

Report to: Communities Scrutiny Committee
Date of Meeting: 5 September 2019
Lead Officer: Democratic Services Manager
Report Author: Scrutiny Co-ordinator
Title: Llantysilio Mountain Fire, Summer 2018

1. What is the report about?

The Committee's review of the wildfire on Llantysilio Mountain during the summer of 2018.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

- 2.1 To present the Committee's findings, conclusions and recommendations following its inquiry into the fire that took hold of the mountain; and
- 2.2 To facilitate discussions with partner organisations and stakeholders on how best to respond and manage similar incidents in future, and how to mitigate against the risk of similar fires occurring or spreading in future.

3. What are the Recommendations?

That the Committee:

- 3.1 formally receives the report (Appendix 1), approves it, and endorses the recommendations detailed in Section 10 of the report;
- 3.2 discusses with partners and stakeholders the way forward in relation to reducing the risk of similar incidents occurring in future; and
- 3.3 receives a report in six months' time on the progress made in addressing the recommendations laid out in the report.

4. Report details

- 4.1 During the hot summer of 2018 Llantysilio Mountain, designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) was ravaged by a wildfire that burnt for over two months between July and September. This fire caused considerable damage to the mountain's habitat and its soil structure. During its height the fire was a cause of great concern to local residents and severely inconvenienced businesses in the area. In the medium to long-term its consequences have the potential to adversely affect local businesses for an extended period of time. It could also see the livelihoods of farmers and graziers in the area change considerably particularly if the hefting flocks do not return to the mountain because of the lack of available grazing. These flocks, not only benefit the farmers and graziers, they are key to conservation work on the mountain and are

therefore a valuable tool in moorland management. If they are lost a part of the mountain's heritage and traditional mountain habitat management will be lost, this will inevitably change the mountain's landscape and its communities forever.

- 4.2 In response to concerns raised by residents and local businesses' on how the fire incident was managed and its impact on the area, the Committee decided to undertake a review of the fire incident, along with its short and long term impact on the community, businesses and the local environment.
- 4.3 The Committee's intention in undertaking this review was to identify lessons learnt from the response to the fire and the management of the response for the purpose of improving multi-agency responses to similar incidents in future. It was also keen to understand whether land management practices could be refined in order to mitigate against the risks of wildfires igniting and gaining such a hold in future. As Denbighshire has extensive areas of moorland and forestry within its borders the Committee felt that this topic merited detailed examination.
- 4.4 To facilitate the review the Committee invited all public and private organisations involved with the fire incident, or affected by it, to submit evidence and information to the Committee. Local residents were also invited to share with the Committee their experiences of the fire and its consequences.
- 4.5 It was extremely encouraging for the Committee that all major agencies and organisations involved with the fire and the mountain's management positively responded to the request for evidence and attended the inquiry meeting held at Llangollen on 20 March 2019 to answer the Committee's questions on the evidence submitted. The Committee was extremely pleased that residents and businesses in the area openly engaged the inquiry, via the submission of their personal experiences of the fire and through the provision of photographic and video evidence. The wealth of evidence submitted to the Committee was invaluable to it in undertaking its review.
- 4.6 From the outset it was emphasised that the objective of reviewing this fire incident and its consequences was to learn lessons for the future through understanding what worked well and what aspects would benefit from strengthening in order to be prepared for similar incidents in future. There was never an intention to apportion blame on any individual, service or organisation in relation to their response or management of the fire incident.
- 4.7 Following detailed consideration of the evidence presented to it by all those who contributed, the answers provided at the meeting in Llangollen in March 2019, along with the supplementary information submitted following that meeting on the questions which could not comprehensively be answered at the meeting the Committee is now in a position to publish its findings, conclusions and recommendations. The Committee's full report can be seen at Appendix 1.
- 4.8 In preparing this report the Committee has made every attempt to record all viewpoints presented to it, accepting that at times that some views may conflict with those of other contributors. In order to highlight that these are the views of the individuals, agencies or organisations giving evidence each section in Parts 5 and 6 of the report emphasise

that those paragraphs reflect the views of that particular body or individual and not necessarily the view of the Committee.

4.9 Part 7 of the report details the North Wales Local Resilience Forum's (NWLRF) conclusions on what worked well during the services and agencies' response to the fire incident itself. Part 8 contains a summary of the areas identified by each agency, organisation or body for improvement, be it in relation to responding to a similar incident or in respect land management in the future.

4.10 The Committee's own conclusions are detailed in Part 9 of the report. They fall into two main categories:

- **Land management:** the lack of robust land management over an extended period of time on the mountain contributed towards the length of time the fire burned and the devastation it caused. Therefore a regular programme of land management activities is crucial if the risk of extensive environmental and economic damage from similar fires is to be lessened in future.
- **The fire incident and the management of it:** the need to ensure clear, open lines of communication at all times between all agencies responding to this type of incident to facilitate a joined-up, co-ordinated response, and to facilitate the communication of clear, accurate information to the public and those affected by the incident on a regular basis

4.11 The Committee's recommendations following its review can be seen in Part 10 of the report. Its first recommendation endorses that of the NWLRF following its review of the Llantysilio Mountain fire and relates to preparing for, and responding to, mountain fires. The Committee's second recommendation deals with strengthening multi-agency work when responding to similar incidents and aspects that should be included in the proposed Regional Wildfire Plan. The third recommendation proposes a way forward to coordinate land management activities in this and other moorland areas with a view to reducing the risk of similar fires in future. The fourth recommendation seeks the Welsh Government's support to maintain the economic and environmental sustainability of upland moorland areas via its Agricultural Policies and to consider providing financial assistance to facilitate the necessary restoration work on Llantysilio Mountain.

4.12 In publishing this report the Committee wishes to emphasise that whilst there are always lessons to be learnt following major incidents such as this one, despite the devastation caused to Llantysilio Mountain and the inconvenience experienced by local residents, no lives or properties were lost because of the fire. The Committee wishes to place on record its gratitude to all who worked tirelessly under very difficult circumstances to ensure residents' safety and well-being and to safeguard their properties.

5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?

The Council's corporate priority relating to the Environment is aimed at ensuring the area is both attractive and protected, not only for the purpose of supporting economic prosperity but also to support the well-being of residents and local communities. The

Authority wants to increase the biodiversity value of the county by protecting vulnerable species and habitats for the benefit of both wildlife and people who live and visit the area. Restoring the habitat on Llantysilio Mountain will help it deliver this corporate priority as will ensuring that similar moorland areas are actively managed on a regular basis. Proactive land management will also reduce the risk of wildfires causing widespread damage and devastation and support efforts to increase the population of black grouse, adders and other species in the county.

6. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

Costs for establishing and maintaining an Upland/Moorland Management Officer post would require further exploration to determine whether external funding sources were available to fund the post, or if it could be jointly funded with other partner agencies.

7. What are the main conclusions of the Well-being Impact Assessment?

A Well-being Impact Assessment is not required for this report as its purpose is to present the Committee's recommendations following its review of the fire incident and its impact.

8. What consultations have been carried out with Scrutiny and others?

The Committee's draft report and its findings, conclusions and recommendations have been shared with all services, agencies and organisations who participated in the review for accuracy purposes.

9. Chief Finance Officer Statement

Although the recommendation for an Upland/Moorland Management Officer post is supported in principle, as with any additional post, it is important that funding is identified prior to final approval. Further work is required in this area in order to ensure that long term funding has been secured.

10. What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?

The Committee conducted the inquiry and review in response to residents and businesses' concerns in the wake of the serious wildfire. Having conducted the review and drawn its conclusions and recommendations the Committee's aim is to secure effective multi-agency working when responding to 'major' or 'emergency' incidents in future, and going forward to secure effective working between all stakeholders to mitigate against the risks of grass, gorse and other wildfires being able to catch-hold and spread so quickly causing devastating consequences.

11. Power to make the Decision

Local Government Act 2000

Section 7.2.3 of the Council's Constitution states that Scrutiny may consider any matter which affects the Council's area or its inhabitants

Section 7.4.1(d) of the Constitution stipulates that Scrutiny can liaise with other external organisations operating in the area, whether national, regional or local, to ensure that the interest of local people are enhanced by collaborative working

Section 7.4.2 (e) of the Constitution states that Scrutiny may review and scrutinise the performance of other public bodies in the area and invite reports from them by requesting them to address the Scrutiny Committee and local people about their activities and performance.

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