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Y Gweinidog Newid Hinsawdd
Minister for Climate Change



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Eich cyf/Your ref P-06-1398
Ein cyf/Our ref JJ/00119/24

Jack Sargeant MS
Chair - Petitions committee
Senedd Cymru
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1SN

07 March 2024

Dear Jack,

Thank you for your letter of 18 January.

I would like to reassure the Committee I am extremely concerned about the impact of pollution on the quality of our rivers. Improving water quality is a complex issue which defies easy solution.

As a case in point, the Afon Teifi is under multiple pressures, including pollution from abandoned metal mines at the top of the catchment to pollution from wastewater assets, and diffuse pollution from land runoff. It is also subject to strategically important public drinking water abstractions.

Tackling pollution on the Teifi and other water bodies in Wales needs the integrated management of natural resources to maximise economic and social benefits in an equitable way, while protecting all ecosystems and the environment. These ambitions can't be realised by the Welsh Government or Natural Resources Wales (NRW) alone. We need everyone to think about how their actions impact on the wider water environment: a 'Team Wales' approach. NRW are a key player for Team Wales and with existing funding are undertaking significant work throughout the Teifi catchment to improve water quality, alleviate pollution pressures, and achieve significant, tangible, and longstanding improvements to the Afon Teifi and its wildlife.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

NRW leads the '4Rivers for LIFE' project, an ambitious, large-scale river restoration project, which secured over £9 million in funding (of which Welsh Government has provided £850k per annum for 4 years as match funding) to focus on the restoration of freshwater features in four SAC Rivers in Wales: Afon Teifi, Afonydd Cleddau, Afon Tywi and River Usk. Working with partner organisations, farmers, landowners, local communities and contractors, the project is using long term nature-based solutions on the Teifi and the other target rivers to improve its ecological quality. Specifically on the river Teifi the project will visit over 150 farmers to provide land management advice, install approximately 25km of riparian fencing and plant around 12,500 riparian trees. There are also plans to re-meander around 3km of straightened river in the catchment, to restore natural processes and improve habitats along these sections. The project is tackling invasive riverine species such as Himalayan Balsam and American Skunk Cabbage, aiming to eliminate these species in some sub-catchments. This work is being delivered through local contractors as well as volunteers.

In addition to the 4Rivers for LIFE project, NRW is using the Afon Teifi for an innovative pilot '[demonstrator catchment](#)' project, supported by Welsh Government. The Teifi Demonstrator Catchment project is about thinking differently and using innovative solutions to explore new and novel ways of working, and to seek innovative environmental solutions by working together with both public and private organisations, communities and third sector organisations. It will build on work already taking place and focus on how NRW can add value and demonstrate additionality. NRW are reviewing freshwater monitoring work, looking ahead to future needs, new approaches and innovation. NRW are also seizing upon the interest and enthusiasm of members of the public and community groups that are keen to monitor their local rivers, beaches and lakes. NRW are working to develop their approach to Citizen Science to enable use of valuable data to further advance their work. I am also keen to see consideration given to using NRW's experimental powers where appropriate. NRW are actively collaborating with 16 other organisations to develop and agree clear objectives for the project and to co-develop a work programme for joint delivery. Collectively, they have submitted an Ofwat Innovation Fund entry for £2m to support delivery of interventions in the catchment. The challenge for NRW and stakeholders should not be underestimated – as it is understood the life of the project could span up to five years. While change may feel slow, the project comes at a critical time for our rivers. How we work together – as regulators, Government, landowners, businesses, and communities – will be pivotal if we are to deliver the improvements in our rivers that we all seek.

Following publication of NRW's Compliance Report in January 2021 that found the Teifi was failing targets for phosphorus, NRW established the SAC Rivers project to address some of the water quality issues across the SAC Rivers in Wales. Source apportionment studies commissioned by NRW to identify the sources of phosphorus pollution has identified discharges from Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water sewerage treatment works and Combined Storm Overflows (CSOs) as the lead contributor to phosphorus levels in the Teifi catchment. NRW is working closely with and has oversight on over 30 DCWW improvement initiatives and schemes in the catchment. As part of the Welsh Government's [Action Plan](#) to tackle phosphorus pollution in SAC river catchments, NRW is currently undertaking a review of discharge permits in a bid to reduce the impact from DCWW assets and to improve compliance.

Working with the Wales Better River Quality Taskforce, NRW are delivering their commitments in the storm overflow roadmap, strengthening our regulatory framework for storm overflows to ensure water and wastewater companies effectively manage and operate their network of sewers. The ambition is to deliver a resilient sewerage system that adapts to the pressures of climate change and ensures overflows operate only as required. Fundamental to this is collecting new evidence to demonstrate the impacts of overflows, as well as gathering information on emerging pollutants. The taskforce is also looking at how NRW communicates with stakeholders, building on the increased interests around water quality and recreational use.

Following years of collaborative work between the water companies and regulators including NRW, water companies in Wales submitted their business plans in autumn 2023. These business plans set out a significant programme of much needed investment across Wales. The investment amounts to nearly £1.9 billion, representing an 84% increase than the previous period. NRW and I expect that after Ofwat determines the business plans, those plans will demonstrate they will support sustainable environmental improvements for the benefit of current and future generations thus contributing to the improvements in the Afon Teifi and other SAC Rivers, CSOs and a range of other water programmes.

NRW is actively working with the Coal Authority and Welsh Government to tackle the legacy of historic metal mining in the Teifi catchment to reduce the discharge of metals from two abandoned metal mines - Abbey Consols (Teifi headwaters) & Esgair Mwyn (Meurig tributary). Welsh Government funding of approximately £5m has been allocated to implement measures to reduce zinc and lead pollution on these sites. An innovative Nautilus Pond is planned for Esgair Mwyn that will remove sediment from the discharging water, while legal advice has been secured on the appropriate means to gain access and limit risks and liabilities from the Abbey Consols site.

The Teifi's valuable fisheries are being protected and enhanced by NRW's work and oversight in the catchment. The Fisheries Habitat Restoration Plan, funded by the Sustainable Fisheries Project and Inland Fisheries Habitat Restoration (IFHR) Strategic Allocated Fund (SAF) grant award to Afonydd Cymru and the West Wales Rivers Trust, includes installation of livestock fencing to limit stock access to watercourses and promote the growth of native vegetation to secure habitat and shading benefits. As well as this restoration, NRW have demonstrated robust and effective use of their enforcement powers in respect of fisheries on the Teifi. In 2022, NRW investigations successfully shut down and brought criminal convictions against an organised poaching gang embroiled in 20 years of prolific illegal salmon fishing on the Teifi. The ringleader was ordered by the court to have £61,791.50 confiscated due to the financial gains he made from his crimes. Subsequent investigative work exposed broader criminality spanning two decades.

NRW are undertaking many other activities in the Teifi catchment as part of their general duties and responsibilities. These include reactive incident response and enforcement and proactive permitting, permit compliance/inspections - NRW aim to carry out 800 inspections on high-risk farms across Wales in relation to the Water Resources (Control of Agricultural Pollution) (Wales) Regulations 2021.

Welsh Government ensures continuity of NRW's performance in delivering on their obligations and providing value for money through regular and robust conversations and touch point meetings. NRW are demonstrably playing their full part in working to prevent pollution and improve water quality. Despite the squeeze on public finances, they are successfully using all the resources at their disposal to prevent and minimise pollution, carrying out more inspections and prosecuting those who commit the most severe or deliberate damage.

I am confident that the Senedd will continue to provide active and robust scrutiny of NRW.

Yours sincerely



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