

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Climate adaptation and emergency response, HC 68

Tuesday 15 September 2026

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Members present: Mr Alistair Carmichael (Chair); Sarah Bool; Charlie Dewhurst; Sarah Dyke; Terry Jermy; Josh Newbury; Henry Tufnell.

Environmental Audit Committee member present: Mr Toby Perkins.

Questions 73 - 182

Witnesses

I: Jenny Riddell-Carpenter MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, DEFRA; Gabrielle Edwards, Interim Director for Strategy, Governance and Climate, DEFRA; Baroness Blake of Leeds CBE, Minister for Building Safety, Fire and Resilience, MHCLG; and Peter Lee, Director for Fire, MHCLG.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#)
- [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jenny Riddell-Carpenter MP, Gabrielle Edwards, Baroness Blake of Leeds CBE, and Peter Lee.

Q73 Chair: Good morning, everybody, and welcome to this meeting of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. The Committee returns this morning to its work on wildfire risk and response. We are delighted to have with us this morning two new Ministers. Minister Riddell-Carpenter, welcome back to the Committee. For the benefit of those who are following our proceedings and for our own official record, would our witnesses introduce themselves to the Committee?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I am Jenny Riddell-Carpenter, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for DEFRA.

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I am Baroness Judith Blake, Parliamentary Under-Secretary in the House of Lords from MHCLG.

Peter Lee: I am Peter Lee, fire director, MHCLG.

Gabrielle Edwards: I am Gabrielle Edwards, director of strategy, governance and climate in DEFRA.

Q74 Chair: The acoustics are not great in this room so please keep your voices up when you are answering questions.

It has been a quite remarkable, dreadful summer for wildfires across the United Kingdom. We have seen record numbers; we have seen 19 homes destroyed and over 50,000 acres burned. So, Ministers, first of all, what lessons have the Government drawn from this year's wildfire season? Jenny, I think it is logical to start with you.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Thank you, Chair. First, it is wonderful to be back.

I have said this quite a few times in my own constituency. I know that many people in the room have also suffered from wildfires and many people watching the session today will have felt the real impact in their locality. I have had a large wildfire in my own constituency, in Dunwich Heath, and I have had many conversations, as you would expect, with constituents from the local fire service. We definitely come out of this summer in a very different place from how we went into the summer and there are many lessons learned from it: behaviour, further need for adaptation, and looking abroad for examples of how the higher risk of wildfires are real lessons that can be learned here in the UK.

I am sure we will unpack lots of those lessons throughout the journey of this session today, but I cannot overstate how we have come out of this summer in a very different place. Evidently, we need to re-look at heightened risk. We face the hottest summer record, which could well be the coolest summer we will ever have in the future. We have had over



1,300 wildfires—record numbers. It is evident that we have to look at the whole suite of changes that need to be made.

- Q75 **Chair:** There is a lot to unpack there and that effectively is the purpose of this morning's session, but what I am hearing from you—tell me if I am misunderstanding this—is that there is a willingness now to look again at different aspects of land management, responsiveness, and those sorts of things. Is that a fair comment?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: On a headline level, what we have in place now is not going to be fit for managing fires in 10 years' time. I have spoken at length with officials about that. There is some stuff that we need to have a greater drive towards—a greater push towards. There is some stuff that we need to look again at its effectiveness, and we need to look at behaviour change as well.

- Q76 **Chair:** Judith, from the MHCLG perspective?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: First, thank you for inviting me to come before you this morning. It is an enormous privilege to be here on behalf of MHCLG. One of the things that we learned from the events over the summer was that fire and wildfires is in the right place, back in MHCLG, and I think that is quite a big lesson for me going forward.

As we know, the summer was extraordinary, and can I just open my comments by referencing the extraordinary response from the fire service and everyone who was involved in dealing with the situation as it unfolded? We saw incredible professionalism, extraordinary courage and dedication from all involved, and the whole experience just reinforced how it is about working together, not only across Departments in Government but on the ground. The local response, communities, and the role of local authorities is pivotal.

The real step change—obviously there is the increase in the numbers—is that one of the things we now probably have to look forward to is the impact on urban fringes. I come from Yorkshire. I live very close to moorland and wildfires have been a regular feature, but the impact coming in, affecting people's homes, communities, and threatening vital infrastructure as well has been an extraordinary lesson for us all and focuses our minds on the need for prevention, looking at mitigation, how we recover from these effects, as well as the response. Future preparedness is going to be critical in all the work that we do.

- Q77 **Chair:** That is an interesting perspective. People in more rural communities have lived with this for years. If you have not had the opportunity to read the initial written evidence submissions that we got, can I recommend that you do so? We received over 300 of them, and about 70% came from private individuals. You are right that the response of those who are professional, who do this for a living, has been beyond reproach, but over and above that, there have been hundreds, possibly thousands, of people who are not paid to fight wildfires, who are land



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managers, farmers, shepherds, gamekeepers, who are often at quite considerable personal risk, and we read the accounts of them coughing up ash days after they have been involved. They just do not hesitate to answer the call.

You are right, too, I suppose, in that the event in Stourbridge, I think on 13 August, brought attention to the destruction of people's homes. Is that what it takes to make the Government take this seriously, because that is not a message that is going to be well received in more rural communities?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I agree with those comments. I have seen at first hand, local to my community, the devastating impact. What people see on the television screens—I think that was the point I was making—in terms of the wider public understanding of the risk of wildfires is something that perhaps we have not seen before. Now, we can question why that significance has not happened, but as you quite rightly say, the impact has been profound for many people over many years.

Q78 **Chair:** Fires were ablaze for weeks. It was only then when they hit the suburbs that the Prime Minister convened Cobra, and then you were appointed, because from 22 July to 14 August we did not have a fire Minister at all. What lessons about the priority given to this within Government do we read from that?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: Timing is everything. There was a change of Administration and a new Prime Minister coming in, making the appointments through the Department. I think it is about timing, but—

Chair: You are not responsible for who gets the jobs. We understand that.

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I think that the response from the Prime Minister, from the Secretary of State and across the Department has been recognised and the seriousness with which this Administration is taking the situation has been welcomed. I am delighted that the Prime Minister is committed to holding the wildfire summit, which we anticipate happening later in October, pulling together and recognising everybody involved. I think it is right to recognise the role of ordinary individuals in their communities.

Q79 **Chair:** Will the summit that the Prime Minister has announced have the right range of voices in the room so that it is not just the professionals? Will there be community representation in there?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I think it is critical that we pull together all the learning from across all the different aspects of those involved. Obviously significant are the local resilience forums, the work that they do, the ones that are better placed to respond to these situations—looking and learning about how we can improve the resilience of different areas.



Q80 **Chair:** Do you think it is adequately resourced at the moment or are you going to have to find more resource to put into it?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: The most important thing is that through the work bringing together the key players we fully understand the change in needs for the fire service, the changing patterns of fires, and the way that money has been allocated in the past. Is it still the appropriate way? Do we need to look at more resource going into what we anticipate to be, sadly, a pattern that will go on?

Chair: I am asking you, do you have an answer to that yet?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: It is work in progress, and I do not want to pre-empt the decisions that come out of the summit. What we want to make sure of is that the summit is not just a talking shop, and that it gets underneath the issues and helps us to address and focus. We recognised the importance of the resource by putting the £97 million into resilience before the start of the summer. I think that reflects the seriousness with which the Government take this issue.

Q81 **Chair:** I have one final high-level question to you both. This is a national issue now. Do we need a more co-ordinated UK-wide approach? I will start with you, Judith, and then Jenny.

Baroness Blake of Leeds: The situation in south Wales highlighted how important it is to work across the borders, and that will be at the core of everything that we do, recognising the different responsibilities through the devolved authorities, and understanding that we need to work together to share resource if appropriate, to anticipate what is coming, in the same way that we look outside of the country at experience across the world.

Q82 **Chair:** As fire Minister, have you spoken to your opposite numbers in the devolved Administrations?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I have not up to now.

Chair: Not yet?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: No.

Q83 **Chair:** Okay. Would that not be quite an urgent piece of work, then, if you are going to have a UK-wide strategic approach?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: Well, exactly that. It is interesting that the Welsh Administration are organising their own summit. I am sure the Committee is aware of that. I agree that we need to have better co-ordination at a political level, but that is not to say that the work on the ground is not happening between the Administrations.

Chair: Jenny.



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Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Do I think that we should have better co-ordination between the devolved nations?

Q84 **Chair:** Do you see this as a national issue?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Yes. Fires do not respect borders so of course we have to make sure that we have a joined-up approach. That means sharing evidence and best practice. But in direct answer to your question about whether it is a direct strategy, that is something, fed in together, that will have to come out and through the process of the summit.

It is worth saying in response to your earlier question that within DEFRA we already are scaling up resources in the Department for wildfires. We have been doing that over the course of the summer, since I came in post, and we will not be waiting until the summit alone to move forward with lots of the work that is happening. We are working on an action plan at the moment. We will be moving that into the summit. It is also worth saying, obviously, that we are not going to fight fires from Whitehall alone. We need to make sure we are investing in the right resources on the ground, and that is through investment with the MHCLG, but also with landowners and land managers.

Q85 **Henry Tufnell:** On the point about engagement nationally and with the Welsh Government, have you reached out directly to the Welsh Government and your approach has been rebuffed?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: No. Peter, do you want to come in and give the background on the engagement?

Peter Lee: To reassure you, we are regularly engaging with our counterparts in the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish Governments.

Q86 **Henry Tufnell:** Why are we not having a national summit on wildfires, recognising it is a national issue, but then having a disjointed approach between Wales and England?

Peter Lee: You would have to ask the Welsh Government.

Q87 **Henry Tufnell:** Has MHCLG reached out to the Welsh Government and set out that this is a national issue and that we should be co-ordinating together?

Peter Lee: We are discussing these issues with the Welsh and Scottish Governments.

Q88 **Henry Tufnell:** The question is: are you being rebuffed when you are coming to ask that question because it is clearly not happening? There is clearly not a co-ordination between the two Governments.

Peter Lee: I have never had any rebuff from our counterparts in the devolved Administrations about any issues around wildfires and we have complete agreement. We need to work across the Administrations on these issues.



Q89 **Chair:** Is it fair to say there might be a bit more scope for Whitehall to reach out to Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast?

Peter Lee: My team and I were in Scotland for a week, three weeks ago, talking to our Scottish Fire Service and Scottish Government counterparts. This is not something that is not happening, I can reassure the Committee.

Chair: My experience would be that actually a ministerial lead makes these things much more effective. That may be something that you wish to take away and consider.

Q90 **Josh Newbury:** I am glad that we are having this discussion this morning because my constituency in Cannock Chase was particularly badly affected. Huge swathes have been burned. We have lost precious heathland, as Jenny mentioned about her own constituency. We were very fortunate not to have a situation similar to Stourbridge's, to be honest. I was at an event on the Chase over the summer where one of the things we were discussing was the risks of wildfires and how we can all work together to prevent them. Just as we were discussing that, the members of the Fire and Rescue Service and the police rushed away to deal with a fire that was just outside Brindley village, just down the road, and that was very close to home. I think we all realise that the risk is increasing and it very much is on the doorstep of people's homes.

I want to ask very quickly, Baroness Blake, about the capacity in the fire service that the Chair was referring to. The Chief Fire Officer of the Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service has told me that this summer was unprecedented in his 30-year career. He also did say that even with burden sharing, and even with all the additional resource that we have put in place, there were times where they were so stretched across multiple locations, even within our county, that they did not have the appliance availability that they would like. In other words, if another incident had happened, they would have been very hard placed to attend to it.

Do you accept, at least, that this summer's wildfire season has exposed some major gaps in local, regional and national resilience?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I will go back to what I said earlier. Absolutely, but the changing pattern of wildfires throws up issues about how we allocate the resource and how we share out the resource to make sure that we can get response speedily to the correct areas. This summer was unprecedented, but it is vital that we look very carefully at all that evidence and work out how we respond and prepare ourselves better for the future.

The sad truth is that if we are to believe the predictions around the change in climate and a repetition of this summer—it is not just about heat; it is about wind patterns too—we must make sure that we all pull together to share that evidence and make sure that we can get that response. We have pilots looking at appropriate equipment around the



country and what is the best way to respond to these fires because it is not through traditional means. That is one of the things we have to learn.

In answer to your question, yes, it was a very difficult situation, particularly in the area that you are referring to, your own patch, but again incredible resourcefulness was shown from across the pitch coming in and giving the support when it was needed.

Q91 Sarah Bool: Baroness Blake, you just mentioned the importance of changing patterns and we welcome hearing that there are pilots looking at alternative means of responding. The UK currently does not maintain a dedicated aerial firefighting capability. Any aerial support rests with individual fire and rescue services dealing with commercial providers. Do we realise and recognise that reliance on these local arrangements with commercial providers is not sufficient?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I will answer that and then I might ask Peter to come in on the more technical issues. You are right to raise this because it has been one of the issues mentioned quite frequently and the Prime Minister has committed to consideration of this at the summit.

I had quite an in-depth conversation with fire chiefs yesterday. It is fascinating how aerial intervention can be used. The fire chiefs described it as good at putting out the flames but not so good at dealing with the underlying fire if it is caught in heathland or wherever. I look forward to the outcome of those discussions. It is right at the top of the agenda. Looking at footage from around Europe in particular, but around the world, you will see the aerial support coming in and spreading their loads.

Another interesting thing, of course, in Jenny's local area is the use of seawater and how that can contribute. That is very interesting from an environmental point of view, how you balance competing interests, if you like, in that regard. Aerial support is absolutely top of the agenda and you are right to mention it.

Peter, do you want to give a bit more of the technical side?

Peter Lee: I think the way you approached the question is exactly how I would have described it. We have always relied on fire services resourcing themselves with a thin layer of national assets focused on particular risks, and we did have a layer of national assets available on wildfire fighting. It did not include aerial assets such as we have seen in other countries.

We did have some aerial assets deployed to some wildfires in Manchester and Derbyshire and in the Cairngorms in Scotland, but we have recognised that individual fire services having to look around for commercial arrangements when they are in the middle of a response is not going to cut it in future. What we are looking to do with the fire service and with the devolved Administrations—this is a conversation I have had with the Scottish and Welsh Administrations—is think about



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how we can make sure we can have cost-effective on-call availability that we can rely on in place ideally for the next summer, because 44 services competing for the same asset is not very cost-effective. That issue is squarely on the top of the list for the summit.

Something else we are looking at is drone capability, and we put some funding into Lancashire Fire and Rescue on this. Drones are already a key part of firefighting, particularly in London. Drones are already being used heavily overseas, particularly for surveillance, but there is also now water-carrying technology and heavy-carrying drones. That is something else we are looking at. At the moment aerial firefighting depends on helicopters and aeroplanes, and that is a dangerous occupation, it is fair to say, as we have sadly seen elsewhere. We must look forward to the technology of the future. We need to solve the problem for next summer, and we also need to be looking forward to how we can solve it in future years in a more effective way.

Q92 Sarah Bool: Thank you. Drones is a fascinating area to look into, because as you said, it is very dangerous.

Baroness Blake, you mentioned that the Prime Minister is looking at commissioning some of these firefighting planes. Have you had a discussion with him yet about whether that would be a national asset and how soon they would be available, or is that all still to be decided?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: It is slightly premature to talk about that, given the short number of weeks since all this happened and the discussions started, which will involve sharing a lot of expertise and bringing it together, but I look forward to having an in-depth conversation with the Prime Minister at the appropriate time.

Sarah Bool: Yes. I would stress that for all those residents who are affected, time is of the essence, even if it seems a long time away for the next—

Q93 Chair: Do you have a timeline for any of this?

Peter Lee: We have started these conversations. We are already talking with providers, as are our fire service colleagues. We are not waiting for the summit to start those conversations. We need to conclude exactly the mechanism by which we would contract for this and allocate it. Clearly, when we have competing needs, as we did in Scotland and the midlands, someone has to decide what the highest operational need is. We need to have those mechanisms in place, but we are not waiting to start talking to the people in both the private and public sectors who may be able to help with the provision. Some public sector agencies already have helicopter availability. We are already actively looking at all that.

Q94 Chair: Do you have a timeline?



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Peter Lee: What we want to hold ourselves accountable for is that by next summer we need to be in a much better place than we were this summer.

Q95 **Chair:** You start conversations. Public procurement happens. You have to liaise with devolved Administrations. You have councils. We will be into the next wildfire season before we know it if you do not have deadlines that you set yourself in this process. You are telling me you have not set these deadlines.

Peter Lee: The wildfire season starts next spring, or even earlier now; the wildfire season can start even earlier than that, and the wildfires that we need aerial assets for certainly. That is when I want to have this in place by. As you say, Chair, there are a bunch of complexities that we need to work through.

Q96 **Sarah Bool:** I need to follow up on those timelines. I would like to pin that down.

One alternative is obviously looking towards the military for its capability, which you mentioned. Some of us were very fortunate to be in Cyprus with the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme with the RAF at Akrotiri when the wildfires were going on last year. I was there and we saw the Chinooks in operation. What discussions have been happening about using military aviation assets to support the response to wildfires here?

Peter Lee: The RAF is one of the organisations involved in this discussion. It is not just in Akrotiri. There are also military assets in the UK. We are looking across the public and private sector at what assets are available and could be brought into play and at how operationally we can guarantee and rely on their deployability when needed. That is the work we need to go through. Nothing is off the table in terms of who we are going to talk to about that—the military, other public agencies and the private sector.

Q97 **Sarah Bool:** You mentioned various assets. We know that at least three RAF Chinooks are not going to be continuing in service. They will be replaced in Cyprus by three Airbus H145 Jupiter HC Mk2 helicopters—trips off the tongue. Have the Government considered utilising those Chinooks if they are going to go out of service, bringing them back here?

Peter Lee: That is a level of detail that I cannot go into. I am impressed that you know about the new resources exactly. Certainly, we will look into and actively pursue anything we can do to ensure that we have cost-effective capability available nationally.

Chair: We will move on to wildfire strategies and international lessons.

Q98 **Josh Newbury:** We have talked a lot already this morning about the need for co-ordination and strategy to be the way forward for next season. Given the severe seasons that we had last year as well, not just this year, why does England still not have a national wildfire strategy,



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and is there going to be a commitment to publishing one before the next season?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I appreciate that was one of the themes of your last session in June. Since I have been in post, I have worked with officials to make sure that we have the wildfire action plan. Leading into the summer—I hope this is answering your question but in a slightly longer-form way—the way that I have seen it is that we need to make sure we are going into spring next year in a far stronger place than we have come out of this year. That is a one-year focus, but then we need to make sure we are also focusing on the two-year approach, so what resources need longer to make sure that we are steering to using the evidence that we have? Then, what is the 10-year plan for this? For me, it is a one, two and 10-year vision.

I alluded to this earlier. Since I have been in post and coming out of the summer we have increased resources in the Department with staff in DEFRA focused on wildfires. The current immediacy for me personally, and I believe for the Department as a whole, is to make sure that we can hit that target of making sure we are in a better place by spring next year, rather than looking at what strategy needs to be written in order to publish it. For me, this is an iterative process. We will go from the action plan that we talked about into the summit and have a conversation with all the experts, gather the evidence, and be in a position to make that all public.

If you are asking me a direct question about the strategy, the wider question that I want us to be looking at is how we make ourselves better resourced and in a stronger position in the short, medium and longer term.

Baroness Blake of Leeds: We are working towards a strategy through the action plan, but I want to give reassurance that we are not waiting for that to be in place before we start co-ordinating. One of the positive aspects of all this is the joint governance arrangements between our two Departments, recognising the essential nature of the overlap and how we can be better focused on picking up and making sure that we communicate across the piece. Then there are other Departments that we need to look at bringing together and how to do that. That is about a level of co-ordination across Government that, if I am honest, has not been there.

We need to use this as a catalyst to make sure that we get that rigour into the plan and build on the pilots that I mentioned earlier, finding what works well in different locations through the local resilience forums, recognising the different needs of different areas and having a much more sophisticated approach so we can be ready. Unfortunately, as much as we try, weather patterns are unpredictable and we cannot make assumptions of where the next crisis might be. That is one of the issues around preparedness that we need to take into account.



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Q99 Josh Newbury: I completely agree. It is entirely possible that the next wildfire season could be just as bad but, as you said, in a very different way, in very different places, which I think speaks to the need for that co-ordination. I want to say that it is encouraging that you are both here this morning, and that you are both singing from the same hymn sheet, because a lot of us who have had this challenge in our constituencies for a long time have harboured concerns that that co-ordination between MHCLG and DEFRA has not always been there, and that the fire service and the preparedness may sit separately from some of the nature-based solutions and the land management side of things, so it is to be welcomed.

On that, we must also have co-ordination between a national level and a more local level. One of the things that has already been discussed in my part of the world quite a lot is the fact that we do not have a wildfire management strategy or a plan of any kind, really. A lot of people are pointing to the Cairngorms national park as an example of an integrated wildfire management plan that maybe we should all be looking to. I know you mentioned Dunwich Heath, Jenny, which is obviously in a national landscape as well, as Cannock Chase is. Is that something that the Government are looking to try to co-ordinate at a national landscape level, where we have precious habitats that need to be protected but where the circumstances around those areas and their wildfire risk is very different? Is that top-down co-ordination going on?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Correct me if I am wrong, but I believe that local authorities should be developing their own fire resilience plans and that that should be tempered and managed to the circumstances of their locality.

On the specifics of the national landscapes, again, DEFRA gives advice, or historically has given advice, on wildfire management. What we are saying today about a lot of the advice that we have given in the past is that the evidence about the threat of wildfire has changed. I will give you an example from my constituency, which I have referenced quite a lot in meetings with DEFRA. Not three years prior to the fire, National Trust and RSPB Minsmere had a conversation with Suffolk Fire Service, and they were effectively compliant with the standards and the expectation for fire management on that land. The fire breaks were sufficiently wide. Everything they had done was sufficient on their walk around. Evidently, we had a huge wildfire there and now they are looking again, working with Suffolk Fire Service, at increasing the width of those fire breaks and looking at what else needs to be done, because evidently it was not sufficient. What was agreed three years ago is not sufficient for the increased risk that we have now. So that advice is changing in the light of the increased severity of risk and the heightened risk of fires and the evidence that has changed.

Baroness Blake of Leeds: You might say that I would say this, as a former local government leader, but local government is central to our response, and the local resilience forums, which should cover every area,



are so important in bringing together all the different partnerships. Community behaviour is another aspect that we have not touched on yet. I understand that every local resilience forum will need to have expertise on wildfires feeding into them.

Another area that we are looking at very closely is how we can make wildfire risk explicit in planning policy. That is an area that we have to take exceptionally seriously in building resilience. We already have elements of our experience with flooding to learn from, but I think now we are at a point where we recognise that sadly wildfires are something we are going to have to deal with regularly in future. We are looking at every possible way that we can assist locally for the response.

We used to say, when we were dealing with disasters, that local authorities were like the fourth emergency service, and when the risk to life and property and all those things move on, the local authority is very often left to deal with the consequences of what has happened. I cannot stress enough the importance of the issue of consistency that you have quite rightly raised. We have to make sure that we have a very clear understanding of what every resilience forum should be dealing with.

Q100 Josh Newbury: I am right there with you on the important role that local government has to play. A number of us around this table are former local councillors so we definitely understand that, but sadly some of us now have local authorities being run by people who deny the role of climate change in all this as well, so sadly again some of this is going to have to happen nationally.

Baroness Blake, the Chair asked a number of questions about the wildfire summit but can I follow up on a couple of things? What would you really like to see come out of it? Henry Tufnell mentioned that there is potential for fragmentation within the UK. What do you and the Prime Minister really want to see coming out of that summit?

I have a follow-up to that since clearly so many parts of the country are affected and mine is one of them. How are you going about drawing up the invitation list for the summit? How will you make sure that all affected parts of the country are adequately represented?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: Right from the start, the Prime Minister made it very clear that he wants the summit to be about action and not just people having a comfortable conversation in the room. It is about sharing best practice, looking at the hard edge of what the implications of that actually are and how it will affect policy. That is the crucial thing to keep in mind, that this gathering of all the information from across the United Kingdom needs to inform the next steps that we take in changing policy.

Josh Newbury: In terms of making sure all the country is represented?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I cannot stress enough how important it is that we get that co-ordination between the different nations absolutely



right. We have a new Administration in Wales, which we will be picking up, but fires do not respect any artificial boundaries. There is a very clear example from the summer of how we need to look at sharing resource and responding to need. When we have an emergency we need to make sure we have everything in place so that the response can come from across the country to help wherever that emergency happens to be.

Q101 Josh Newbury: I have a couple of questions now on the international aspect and where we can perhaps learn lessons from countries that have been battling severe wildfires like we have seen for a very long time.

Jenny, looking particularly at Australia and many EU countries, their wildfire strategies place a far greater emphasis on prevention, including landscape-scale ecosystem management. Are you satisfied that the Government are doing enough to use the likes of land management and nature recovery policies to reduce wildfire risk?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: That is two big questions in one. We are all alive to the international point. Many countries across the globe—Europe and beyond, Australia, Canada—have been experiencing these heightened risks for decades, and we are very aware of that. Learning from lessons that they have trial-and-errored for us is not an unhelpful situation for us to be in. Some of the lessons are about behaviour. Looking at Australia and much of Europe, some of the packages of changes they have made over the last few decades have been focused on behavioural change, heightened awareness during peak fire risk season, and encouraging that behaviour change. It is now ingrained in the norm in much of those societies that people, individuals, take that heightened threat extremely seriously.

In communities where we had wildfires in our constituencies, we felt that sense that people were taking it seriously and wanted changes in behaviour. I could see it locally in my constituency, people wanting things such as disposable barbecues to be banned or further measures to happen because they felt the real impact and the fear of a fire that many of our overseas allies have experienced over the years. On the behaviour point, I am making a wider point that there are lessons to be learned and conversations that we need to have as a country on behaviour.

On the land management point, we have to manage our land in a way that is appropriate for our land. Some of the international lessons probably do not transfer or translate as easily to our land, but equally there are lessons to be learned. I do not know if we will come on to this, but peatland restoration is a huge opportunity for us to restore nature and manage water. We have experienced heavy drought and the impact of that has also increased the severity of fires and wildfires. Peatland restoration is good for carbon capture. It has so many benefits the country has been investing in for the past seven years, and we have to make sure we are accelerating that investment because we know that in the right landscape it is a tool to manage and reduce the risk of wildfire



while also having multiple other benefits to nature and to our national resilience.

That was a very long way of answering your question, but yes, we do need to look at land management, and we need to take examples from abroad, but we need to do it in the right way for our landscape. It will not always be a copy and paste from abroad, but some of the behaviour stuff I think we could learn more direct lessons from.

Q102 Josh Newbury: You will be aware, I am sure, that a big debate is raging at the moment around nature restoration schemes and rewilding, and where grazing has been pulled away, particularly from upland parts of the country, whether that has created a greater fuel load that made this summer's wildfires more severe in some areas—not all. Where does DEFRA stand on that? It is a tricky question, isn't it? Clearly, we cannot completely about-face on all that, but do you think there is a point there?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I think that is really interesting and I was expecting this to come up today. The heather and grassland issue that you are referring to covers 5% of the UK, but sometimes it feels like it dominates 95% of the debate. I think it is important that we keep in mind that different lands need different management and where we are trying to do, for instance, peatland restoration or management of heather, we have to make sure that we are balancing lots of competing issues, including the need to restore nature.

Cutting is often a viable way of reducing that heat load, and where cutting is not possible for access or other reasons, fire licences have been granted. In the last 12 months, I think 24 licences have been put forward to DEFRA. Two of them have been approved because other means of land management or grazing have not been appropriate. In that scenario, two licences have been approved, but it is important that we do not lose sight of why we are doing a lot of the restoration. If we continue to invest in peatland restoration over the next decade with the ambition that we have, that will be one of the best ways to increase resilience on that landscape. A wetter moor is a better moor, and it provides so many benefits—not just fire resilience but water and drought management.

My final point on this—you alluded to it—is that it has been a very loud debate and lots of those points have been very passionately brought forward, but if you look at my fire in Dunwich Heath, not to talk about it too much, that was not because of nature restoration. That land has not been brought back into nature; it has not been rewilded. It has been for nature, with nature, for hundreds of years, but I have seen videos where people are trying to make the argument that because we have not allowed managed fires that was the cause of the fire in my constituency, which is not the case. In some areas I think we are seeing a distorted argument play out, which does not allow us to have a proper conversation about the different ways of managing different landscapes in the appropriate way. That was quite a long way of answering the question.



Baroness Blake of Leeds: Could I come back on the first point about international learning? I want to give reassurance that learning from partners around the world is already having an impact on the UK response. Firefighters in the national wildfire capability trained in South Africa and Poland. They were able to bring in tactics such as tactical burning over the summer. Of course, the learning is always tested but it is crucial to know that we are very active members across the international community. We hosted the World Fire Congress in London just last week. I was privileged to go and to meet senior firefighters from around the world, and sense the differences but also the similarities that different areas are facing and channel the learning from that. I am very pleased to say that we are at the forefront of that movement and that experience.

Q103 **Josh Newbury:** I have a bit of a technical question around international co-operation. The Government have previously said they are exploring co-operation with the EU's civil protection mechanism, and under the rescEU scheme there are shared wildfire response assets that could potentially be brought in. Is that being considered? Might it be under consideration at the summit that is coming up with our EU partners?

Peter Lee: My understanding is that the UK can already seek access to the available assets in the EU if necessary. Our view is that over the summer the needs of the likes of Spain and France were greater than ours. As much as we did need aerial assets, the wildfires they were facing were much more significant.

We have that potential at the moment. Our first move, because aerial assets are the obvious ones to access, is to try to make sure we have our own domestic provision in place first, but the Minister has outlined a broader co-operation with our EU partners. We have an MOU with Greece. We are looking to Greece to help us better understand wildfire fighting and we are helping Greece to better understand high-rise building firefighting because that is the increasing risk they face. We are having that discussion. We have access to those capabilities, but this summer indicated that, realistically and probably for the foreseeable future, needs in southern Europe are likely to exceed ours. Therefore, we need to make sure we have our own house in order.

Q104 **Chair:** Can I briefly stick with this question of fuel load on the hills? I do not disagree with you on re-wetting opportunities, but that is a massive task that is going to take decades probably. On any individual project it will take up to 10 years sometimes. What is DEFRA doing to reduce the fire load on the hills for next year?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: That is a good question, Chair. It will take a long time. The ambition is there, the investment is there, and work on the ground is happening. I will answer your question in a few parts if I may. To get to a point where our moors are wetter and more resilient, we have to invest and that takes time.



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Chair: No argument on that.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Good.

Q105 **Chair:** Now and next season, what are we going to do?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Two things. Cutting is available as an option.

Chair: Cutting does not take the fire load off the hill, especially not on steep, inaccessible parts of moorland.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I come back to the earlier point that over the last year we have had 24 applications for licences. Two of those have been granted where cutting is not accessible and nor could the fuel load be removed. It is fair to say that in circumstances where cutting cannot reach and it is a difficult-to-access site, licences would be approved where cutting or other means of management of the fuel load cannot get access.

Q106 **Chair:** Is that over any peat depth or is it restricted?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I do not think it is limited to peat depth.

Gabrielle Edwards: The licensing scheme operates in areas where peat depth is greater than 30 cm, so in areas of deep peat across the upland areas a licence would be required. We are very clear that there is not a complete ban on burning and the licensing scheme is available.

Q107 **Chair:** It is not a complete ban, but you have issued two licences.

Gabrielle Edwards: We have issued two licences. We have only had 24 applications. The vast majority of those licence applications were not for wildfire mitigation; they were for education and training purposes. We take advice from the Fire and Rescue Service on each of those applications. Its steer is that there are less risky places to do training than on deep peat, given the risk of it catching.

Q108 **Chair:** You expanded threefold the area subject to licensing in the 2025 regulations. Do you think that that is helping to get fire load off the hill?

Gabrielle Edwards: There are some very difficult balances to strike here, aren't there?

Chair: Can we just stick to the question, please? Is this making it easier to get fire load off the hill?

Gabrielle Edwards: If you do not start re-wetting the land—

Q109 **Chair:** No, I understand that. I have accepted your point about re-wetting. I think re-wetting is a good thing, but there is a range of different options available to land managers here. There is grazing, there is cutting and somehow removing, there is going to be re-wetting, and there is cool burning, as you would call it, at the end of the winter. Why are you so set against that? Why are you so determined to leave that fire



load on the hill?

Gabrielle Edwards: I do not think we are determined to leave the fire load on the hill. What we are saying is that if your long-term objective is the re-wetting of the landscape, then cool burning messes around with the hydrology and you do not start to deliver the benefits over time of re-wetting. You have to manage your way through this process. We recognise there is a time span and that is why we enable people to apply for licences. At the moment, we have not had many licence applications that have been credible. If we get credible licence applications, we will issue them.

Q110 **Chair:** So you are content that the '25 regulations strike the right balance?

Gabrielle Edwards: That is our current position, yes.

Q111 **Chair:** Have you heard contrary views from the land managers, the people we were talking about—the gamekeepers who then end up coughing up ash after they are fighting fires? Do they tell you this?

Gabrielle Edwards: We have heard a range of views, yes.

Q112 **Chair:** Do you have any respect for these views?

Gabrielle Edwards: Of course we have respect for these views.

Q113 **Chair:** What actions do you take on the basis of them?

Gabrielle Edwards: We are continuing to talk to those land managers about ways in which we can ensure that the licensing scheme works for them, to make sure that it is as flexible as it is, but our long-term ambition remains to move to a wetter peatland environment.

Q114 **Chair:** You are going to do that before the start of the next fire season?

Gabrielle Edwards: We have always recognised that this takes a number of years.

Q115 **Chair:** What are you doing to take the fire load off the hill before the next fire season?

Gabrielle Edwards: That is why we have a licensing scheme, and there are other options such as cutting and other ways to manage the vegetation. Some people will take the cutting load off the hillside as well, so those options are there for people to develop wildfire management strategies.

Chair: I do not think we are going to make any progress on this.

Q116 **Henry Tufnell:** You talk about the licensing agreements, but evidence has been provided to us that it is complex, slow and impractical.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: This is a good point about how the 95% of the debate that I talked about often crowds out the opportunity to hear



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feedback on the licensing. The CLA provided evidence about some of the practicalities of the licensing and how it is very prescriptive on putting in a geolocation and by the time that gets approved the wind or the locality might have shifted, and therefore where they would want to do the controlled burning would be different from what is on the licence they put in. That conversation is ongoing with the Department. Where there is sensible and fair feedback on the complexities of the licensing, that is something that we are listening to and are alive to, and it should be a reiterative conversation.

Q117 Henry Tufnell: It is quite concerning, though, that the evidence you are basing the licensing conditions on is Natural England's evidence review, which did not undertake any conditions around wildfire risk.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: The evidence review from 2013?

Henry Tufnell: No, Natural England review 155, which informed the changes on peat that we were just talking about, from 40 cm to 30 cm.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Yes. There were 102 further submissions of evidence into that.

Gabrielle Edwards: The 102 further pieces of evidence were reviewed as part of that, and yes, it is focusing on what the impact is on the environment of regular burning and trying to work out, for example, what the impact is if you burn—what the impact on hydrology is, for example.

Q118 Henry Tufnell: We have talked a lot about cutting. That was not involved in the evidence review. We are talking a lot today about wildfires. That is the main topic. That was not included. All that was included—and this heavily influenced the decisions the Department took in terms of the conditions for the granting of those licences—was around burning in terms of biodiversity, carbon and water. I am not saying that those are not important factors, but when you are looking at such a huge impact and gamekeepers coughing up ash, does it not alarm you that that is the evidence base you are using to make decisions on how you grant licences?

Gabrielle Edwards: There are two different things. When we were making decisions, or when Ministers were making decisions, about whether to introduce the changes to the regulations, we ran a consultation and we talked to a range of organisations. The Minister at the time had a meeting with the National Fire Chiefs Council. A range of issues was taken into account, including the wildfire risk, before making those changes. When we get an application in for an individual licence, we will take advice from both the local fire and rescue service and from Natural England about that range of issues before we reach a decision. We have had licence applications come in that have not been supported by the fire and rescue service. We have had applications come in that have been supported by the fire and rescue service. We take this into account.



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Q119 **Henry Tufnell:** What makes it even more strange, though, is that you are funding the IDEAL wildfire research team. You are putting £2.5 million into five years of Government-funded research into the impact of different land management interventions on heathlands and moorlands. You are putting Government money into a research scheme but you are not waiting to inform your own methodology on the licensing agreements.

Gabrielle Edwards: You never have a perfect evidence base, do you? It is always entirely normal for the Government to continue to invest in improved evidence all the time.

Q120 **Chair:** You called for the evidence but you do not wait to get it before you make a decision.

Gabrielle Edwards: No, you get evidence and you continually try to refine your evidence base and you would review your policies in line with the evidence base. I do not think anyone would say that at the point you introduce some regulation you would automatically stop with the evidence.

Q121 **Henry Tufnell:** Does the difference not concern you? We talked about the importance of co-ordination between devolved Administrations. We have such a glaring distinction between Scotland defining it differently, having a different level, and England doing something different, yet you are at odds in terms of how you are defining your evidence bases and the decisions that you are making off that evidence base. Is that not concerning to you, to be at odds? On top of this, we have already accepted that wildfires do not respect national boundaries.

Gabrielle Edwards: I think the difference between the English and Scottish positions can be overstated, actually. They are also different environments. We do talk to our Scottish colleagues about this and I think we can defend the differences between them.

Q122 **Chair:** Will the people who are the first responders—the gamekeepers, the farmers, the shepherds—get a voice at the Prime Minister’s summit?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: You have made a very compelling case to make sure that that voice is adequately brought in. I will take that away. I firmly believe that having local input into all these situations, looking at the response, is fundamental to understanding how we can move forward, because as you rightly say, they are living right in the midst of the situation and they have to stay and deal with the consequences afterwards.

Chair: I am going to move on to Charlie on cross-Government working.

Q123 **Charlie Dewhirst:** Part of my question follows on from that line of questioning. Just to be absolutely clear on licensing, and back to DEFRA, which ultimately makes the final decision, where there is a conflict between a fire authority and Natural England, who ultimately within DEFRA makes the decision as to whether to grant a licence or not?



Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Ultimately, I believe it is me—I have not had an application come across my desk as yet—but the advice would be given from the fire services and that evidence would be submitted and a final decision would be made.

Q124 **Charlie Dewhirst:** Just to clarify, it is at ministerial level.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Yes.

Q125 **Charlie Dewhirst:** Thank you. It is great to have two Departments here today. Which of you is overall responsible for the wildfire cycle? You both have responsibilities.

Baroness Blake of Leeds: We are joined at the hip.

Q126 **Charlie Dewhirst:** At the end of the day, someone has to be ultimately responsible. Does responsibility lie with MHCLG, ultimately? Fire policy obviously does overall, so that is with you. Therefore, what formal structures are in place that you are working with, hand in hand with DEFRA? What do those structures look like? How often do you meet?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: You will have to forgive me in the sense that I am literally just into the role, but it is my intention that we take the ministerial joint meetings incredibly seriously and that we work out a practical and efficient way of moving forward, making sure that responsibility lies in the right area for the right Department, and that we share all the information and, importantly, look at other areas that need to be brought into the mix.

Q127 **Charlie Dewhirst:** There are always going to be policy areas that are shared across more than one Department—in this case a very important one—so I think it would be helpful if there was a more formal set-up to ensure that that information is always shared.

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I don't know whether Peter wants to come in on that because he has more experience.

Peter Lee: First of all, I completely recognise the fact that probably 18 months ago this was not in the right place. We were working in two separate silos. That is a trap that Whitehall unfortunately falls into. We have been doing a lot of work since then to close that gap. We did set up a senior level strategic group with myself, DEFRA and all the other partners—the Met Office, the fire service and various others—to try to close that gap. We set up a bunch of working groups to look at the four aspects of prevention, mitigation, response and recovery.

We have not put a date in, but we almost certainly will be meeting again after this wildfire season to take the lessons away from that. I think the day-to-day working has much improved. For ourselves, DEFRA and other partners there is loads more to do to get that close join-up, but at an official level it has been happening.

Q128 **Charlie Dewhirst:** Without wishing to complicate things by bringing



another Department in, the Home Office published the wildfire framework for England in 2021. Does MHCLG still regard that framework as current policy or have you developed further policies?

Peter Lee: That is a reflection of the machinery of government move. When that happened, fire was in the Home Office. We have brought that over into MHCLG.

Charlie Dewhirst: But it is still current policy.

Peter Lee: It was also under a previous Administration, and a lot of things have changed since 2021, not least some significant wildfires: London 2022, the Langdale moor, North Yorkshire and various others. I think we have moved on a lot in five years and we have already discussed with the Committee the wildfire strategy and action plan.

Q129 **Charlie Dewhirst:** Yes. It is something we would want to see published in the future, an updated version. That would be helpful. The Government appointed a wildfire adviser in 2024. What tangible changes have resulted from their work, and where is that role situated within Government?

Peter Lee: The wildfire adviser sits within our national resilience capability and is of incredible experience—probably the most experienced wildfire expert in the fire service. The national resilience capability is something the Department directly funds. It is hosted within Merseyside Fire and Rescue. A tangible difference is the six wildfire specialist teams we deployed in July that have been engaged in the wildfires fighting ever since and which we have equipped with the necessary wildfire equipment. These are the things the wildfire adviser was advising us to do.

It is partly about advising Government, but it is also about making sure that advice is going to fire services—the 44 English fire and rescue services, any of whom can now be facing wildfires. That is one of the lessons from the last few years. Advising them about firefighting tactics, strategies, equipment and so on is what that adviser has been doing. I think it has made a significant, tangible difference to the approach we have been taking, and will continue to do so for the next few years.

Chair: Thank you. We will move on to the emergency alert and national risk register.

Q130 **Terry Jermy:** Good morning. I want to ask about the emergency alert, because it felt like quite a significant moment in the summer when that national alert came through. Baroness Blake, there were wildfires happening for weeks and weeks, and that alert came through, I believe, on 14 August. In my constituency of South West Norfolk, in the village of Kenninghall, there were two homes completely destroyed by wildfire, and significant agricultural land. Should that alert have been issued sooner?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: That is a very important consideration in terms of lessons learned from the way the decision was taken through



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the Cobra meeting. There are different views—let's be honest about this. I think, on balance, the benefit of putting out the alert has been recognised across the piece, and there needs to be a sophisticated set of procedures in place in terms of when that response is deemed essential. As it turned out, from what I understand, there were discussions about targeting that response, but as 14 August came, and we know how things had escalated around that, the decision was taken to put out the alert across England and Wales.

It certainly caught the attention of the public as a whole. There are criticisms, of course, from certain aspects. One of the main ones has been around vulnerable people, and people having phones that they did not want others in the household to know about. Those are considerations. There was a particular circumstance in Wales about the sequence of putting out the alert in the Welsh language first and then English. It is something we will learn from and then we will consider how appropriate it is to use in the future, because we must make sure that people do not become complacent about it and are like, "Oh, it's another one," and that it is used judiciously to give accurate information when there is a very serious situation unfolding that people in the local area need to be aware of.

There is quite a sophisticated response to flooding, for example, from the Environment Agency in that they have the numbers of all the people along the rivers of the affected areas. That may be something that is a bit more predictable. I think it is the unpredictability of the spread of these fires, and the intensity and the risk attached to it, that we will focus minds on how we use this resource in the future.

Q131 Terry Jermy: You mentioned it caught people's attention. The six alerts that I had certainly caught my attention. Was it a success in the Government's view? Did it work? Have analysis and evaluation been done about its success?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: The analysis is ongoing, but the initial thinking is that, yes, there were criticisms, but overall it was successful in raising the importance of the situation. There is another thing: I have had so many people coming to me saying, "I've just come back from Spain"—or another country—"and there are signs on the side of every major road alerting people." It is about taking into account learning from across the piece on how to have the most impact on people's behaviour. At the end of the day, we are trying to have an influence on behaviour to prevent fires in the first place, because the evidence suggests that most of the fires have a relationship to human activity. It is also an alert as to what action people need to take and what the appropriate response is.

Q132 Terry Jermy: Jenny, do you think it was a success?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Can I add to the point you mentioned fleetingly about the six alerts, and also about why it was issued? The decision was taken at Cobra, but on the advice of the fire services. It was



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not a decision taken at Cobra on the advice of Ministers or civil servants; it was explicitly on the advice of the fire and rescue service. That point needs to be well made for why it came about.

On the point of the six alerts you had, I think I had two or three, and I had lots of emails the next day from constituents who had many more. This is important learning that we have fed back, and we had a conversation about it yesterday, and it will be fed into learnings. You may be aware that the reason you had so many is poor signal. When the alert triggers it does not register as having landed, so then it keeps doing it and keeps trying again until it records a full service. That is a real issue in rural areas where we know we have heightened wildfire risk and it is something that is feeding into the process.

To answer your question on whether I think it was a success, I think it was incredibly important. Those who are holding the risk, the fire service, requested it and therefore it was done. On what it sought to achieve—to bring public awareness of the real risks attached to it—then yes, I think it was, but we need to learn more.

Q133 Terry Jermy: You mentioned the process and both of you referenced Cobra. Just so we are absolutely clear, because I think this is still a relatively new part of the toolkit and it is relatively new legislation that brought this in, who ultimately gave the go ahead for the alert to be issued?

Peter Lee: All alerts are ultimately issued by the Cabinet Office. It holds the technology and makes the final decision. The decision-making body is normally Cobra, or a local resilience forum if it is a local request, but the final decision to actually press the button sits with the Cabinet Office.

Q134 Terry Jermy: Jenny, I want to move on to the national risk register, because the assessment of the likelihood of the reasonable worst-case wildfire scenario is regarded as remote, which we believe is around 1%. That makes it less likely than a volcanic eruption or an earthquake, but we have seen significant wildfires now in 2022, 2025 and 2026. It feels like the new normal; every summer there is huge risk from wildfires. Do you think that assessment is accurate?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Technically, the risk assessment is managed and held by MHCLG and DEFRA is responsible for the land management side of it. On the wider question of whether I think it is a fair assessment of where we are, all the evidence has shown—and the evidence the Government build off from the Climate Change Committee—that realities have shifted and we are now preparing, including having conversations like this and bringing forward the wildfire summit, for an increased risk because of increases in temperature and climate change, an increase in severity of drought and the impact and consequences of these fires playing out on our own national security.

Q135 Terry Jermy: Baroness Blake, if the national risk register is more



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MHCLG, where are we at with reviewing the risk register in relation to wildfires and will that be reviewed? Clearly, the risk is changing. Based on everything DEFRA is saying around climate change and drought, the risk is increasing every single year. Are we catching up from a risk register point of view?

Peter Lee: That is a fair point. The answer is there is a cycle of reviewing the national risk register. All the risks are gone through, led by the Cabinet Office. I think you are right. On my experience of this summer, of course we knew the risk was changing—that is why we took the steps we took before the summer—but the speed that it changed, for the fire service and ourselves, has been significant. You are right that we need to review the risk assessment because clearly the reasonable worst-case scenario is more than one major wildfire happening, and we saw that. As you mentioned, the date the alert went off we had 11 major incidents relating to wildfires across the UK, which is unprecedented. You are right that we need to review that.

Q136 **Terry Jermy:** There is a recognition that it is more likely than an earthquake.

Peter Lee: Yes. I used to be responsible for the earthquake risks in my previous role, and that was usually something I managed successfully. Yes, I think wildfires are now more likely than earthquakes.

Q137 **Terry Jermy:** Given there is an acceptance of the changed risk, when will the risk register be updated?

Peter Lee: We will go back and start having that conversation with the Cabinet Office. We have not done it over the summer because, frankly, we have been dealing with the actual risk. The thing I would reassure you on is, of course, having an accurate and up-to-date national risk register is important. We have been getting on with dealing with the new reality. We need to make sure that the way we assess, publish and make that statement publicly is brought up to date.

Q138 **Terry Jermy:** Could you give us an assurance? Will that be before the next wildfire season?

Peter Lee: Absolutely.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Can I just come back on that because I think there are a few other points here? Correct me if I am wrong on this. You are talking about the national risk register but there is also the Climate Change Committee's "Fourth Independent Assessment of UK Climate Risk", published in May this year. The next step for that is the UK's response to those increased risks, and that has been debated, I believe, at the Environmental Audit Committee. The Government will respond to that in January 2027. That should sit alongside the national risk register that you are referencing as well.

Q139 **Charlie Dewhurst:** Coming back on the alert system, Jenny, you said it



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did a great job of raising public awareness, but that system was designed to alert people to an immediate threat to life. If we use it to tell people, "It is a bit hot outside; please do not have a barbecue", there is a real risk that it is the boy who cried wolf and, while we really do need this system, people will not take it seriously. Would you accept that perhaps in future maybe in a locality where there is a wildfire and perhaps a threat to life it should be used, but it should not be used blanket across the country?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: We have to go back to the point that advice was issued from the fire service. It is obviously dealing with a set of evidence that I, not attending Cobra, did not see myself. I take your point, and this is a conversation that I am trying to have with this Committee and with the work we are doing more widely. How do we move forward into next summer, two years, 10 years? How do we learn from what has worked well here and abroad and where we need to improve?

It is a point that is certainly not invalid, but we also have to start from the point that it was the fire service that requested it based on the evidence that it saw. Could stuff be tailored if some areas are at higher risk in the future? That is something that should be considered. I start from the principle that it was not a political or civil servant decision; it was the fire service's own assessment on the evidence it saw.

Q140 **Chair:** It is requested by the fire service, but the decision is made by the Cabinet Office. Does the Cabinet Office ever refuse requests like that, in your experience, Peter?

Peter Lee: That is a very good question, Chair. We might ask the Cabinet Office to come back to the Committee on that, because I do not want to mislead you.

Chair: You can take that up in correspondence. We are going to move on to local government and devolved powers.

Q141 **Henry Tufnell:** Quickly before we do, you pointed out the issues in rural settings with the alert and people receiving it multiple times. In Wales, we had the delight that many people who I represent in Pembrokeshire do not speak Welsh. There was a significant delay between the Welsh version and the English version being sent out, meaning that a lot of people were severely alarmed by receiving an alert that they could not understand and then had to wait for a significant period before they received the English version. I wonder whether that is something that has been fed back to ensure that they are coming out at the same time so that people are able to understand what alert is coming through at any given time.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Yes, I believe that has been fed back.

Peter Lee: It has been fed back to us extremely clearly and is something that we will—obviously it is a broader issue than solely wildfires because



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it is an issue for anything where you are going to be issuing an alert in Wales. That has been picked up in the lessons learned.

Q142 Henry Tufnell: I am grateful. Briefly, for complete clarity, we were talking before about Natural England's evidence review. I want to make it perfectly clear—I know the Committee is aware of this—that my father is a non-executive director of Natural England. I think it is important, just in case.

If we move forward now to local government and devolved powers, I want to ask a question about whether devolution by default makes it easier for local authorities to implement control measures, such as restricting public access or banning open flames.

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I am intrigued by your question. The important thing to remember is that local resilience forums sit above the boundaries and reflect local areas, so there will be a need to co-ordinate between the different areas. I believe in this instance that devolution of the appropriate powers to a local area, and obviously working through the planning system, can help to equip local areas to respond in the most appropriate way.

Every area has different circumstances, needs and partnerships, and they also need to recognise that each partnership has a different strength from the different members on them. It is complicated, but I think that local oversight should be an important addition to the toolkit. In terms of local authorities working within strategic authorities, that is an emerging picture and we still have some further thinking to do about how we most effectively get the representation at the right level.

Q143 Henry Tufnell: The Moorland Association and Whitfield Estate Partnership have reported that while local authorities have in the past implemented some of the open access restrictions, they are never used. Josh was talking about the international learnings. These open access restrictions were definitely being used in France in August last year. Do you think that these powers should be extended to land that is not owned by local authorities towards land that is managed by private landowners?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I think on the responsibility of helping to prevent wildfires in the first place, and dealing with them if they emerge, there needs to be a very close relationship between the two.

Q144 Henry Tufnell: I think the local authorities can create by-laws to ban disposable barbecues, but the CLA pointed out that that will not have an effect on private land. I wondered what your strategy is for making sure that you have consistency.

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I think that is worth reflecting on. The barbecue issue relates to the Department for Business and Trade, in terms of implementation. That is a wider conversation that we need to have. I still need evidence on how effective the announcement was, as I am aware that some shops still had them for sale after the ban was



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announced. It is a complicated area that we need to spend some serious time looking into.

Peter Lee: You are right that the Public Spaces Protection Orders that are available to local authorities to do things like banning disposable barbecues can only be used on public land. They are a tool, but part of our approach between now and the next wildfire season, and going forward, needs to be how we ensure that locally they have the necessary powers to deal with source of ignition when the risk of ignition is as high as it was in the summer, and how you do that effectively. Having the powers is fine, but you need to be able to enforce. That is something we are definitely thinking about, and it became an issue with disposable barbecues over this summer.

Q145 **Henry Tufnell:** I don't know whether DEFRA is feeding into these conversations around devolution.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: On devolution I could not tell you, but on the wider point about land access and the disposable barbecues, we are.

Q146 **Josh Newbury:** Just briefly, even before the alert that we have talked about was issued, I was urging supermarkets and retailers around my area to cease selling disposable barbecues because of the huge risk around Cannock Chase. We did have one fire just outside my constituency that was directly linked to the use of a disposable barbecue. I appreciate that this one sits outside your ministerial briefs, but given the scale of what we have seen this summer I do not think that this is something we can just leave to Public Spaces Protection Orders or voluntary guidance.

I think the reason, Baroness Blake, that we saw businesses flouting what the Prime Minister had asked them to do is because it was voluntary guidance; it was not enforceable. Will you take this back to colleagues and impress on them the need to at least consider a nationwide ban on these high-risk items when this risk presents itself again?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I think all things are on the table around this, but there is also a need for public awareness raising about what can cause wildfires. Disposable, portable barbecues are one, but there are many other things. We have a terrible situation across the country of people leaving litter behind them when they have been on days out. Leaving a bottle or throwing it out of the car can be just as dangerous. It goes back to what I was saying before about behaviour and a real understanding of where the risk is and what causes the problems.

It could be completely inadvertent, other than we know people should not leave litter around the countryside, but I am not sure that there is the awareness out there of just how dangerous and then potentially damaging it can be if it is not taken seriously. There is a lot more work to do in this area to raise public awareness. If some people continue with that anti-social behaviour, from experience other responsible members of the community will step in and recognise where the risk exists.



Q147 **Chair:** Again, the evidence that we got from people on the ground was that where land managers, gamekeepers, farmers and so on would approach somebody who was lighting a fire, using a barbecue or something inappropriate, they got nothing but abuse and occasionally they were threatened. This would be a very important signal that would be sent by Government. It is one occasion where Government could send a signal.

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I recognise this from the commentary from farmers around Yorkshire—it is that level of abuse. There are similar issues with letting dogs off leads and so many of these things that we need to take very seriously. It must be the most disheartening thing when you have been out to warn people, to ask them to change their behaviour, and they just ignore you, and then the consequences are as we know.

Q148 **Charlie Dewhirst:** Planning. We love planning. Baroness Blake, or perhaps Peter, I want to talk about the 2026 national planning policy framework and the reference to wildfire risk and mitigation. What role did the fire services have in shaping that with other wildfire experts? Peter, were you involved in that process?

Peter Lee: I think it was a bit before my time, so I was not directly involved. In order that I do not give you a false account, the details of how fire were involved—and I believe they were involved, almost certainly via the National Fire Chiefs Council—I can provide the Committee with that subsequently rather than saying what I think happened.

Q149 **Charlie Dewhirst:** We will perhaps cover detail in terms of what the framework describes. It requires developers to incorporate proportionate measures to mitigate against wildfires where opportunities to do so exist and where wildfires pose particular risk. What do you think that means in practice in terms of new developments on the edge of town, maybe closer to wildfire risk? How would you recommend that developers incorporate any risk of wildfire in building?

Peter Lee: There are some obvious measures that can be taken around wildfire transmission. The wildfire transmission we have seen in all the rural-urban interface is obviously where you have something like a railway embankment on fire that then spreads to the boundary of a property, and then spreads along fences or sheds to the property itself. Just putting in place a basic fire break within the new development to ensure it does not spread easily from rural to urban is the most obvious thing to do. Balancing the aesthetic needs of the development alongside very basic wildfire protection can make the difference between a house being affected or not.

There is also the spread from one house to another. Some of that is unavoidable; if you have terraced housing, that is very difficult to avoid. For new developments, planning and design is always a balance of



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different requirements, but there are some pretty common-sense things that can be deployed around new developments to slow down fire spread. It is that mitigation point. The more you can slow it down, the more time you are giving the fire service to turn up and deal with it. If you do not have those, the fire can spread so fast that the fire service cannot get on the ground quickly enough to be able to prevent its spread.

- Q150 **Charlie Dewhirst:** Your view is that there are actually quite simple measures that you can put in? Because one of the concerns might be that wildfires could be used as another reason something should not be built. It is always a challenge with that balance between building and those who might not want something built, whether it is housing or other.

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I understand where you are coming from. I think it is important that the wildfire risk is part of the overall package when looking at planning objectives, and design, environmental impact and green infrastructure are a significant part of the planning process. We have to make sure that the wildfire risk is incorporated into that and is not seen as a stand-alone separate issue.

- Q151 **Charlie Dewhirst:** The Chartered Institute of Housing has published its draft guidance on managing wildfire risk in new housing developments. Is that something the Government are looking at to put on a statutory footing or are you happy for that to be left to the market at the moment?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I cannot answer that at the moment, but obviously a lot of planning policy works around guidance.

- Q152 **Charlie Dewhirst:** Jenny, you are well versed on the challenges of rural planning and everything else. There are certain simple mitigations that farmers and landowners might wish to introduce— tracks, for example, and other things that could create fire breaks—and often there is a challenge then getting that through planning. Is that something you would look to work with Baroness Blake and others in MHCLG on, to make sure that such simple planning measures could be easily introduced?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Absolutely. I think all of what you were saying needs to be on the table. It is on the table, not just for changes on the land use but also when we look at water resilience on land. The two go hand in hand—wildfire and drought. We have a real ambition to make sure that we are driving forward land water capture on farmland. That is a resource that could be used to support wildfire prevention and tackling wildfires. Changes were announced in the last NPPF round on reservoirs, but there is a real drive from the Department to make sure that it is part of a number of the solutions that we should be exploring for wildfire management.

- Q153 **Chair:** Is there an interaction between the risk register point and the planning framework? Proportionality is the word you always hear in relation to planning policy, so mitigation risks have to be proportionate. If we are telling people that the risk of wildfire is less than that of a volcanic



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eruption, is it then difficult to force developers to take meaningful measures when they are considering an application?

Peter Lee: I suspect that developers will focus on what the planning guidance is rather than the contents of the national risk register. Therefore, I think that, while it is incumbent on us, as we have tried to do—

Chair: If I am a developer and I say, “I want to build 50 houses,” and you say “You can only build 40 because you have to build a fire break in there,” I will say “You’re not being proportionate in your application.”

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I think that is why it is important that all the considerations are taken in the round, so it is not just isolated to this particular risk but reflects planning policy as a whole and all the considerations.

Chair: We will move on, because that is tangential, to water availability.

Q154 **Sarah Dyke:** The National Fire Chiefs Council told us that water availability is becoming a growing challenge during wildfires and heatwaves. During August, at the New Forest wildfires, the Deputy Chief Fire Officer told the BBC that alongside the difficult terrain, hot conditions and changing wind direction, maintaining a sufficient water supply was an additional challenge. Are the Government considering stronger requirements on water companies to support firefighting? Baroness Blake, would you like to answer?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I do not have an answer for you on that specific point right now, but we are in the process of gathering the evidence around supply. You have made a very natural leap across to water companies. I will have to take that away. I do not know if Peter has something more specific.

Peter Lee: Regulation of water companies sits with our DEFRA colleagues, so it is something, again, that we are working on jointly together. Water companies also tend to be represented on local resilience forums when responses are taking place, and fire services normally have a contingency in resilience around water supply, but we have also heard that in other instances water availability can be an issue. It is something the fire services will talk about directly with the water companies. They often operationally try to work with them to ensure sufficient water supply. In terms of regulation on the water industry, it is probably one for us to take between the two of us.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: It is worth saying that following the Cobra meeting that was convened in August, one of the actions that was taken from it was the drought working group chaired by Minister Emma Hardy. On those calls we would have the water companies, water extraction groups, the EA, and farming groups. The two sit side by side, so the increased risk of drought, or the drought that we have experienced, and



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the wildfire season have sat side by side and been related to each other. Is there anything more you want to add on that?

Gabrielle Edwards: The only thing I would add is that as we start to think about adaptation to warmer climates as we move forward, we need to think about these things in a very integrated way. You are almost certainly going to get droughts and wildfire risk increasing, so thinking about the interplay between all these is going to be critical in terms of managing those risks as we go forward.

Q155 **Sarah Dyke:** Leading on from that, Professor Emma Howard Boyd told the Committee earlier in the summer that during the Wennington 2022 fire, when the fire and rescue service arrived the water pressure had been reduced by the water company itself. However, it is contested whether that was due to testing by the utility company or due to managing demand during a heatwave. There was a delay of many hours before the water was at the pressure that was required.

On that basis, what responsibility should water companies have to ensure that enough water pressure and supply for firefighting particularly is available during major incidents and periods of drought? It seems ridiculous that we are in a position where there is not enough water available when it is required.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I am happy to lead on that, but with support if anyone wants to come in. I only heard of that when I was looking at the Committee's notes. Previously, it was not something I was aware of. The fundamental principle is that we need water resilience and we need to make sure that we are holding enough water, and that the water companies responsible for that are also doing everything they need to do to ensure that there is water security in these moments.

There are a number of measures that the Government, working with water companies, took over this summer, including the temporary use bans, to make sure that they built up that water resilience where they can in a summer of severe drought. We have to make sure that the responsibility is also on the water companies in that instance to make sure that they are investing in their infrastructure and providing that water resilience as well.

Gabrielle Edwards: The only thing I would add is that DEFRA works very closely with the EA and the water companies on drought planning and ensuring that emergency preparedness is part of that. There is a legal security and emergency measures direction under which water companies have a legal duty to maintain robust emergency preparedness, but clearly there is a particular angle to this that you are raising and we will make sure that we take that away as we develop our plans.

Q156 **Sarah Dyke:** Do you feel that there is a lack of protocol for water companies to support large flows when they are needed for firefighting?



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Gabrielle Edwards: I think we just need to take this one away and look at it properly, because there is a lot of work going on about how we make those drought arrangements much more robust. As we start to see wildfires becoming an increasing part of the landscape we would expect to see every year, we need to make sure that this is something that has been properly addressed. We will take that away.

Peter Lee: I have a couple of things in terms of the alternatives that fire services will deploy. The expert teams that we have put in place are trained on tactics that do not require as much water to be placed on the fire. Tactical burning we have already talked about. We also have the high-volume pumps as part of our national resilience that you can deploy to move large volumes of water long distances, so you can extract from a lake or even, as the Minister mentioned, from sea water.

When water supply is low for a variety of reasons, I want to reassure the Committee that the fire service will have alternatives available to it to ensure that it can still fight the fire. That is something we are increasingly developing to ensure that we have alternatives. As you say, of course it is important that the fire service has the water available that it needs.

Q157 **Sarah Dyke:** That leads me on to farmers and landowners, and the role that they can play in resilience around wildfires. As we know, farmers and landowners are so often on the frontline of climate change, but the impact that wildfires can have on them can be severe and long-lasting. I welcome the £15 million announcement for on-farm reservoirs in response to these drought conditions. Will the Government also tackle the planning and obstruction licensing barriers that farmers are saying are delaying these reservoir constructions at the moment?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: As you said, the £15 million that has come this summer also comes with a real commitment to ensure that we are unlocking those barriers and making it easier for farmers to access that. That is a piece of work that is happening with MHCLG on the planning point. There is also a wider point that we need to capture water. We need to do that through reservoir or managed aquifer recycle schemes. There are so many initiatives that farmers right across the country, particularly in drought-stricken areas, are doing, trying to do, piloting or investing in. We need to make sure that we are supporting them, and we are supporting them. This summer, there has been a real focus on making sure that there is an understanding of where those barriers are and unlocking those barriers, be it funding, planning or resources.

There are other things that I think are important and will be explored over the next few months. In Dorset, there was a scheme that I have been made aware of—I am very keen to go and visit it in the next few months—where farmers have been actively working alongside their local fire service and getting the right equipment in place to make the adaptations so their water tanks can be used and they have the right equipment.



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There are grants available through, for instance, Farming in Protected Landscapes or other funding schemes that are available through DEFRA for farms to use and access if they want to play that role, and many of them do. Part of it is about, yes, we need to make sure we are giving them the full support, as we are, to make farming more resilient, capture water, and push back on some of the challenges that drought presents. Equally, there is other stuff that we can do that are smaller adaptations as well.

Q158 Sarah Dyke: The FiPL grants are limited to the farmers within those protected landscapes. They are sadly not available to all farmers. The CLA contended that new farm reservoirs were simply not being delivered quickly enough because of the abstraction licences not being able to be put through quickly enough, and obviously planning permission as well. I have farmers in my constituency, Glastonbury and Somerton, saying that the window for applications is limited and sometimes businesses won't be able to get bids in on time. Will this be a rolling window? Will there be further windows of applications? Will it be repeated or is it just a one-off pot?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Do write in to the Department. Minister Hardy is the responsible Minister, but it is something that we are working on across the Department with our ministerial portfolios where there is massive overlap between Minister Stephen Morgan from farming, myself on nature resilience, and Minister Hardy on water. Minister Hardy has been convening those drought meetings. Over the summer, since the first Cobra meeting into the drought meetings, we are seeing that political push and drive through the drought meetings. We are seeing some really good examples locally across the country where things are happening because pressure is being applied from DEFRA in the right manner. So, do write in.

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I will just add that on the issue of flexibility that farmers have been raising, a huge amount of this has come from the situation they have faced repeatedly around drought. We are currently working with the National Farmers' Union on an evidence-led review around introducing permitted development rights for on-farm reservoirs. I think it is that ability to take more control of what they are able to do. There is a huge desire from the communities that have been affected.

Q159 Sarah Dyke: That is welcome news, certainly in Somerset. We spend a lot of time, certainly on Levels and Moors, under water, but as the rest of the country has seen significant drought over the summer, the ability to be able to hold water where it is required at the time it is needed will be much appreciated.

Across the country, communities are facing the exceptional risk of wildfires, as we know, and this year has been unprecedented. I have written to the Minister of State for Water and Flooding to ask that fire pond creation within community areas be explicitly and formally recognised within the farming road map. Given the growing risk of



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wildfires, should land managers be able to create these wildfire ponds through permitted development rights, as well as those reservoirs?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I am very pleased to hear that you have raised it. It is one of the things that will be given full consideration. I do not have an answer now, but it feeds into the general picture of how these things could be managed on the ground practically, which they aren't at the moment.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: As we go into the summit, and as I said earlier about the joined-up nature of this between farming, nature and water, the working principle needs to be how we make sure that farms and farmers that are struggling to get access to water, critically needing to get that water, can capture that water on their land, whether that is a recharge system, a pond or a reservoir. You will frequently hear people talk about just reservoirs, but I always interpret that as a catch-all term for water management, water capture. So many different ideas, pilots and initiatives are happening, and it is about making sure that they have the opportunity to bring forward a scheme that works for them on their land.

Chair: I still have two sections to go and I am keen to finish at or around midday, but we will finish when we are finished.

Q160 **Terry Jermy:** I want to follow up on Sarah's point around farming and planning, specifically around the changing risk. Baroness Blake, you mentioned earlier wildfire risk needing to be incorporated into planning policy. There is a huge issue with profitability in farming, and particularly in Norfolk and Suffolk the availability of water is a key challenge. Many farmers in my area are turning to ground-mounted solar and battery storage. I have an application for 5,000 acres of solar farm that is currently grade 2 agricultural land. The landscape is changing but, more importantly in this context, the risk profile is changing as well. Are we doing enough through planning policy to mitigate and account for that changing risk in relation to ground-mounted solar and battery storage? There is surely an increased risk in relation to wildfires.

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I would not presume to give the technical answer to that; I have Peter here who can attempt to do that. Obviously, if there are any significant changes, as you outline, they need to be looked at in the context of the increased risk, as we discussed earlier.

Peter Lee: I am not an expert on the planning issues, but I will say that at the World Fire Congress, which we were at last week, lithium-ion battery storage and so on is the issue that is being talked about across the world. There are a number of vectors for that, not just the ones you outlined. Fire services across the world are catching up with that risk and the changing nature of firefighting tactics required for new technology. It is something that we are alert to.



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As ever, the fire service will always be looking to enable economic development, to enable the environment to be managed, improved and sustained, while also protecting lives and livelihoods. That is always the balance that we will strike. We will deal with the risk that is in front of us as a fire service, but it is definitely an area where technology is running and firefighting across the world is looking to try to keep up.

Terry Jermy: I hope it is an issue that you can take away, because it is a concern of mine. We have very remote rural communities' water availability, and if the policy does not catch up we are going to have permissions granted for significant solar farms and a huge changed risk that is not accounted for in planning policy. I think there may be some more work to do there.

Chair: The second to last section is on joint on-scene response to wildfires.

Q161 **Josh Newbury:** As we have heard a lot in this session already, strong working relationships between fire and rescue services, land managers, farmers, and rural communities are going to be vital to tackling wildfires in the future and obviously over this summer, too. What steps are your respective Departments taking to strengthen those partnerships?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: It is critical. I think I referenced earlier some good learned examples and working examples across the country in Dorset. We talked earlier about the summit that will happen next month, this autumn. It is vital that all partners who play a role, be it land management, fire resilience, or firefighting in traditional terms, will play a critical role in that.

I talked in my opening remarks about the one year, two year, 10-year focus that I have projected for fire management. Over the next year we need to make sure that we are in a better place entering the spring—entering the fire-risk season. Some of that focus over the next nine months in the short term is making sure that land managers are working with the fire service, re-evaluating the land in the same way that I talked about earlier—the example of Dunwich Heath where what was fit for purpose three years ago evidently is not fit for purpose—so making sure landowners are working with that and taking that advice forward.

Equally, there are land management schemes that should be taken up, and there is more that we can do as a Department. I have asked officials to look at what more we can do to ensure that farmers and landowners are accessing schemes in order to help them put those mitigations in place on their land, because at the moment we are not seeing a full uptake of lots of the schemes that are available to them. They are there. We need to use them; we need to get them out the door. I have asked what more can be done to make sure we are focusing that potential to the landowners who are not taking it up and should be taking it up. Then there is the wider two to 10-year point.



Baroness Blake of Leeds: To go back to the critical point about strengthening the breadth of experience in local resilience forums and making sure that there are mechanisms for views to be fed in, increasing risks, and recognising that a lot of the people to whom you are referring do not have the time to come and sit round the table at endless meetings, there has to be a good form of communication. Each one should be bespoke to reflect the challenges in their local area, and then through those fora making sure that they are prepared for what might happen in the local area. They are also a means to share intelligence on a much wider footprint that could then come to influence changes in legislation, if required.

Q162 **Josh Newbury:** From a DEFRA perspective, given we have seen extraordinary efforts from farmers and land managers often jumping into action before anybody else had even spotted a fire—ploughing firebreaks, rescuing livestock, often on others’ farms as well as their own—is it time now that the Government make some monetary recognition of the social value of farming, as they do in Wales?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I have seen that in my own constituency. Farmers played a critical role in the emergency response. In terms of the monetary role—hopefully this answers your question—linking back to what I said earlier about there being schemes and grants available, we need to make sure we are pushing where there is not sufficient uptake for them. That is either due to a lack of awareness or not realising that the scheme exists or not realising that the adaptations that they could make are available to them and the cost can be covered for them.

Q163 **Josh Newbury:** I am conscious of time so I will just ask this question. We have heard about—the Chair referred to it—the considerable emotional, personal toll that events like this take on communities as well as people responding directly. In Staffordshire, six of our firefighters were taken to hospital; they are luckily recovering well now. Services have had to bring in on-call firefighters extensively; some of them will not have had experience of dealing with wildfires before. What are the Government doing practically to support those affected both during and after incidents like this?

Baroness Blake of Leeds: In terms of understanding the different needs, different equipment and different protection that is needed between fighting different fires, I think we are well on with recognising that there are very practical technical issues that need to be addressed, and making sure that the right equipment and the right resources are in the right area at the right time is fundamental to our response.

You raise a wider question in terms of the broader community and how we can make sure that communities are more resilient, and understand what the risks are and what needs to be in place to deal with an outbreak that unfortunately might come their way. It is still very much work in progress, but I think that emphasis on resilience is going to become more and more important as we move forward, recognising that these things



are not one-offs. They are here and, unfortunately, if the predictions are correct, they are going to continue. Prevention, preparedness, and making sure that we have things in place to help support people will be critical.

Q164 **Henry Tufnell:** Going back to controlled burning, you said that 24 licences were put forward to you but only two were approved. In that process, why is it such a small proportion of the overall total that has been put forward?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: All those were in the last year but before my time as Minister. Having been briefed on it, my understanding is that lots of those licences were declined because they were submitted for training purposes, and the view taken and the advice given from the fire service was that it was not necessary. It was not appropriate in that terrain in that moment. The ones that were approved were put forward and, as I said, the advice was given back and the fire service has deemed that to be appropriate. Where it was just training programmes, I remember seeing one brief where it was not deemed the best way to conduct the training that the applicant had put in. I do not know if there is anything you want to add on that.

Gabrielle Edwards: We have issued two licences: one was for wildfire mitigation; one was for research purposes. Most of the remainder—not all of them—were for training purposes and, as the Minister just said, the advice from the fire service is that you can conduct that training in a less risky environment than on deep peat.

Q165 **Henry Tufnell:** Was Hurst and Chunal moor's—there was only one licence permitted, personally approved by the Minister—one of the two that you are referring to?

Gabrielle Edwards: No, Hurst and Chunal moor's was issued under the previous regulations by previous Ministers. There was a particular condition in that licence, which they had several attempts to meet and they did not, so that licence was withdrawn. The previous Minister decided to withdraw that licence earlier this year, so it was a separate licence where we issued that for wildfire mitigation.

Henry Tufnell: Thank you for clarifying that.

Q166 **Chair:** Even though all the evidence we get from land managers and others—farmers—is that they believe there is a need for seasonal burning in controlled circumstances, such is the nature of the regulations now they are not even applying for it.

Gabrielle Edwards: There have not been that many applications. We have been given different estimates about how many applications might come in, and that is one of the reasons we are having conversations with, particularly, the Country Land and Business Association at the moment, about if there are ways in which we can change the guidance to make the



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licensing process more flexible, to make it more attractive for people to apply for licences. That is an ongoing conversation at the moment.

Q167 **Chair:** You do not want to do that. The Secretary of State in her *Guardian* article said there is no place for this.

Gabrielle Edwards: We have always said that this is not a blanket ban on burning. If the right licence application comes in and there is a good case for using a licence—for example, for wildfire mitigation, we have positive advice from fire and rescue—we would issue that licence.

Q168 **Chair:** What would be the right application?

Gabrielle Edwards: It is very hard to say because it would depend on the individual site, what the proposal was, the size of the burn, what the landscape was, whether alternatives were acceptable, what the fire and rescue service advice was, and what the exit strategy is. As you said earlier, we all agree that in the longer term we want to move to a restored peatland environment, and if we have continual controlled burning then we will not make that move.

Q169 **Chair:** Do you think that the two are exclusive of each other?

Gabrielle Edwards: Because controlled burning changes the habitat over time, it is very difficult to get that peatland restoration—to get the blanket bog forming—if you are continually drying out the land and promoting continued growth of the woody materials such as heather, which is, as we know, something that is extremely flammable. There is a transition to go through here.

Q170 **Henry Tufnell:** Do you think it is okay for that transition to be gamekeepers coughing up ashes and livelihoods being lost and huge fires devastating the country?

Gabrielle Edwards: I cannot deal with that sort of—sorry. I recognise entirely what you are saying about the emotional argument and the impact on individuals. What we are saying is that we need to consider licence applications case by case and against the overall policy that Ministers have decided. At the moment, we are not getting licence applications coming through that show a credible approach to using this as a management tool.

Q171 **Chair:** You are not even getting the applications.

Gabrielle Edwards: We are having some applications.

Q172 **Chair:** Is that not just an illustration of how restrictive the regimes have now become since the 2025 amended regulations?

Gabrielle Edwards: As I said earlier, we were expecting more licence applications. We have not been getting them through. That is why we are in a very live conversation. I went out with the CLA earlier this year. They made some very credible arguments, compelling arguments, about some things that we could change that would make it more attractive for



landowners to apply for licences, showing us why some areas just are not conducive to cutting. I think we all understand that. We are carrying on that conversation with the aim of trying to improve that guidance for the burning season that is due to start shortly.

Q173 **Chair:** Are these improvements going to come in before the next burning season then?

Gabrielle Edwards: We are working on it now, and some of my team are, I think, doing another visit with the CLA this week to have a look at what could be done.

Q174 **Mr Toby Perkins:** Minister, climate adaptation has possibly been the less fashionable cousin of climate mitigation under this Government and previous ones. You will be aware that national adaptation plan 3 under the previous Government was described by the Climate Change Committee as falling far short of what is required and being not fit for purpose. Do you share that assessment?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: The honest answer is that is prior to my time, and I repeat what I said at the beginning, which is we leave this summer in a very different place to where we entered it. Focus has to be on making sure the adaptations that come forward following the Climate Change Committee's fourth risk assessment, which we will respond to in January, meets the risks as they are presented now. I take that evidence and the challenges from the Climate Change Committee.

Q175 **Mr Toby Perkins:** Do you think that as a plan it is fit for purpose or not?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I refer to my earlier answer, which is that the evidence has shown a change in reality of the severity of what we are facing, and things like the conversation that we are having today show that we need to be making sure we are going further where that is required.

Q176 **Mr Toby Perkins:** Okay. The Government defended national adaptation plan 3 in the courts under the threat from Friends of the Earth but accepted that it needed to change. The Climate Change Committee has said since then that this Government's work on climate adaptation has made no progress and that they do not seem to have changed their approach from the previous Government's at all, which is pretty damning criticism when you consider what it has had to say about that plan. Do you believe that with wildfire records having been broken now three times in the last five years the adaptation approach to wildfires and others that we have in national adaptation plan 3 is adequate? Can we expect it to be radically different in national adaptation plan 4?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: We are clear that in adaptation 4 we will set stronger objectives. We will improve the preparedness for climate change, to which many of you have alluded to and spoken of today and previously. The objectives will be developed to prepare for a minimum of 2% warming by 2050 in line with the advice from the Climate Change



Committee. Yes, it is a focus. We are going bolder with meeting those objectives in adaptation 4.

Q177 Mr Toby Perkins: When you have the Climate Change Committee saying the existing plan that you have is not fit for purpose and saying that this Government's approach has not really changed compared with the previous Government's, why are you content to sit until 2028 before national adaptation plan 4 is produced?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: This is a recurring theme of a wider approach to it. We are committed to making that adaptation 4 programme come—and it will come—but there are actions that can be taken before that is released. We do not need to be sitting on our hands while we are building that adaptation, building on those recommendations from the Climate Change Committee. We have said that we are going to set bolder, more ambitious objectives, but there are things and programmes that we will be doing before that launches, including things like the wildfire summit as we talked about, making sure that we are adapting, we are moving at pace, we are investing in the right areas, and we are looking at climate adaptation. Lots of those will come together and come through that adaptation plan, programme 4, but we certainly do not need to wait until that happens in order to drive it.

Q178 Mr Toby Perkins: The Climate Change Committee has not updated its advice or its assessment. From conversations you have had, do you think that it would say that the approach of the Government now is better than it was when it said in April 2025 that you had made no progress and were no different to the previous Government?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: My view of it, being new in over the summer—I am at risk of repeating myself—is that we are leaving the summer in a very different place to how we went into it. There is a national recognition across Government, across all Departments, that nature resilience is related to national security. It has a fundamental impact on our ability across our supply chain, across resilience, across a whole set of issues. There is a full lean-in across Government Departments for this. There is a national Government drive towards it, and I would not sit here and say after seven weeks that I feel that we are not ambitious. I would say that we have more ambition than we have ever had.

We have a Climate Minister and Nature Minister for the first time through this Government. Under the last Labour Administration from 2024 we have had a Nature and a Climate Minister. There is more ambition than I think there has ever been before under any other previous Administration to make sure that we have—

Q179 Mr Toby Perkins: We have heard several stakeholders suggesting that under ELMs wildlife resilience should be recognised as a public good, but will it be?



Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: There are a number of land management schemes where they can already access funding for adaptations for fire resilience. There is a job and a task at hand—I have spoken to officials about this—to make sure there is better awareness that farmers and landowners can draw down on funds, be it through Farming in Protected Landscapes or through other schemes. There is a lack of awareness and therefore a lack of uptake. I have asked to see what can be done to make sure we are encouraging more people to apply to all that. It is critical. I do not want to see farmers or landowners not using that scheme and being out of pocket because they are doing the right thing in their land to make those adaptations.

Q180 **Mr Toby Perkins:** You would encourage applications in that regard then. The Climate Change Committee highlighted data gaps on wildfire risk to homes and said that cross-Government recovery planning for wildfires is less developed than for flooding. Why should homeowners or landowners at risk of wildfires be confident that by the next wildfire season the Government will be better prepared than they were this year?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: It is a very good question. I have asked officials to look at the one-year, the two-year, the 10-year. We have to make sure we are going into spring and wildfire season next year in a better place than we left this summer. There are schemes available that we talked about and we need to drive more uptake. There are things that we can do to make sure we are definitely more prepared.

Of course, there are longer-term investments that need to come, and wider national conversations, including with our devolved partners, to make sure that we are far more resilient, and that will take the two and 10-year approach. There are measures, things that can be done over this winter—over this period—including water storage, water capture, access to ELM programmes, and other things besides.

Flooding is a good example. Ten or 15 years ago we would be having this conversation about lack of preparedness for flooding. We have come such a long way in the last 10 to 15 years on flooding. We need to make sure that that is a blueprint for how we, as a nation and a Government, are tackling the real threat of fire, wildfire, and using nature and nature recovery as a key answer for that. It is not the only answer but we can use nature and adaptation in that response.

Q181 **Mr Toby Perkins:** Finally, I think many people welcome the sense that there is greater priority on this, but if your Department is going to play a key role in assisting this greater resilience, do you feel that you have the budget? We are all conscious that DEFRA has been much more stretched for budgets than, for example, DESNZ. Are you going to have the resources you need if the Government genuinely believe that you are a priority Department in this regard?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: Going into the autumn, we have the summit. We have to be evidence-led. We have to be making sure that anything



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that comes out of it—the recommendations, the cross-working with other Departments, the proposals, the ideas, the solutions that come out of that—are evidence-led. Then that will lead to a—

Mr Toby Perkins: My question is: are you going to have the money to do this or not?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I am trying to answer it, but I appreciate it is not a yes or no answer. I can answer it by saying there is lots of money that is not being taken up at the moment through ELM programmes, but we need to make sure we are getting it out the door to people who should be using it but are not aware of it. We also need to make sure that when we come up with the plans for future resilience on that two to 10-year cycle that it is evidence-led, and that allows us to have a conversation rather than saying, “We need £1 billion but what are we going to spend it on?”

We need to make sure that it is planned by a real response from the ground, on the ground, and driven by that evidence—that insight. There is going to be a lot of stuff that will be about behaviour change. That is not a question about resourcing for infrastructure; that is a question about how we shift behaviour. Of course, there will, in the realm, be a question about funding, but there will also be a question about what is the right thing to do to change behaviour, to adapt and make sure that we have the right resources for that resilience.

We talked earlier about changing technology and aerial use—for instance, the use of drone rather than helicopter. Lots of that will be a conversation across different Departments about using modern technology, as well as using other things like shifting on behaviour.

Q182 **Chair:** We have run slightly over time, for which I can only apologise, but we have covered the ground that we wanted to cover today. It is good to see the two Departments here together. I hope that this is reflective of a future intention that there should be better integration across Government.

If I can leave you with one final thought, it is just to instil an ever greater sense of urgency here. It is September now. We will be into the next wildfire season before we know it and the machinery of government very often, left to its own devices, will grind slowly. It is your jobs, Jenny and Judith, to make sure that it does not.

Baroness Blake of Leeds: I want to go back and focus again, from the perspective of the fire service, at the impact that this has had on the individuals responding, as well as the wider community. I completely take that point, and just to reassure the Committee in terms of the resilience of the people involved, we are looking very carefully at the health and wellbeing needs of firefighters. It is critical that we look after the people who keep us safe. That goes alongside all the different aspects of what we have been covering today.



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Chair: I agree: it is all about the people. That is a good starting point, but I am afraid it is a good ending point for us as well. That is all we have time for today. Thank you for your attendance and engagement.