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Y Gweinidog Cyfoeth Naturiol a Bwyd
Minister for Natural Resources and Food



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Alun Ffred Jones AM
Chair
Environment and Sustainability
Committee
Ty Hywel
Cardiff Bay CF99 1NA

14 May 2014

**Response to the Environment and Sustainable Development Committee on
Sustainable Land Management – Evidence Gaps Project**

I write following the commitment I gave at the Environment and Sustainability Committee's Inquiry on 1st May to provide further information regarding the Wales Biodiversity Partnership Evidence Gaps project that was recently launched.

The recent State of Nature report highlighted the decline in many of our habitats and species and the lack of data in such areas. Our response had to be a totally new approach that recognises the central importance of our environment to every sphere of our lives.

Last year I published the Environment Bill white paper which set out a package of proposals to establish a statutory framework for the sustainable management of our natural resources. Among these proposals was the requirement for Natural Resources Wales to produce a State of Natural Resources Report. This will assess the current and future state of our natural resources and present the assessment in a way that recognises the fundamental links between social, economic and environmental outcomes. This in turn will underpin the development of our Natural Resource Management policy and our integrated area based approach to the management of our resources. This project will directly support the development of this policy. My officials are currently working with NRW to develop an Information Hub to improve access to, and the sharing of, environmental information across Natural Resources and Food and this will be available to the public, NRW, the public sector and academia. The evidence gaps project directly contributes to the development of this wider evidence agenda.

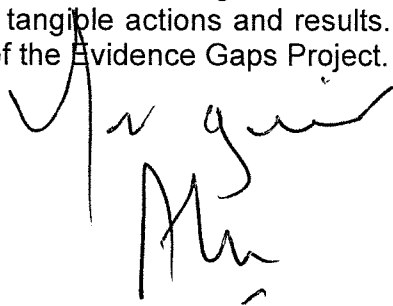
The evidence gaps project will help to ensure that we have a robust evidence base to underpin the development of our Nature Recovery Plan and wider policy development.

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Wedi'i argraffu ar bapur wedi'i ailgylchu (100%)

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Robust evidence and partnership working are essential to deliver our policies and to develop a shared vision and ambition for Wales to lead the way in addressing the threats to our biodiversity whilst ensuring economic and social benefits for our communities. I am determined that rigorous evidence will inform our policy development which in turn will lead to tangible actions and results. I enclose an annex with this letter that provides further detail of the Evidence Gaps Project.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alun Davies', written in a cursive style.

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Y Gweinidog Cyfoeth Naturiol a Bwyd
Minister for Natural Resources and Food

Annex - Further Information on the Wales Biodiversity Partnership Evidence Gaps Project

- The Wales Biodiversity Partnership contributes to the delivery of Global, European and national targets for biodiversity and ecosystems. One of the key roles of the partnership is to identify evidence requirements and build consensus on priorities to inform the development and delivery of biodiversity conservation and the Ecosystem Approach.
- The Sustainable Places Research Institute is about making new connections in sustainability research. It is about finding pragmatic, policy-led locally-based solutions for individual cities, regions and nations.
- The WBP Evidence gaps project engages academics representing universities across Wales.
- This innovative project linking academia, statutory and non-statutory bodies, and the third sector with a common aim, is one of the first of its kind in the UK.
- The overriding objectives of the project are to address the evidence gaps that Welsh Government, the third sector, local authorities and other partners have with regard to biodiversity, the Ecosystem Approach, Sustainable Land Management, Payments for Ecosystem Services and other developing policy areas. It is essential that the developing, complex policy environment moves in concert and that our policies are based on sound science and robust data.
- The aim is to do this by engaging the research community in Wales and further afield in innovative new ways and, where appropriate, by leveraging the existing 'grey' literature and accessing unpublished data in the Universities.
- The recent update to the Research Excellence Framework, (REF), undertaken on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Councils, means that University research is graded in a new manner. Perhaps the most relevant change in this framework is that research that demonstrates an engagement with, and direct influence upon policymaking is graded more highly. This presents a win-win situation for Universities and for Welsh Government, local authorities and the third sector and is a strong driver for greater cooperation and joint working.
- There are limited resources for commissioning research within Welsh Government and the Local Authorities in the current economic climate. However there are a large amount of data and research that is already available but is underutilised in the Universities. Given this, the Ecosystem Groups and Species Expert Groups of the Wales Biodiversity Partnership (themselves coalitions of experts from Welsh Government, Natural Resources Wales, Local Authorities, the third sector, species and habitat experts) have generated a list of the major evidence gaps for thematic areas including Freshwater, Uplands, Grasslands, Heathlands, Woodlands, Invasive

Non-Native Species and Species in general as they pertain to our developing policy areas.

- This list has been examined by the relevant Academics in each field with them indicating where the appropriate leads can be found and engaged for each research gap. They have also identified where evidence gaps can be met with existing data or ongoing research programmes. This will reduce duplication of effort and wasted resources.
- Academic leads, experts and policy makers will then arrange to address remaining gaps, determine what outputs are required, and also determine what data quality is required. This will ensure a far more efficient use of people and research resources and will engender more policy relevant research in future. In addition, Welsh Government and other institutions will offer placements to students or researchers for limited periods to ensure closer working and a better fit between policy requirements and the outputs of research.
- There will be a consistent methodology in place across the sector so that results produced by different institutions or in different areas can be collated effectively and scientifically. This methodology will also clarify exactly what is required before resources are committed to ensure the evidence base is robust and relevant. Links will also be made across the UK to ensure that Wales is effectively engaged and benefits from research in the other areas of Britain. International links will also be explored and utilised as appropriate.
- Initial plans are to hold at least two more workshops, one in Aberystwyth and one in Bangor to address different evidence gap themes. This coming Autumn, Cardiff University will be marketing the evidence gaps to students for their degree, MSc, PhD and postdoc projects, hoping to engage motivated students who want to do relevant and interesting projects that improve their employability and provide meaningful, applied research. The other Universities will follow suit in the next academic year.

Key contacts for this project are Tracey Lovering: (Tracey.Lovering@cyfoethnaturiolcymru.gov.uk) of the Wales Biodiversity Partnership and Professor Mike Bruford of Cardiff University BrufordMW@cardiff.ac.uk