

Alun Phillips

Huw Irranca-Davies AS/MS
Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Climate
Change and Rural Affairs

Your ref HIDCC/10356/24

11 November 2024

Dear Huw,

Thank you for your letter in response to the petition calling for a comprehensive review of Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and its ability to meet its statutory obligations to protect Wales.

It is with regret that I have come to learn about the recent decision to reduce NRW staff levels and close visitor centres across Wales. These centres and the dedicated staff supporting them are integral to protecting our natural landscape for future generations, as well as serving as key points for public engagement and education. The closures will deprive the public of essential resources, information, and a personal connection to conservation efforts that only face-to-face interaction can offer.

You acknowledged the hard work and passion of NRW staff. I agree—there is indeed much dedication within the organisation. However, recent financial strains, the need for a £19 million HMRC bailout, a £12 million savings target, and the elimination of more than two hundred roles all point to significant challenges and failings at the management level. In light of these issues, I wonder if you could clarify whether there will be any action to review the leadership, particularly CEO Claire Pillman's role? In the private sector, underperformance of this nature often results in leadership restructuring to ensure accountability and organisational improvement.

The petition ultimately seeks meaningful government action to safeguard our environment. Yet NRW is rarely recognised for positive environmental contributions and, unfortunately, is more often noted for failings in the media and through perceived inaction. Publications by the CEO suggest that she believes prosecutions for environmental offences are ineffective. If this is the position of NRW's leadership, I must ask: how does the Welsh Government intend to penalise persistent environmental polluters such as Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water, where taxpayers have funded over 250 investigations, with only a handful of successful outcomes? If NRW, the agency mandated to prosecute, is failing to do so, what incentive remains for companies who repeatedly pollute our rivers and countryside, seemingly with little accountability? Without robust enforcement, we risk enabling ongoing environmental harm and eroding public trust in NRW's mission. As environmental matters are devolved, would you agree that a sensible approach would be that any and all fines for environmental pollution

in Wales are kept in Wales for investing back into the environment directly, rather than being sent to the UK treasury?

Given that Welsh Government has oversight of NRW's spending, how can it justify these inactions, reported cuts and the recent tax-funded bailout, particularly when other public sector bodies are also struggling and facing significant reductions in spending? How were NRW's executives allowed to exhibit such levels of financial mismanagement and inefficiency? It is difficult to understand how these issues were permitted to escalate to this point, given the oversight mechanisms in place. Will you be happy to assure the public of future protections put in place to prevent this situation reoccurring?

Furthermore, I would like to ask if the Welsh Government is considering action to split NRW back into its original components—the Countryside Council for Wales, Environment Agency Wales, and the Forestry Commission Wales—to enable a more focused approach to environmental protection? Eleven years since the merger, the outcomes appear increasingly unfruitful, and many now view NRW as a bureaucratic entity, struggling to meet its original aims. With so many concerns raised by the public, it would seem prudent to reassess NRW's structure and consider a return to a more streamlined, environment-centric model, one that prioritises environmental integrity and avoids further embarrassment and a waste of public money.

I hope you will take these concerns seriously and consider the steps necessary to restore public confidence in NRW's role. I look forward to your response regarding the potential for a senior management review and any measures the Welsh Government might take to improve NRW's effectiveness and focus.

Yours sincerely,

Alun Phillips