

- Croeso pawb. I am pleased to be speaking with you today at the WaterSource conference 2022 which comes at a time of utmost importance. I would like to thank Dwr Cymru for my invitation today and apologise for not being with you in person this morning.
- Water is one of our greatest natural assets but our water sector is facing immediate and unprecedented challenges.

- Wales, along with the rest of the world is facing a nature and climate crisis. Over the next 20 years, Wales faces wetter winters, hotter drier summers, rising sea levels, and more frequent and intense extreme weather events. The need to achieve decarbonisation, climate resilience, and reverse the decline in biodiversity will require innovative solutions, behaviour change, and long-term investment in our water infrastructure.
- The Programme for Government commits Welsh Government to embed our response to the climate and nature emergency in everything we do.

- However, the onus is on all of us to act. A ‘Team Wales’ approach is required to deliver at scale and pace to realise our ambitions for nature and the climate, and we must each understand the role we can play.
- Collaboration was a key theme throughout my recently concluded biodiversity deep dive. I am pleased that our recommendations are guiding the discussion at today’s event and I hope today’s workshops will showcase what successful collaboration looks like.
- The deep dive identified key themes and recommendations to ensure meaningful delivery of the 30 by 30 target. This target aims to protect and effectively manage at least 30% of our land, freshwater and sea for nature by 2030.

- The target is one of several international targets that will be agreed at COP15 later this year. These targets are important, and they define the 'decade of action' needed to achieve our ambitions for nature.
- The key challenge to meeting the target is that protection alone is not enough. There is a need to ensure our protected sites are effectively and equitably managed, are in good condition, connected and resilient to climate change. Partnership working at landscape scale will be integral to delivering our ambitions, both for protected sites and nature recovery more broadly.

- It is crucial that we explore what the blockers and challenges to partnership working are and what actions we can take together to facilitate more effective and timely delivery of solutions.
- Following from the deep dive recommendations, we will be developing a set of specific actions we can take in Wales to ensure their meaningful delivery. One such recommendation was to create a framework to recognise Nature Recovery Exemplar Areas and Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures, which deliver biodiversity outcomes.

- This recommendation encapsulates some of the aims of today's conference. We want to establish a series of Nature Recovery Exemplar Areas. These could be collaborations between public, private, voluntary and community actors, united in a common goal to restore nature in protected areas and the wider landscape.
- The linkages between the protection of our land and water quality present ample opportunities for collaborative partnerships and it is my hope that today's discussions explore those in more detail.
- A place-based approach will enable us to address the challenges of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation. It will also show how the benefits flowing from these ecosystems can be harnessed to sustain this activity for the long term.

- River catchment systems were identified as areas at higher risk of biodiversity loss and are key in linking terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecosystems.
- We need to take an integrated water catchment approach focusing on multi-sector co-operation and nature-based solutions to drive water quality improvements.
- This means that we should pursue an approach that will engage and mobilise local people, businesses, voluntary and public organisations working in our land, freshwater and marine ecosystems.

- Getting our approach to looking after the land which provides our drinking water right, is clearly important. Sustainable water and wastewater services for current and future generations are based on a healthy natural environment and a resilient asset base.
- We must deliver a resilient water and wastewater sector in Wales that is customer and environment focused, integrated, sustainable and resilient, while delivering value to customers and the environment.

- I recognise, as I am sure you do, that rising to the challenge of biodiversity loss is no small task. In addition, the water industry faces challenges in relation to tackling storm overflows and phosphorus in our rivers. Nature based solutions can assist with these efforts to address the challenges and it's important we recognise the interdependencies between action for nature and for the climate.
- Part of this approach is captured under my aim to transform our protected sites series so that it is better, bigger, and more effectively connected. The National Peatland Programme is a great example of nature-based solution working at scale and we invested over £2 million last year alone. It delivers multiple benefits such as carbon capture and downstream flood mitigation while reversing habitat loss.

- While we have long-term ambitions for nature; we need to act now, and collaboration has never been more important. Team Wales must tackle the multiple risks impacting our lakes, rivers and streams and deliver real improvements to the quality of our waterways.
- That's why I have pledged to invest £3.3 million over the next three years in our Local Nature Partnerships so that we can bring organisations, businesses, and communities together to tackle local priorities, including those affecting our waterways. This backs the £900,000 already invested this year.

- Coupled with the Nature Networks Programme, we will build on our existing investment of nearly £15 million to prevent further decline in species and habitat condition, supporting nature recovery and enhancing our capacity to adapt to the climate crisis. Financial resilience, community engagement, and training and inclusivity work are at the heart of the recent round of funding, ensuring we future proof our efforts to protect our nature.

- This transparency, openness and adaptability is exactly the response we need to address the decline of biodiversity and protect one of our greatest natural assets, our water in Wales. I am always impressed by the scale of work going on to respond to the escalating crises for nature and climate and I wish you well today.
Diolch yn fawr.