

Written evidence from the Welsh Government, Llywodraeth Cymru (PAE0011)

Dear Kate,

Thank you for the invitation to the Welsh Government to provide evidence to the Lords Environment and Climate Change Committee inquiry into protected areas. I think of particular interest to the Committee will be the perceived lack of engagement with the Welsh Government on issues involving the complexity of devolution in areas like marine consenting, the Energy Bill and REUL as recent examples. Our role and competence in these devolved areas needs to be respected as we are the responsible authority in these areas. I have included some detail on these in the relatively short answers below to the suggested questions you asked.

1. How effective has past coordination with the UK Government been regarding the UK's international obligations for protected areas, and how could this be improved with respect to achieving the '30 by 30' target?

Wales work with the rest of the UK through the Four Countries Biodiversity Group (4CBG). The secretariat for this group is provided by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC). A series of workshops has been organised (three per year) which provides the opportunity for us to collectively share progress as well as develop our thinking around the implementation of this target. Whilst coordination and relations through the 4 CGB are good, it could perhaps be further enhanced by more regular meetings and the earlier sharing of information so that each of the administrations are able to consider properly. Our role and competence in devolved areas needs to be respected and further examples would be the interplay between MPA management and the marine consenting and licensing regimes which are all largely devolved, but where some areas such as Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects have been retained. For example it is notable that clauses in the forthcoming Energy Bill do not yet correctly reflect the devolution settlement and the Welsh Ministers' role in licensing of renewable energy projects in the Welsh inshore or offshore regions, where Welsh Ministers are currently the appropriate authority with a duty to secure compensatory measures for protected European marine sites.

Further, we are also concerned that the clauses in the forthcoming Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill reforming the approach to environmental assessments for plans and projects do not currently reflect the devolution settlement either in respect to the protection of the environment. We support the streamlining of consenting processes where possible but potential changes to current consenting and licensing practice could result in different regimes applying across Welsh waters.

2. Are there any lessons learnt regarding the management of protected areas in Wales which you would like to draw to the attention of the Committee?

We have taken a wide range of new initiatives in recent years to improve the natural environment in Wales including our National Forest, the Sustainable Farming Scheme, our world-leading requirements to implement sustainable drainage and the priority we are giving to nature-based flood management schemes. We are also committed over the course of this term to develop further initiatives, including a coastal habitat restoration scheme, and a new National Park.

We recognise there are multiple drivers of change threatening the resilience of Welsh ecosystems and our protected sites. These were identified by the NRW State of Natural Resources Report in 2020, and include: climate change, invasive non-native species

(INNS), land-use change, over-exploitation, and pollution. Despite many of the physical interventions we might seek to implement on site to improve the management of our protected areas, these pressures degrade the biodiversity of our sites, need to be tackled at source and require integrated approaches.

Through evaluation of previous schemes such as our N2K / SMS scheme we have incorporated lessons learned to help inform the development of current initiatives such as our Nature Networks Programme (NNP). Defining outcomes clearly, having a longer-term approach and streamlining the application process were some of the recommendations incorporated into the development of the NNP. An integral element of the INNP is the Nature Networks Fund working with partners focussing on improving the condition and connectivity of our protected sites network whilst also encouraging community engagement. Since its launch in 2021, 46 projects have received funding totalling £11m, benefitting more than 100 habitats and species of international significance in the terrestrial, freshwater and marine environments. A further announcement on successful large projects will be made in April. This programme recognises nature as a series of networks on land and at sea that we need to connect and grow to make them more resilient. Projects we are funding include connecting fragmented woodlands to enable species to establish habitat over larger areas, reducing phosphate pollution in rivers to protect nature far downstream, and improving the condition of habitats to enable some of our most iconic species greater freedom to roam – the curlew, fritillary butterflies and angel sharks.

Crucially, these projects harness the energy of local communities – supporting citizen science, involvement of schools, providing skills and training opportunities. In this sense, nature networks are both ecological networks and networks of people needed to ensure we are able sustain this action on nature into the future. However, we recognise the need to further build capacity, skills, behaviour change and ensure a broader range of available funding sources for protected sites are required given the scale of the biodiversity challenge.

The Welsh Government is committed to supporting the COP 15 global Convention on Biological Diversity 30x30 target to protect 30% of our land and seas by 2030.

In Wales, we recently held a Biodiversity Deep Dive focussing on Wales approach to the delivery of the 30 by 30 target as a key mechanism to tackling the nature emergency. To key objective was to develop a set of collective actions we can take immediately to support meaningful delivery of the Convention of Biological Diversity '30 by 30' goal, recognising the capabilities we have in Wales and reflecting our duties under the Wellbeing of Future Generations and Environment Acts. Key to these are:

- Taking action to transform the protected sites series so that it is better, bigger, and more effectively connected.
- Develop Nature Recovery Exemplar Areas that deliver biodiversity outcomes.
- Unlocking the potential of designated landscapes and reform land, marine management and planning to deliver more for both protected sites and wider land / seascapes in Wales.
- Building a strong foundation for future delivery through capacity building, behaviour change, awareness raising and skills development.
- Unlock responsible and high integrity public and private finance to deliver for nature at far greater scale and pace.

The Deep Dive reported in October 2023 with a Written Statement [Written Statement: Biodiversity Deep Dive \(3 October 2022\) | GOV.WALES](#) and the key

recommendations - [Biodiversity deep dive: recommendations | GOV.WALES](#). We are currently developing an action plan to deliver these recommendations through co-production with a wide range of stakeholders. This partnership approach has been vital to securing agreement to the recommendations and buy in to their implementation, recognising that a Team Wales approach is required for delivery.

a. How does monitoring of the condition of protected areas vary across the UK?

The Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) co-ordinate the collective monitoring and reporting against all of the recently Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework at a UK level.

The JNCC is **required by statute to develop common standards throughout Great Britain** for the monitoring of nature conservation and for the analysis of the resulting information. In 1998, the Committee published A Statement on Common Standards for Monitoring Designated Sites in compliance with this duty. Common Standards Monitoring is based on identifying the feature or features on each individual site. A management plan should be in place for each site and the monitoring tests whether the objectives for that site have been met.

Natural Resources Wales (NRW) established the 2020 Baseline Evaluation project to assess the quality of protected sites evidence base to help understand, where possible, the relative 'health' of the key species and habitats across the range of freshwater and terrestrial features on protected sites in Wales. The evidence on each feature was reviewed and, if possible, given an indicative condition assessment category. This Baseline Evaluation confirmed that more information was needed on nearly 50% of the species and habitats of interest on our protected sites and where we did have information on features of interest 60% are in unfavourable condition. This evaluation informed both NRW's management approaches to features in poor condition and their approach to evidence collection under a new more comprehensive terrestrial monitoring strategy. The results and further information can be found at [Natural Resources Wales / Protected sites baseline assessment 2020](#)

In 2018 NRW published indicative site level feature condition assessments for Welsh European Marine Sites. Over 69% of the Welsh inshore region is designated for some form of protection, with 50% across the total EEZ. Of those sites, 46% of network features were assessed as being in favourable condition. As part of the Nature Networks Fund, NRW have commissioned further work to build on the indicative assessments and update our understanding of our marine sites and the critical pressures impacting our sites.

I am happy to provide any further information as required.

Yours sincerely,



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