

Huw Irranca-Davies MS,
Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs,
Welsh Government,
Pierhead Street,
Cardiff. CF99 1NA.

2nd of September 2024

Dear Huw,

I am writing to provide you with my advice regarding the workings of the Rivers Summits. The issue of water and river quality is a matter of huge concern to the public and one of the issues on which I receive most correspondence. It is clear we need to manage our rivers and waterways in a sustainable way for both current and future generations.

Whilst this advice is specific to the working of the Rivers Summits given their important function, I am committed to making river and water quality a priority for my time in this role and am taking action in other areas. For example, you will be aware I am also working with the Interim Environmental Protection Assessor for Wales on a review to inform how Wales can improve its laws to reduce water pollution and protect our environment and people's health.

In preparing this advice, I employed the services of the Institute of Welsh Affairs (IWA) to benefit from their expertise and objectivity. The IWA team spoke to many of the key stakeholders that attend the Rivers Summits. This has enabled me to provide you with advice and recommendations that enjoy broad support, and in many cases consensus, amongst the relevant organisations.

I enclose the full report which provides further information about the methodology used in preparing this advice as well as full details about the findings and recommendations. The key points in my advice are summarised as follows:

1. Welsh Government must renew commitment to Rivers Summits under the First Minister and a Cabinet Secretary to reinforce their credibility, purpose and urgency. Political leadership, ownership and accountability of tackling river pollution is vital.
2. Welsh Government should restate the key purpose of the Summits, indicating a broader remit, which focuses on river health more broadly, taking into consideration:
 - . Nutrients beyond phosphates (which should remain a consideration as a major polluter), such as nitrates, ammonia as well as soil health;
 - . Include rivers beyond SAC (Special Area of Conservation) rivers (notwithstanding that these should continue to be a priority, merely not an exclusive one);
 - . A focus beyond impact on housebuilding and development;
 - . The need to hold stakeholders to account as well as to turbocharge the delivery of actions.
3. Welsh Government should consider:
 - . Reviewing and renewing the Summits' governance structures



- . Setting up smaller sub-groups of stakeholders to tackle issues in-depth, reporting back to River Summits as the overarching forum.
4. Welsh Government should co-produce a map of stakeholder roles and responsibilities when it comes to tackling river pollution, which will be co-produced at a future Rivers Summit. This should:
 - . State the roles and responsibilities for each stakeholder (including agricultural businesses, water companies, NMBs and regulators), and ownership of actions;
 - . Identify who is funded to deliver what, and how;
 - . Be long-term in focus to provide certainty.
 5. Welsh Government should use the Rivers Summits to clarify the role of Nutrient Management Boards over the long-term. This should aim to establish:
 - . Their long-term remit;
 - . Their responsibility for action and measurement of improvement in water quality in SAC rivers and beyond;
 - . What their long-term funding settlement is.
 6. Future Rivers Summits should expressly focus on putting in place long-term funding arrangements for tackling river pollution.
 7. Future River Summits should place a greater focus on outputs and evidence including:
 - . Data on outputs of investment projects, including from water companies;
 - . Effective monitoring against actions;
 - . Nutrient management readings to analyse improvement or lack thereof;
 - . Producing a clear set of progress indicators to tie in action for the future.
 8. Future Summits should showcase more innovative, nature-based approaches to tackling river pollution and their effectiveness to be rolled out at pace and scale.
 9. Future Summits should focus on the production of a clear action plan for tackling agricultural sources of river pollution including:
 - . Public subsidy regimes for the sector to tackle pollution;
 - . Ring-fenced support for farms to invest in nature-based solutions alongside an education budget to inform best practice. This should encompass clear, practical guidance and support for how farms can use nature based, regenerative farming practices to limit run-off of nutrients, adopt effective slurry storage and to reduce legacy phosphates in soils;
 - . Compliance and enforcement of existing regulations.
 10. Consider appointing an independent Chair for future Rivers Summits.
 11. The Rivers Summits must improve public communication and engagement. The health of rivers and waterways is a matter of considerable public interest, yet the communications from Welsh Government are considered to be poor and opaque. Future Summits should:
 - . Provide a clear list of actions agreed at each Summit;
 - . Provide a greater overview of presentations made;
 - . On contentious areas, co-produce and consult with stakeholders, including members of the public.
 12. Future Rivers Summits should examine the long-term role of citizen science which leads to longer term action on identified trends.

Thank you for the opportunity to present my early findings at the last Rivers Summit at the Royal Welsh Show. As I said at that meeting, I am planning to share this letter and the enclosed report with members of the Rivers Summit as well as publicly in the spirit of openness and transparency, which are values I am committed to honouring in carrying out this role.

Given the necessity to act urgently to protect our rivers and waterways for future generations, I hope you and your team can consider my advice without delay with a view to making changes in time for the next Rivers Summit in the Autumn.

If you require any further information, I would be pleased to provide it.

Yours sincerely,

Derek Walker

Future Generations Commissioner for Wales