

To the Senedd Petitions Committee

Thank you for scheduling a discussion at your forthcoming meeting on the petition to safeguard Kenfig Nature Reserve. This letter provides some additional background information and proposes a way forward that will address the issues raised by the petition.

Kenfig National Nature Reserve

The reserve is part of a wider estate under the custodianship of the Kenfig Corporation Trust (KCT), a private corporation registered with the Charities Commission. The committee has received several petitions over the years asking it to intervene to protect threatened sites, and petitioners will naturally wish to talk up the importance of those sites. With Kenfig we don't need to: it is in the top flight of nature reserves in Wales and its international importance for biodiversity is reflected in the number of conservation designations it has.

The nature of the habitats at Kenfig means that they require ongoing management to prevent the rare species they support from declining and disappearing, as has happened at other South Wales dune systems. The high level of recreational use of the site brings additional pressures. Bridgend council managed the reserve very successfully over many years, but the site is now in a state of limbo; even after protracted discussions between KCT and conservation bodies, no suitable arrangement for the future management of the site is yet in place.

The petition

The petition was conceived by a group of naturalists in south Wales. The co-ordinating group for the petition includes people working in nature conservation in professional and voluntary capacities. The petition has gained over 8,000 signatures, including over 5,000 from Wales. A large number of signatures are from the immediate environs of Kenfig, but all Welsh constituencies are represented. The international importance of Kenfig is reflected in the large number of signatures from other countries. The petition was still attracting over a hundred signatures a day with over three months to go until its end date, and so we are confident that it would have reached the new threshold of 10,000 signatures, which was introduced part-way through the signing period, but we agreed to close the petition early to allow the committee to consider it now rather than allowing it to run for the full six months.

Compulsory Purchase

The Welsh government has the powers to make a compulsory purchase order for a site such as this, given its strategic importance for nature conservation and the threats that it is facing. Although some local residents believe that the land cannot be sold, there are no legal restrictions which would prevent this. The low commercial value of the site means that this solution need not be cost-prohibitive.

Attempts to reach a settlement with Kenfig Corporation Trust

Discussions have been underway for several years with Kenfig Corporation Trust to reach an agreement on how the site should be managed. Several options have been considered, including the involvement of the Wildlife Trusts and the RSPB, but all of these options were ruled out by KCT.

The latest proposal, that KCT itself manages the site, is of concern. KCT is a small village charity, run by voluntary trustees, with no skills or expertise in managing internationally important nature conservation sites, or with the many other complex logistical issues associated with managing a site of this nature. Although a job advertisement for a reserve manager has been issued, the proposed salary for this is well below that for comparable roles with similar responsibilities, and this poses the risk that no suitable candidates will apply, which could lead to Natural Resources Wales having to provide a considerable level of ongoing support. There will also be significant non-staff costs (e.g. for premises and equipment) which KCT may not have budgeted for.

In addition, during the period that this petition has been open, a number of individuals, including both those supportive of the petition and those who did not feel able to support it, raised concerns with us about the culture of KCT.

This letter is not the place to go into detail about those, but these concerns have prompted a group of local residents (unconnected with the petition) to make a formal request to the Charities Commission to undertake an investigation into the activities of the trust. As a petition co-ordinating group, we do not have any direct knowledge of the issues raised, but we feel the committee should be aware of this situation: the Charities Commission has a number of sanctions available to it, and some of these could have a significant impact on the ability of KCT to meet the commitments associated with any agreement it might reach for the management of the site.

While an agreement between KCT and Natural Resources Wales to manage the site should not automatically be ruled out as a solution, there are a number of issues which need to be resolved before we can have confidence in any proposal. Crucially, there is no such agreement yet, merely the intention to create one. And an agreement on paper will not be enough; there will need to be a high level of confidence in KCT's ability to deliver on the agreement such that the site will not become threatened again in a few years' time.

What we would like to happen next

At this stage, we would like to propose to the committee that the following approach is taken:

- i) the committee keeps open the option of a debate on compulsory purchase, pending further information from the Welsh government on the position of the discussions with KCT, and
- ii) the committee requests that the Welsh government (or Natural Resources Wales) engages directly with the petition co-ordinating group with the aim of agreeing how the suitability of any proposed agreement with KCT should be evaluated.

Steven Preddy, on behalf of the Kenfig Campaign Co-ordinating Group

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