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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref HB/05322/19

National Assembly for Wales Petitions Committee

SeneddPetitions@assembly.wales

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Dear Janet,

Thank you for your letter dated 24 May regarding the Petition P-05-717: *Establish Statutory Public Rights of Access to Land and Water for Recreational and Other Purposes*. You have requested views on the comments made by the petitioners (Waters of Wales) and detail about the Government's intended approach to resolving issues around access to inland waters.

I recognise that both angling and paddle sport recreations deliver important tourism, socio-economic, health and wellbeing benefits for Wales. Access to inland water has long been a contentious issue with both user communities passionately believing that they are in the right, both legally and morally. These highly polarised views have hindered efforts to reduce the conflict between users to date. I believe that access to water now needs to be considered as part of a wider approach, not in isolation. We need to broaden the debate and ask what Wales wants from its inland waters, and the role that access rights have in delivering this.

To try to resolve this stalemate, I have asked the National Access Forum to give particular priority to laying the ground work for greater dialogue on inland waters issues that is needed. I am also seeking specialist advice from Natural Resources Wales, who are the Government's advisers on access matters which will include possible non-legislative approaches. However, I recognise that options may be limited given that we have tried to promote VAAs (Voluntary Access Agreements) before, with little take-up.

I strongly feel that the long term answer needs to come from stakeholders and have encouraged them, through my Written Statement, to find a practical joint solution. I hope that by focussing on what we share, rather than our differences, may help to find solutions and reach some form of consensus.

Should I not be satisfied of reasonable progress within 18 months, I plan to consider future legislation on access to water. However, at this stage I do not have a set view of what any such legislation would look like.

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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.

Waters of Wales raised a number of questions in their letter dated 25 April.

1. Why is the strategy not based on a presumption in favour of access?

Welsh land has the potential to deliver significant benefits for all the people of Wales. In developing a strategy, I am mindful that we must seek to maintain the right balance between different stakeholders.

2. Why is lifting restrictions on access to man-made bodies of water not even to be considered?

Following careful consideration of all the consultation responses, I believe that there are particular safety concerns with allowing water based recreation on man-made bodies of water.

3. How will the representativeness and independence of the 'Access Reform Group' be established and protected?

The Access Reform Group will be comprised of experts in the field and will as part of its remit, be speaking to a number of important stakeholders. Members of the Group will be challenged to work together constructively to achieve progress. They will be expected to sign up to a Terms of Reference, which will require members to take on board others' perspectives and find ways to overcome differences. Following a period of investigation of approximately 18 months, the group will report back to me. Details regarding membership of the Access Reform Group are still being finalised.

4. Why are verbal commitments, reportedly made in meetings around the country, not formally included in the report, to enable measurement of progress against them?

I am unclear what verbal commitments have reportedly been made.

Yours sincerely,



Hannah Blythyn AC/AM

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