



Eich cyf/ Your ref P-05-945
Ein cyf/ Our ref LG/00896/20

Janet Finch-Saunders MS
Chair
Petitions Committee

14 October 2020

Dear Janet

Thank you for your letter of 1 April, regarding Petition P-05-945, entitled The Climate Emergency and a National Forest for Wales. I apologise for the delay in my response to your correspondence due to an administrative oversight.

In their letter the Woodland Trust raise a number of important questions. Some of these issues relate to long term planning and work which is ongoing with Welsh Government. I have asked my officials to maintain contact with the Woodland Trust, along with other interested groups, to help us shape our approach in this area to make sure we succeed in our ambitions in relation to forestry. Natalie Buttriss (Director of Coed Cadw) is a valued expert member of the Woodland Strategy Advisory Panel, who directly advise Welsh Government and Welsh Ministers on these matters.

Sustainable Forestry

The UK Forest Standard (UKFS) is the Governments' reference standard for sustainable forest management in the UK and includes requirements and guidelines in relation to new woodland creation. The Standard was updated to its fourth edition in 2017 and continues to be widely accepted by the forest industry.

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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.

Although voluntary, compliance in Wales is encouraged through the Glastir Woodland Creation Scheme and our regulations, such as felling licences and the Environmental Impact Assessment process. This ensures new planting proposals and management operations are in line with the standard.

As set out in 'Prosperity for All: A Low Carbon Wales', we are developing guidance to help NRW, as regulator for woodland creation, demonstrate new woodland is established in accordance with the objective and principles of the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources. This guidance will evidence the link between these principles and the UKFS.

Planting targets and Climate Change

The creation of new woodland is important for addressing climate change. The 2,000 hectare target encompassed in our Woodlands for Wales Strategy was driven by the minimum scenario in the UK Committee on Climate Change (UKCCC) advice on the pathway to reach Wales' previous target to reduce emissions by 80% by 2050. The UKCCC's 80% scenario assumed 4,000 hectares new creation p.a., which was not considered deliverable in the short-term. However, we have committed to increasing woodland creation to this level as soon as possible.

In December, the UKCCC will publish advice on how their recommended 95% target for 2050 affects Wales's interim targets and carbon budgets. I have also asked them to explore how Wales could go beyond 95% by 2050. We will ask the Senedd to review the emissions targets and carbon budgets early in 2021, and will then review our planting targets, if appropriate.

We have taken significant steps this year to increase tree planting in Wales. Earlier we increased the budget of our Glastir Woodland Creation scheme to £8m. We received 379 expressions of interest for this window, with a total value of £17.5m.

Last month, I announced a further window of the Glastir Woodland Creation and Restoration schemes will go ahead, with a total budget of £10m. This demonstrates our commitment to providing the support required to increase tree planting in Wales.

National Forest

I fully understand the importance of well managed woodlands, both to support a range of biodiversity objectives and their role in sequestering carbon from our atmosphere. Restoring and bringing under-managed woodlands back into management will certainly be one of the key objectives under our National Forest in Wales. We are working closely with Natural Resources Wales (NRW) to undertake a targeted programme of enhancing and restoring a number of existing woodland sites (including our precious ancient woodland sites), to restore and improve access to these woodland gems and create exemplar National Forest sites within the Welsh Government Woodland Estate.

The National Forest will create areas of new woodland and help to restore and maintain some of Wales' irreplaceable ancient woodlands. In time it will form a connected ecological network running throughout Wales, which will bring social, economic and environmental benefits.

By the end of the year, we will have developed with stakeholders the outcomes we want the Forest to achieve and created the National Forest brand, enabling us to designate the first National Forest sites. Alongside this we are running a number of demonstration projects to start activity on the ground, test funding and delivery mechanisms for improving and creating woodlands to inform our future plans and help us determine the level of funding we may need for the National Forest.

In June we launched the £2.1m Community Woodlands Grant, in collaboration with the National Lottery Heritage Fund, which will help people across Wales create places for nature in their own communities, once the nation looks to move beyond the current pandemic. We have launched the Forest Industry Recovery Scheme (FIRS) with a budget of £1.55m. This scheme, which will provide capital funding to the sector to increase its capacity and contribute to a Green Recovery in Wales, illustrates our ongoing commitment to increase woodland creation in Wales, and thereby achieve our tree planting and climate change mitigation targets. Alongside this we have provided funding of £200k to Keep Wales Tidy to create “Tiny Forests” which are dense, biodiverse, fast growing forests the size of a tennis court in a number of towns and cities across Wales.

Step change in land use

Alongside running the Glastir Woodland Creation and National Forest demonstrators, we are developing a longer term approach to achieving our woodland creation targets. A key element of this will be the new Sustainable Farming Scheme. Within this scheme, we propose to remove the link between payment and the amount of land a farmer claims; to provide financial support for sustainable land management based on delivering environmental outcomes; and to develop a new relationship with farmers where they take more control in delivering the desired outcomes but with the support and guidance from the Welsh Government. We will set out further detail of how the scheme can help contribute to woodland creation in the Agriculture White Paper.

Timber Production

The Glastir Woodland Creation and Restoration grant schemes require an increased number of different species to be planted, varying with woodland category within scheme. This helps to increase the resilience of new woodland and restored sites and recognises the different objectives of new woodland creation in Wales.

The Welsh Government Woodland Estate (WGWE) will continue to be managed sustainably through the UK Forestry standards (UKFS) and certified through the UK Woodland Assurance Scheme (UKWAS). It will continue to be managed to improve its extent, condition and diversity to increase its resilience to the impacts of climate change, demonstrating best practice. The overall productive potential (in terms of timber, wood products and other benefits) of the WGWE will be maintained and if appropriate, enhanced, to support the continued sustainable growth of the forestry sector in Wales and beyond.

Water quality and flood mitigation

A key priority of the draft National Strategy for Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management in Wales is to deliver more natural interventions and catchment approaches to help improve the environment. The restoration of our uplands and managing them for biodiversity, carbon and water can reduce flood risk as well, and so complements our approach to encourage more natural flood management.

I announced earlier this year the Flood and Coastal Risk Management Programme for 2020-21. I want to ensure we move at pace to deliver natural flood management and catchment schemes throughout Wales, especially following the devastating effects of recent flooding, and am awarding 100% funding for such schemes over the next 2 years.

These approaches replicate natural processes to help protect our coastline and to hold back rain water in upper catchments, slowing the rate of run-off into our rivers and streams. These projects will be carefully monitored so we can share evidence and good practice to help promote and refine approaches which deliver the greatest benefit. My ambition is for Wales to lead the way with this work.

Carbon Sequestration and Storage

The Environment (Wales) Act 2016 set a legal target of reducing emissions by a minimum of 80% by 2050 and places a duty on the Welsh Ministers to set a series of interim targets (for 2020, 2030 and 2040) and carbon budgets. Carbon budgets set limits on the total amount of emissions emitted in Wales over a 5-year period and act as stepping stones to ensure progress is being made towards the decadal targets.

The UKCCC's 2020 report on land use policies for net zero recommended a key measure should be a carbon trading scheme or auctioned contracts to attract private sector investment.¹ We are considering the role schemes like this can play in driving woodland creation in Wales.

I recognise, due to the multifunctional nature of woodlands generally, there is considerable crossover between the various policy areas set out above. The Woodland Trust's insights are welcome to help implement and develop our policies and I hope we will be able to continue these discussions going forward.

Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lesley Griffiths". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Lesley Griffiths AS/MS

Gweinidog yr Amgylchedd, Ynni a Materion Gwledig
Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs

¹ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/land-use-policies-for-a-net-zero-uk/>