Stanley, 2024), and the lack of community decision-making power in matters of land-use change (Martin et al., 2023a). Minimalist interventionist objectives associated with rewilding may clash with preservationist ideals of beauty, and the desire to achieve wild qualities may come at the expense of historic ecological authenticity (Prior & Brady, 2017). Given the legacy of past traumas such as the Highland Clearances (Richards, 2020), and with perceptions of some practitioners that rewilding constitutes a ‘new form of Clearances’ (Deary & Warren, 2019, p. 468), inclusivity, transparency, and appreciation of historical sensitivities around land use are critical to gaining support for any future rewilding strategy (Macmillan, 2021). Although research indicates that Scottish rewilding discourse has evolved to include human dimensions such as re peopling (repopulation) and the transformation of rural economies (Martin et al., 2023a), beyond this adaptive organisational positioning there is little evidence of wider inclusion in decision-making (Martin et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2023b).

English policy landscape

Among conservationists in England, rewilding has become a recognised element of conservation discourse, although divergent views on the level of intervention and uncertainty persist (Dempsey, 2021b). Thomas (2022a) suggests that the UK’s withdrawal from the EU Common Agricultural Policy has created a policy window of opportunity whereby rewilding has become ‘politically and economically viable’ due to new agricultural support payments based on the principle of public money for public goods (Thomas, 2022a, p. 87). Policy negotiation and participatory communication have appeared as fundamental to the specific type of rewilding which has emerged in the English cultural context (Thomas, 2022a). In this way, rewilding has become ‘domesticated’, where the more radical elements of rewilding have been put aside in favour of small-scale initiatives where new biopolitical modes guide ethical decision-making (Thomas, 2022c). In the English uplands, while changes to agricultural subsidies may offer opportunity for new types of land management in Less Favoured Areas² where production conditions are difficult, traditional land use and cultural connections may present barriers to plans for management reduction or withdrawal (Sandom et al., 2019). Olwig (2016) argues that rewilding’s influence on environmental policy in the Lake District is tantamount to a form of ‘virtual enclosure’ of the commons, where sheep have become ‘scapegoats’ and pastoral landscapes are under threat from the singular objective of nature conservation (Olwig, 2016, p. 259). Some argue that the combination of rewilding with agriculture has the potential to offer new environmental and human benefits, allaying concerns of removal of human engagement with the land by enabling sustainable livelihoods (Bruce et al., 2022). Indeed, with 70% of land in England under agricultural management, engagement and collaboration with the farming community is seen as central to advancing visions of restoration and rewilding (Mikołajczak et al., 2022). However, the complexities of achieving this in ‘culturally-saturated’ English landscapes are argued to necessitate novel approaches for navigating the ethical and

socio-cultural dimensions of the debate (Brook, 2018). Even against the backdrop of post-Brexit policy reform, the remnants of past policy can still be seen in the way that land is used and shaped. Land ownership remains central to how rural land is used and managed in Britain, and despite marginal change in land ownership structure, landed estates and large-scale farming continue to dominate (Burchardt et al., 2020).

Welsh policy landscape

In mid-Wales, where a context of complex histories, the legacy of land acquisitions (Milbourne & Mason, 2016) and ‘the taint of colonialism’ frame rewilding initiatives (Wynne-Jones et al., 2018, p. 389), a ‘more peopled and culturally responsive vision’ is being advocated for, via connection with the continuing needs of existing local communities, the Welsh language, and cultural narratives (Wynne-Jones et al., 2018, p. 397). However, the complexity of values underpinning people’s relationship with landscape and the environment means that deciding on and delivering a shared vision is no easy task. Holmes et al. (2022) found that rural communities are not homogenous but display complex departures in landscape values and relationships. Even where local support for rewilding is found, projects can suffer setbacks when social, cultural, and economic priorities are not balanced (Holmes et al., 2022). Jones (2022) further illustrates this complexity through her study of sheep farming in the Cambrian mountains, where the area’s distinct ecologies are co-constructed alongside food production within the cultural framework of upland sheep breeding. Rewilding, in many cases, undervalues such situated knowledge (Jones, 2022), which has the potential to cause significant conflict and distress among communities. Of particular note is the legacy of Rewilding Britain’s Summit to Sea project; targeting 10,000 hectares of terrestrial habitat in mid-Wales and c.30,000 hectares of marine habitat in Cardigan Bay, the project was abandoned in its original form after concerns were raised by local communities and farming unions (Weakley, 2019). Reflecting ongoing sensitivities around the creation of wild areas, namely the primacy of ecological aims over social and cultural endeavours, the reformed project (now named Tir Canol) has replaced ‘wilding’ language in favour of ‘a much more sophisticated, nuanced rhetoric built through a co-production approach with stakeholders’ (Summit to Sea, 2020).

Methodology

We use qualitative policy document analysis to review policy documents from Scotland, Wales and England. Northern Ireland has been excluded from this analysis given the current stated lack of formal engagement in rewilding in the country (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2022). This research has been approved by the University of Aberdeen’s Physical Sciences & Engineering Ethics Board, under application number 654322.

Qualitative analysis of policy documents

We analysed how rewilding is represented in policy documents across three nations using qualitative document analysis, which can be used to assess documents in a rigorous

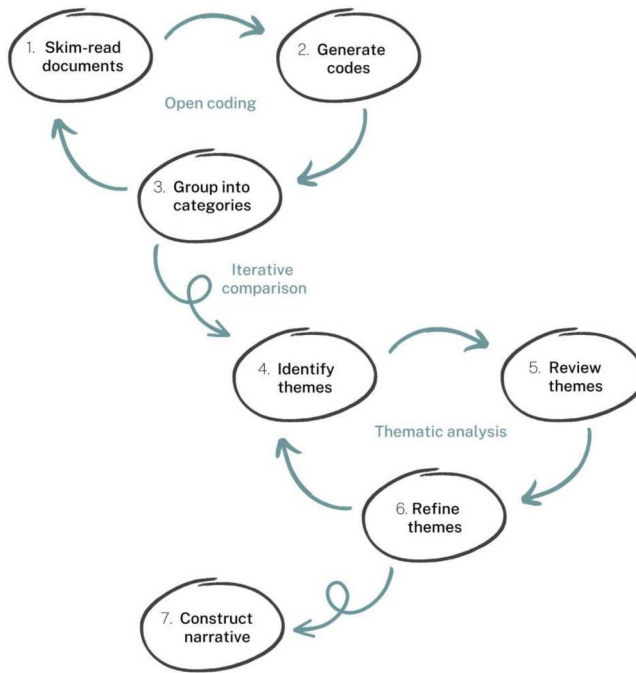


Figure 1. Overview of document analysis method.

and systematic way (Wach & Ward, 2013). Commonly applied in social sciences, document analysis can be used to understand the representation of specific issues (Altheide et al., 2008) or applied to policy to investigate the contents of certain types of policy as they differ across geographies (Hecker et al., 2019). It has been applied to environmental policy to characterise policy trends through the large-scale analysis of legal documents (Hall & Steiner, 2020).

The goal of our qualitative document analysis that progressed in stages (Figure 1) was to understand how rewilding is represented in policy documents and if or how this differs across three administrations.

Search strategy for gathering policies

Using the policy search function on the government websites (gov.uk, gov.scot, gov.wales), we carried out a methodological search for relevant documents. Since our analysis focused on policy content (as opposed to the policy process³), we recognised official policy documents, including both formally adopted policy and proposed policy from the UK Government, Scottish Parliament, and the National Assembly for Wales. Inclusion criteria were that documents had to be available in the public domain and dated between 1st January 2018 (the publication date of the UK Government's 25 Year Environment Plan, which set out a roadmap for environmental policy once the UK is no longer a member of the EU) and end of April 2023.

As a search for the term 'rewilding' returned very few results, we instead retrieved documents by filtering using each website's predefined search terms. The filtered

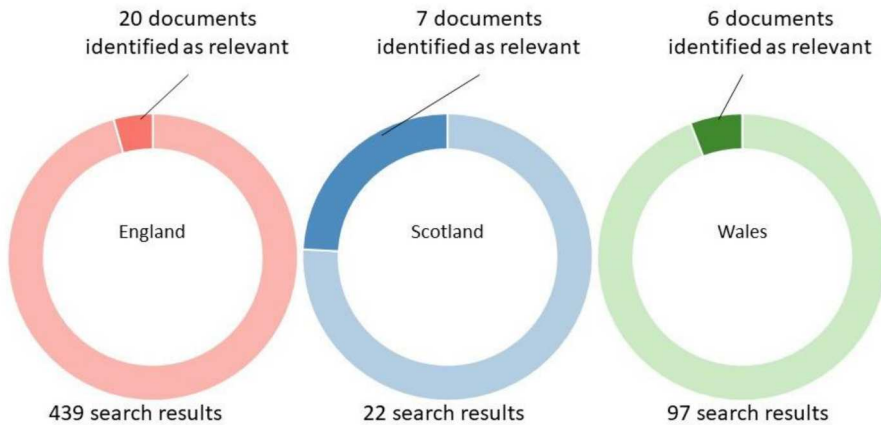


Figure 2. Number of documents found in structured search compared to documents identified as relevant for in-depth qualitative analysis.

search results were screened manually using expert judgement on thematic policy area to allow for final selection of documents based on their applicability to the research themes. To select a feasible number of publications for manual analysis, we focused on policy areas which we deemed relevant to rewilding including biodiversity (species protection) and land use (ecosystem services, multifunctional landscapes, agricultural policy, rural policy). The analysis focuses on terrestrial rewilding, documents relating to marine policy were excluded as outwith the scope of this study. In total we initially took 33 documents forward in total for detailed analysis (Figure 2).

In addition to the 33 documents identified through the structured search, we carried out targeted searches for specific documents which we identified through citations. This allowed us to gather relevant documents that did not appear in the results of the structured policy search, but which we identified as relevant during the screening and open coding process. To ensure that no relevant documents were missed, we crosschecked our list of documents with the latest developments listed by Westminster Forum Projects' national forums: Policy Forum Wales, Policy Forum London, and Scotland Policy Conferences (Westminster Forum Projects, 2023). Using a manual search strategy allowed for more nuanced decision-making regarding inclusion of documents for analysis, such as, for example, in the case of publications which are not authored by the national government. This strategy resulted in 7 additional documents identified (some with publication dates after April 2023), and a total of 40 policy documents for analysis (Appendix 1).

Qualitative content analysis (inductive)

To produce contextual data and develop understanding of the current policy environment, we conducted a review of policy and strategy documentation using qualitative document analysis as described by Bowen (2009). This is an iterative process of skimming, reading, and interpretation, analysing content by identifying relevant information and organising (coding) it under themes derived from our research interests (Figure 1). We used NVivo qualitative data analysis computer software (QSR International Pty Ltd,

2020) for analysis. NviVo allows the handling, organisation, and analysis of non-numerical or unstructured data. The software facilitates the multi-stage process of gathering material by category ('coding') and allows the user to find patterns and connections in data, cross-examine information and identify trends.

First, we carried out an initial targeted search for the term 'rewilding' and its variations (re-wilding, wilding) to identify presence or absence within each policy document. Then,

Table 1. Policy documents containing 'rewilding' as a term, or any of the 3 thematic frames identified in the analysis.

Author	Year	Title	Occurrence of 'rewilding' as a term	Themes		
				Freedom & letting go	Wilder areas & landscapes	Competing land uses
Scottish Government	2022	Land Reform in a Net Zero Nation Consultation Paper				✓
Scottish Government	2019	Scotland's Forestry Strategy 2019–2029				✓
Scottish Government	2021	Scotland's Third Land Use Strategy 2021–2026	✓			✓
Scottish Government	2020	Update to the Climate Change Plan 2018–2032: Securing a Green Recovery on a Path to Net Zero				✓
England						
Defra	2022	25 Year Environment Plan Annual Progress Report April 2021 to March 2022		✓		
Defra	2020	The Path to Sustainable Farming: An Agricultural Transition Plan 2021–2024		✓	✓	✓
HM Government	2023	Environmental Improvement Plan 2023: First revision of the 25 Year Environment Plan				✓
Defra	2022	Policy paper – Government food strategy				✓
Defra	2022	Policy paper – Landscape Recovery: more information on how the scheme will work		✓	✓	
J Glover	2019	Landscapes Review	✓	✓	✓	✓
Defra	2022	Nature recovery green paper: protected sites and species	✓	✓		
HM Government	2021	Net Zero Strategy: Build Back Greener				✓
UK Government	2021	England Peat Action Plan				✓
UK Government	2021	The England Trees Action Plan 2021–2024			✓	✓
Wales						
Welsh Government	2018	Valued and Resilient: The Welsh Government's Priorities for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks				✓
Welsh Government	2019	Brexit and our land: Securing the future of Welsh farming				✓
Welsh Government	2019	Prosperity for All: A Climate Conscious Wales. A climate change plan for Wales				✓
Welsh Government	2022	Sustainable Farming Scheme Outline Proposals for 2025				✓

we reviewed each policy document using an inductive analysis approach, employing open coding (Crang & Cook, 2007) followed by structured coding, where codes are first derived from the textual data and then applied to the whole corpus. A first round of open (inductive) coding generated an initial list of codes. This process was followed by aggregation of codes into broader categories. Next, the codes and categories were compared iteratively to identify themes. These themes were reviewed and refined and then used to analyse the language used and the convergence or divergence of policy across Britain.

Results

Occurrence of the term rewilding in policy documents

In the 40 policy documents we reviewed we identified three policy documents which included the term ‘rewilding’ (Table 1). In all instances, rewilding is referred to in the context of case studies.

In Scottish national policy, rewilding appears in the third Land Use Strategy, where Dundreggan Rewilding Centre in the Scottish Highlands (Figure 3) is used as a case study example of sustainable land use via ecological restoration, specifically ‘protecting and enhancing...wider native ecology’ which is described as ‘iconic’, ‘rare’ and ‘elusive’ (Scottish Government, 2021, p. 26).

In English national policy, rewilding is referred to in the 2019 Landscapes Review, where the Knepp Wildland Project in West Sussex is used as a case study example of the ‘restoration of dynamic, natural’ areas to ‘establish a functioning ecosystem’



Figure 3. The tree nursery at Dundreggan Rewilding Centre in the Scottish Highlands, where rare and hard-to-grow species are propagated. The project is expanding the area of Caledonian forest through a combination of tree planting, natural regeneration and reduced grazing pressure. Image credit: © Craig Wallace (cc-by-sa/2.0).



Figure 4. Tamworth pigs foraging at Knepp Wildland Project. Tamworth pigs are used as a wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) substitute at Knepp, creating soil disturbance through rootling. Image credit: Flurina Wartmann.

(Glover, 2019, p. 45). The Knepp project is referenced again in the 2022 Nature Recovery Green Paper, which details policy proposals for protected sites and species:

In recent years alternative ‘rewilding’ approaches to biodiversity conservation and nature recovery have been developed on land. We’ve seen huge successes in projects like Knepp, where **restoring dynamic natural processes** saw nature return within a decade. (Defra, 2022b, p. 14, emphasis added)

Here, Knepp is described as hugely successful in restoring natural processes and ensuring ‘ecological coherence’ (Defra, 2022b, p. 15) through multiple conservation strategies such as the introduction of free-roaming grazing animals (Figure 4). Further references are made to the Knepp estate in additional English policy documents, though in the context of landscape-scale restoration and species reintroduction, rather than rewilding explicitly.

No Wales policy documents (Appendix 1, Table iii) use the term rewilding. This is reflective of an avoidance of the term in the context of Welsh landscapes, and a preference for language such as restoration and nature-based solutions (Woodland Trust, 2020). For example:

Innovative use of **nature-based solutions** and integrating green infrastructure in and around urban areas can help **restore natural features and processes** into cities and landscapes. (Welsh Government, 2021, p. 78, emphasis added)

Resilient ecological networks are key to delivery for biodiversity and climate change, and **nature-based solutions** to address both challenges should contribute wherever possible to **maintaining and enhancing these nature networks**. (Welsh Government, 2020, p. iv, emphasis added)

While the term rewilding is avoided in the Welsh context, ‘nature-based solutions’ is used to describe the same characteristics which are associated with rewilding (Carver et al., 2021) in English and Scottish policy, namely restoring natural processes and enhancing ecological networks. Our analysis also revealed shifts in terminology within Welsh policy. The more recently published Biodiversity Deep Dive (Welsh Government, 2022a) does not include reference to nature-based solutions, and instead uses ‘nature recovery’.

In the following sections, we present the main themes identified through thematic analysis.

Themes identified in policy documents

We found three main thematic framings linked to rewilding through our content analysis of policy documents: a theme of freedom and ‘letting go’, the role of wilder areas and landscapes, and narratives around competing land uses.

Identified theme: freedom and ‘letting go’

We found themes of freedom and ‘letting go’ in English policy documents (Table 1), where the UK’s departure from the EU offers opportunities to ‘break free’ from the restrictions of previous legislation. Plans for agricultural reform are contrasted with European Union ‘old style’ legislation which is described as ‘dysfunctional’ and ‘draconian’:

The dysfunctional, top-down rules and draconian penalties that were a feature of the EU era will be struck down or reformed. (Defra, 2020, p. 4)

As part of this reform, a transformation of terrestrial site designations is planned ‘... to better enable nature’s recovery through a less prescriptive system which allows the right actions to be taken in the right places’ (Defra, 2022b, p. 10). Descriptors used for new approaches include radical, bold, dynamic, modern, innovative, and non-traditional, with flexibility at the core. Such bold, inspirational, and optimistic language is identified in the literature as a key characteristic of rewilding (Carver et al., 2021). For example, the Landscape Recovery scheme, part of England’s agricultural transition arrangements, is described as:

... for landowners and managers who want to take a more **radical and large-scale approach** to producing environmental and climate goods on their land. (Defra, 2022a, emphasis added)

Documents acknowledge the need for a plurality of approaches, employing both active and passive forms of management to deliver nature recovery:

The diversity and distinctiveness of our national landscapes means we can trial different approaches in different places, from ‘letting nature take its course’, to active interventions. (Glover, 2019, p. 44)

The use of a ‘hands off’ approach, where control is relinquished, is put forward as a means to foster nature recovery:

... we can make space for nature in new areas and better reflect our goal of not only halting the decline in nature but restoring it. By simply **letting go of the reins**, we can **give nature the space to return** in relatively short timeframes. (Defra, 2022b, p. 5, emphasis added)

A key characteristic of rewilding is its ability to highlight the dynamic nature of ecological systems ‘freed from imposed order’ (Carver et al., 2021, p. 1886). Whereas conservation is associated with control and placement of nature, rewilding in contrast emphasises a reduction in human control and intervention (Wynne-Jones et al., 2020). For example, Knepp Wildland Project’s ‘driving principle is to establish a functioning ecosystem where nature is given as much **freedom** as possible’ (Glover, 2019, p. 45, emphasis added).

Identified theme: wilder areas and landscapes

We found a theme of wilder landscapes in our analysis of English policy documents (Table 1). The creation and restoration of ‘wilder landscapes’ is included in the scope of England’s Landscape Recovery Scheme; under this scheme’s pilot, the creation of 20,000 hectares of wilder landscapes is expected to deliver improved biodiversity, water quality and net zero outcomes (Defra, 2022a). Wilder areas are also referenced in the ‘Trees Action Plan’ and the ‘Landscapes Review’, where wilder areas are associated with specific management actions, namely the reduction in grazing or the use of particular species:

Wilder areas do not necessarily mean standing back from these areas completely – it is not a choice for example between farming and wilding, or landscape and biodiversity, but a continuum where there is space for all. This could include supporting less grazing or different kinds of grazing, with cattle or ponies in places. (Glover, 2019, p. 44).

This theme of wilder areas and landscapes is not found in documents from Scotland or Wales. In the Welsh Government’s ‘Priorities for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks’ document (Welsh Government, 2018), the equivalent of England’s Landscapes Review, there is no reference to terms such as ‘wild’, ‘wilder’ or ‘wilderness’. Similarly, no reference to ‘wilder’ areas was found in the Scottish Land Use Strategy.

Identified theme: competing rural land use

All three nations have committed to large-scale tree planting and peatland restoration, and policies across all nations highlight the challenge of balancing multiple land uses to meet climate and biodiversity targets. Policies recognise the potential for conflicts and the need for integration to balance demands. For example, in Scottish policy:

[We] have set a clear ambition to ensure that an integrated approach to land use is taken, seeking to maximise synergies and reduce potential conflicts between different land uses. (Scottish Government, 2021, p. 22)

The Scottish government has committed to transforming land use by creating 18,000 hectares of woodland per year by 2024/2025, and restoring 250,000 hectares of peatland by 2030 (Scottish Government, 2020). In Scottish policy documents, transformational land use change is framed in terms of people and justice: building of the rural economy and workforce and using land use change as a catalyst to repopulate rural areas:

Achieving land use transformation on this scale will require a major increase in the size and capability of the workforce. This significant expansion of an already important sector of the rural economy is an opportunity for more people to work and live in rural Scotland. (Scottish Government, 2020, p. 168)

There is a strong emphasis on getting people onto rural land, for example:

We must also ensure that we don't assume nor accept that radical reform of land use necessarily means fewer people living in rural Scotland: the aim should be to use land use change to help repopulate remote and island areas too. (Scottish Government, 2020, p. 168)

Scottish land reform policy envisages:

Scotland with thriving (and growing) rural and island communities and where more, not less, people live and work sustainably on our land. (Scottish Government, 2022, p. ii)

Welsh policy also highlights tensions around conflicting land uses:

AONBs and National Parks, which contain a socio-economic dimension, should exemplify approaches to reconciling tensions around competing demands for natural resources. (Welsh Government, 2018, p. 8)

The Welsh government is proposing a land-sharing approach to reconcile multiple demands and enable the delivery of environmental and social outcomes through sustainable land management (Welsh Government, 2022b, p. 9). Wales is the only country which specifies a land-sharing approach and modelling suggests delivering this will be challenging in a Welsh context, requiring transformative and coordinated policy actions across sectors (Jones et al., 2023). In this land-sharing approach, active agriculture is identified as key to balancing socio-economic and cultural dimensions, and there is an emphasis on keeping people on rural land:

We must keep farmers on the land: Keeping farmers on the land will also support our rural communities, creating and reinforcing social networks and helping bring cohesion and resilience to communities. (Welsh Government, 2022b, p. 11)

... reward those farmers who are actively farming the land in a sustainable way (Welsh Government, 2022b, p. 62)

In England, land use is moving away from being principally for food production, and the publication of a land use framework is imminent (House of Lords, 2022). Like Scotland and Wales, policy highlights the issue of competing land uses and access to natural resources.

Like other resources, our land is finite and competition for it will need to be managed as we rely on natural resources and use land for multiple new purposes ... We will also need to ensure net zero is compatible with wider uses of land such as agriculture, housing, infrastructure, and environmental goals. These land use challenges are exacerbated by the impact of climate change on the availability of productive land and water in future. (HM Government, 2021, p. 87)

However, in contrast to Wales and Scotland, narratives of getting more people onto land were not found in English policy documents.

Discussion

How does rewilding feature in public policy documents for the three nations of Britain? (RQ1)

Our research demonstrates that despite a growing level of public interest in rewilding and a multitude of smaller and larger scale initiatives sprouting up across Britain, the term ‘rewilding’ barely occurs in national policy documents at all.

In Wales, the term ‘rewilding’ is absent from national policy, and not applied at delivery-level by government-sponsored bodies such as Natural Resources Wales, indicating an avoidance of the term. Rural land use in Wales is strongly tied to active agricultural management, and extensive land-use change which prioritises ecological concerns over social and cultural endeavours is not welcomed. Instead, a vision of land-sharing, rooted in sustainable land management and the use of nature-based solutions, appears in Welsh national policy. Given this policy trajectory, and a legacy of negative past experiences with rewilding in the country, it seems unlikely that future policy will engage with such a contentious topic. While this does not exclude the possibility of further rewilding practice developing on the ground, extensive implementation of rewilding as a plausible macro-level conservation strategy in this context is unlikely.

In Scotland and England, the term rewilding is present in national policy documents, and every incidence occurs in the context of select case studies, specifically Dundreggan (Scotland) and Knepp (England). Linking of the term with case studies reflects rewilding’s status as a boundary object (Star, 1988): ‘plastic’ objects which are locally interpreted but retain a common identity. Rewilding is locally interpreted and strongly structured at individual site level, therefore easy to position illustratively in a policy context via specific case studies. At concept level the term is too abstract and weakly structured, so discussion of rewilding outside of case studies is avoided.

A single reference to Dundreggan Rewilding Centre occurs in Scottish policy documents. In English policy, the Knepp estate features in multiple policy documents, both in the context of rewilding, landscape-scale restoration, and species reintroduction. We suggest that the repeated use of Knepp as an example, over other rewilding projects, is a political choice and worth considering. Recent policy analysis has indicated that current nature and agri-environmental policies are not sufficient to enable a paradigmatic shift towards rewilding using government funds (Mercer & Gregg, 2023). This suggests that rewilding projects in England will continue to be driven by blended finance models or by those individuals with the financial means and influence to achieve their rewilding ambition. Knepp estate is in traditional private ownership. Such long-standing arrangements may have facilitated the sort of networking and strategic relationship building needed to access high-level decision-makers and ensure project support (Root-Bernstein et al., 2018, p. 298). As sole landowners, they are the decision-makers, and they have developed and publicised a particular adaptation of rewilding (Tree, 2018). Their ‘safari-park’ model allows them to continue to farm meat alongside an adapted form of rewilding, which ensures ‘nature recovers relative to previous agrarian land-uses’ (Leadbeater et al., 2022). We suggest that the choice of the Knepp estate as case study indicates the continued domination of landed estates and large-scale farming in rural land use policy. Instead of relying on a diversity of

case studies in national policy as examples to demonstrate the possibilities and complexities of rewilding at landscape-scale, the Knepp model is the only project showcased at national level, reflecting dominant political interests.

What commonalities or distinctions are there across the three nations of Britain? (RQ2)

Within the theme of competing land uses, we found commonalities in Welsh and Scottish policy documents, notably the importance of getting (or retaining) people on land. In Welsh policy, agriculture is at the forefront of sustainable resource use and a shared approach to land. A combination of active farming and the use of nature-based solutions are central to delivering social, economic, and ecological resilience. Scottish policy also emphasises ambition to increase people living and working on rural land so that ‘transformational’ land use change can achieve biodiversity and net zero goals, alongside social justice. Though Welsh policy avoids contentious rewilding/wilding terminology, the Scottish context is distinct in its active confrontation with the term. Taking control of rewilding at delivery level through defining the term indicates an attempt to shape rewilding implementation in line with political interests. Rewilding in Scotland is now defined as explicitly including local community benefits at a time when policy ambitions are targeting sustainable land use which puts people at the heart of decision-making. The choice of rewilding project showcased in national policy is also significant – Dundreggan Rewilding Centre is a charity-run project designed to involve the public in locally-led rewilding processes. This choice is suggestive of an attempt at policy level to redirect the rewilding narrative away from its more contentious aspects, and towards a role in securing just and transformative land use change.

However, delivering this transformational land use change is resulting in unintended consequences. Research into Scotland’s woodland creation subsidies has drawn attention to privileging of certain actors, such as green investors and multinational companies, over others (Sharma et al., 2023b; Stanley, 2024). Assumptions surrounding the transformative potential of community empowerment hide the reality of continued power asymmetries (Sharma et al., 2023a). This poses a challenge for rewilding in Scotland, which, although now defined as benefiting local communities, often entails the negotiation of these very same subsidies, regulations, and policy support mechanisms.

Our analysis of English policy documents revealed how post-Brexit policy reforms are framed as an opportunity to take a fresh approach to managing land, moving away from controlling and prescriptive regimes towards a blend of active and passive approaches. Echoing neoliberal ideology, freedom in the policy arena – enabled by the move away from the EU legislative framework – is thus linked to freedom in nature recovery. Reducing control and liberating natural processes will help to create wilder landscapes and areas, something encouraged by England’s environmental land management schemes.

English policy is distinct from Scottish and Welsh national policy in its reference to creating wilder areas. While the creation of wilder areas or landscapes may be viewed as an opportunity for rewilding, wilder landscape creation is problematic when notions of wildness and wilderness are themselves contested (Carver & Fritz, 2016; Cronon, 1996). Seeking to create wilder natures in modified landscapes results in conflicts as the values ascribed to (and found in) nature are grounded in differing

perceptions of worth (Lennon et al., 2020). Natural and cultural landscapes are entwined with complex histories, and in Scotland and Wales the romantic appropriation of these landscapes has resulted in outsider-imposed constructs of wilderness that erase local cultural and historical use ties to landscape (Lykke Syse & Oestigaard, 2010). The thematic occurrence of wilder areas in English policy, but not Scottish or Welsh policy, holds significance in light of their respective histories.

Limitations and future implications of rewilding in policy

We recognise the limitations of this research, particularly the limited scope of the number and type of policy documents selected for a manual qualitative analysis. Suggestions for future work include scaling up the corpus to include guidance from UK statutory bodies, or further up-scaling to enable a Europe-wide policy review. Given the level of public interest in rewilding in Britain, there is potential to use discourse analysis to compare and contrast the absence of rewilding in policy documents with discourse on rewilding in the media. Finally, because these goals require large corpora of unstructured texts to be compiled, there is a potential to incorporate Natural Language Processing methods with capabilities to process large text datasets and uncover patterns, e.g. in the occurrence of terms within documents. This would allow for a better understanding of how these terminologies are used, and debated, in different arenas over time.

Given rewilding is a conflictive and emotional subject (Wynne-Jones, 2022), to what extent should policy engage with the topic in the future? State support and an enabling policy environment are key to enabling rewilding at scale (Jepson et al., 2016), but the wider suitability of current policy institutions to deal with rewilding as a concept remains challenging (Jepson, 2022). Existing policy frameworks that operate within a compositionalist paradigm, relying on prescriptive management measures to deliver defined species and habitat assemblages, may constrain rewilding implementation (Pettorelli et al., 2018). Fundamental practices of rewilding – flexibility, adaptation, and long-term learning – are at odds with current policy development processes demanding prescription and definition of success (Root-Bernstein et al., 2018). There are issues of temporality, in particular the disconnect between ecological and political timeframes (Piipponen-Doyle et al., 2021). Significant questions remain around how to reconcile the five-year governmental and policymaking cycle with rewilding projects, which may be operating under a 100-year plan. The conceptualisation of such long-term goals requires new ways of working; however, convention demands that policymaking is fast and cheap, and there is an ongoing dependence on particular types of evidence and aversion to risk (Exley, 2021).

Whilst high-level policy definition of rewilding has implications for project-level implementation, working open-endedly at landscape-scale has very practical implications which require specific policy guidance. As others have pointed out, the practical difficulties resulting from rewilding's nebulous characterisation will need to be worked out when it comes to policy decisions (Gammon, 2017). We suggest that policy engagement with this particular boundary object is essential if the social and environmental potential of innovative forms of land use is to be maximised. By using case studies in national policy documents, both England and Scotland have mobilised rewilding as 'success-making policy' (Root-Bernstein et al., 2018, p. 303),

where predefined best practice illustrates success and legitimises action. Such engagement with rewilding at the strategic level of national policy sends a strong message of support. However, it is important that support for certain flagship projects does not gloss over the challenges of such projects in terms of delivering social and environmental justice: where rewilding's ambition is to regain homes for some, it may disrupt the homes of others (De Vroey, 2023).

In Britain, what might a supportive and enabling policy environment for rewilding look like? If rewilding is to retain its flexibility, bottom-up measures to integrate diverse knowledge systems into guidance will be needed alongside strategic-level direction setting to balance land-use trade-offs. It is up to governments to tackle these complexities head-on through join-up between policy areas and the integration of socio-ecological considerations into decision-making. The academic literature has already identified some of the tools needed to navigate these socio-ecological dynamics: moving away from knowledge and value hierarchies in favour of interests and goals (Dotson & Pereira, 2022), and taking a process-based approach to restoration (Tedesco et al., 2023).

In Scotland, the definition of rewilding for the public sector (Waylen & Marshall, 2023) represents a first step towards deeper engagement with the concept in policy. A clear definition of rewilding is a requirement if implementation of the concept is to be supported through legislative and policy revisions (Pettorelli et al., 2018). This document therefore represents a point of transition, where rewilding is entering the policy debating arena, but dedicated policy is yet to be developed. There is space for future work to analyse how this definition is taken up and integrated within wider policy and how this in turn affects rewilding practice.

Conclusion

While the term 'rewilding' is barely reflected in national policy of Scotland, England and Wales, our analysis found underlying policy narratives that indicate possible future directions for rewilding policy and practice in Britain. We found an avoidance of rewilding terminology in Welsh policy, indicating resistance to it as a strategy within the Welsh land-sharing agenda. Without formal policy engagement, it is unlikely that broad rewilding implementation will become established in Wales. In England and Scotland, national-level policy engagement with rewilding is present but restricted to specific case studies that align with policy visions. The Scottish government is choosing to engage with rewilding by showcasing rewilding success via a case study (Dundreggan) in national land use policy, alongside commissioning a definition of rewilding for public sector use. We argue that among the transformative land agenda in Scotland, a proactive shaping of the rewilding agenda has emerged to align it with themes of people and justice. In the English context, the normative legitimacy of rewilding-type action is communicated through semantically associated ideas, narratives, and discursive frames, such as radical, bold, non-traditional approaches to land use, the creation of wilder areas and freedom from prescribed management constraints. Given the recent proliferation of rewilding practice, and the preliminary references to rewilding found in English and Scottish policy, we suggest that the provision of further rewilding guidance by these nations is likely in the near-future. How rewilding becomes aligned in policy will determine its future extent and characterisation as a feasible conservation

strategy in Britain. Examining the production of policies, especially the treatment of conservation concepts within the policy domain, is a crucial aspect of research when effective national-level action is critical to achieving global biodiversity targets.

Notes

1. UK Government guidance provides the full list of devolved policy areas (GOV, 2020).
2. Less Favoured Areas (LFA) were established in 1975 by the European Economic Community Commission (Council Directive 75/268/EEC) as a means to provide support to mountainous and hill farming areas (Wathern et al., 1986).
3. The environmental policy process is conceptualised as having multiple stages: (1) problem emergence, (2) agenda setting, (3) consideration of policy options, (3) decision making, (5) implementation, and (6) evaluation (Benson & Jordan, 2015).

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Appendix 1. policy documents selected for coding

Table i: English policy documents selected for coding

Author	Year	Title	Relevance
HM Government	2018	A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment	Policy roadmap for environmental improvement including 25-year goal for nature restoration
Defra	2022	25 Year Environment Plan Annual Progress Report April 2021 to March 2022	Status update on environmental improvement
Defra	2020	The Path to Sustainable Farming: An Agricultural Transition Plan 2021–2024	Details of agricultural reform post EU exit and what this means for farmers and land managers
Defra	2022	Consultation on Biodiversity Net Gain Regulations and Implementation	Scope and application of Biodiversity Net Gain, including delivery of habitats via on and off-site gains
Defra	2021	Environmental Land Management: Policy discussion. Consultation outcome	Details of land management schemes to deliver environmental improvements
Defra	2022	Policy paper – Environmental land management schemes: outcomes	Details of land management schemes to deliver environmental improvements
Defra	2023	Policy paper – Environmental Land Management (ELM) update: how government will pay for land-based environment and climate goods and services	Details of land management schemes to deliver environmental improvements
Defra	2022	Environmental targets consultation summary of responses and government response	Legally binding targets to restore and protect the environment
HM Government	2023	Environmental Improvement Plan 2023: First revision of the 25 Year Environment Plan	Updated plan setting out work with landowners, communities and businesses to deliver goals for improving the environment
Defra	2020	Farming for the future: Policy and progress update	Details of agricultural reform post EU exit
Defra	2022	Policy paper – Government food strategy	Strategy for achieving a sustainable, nature positive, affordable food system
Defra	2022	Policy paper – Landscape Recovery: more information on how the scheme will work	Environmental Land Management scheme which pays farmers and landowners for actions to recover and restore species and habitats
Defra	2022	Policy paper – Landscapes review (National Parks and AONBs): government response	Details of future management of protected landscapes
J Glover	2019	Landscapes Review	Opportunities and challenges of future management of protected landscapes
Defra	2022	Policy paper – Local Nature Recovery: more information on how the scheme will work	Environmental Land Management scheme which pays for locally targeted actions to make space for nature in the farmed landscape and the wider countryside
Defra	2022	Policy paper – Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment Programme	Data on the extent, condition and change over time of England's ecosystems and natural capital, and the benefits to society
Defra	2021	Policy paper – Nature for people, climate and wildlife	Sets out actions in England to protect habitats and species on land
Defra	2022	Nature recovery green paper: protected sites and species	Proposed reforms to framework for protected sites and species protections
Defra	2022	Policy paper – Nature Recovery Network	Details of the national network of wildlife-rich places, committed to in the 25 Year Environment Plan
HM Government	2021	Net Zero Strategy: Build Back Greener	Strategy setting out policies and proposals for all sectors of the UK economy
UK Government	2021	England Peat Action Plan	Integrated plan for the management, protection and restoration of upland and lowland peatlands
UK Government	2021	The England Trees Action Plan 2021–2024	Long-term vision for England's treescape

Table ii: Scottish policy documents selected for coding

Author	Year	Title	Relevance
Scottish Government	2022	Delivering our Vision for Scottish Agriculture: Proposals for a new Agriculture Bill	Details of agricultural reform post EU exit
Scottish Government	2022	Land Reform in a Net Zero Nation Consultation Paper	Consultation on Land Reform Bill which will make changes to the framework of law and policy that govern the system of ownership, management and use of land in Scotland
Scottish Government	2022	The next step in delivering our vision for Scotland as a leader in sustainable and regenerative farming	Details of agricultural reform post EU exit
IUCN/CPSG	2022	Scotland's Beaver Strategy 2022–2045	Species reintroduction – maximise the environmental and wider benefits of beavers, while minimising negative impacts
Scottish Government	2019	Scotland's Forestry Strategy 2019–2029	Long-term framework for the expansion and sustainable management of Scotland's forests and woodland, including integrated with other land uses
Scottish Government	2021	Scotland's Third Land Use Strategy 2021–2026	Vision, objectives and policies to ensure sustainable land use
Scottish Government	2022	Scottish Biodiversity Strategy to 2045 – Tackling the Nature Emergency in Scotland	Sets ambition for Scotland to be Nature Positive by 2030, and to have restored and regenerated biodiversity across the country by 2045
Scottish Government	2022	Scottish Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement 2022	Informs policy and practice around land issues in Scotland
Scottish Government	2020	Update to the Climate Change Plan 2018–2032: Securing a Green Recovery on a Path to Net Zero	Scottish Government's pathway to new targets set by the Climate Change Act 2019, including land use, land use change and forestry

Table iii: Welsh policy documents selected for coding

Author	Year	Title	Relevance
Welsh Government	2018	Valued and Resilient: The Welsh Government's Priorities for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks	Details actions to improve resilience and realise the full value of Wales' landscapes
Welsh Government	2022	Biodiversity deep dive: recommendations	Details actions focusing on protecting at least 30% of the land and 30% of the sea by 2030
Welsh Government	2019	Brexit and our land: Securing the future of Welsh farming	Details of agricultural reform post EU exit
Welsh Government	2020	The Nature Recovery Action Plan for Wales 2020–2021	Details actions to build resilient ecological networks across the whole land and seascape to safeguard species and habitats
Welsh Government	2019	Prosperity for All: A Climate Conscious Wales. A climate change plan for Wales	5-year plan to adapt to the impacts Wales may face from climate change, including land management actions
Welsh Government	2020	Science and innovation strategy for forestry in Great Britain	Supports the management of forests, woodlands and trees in England, Scotland and Wales addressing the challenges of biodiversity, decline climate change and green recovery
Welsh Government	2021	Future Wales: the National Plan 2040	National development framework for all levels of planning system in Wales, including National Parks
Welsh Government	2022	Sustainable Farming Scheme Outline Proposals for 2025	Details of agricultural reform post EU exit
Welsh Government	2022	All Wales Plan 2021–2025: Working Together to Reach Net Zero	Cross-sector decarbonisation plans, including land use, land use change and forestry