

National Assembly for Wales
Environment and Sustainability Committee
NRW 2015 – 27
Natural Resources Wales – Annual Scrutiny 2015
Response from James Robertson

Written Evidence to the Environment and Sustainability Committee – Natural Resources Wales – Annual Scrutiny 2015.

I welcome the opportunity provided by this consultation, and appreciate the important role that the Environment and Sustainability Committee plays in scrutinising the performance of this relatively new Agency.

I would like begin by setting my brief comments on Cyfoeth Naturiol Cymru/Natural Resources Wales in an historic context, in particular with reference to its inherited functions relating to biodiversity. How well does the new organisation advance the vision set out in Command 7122 and the post-war consensus that there should be a place for nature in a civilised society? Is it delivering its functions in relation to the natural environment in a way which augments and updates this vision?

The merger of the Nature Conservancy Council and Countryside Commission in Wales overcame an anomaly in the establishment of countryside and environment agencies, and although there were teething troubles, it provided the opportunity to bring detailed ecological knowledge and executive function together with a greater sense of the public purpose of its environmental functions, and with the enabling role of grant-aid. It also brought the environment closer to the people, and the establishment of the Welsh Assembly enhanced the democratic process for public scrutiny of CCW's work. Despite the bumps along the way, that organisation proved itself in taking forward the original vision for nature in Wales.

The new organisation, which is understandably dominated by EA culture and functions, was supposed to be developing an approach to its work across the board based on ecosystem services, a difficult concept for most people to grasp. What does this mean for its work? What changes can the people of Wales expect to see as a result? So far I have yet to see evidence to answer these questions, or to show that NRW is aware of and taking forward the historic vision of a place for nature in a civilised society. This raises questions of NRW leadership and of Welsh Government oversight. As an example of the former, I was concerned at repeated comments by the Chief Executive emphasising that NRW has no policy role, and is a functionary of Welsh Government. Regarding the latter, I would cite concerns over the practical value of wordy documents like the Nature Recovery Plan, worthy as their aspirations are, and the predictable fiasco of the Nature Fund, which wasted so much Welsh NGO effort.

I am pleased to see some imaginative work being carried out by NRW, for example at Newborough Warren NNR, and in partnerships, such as with NT at Cwm Ivy. I appreciate the extremely difficult financial context, but note that valuable partnership work carried out by NGOs has been suddenly cut, with no consistent approach to the cuts. Former CCW staff admit to feeling unsupported and having to engage with an interminable bureaucracy to get anything done, and many have now left, taking early retirement schemes. This is creating a significant skills imbalance in the organisation. Good environmental decision-making and advice depends on having access to expert knowledge which, once lost, may be hard to restore.

Although I am optimistic that NRW will come good, I thought the Committee should be made aware of these concerns about vision, leadership, oversight, grant-aid and loss of expertise due to staff cuts.

James Robertson

5 April 2015