

Huw Irranca-Davies AS/MS
Y Dirprwy Brif Weinidog ac Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet
dros Newid Hinsawdd a Materion Gwledig
Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for
Climate Change and Rural Affairs



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Your ref P-06-1541
Our ref HIDCC/01687/25

Carolyn Thomas MS
Chair - Petitions committee

24 October 2025

Dear Carolyn,

Thank you very much for your letter dated 6 October on behalf of the Petitions Committee, referring to the 'Save the River Usk' petition which calls for the development of a Clean Water Bill for Wales.

I can confirm that both I, and the Welsh Government are fully committed to continuing to develop and strengthen environmental law in Wales, and we are doing our utmost to respond to this issue. It must be recognised that there is no easy solution, and it will take time before we see positive outcomes from our actions.

However, Welsh Government is currently working on our response to the Independent Water Commission (IWC), which was published in July this year. You will be aware that the Commission's report presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reform the arrangements established prior to devolution in relation to water. The report focused on various matters such as how water companies operate, and the establishment of an independent economic regulator specifically for Wales. Another key element of the report in terms of improving water quality was the need to review the Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) (England and Wales) Regulations 2017. I will be consulting widely on these recommendations to ensure that we have a regulatory framework that addresses the public needs, gives investors' confidence and improves our environment.

The UK Government has indicated that it will publish a White Paper this autumn, and the Welsh Government intends to consult outlining how we plan to respond to the recommendations set out in the report. This will be of significant interest to you as a committee when considering this petition.

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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.

Furthermore, we are already working on the Environment (Principles, Governance and Biodiversity Targets) Bill. This Bill reflects the ongoing need for sustainable and long-term action to deliver the change required to respond to the climate and nature emergencies. The Bill will provide a key step in ensuring that environmental quality and standards do not decline following our departure from the European Union.

The Bill introduces a statutory framework for setting biodiversity targets, giving Welsh Ministers the power to set targets that drive action to halt and reverse biodiversity decline, primarily through increasing native species numbers and improving ecosystem resilience.

As a result of this Bill, Welsh Ministers will be required to set targets on at least one issue within each priority area. The priority areas include reducing pollution, and a target in this area could focus on freshwater health by seeking to reduce excess nutrients, hazardous chemicals, and plastic pollution. The hope is that the Bill will create an ambitious legal framework for biodiversity and water quality targets.

Regulators have an important role to play in terms of water quality, and the work of Natural Resources Wales, particularly in relation to licensing, is a perfect example of this. They will consider how licences will change in the future, especially regarding the range of pollutants that will drive action.

Your letter referred to enforcing the provisions of the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, and I agree that new legislation places a duty on us to act to achieve real change.

However, I disagree with the view that all rivers designated as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) should be tested in accordance with the Bathing Water Quality Regulations. Specialist and targeted programmes have already been designed to tackle pollution in our rivers to ensure they achieve good ecological status.

In terms of working with farmers to encourage food production without creating nutrient runoff, the evidence is clear—although there is variation from catchment to catchment, it must be recognised that a significant proportion of phosphorus pollution in many of our SAC rivers results from rural land use. This is the main contributor of phosphorus in six of our nine SAC rivers, including four of the five SAC rivers that fail to meet phosphorus targets.

I have held a series of Water Summits which provide an opportunity for the Welsh Government, Natural Resources Wales, water companies, the agricultural sector and other stakeholders to work collaboratively to explore and develop approaches to tackle water pollution in Wales. A summit focusing specifically on agriculture was held on 25 September this year to identify practical steps that could be taken to improve water quality, with the agricultural sector leading the way. The next Water Summit, to be held in early 2026, will also focus on agriculture, considering how we can further collaborate with farmers to improve the water quality of our rivers.

A key part of responding to phosphorus pollution is implementing the recommendations arising from the review of the CoAP. I want to build on the collaborative approach we adopted in developing the SFS by establishing a technical task and finish group. This group will consider the findings of the review, including the closed periods.

Looking ahead, it is essential that all relevant stakeholders can contribute to shaping the future of the water environment in Wales. I am very pleased to be able to contribute to the Committee's work, but the wider context must be considered when acting on this petition. We are already responding to the recommendations of the Water Commission, and the Green Paper to be published in the coming weeks will provide further details regarding any legislative changes required.

Thank you very much for writing to me on this particularly important matter, and I hope this response is helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Huw Irranca-Davies', written over a light blue horizontal line.

Huw Irranca-Davies AS/MS

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