

Elch cyf / Your ref:

Elin cyf / Our ref: Comm
SC Corres 2019/20

Dyddiad / Date:
15 October, 2019

Rhif union / Direct dial:
01824 712554

Ms Lesley Griffiths AM
Minister for Environment, Energy
& Rural Affairs,
Welsh Government,
5th Floor,
Tŷ Hywel,
CARDIFF BAY CF99 1NA

APPENDIX 4(a)

Dear Minister,

Llantysilio Mountain, near Llangollen

I write to you in my capacity as the Chair of Denbighshire County Council's Communities Scrutiny Committee.

Following the devastating wildfire that occurred on Llantysilio Mountain, between July and September 2018, the Committee undertook a review of the fire incident, its impact on the area, its residents and businesses. It also assessed the potential short, medium and long-term consequences of the fire on the mountain's ecology, habitat and bio-diversity, as well as on the livelihoods of those who depend on it for a living.

The review, which received significant input from key public sector partners and organisations, including Natural Resources Wales and North Wales Fire and Rescue Service, along with other organisations and private landowners, is now concluded and a copy of the Committee's report, which includes its findings, conclusions and recommendations is enclosed for your information. All key partners who participated in the review have supported the Committee's recommendations.

You will note from the report that the Committee concluded that the lack of robust land management on the mountain over a prolonged period of time contributed towards the length of time that the fire burned. Regular grazing and land management activities are effective habitat management tools on upland areas, such as this particular mountain, as they encourage bio-diversity whilst at the same time reduce the amount of vegetation and dry matter available as fuel for any wildfires that ignite. In recent years these type of upland and moorland areas across Wales have not been grazed effectively. The reason for this being a combination of changes to agricultural and environmental policies and other economic factors which have led to the reduction in the price and demand for Welsh Mountain sheep and lambs, and other hardy mountain breeds, which graze this type of terrain, rendering them uneconomical to rear and farm. If these breeds, in particular the hefting flocks, are lost from our moors and upland areas there is an increasing risk that more natural habitats will be lost to fires in future. In addition moorlands will become areas of wilderness and lose their healthy bio-diversity and ecosystems, whilst the loss of hefting flocks will see a centuries old way of life lost forever.

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On this basis the Committee requested me to write to you seeking you to act urgently, as part of the on-going review of agricultural and environmental policies, to make sure that future agricultural policies are aimed at securing the economic and environmental sustainability of upland and moorland areas across Wales by ensuring that sheep farming practices and production, essential components for effective and sustainable land management in these areas are supported to be economically viable and therefore maintained for the future.

Investment in natural management practices in these upland areas has the potential to reap significant benefits on a number of fronts. It would support the economic viability of the agricultural sector and help secure the long-term sustainability of local communities. Providing support for effective management of moorland areas can reduce the risk of wildfires taking such a hold in future and consequently realise a significant saving to public finances, as in the case of this particular incident the Fire and Rescue Service was at the scene continuously for a total of eight weeks – at its height all of its 44 stations and their personnel were mobilised at some point to attend the fire. Support for effective land, habitat and bio-diversity management in these upland areas can also realise benefits for improving and enhancing the well-being of the wider population as it will make these areas more easily accessible for all to enjoy.

During the course of this review the Committee recognised the importance of regular and effective habitat management in upland areas and as a result recommended that an Upland/Moorland Management Officer post be established for the purpose of supporting and co-ordinating such activity in these types of areas in future. It is extremely pleasing for me to report that the three main agencies involved with this review have agreed in principle to the creation of this post, discussions are currently underway between the three agencies with a view to realising the establishment of the officer post in the near future.

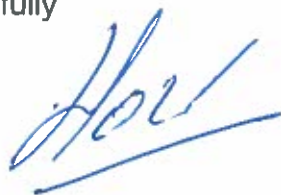
The Committee sincerely hopes that you will give due consideration to the findings and conclusions of this review when drawing up new agricultural and environmental policies which the Welsh Government has stated will be aimed at securing the sustainability of Welsh farms for the production of food and for wider public benefits to improve the well-being of farmers, rural communities and the people of Wales.

The Committee has also asked that representations be made to the Welsh Government for financial assistance towards the urgent restoration work required on Llantysilio Mountain to aid its recovery and the re-establishment of its natural habitat. Due to the severe damage caused to the soil and root structures on the mountain this restoration work is time-crucial and will require some considerable investment if the damage is to be reversed. Whilst we understand that the Welsh Government has provided some financial assistance, in the region of £15K, to support urgent restoration work in the immediate aftermath of the fire, substantially more investment will be required if its natural habitat and ecology are to be restored. The restoration work will be undertaken by Natural Resources Wales with the assistance of other agencies, such as Denbighshire County Council's Countryside Services.

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I sincerely hope that you will give careful consideration to this report and the Committee's request and we look forward to receiving your response in due course.

Yours faithfully



Cynghorydd/Councillor Huw O Williams
Cadeirydd: Pwyllgor Craffu Cymunedau
Chair: Communities Scrutiny Committee

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