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Re: Pendine Wildfire, Critical Infrastructure Protection, Rural Crime and Community Resilience

I am writing following a recent public meeting with residents of Pendine and the surrounding area concerning the recent wildfire and the ongoing issues associated with unauthorised camping, fire-setting, environmental damage, and anti-social behaviour in the locality.

The meeting was exceptionally well attended, and the level of concern expressed by residents was profound. The fear in the room was palpable. Over 20 residents spoke of being genuinely frightened for their safety, their homes, their livelihoods and the future of the local environment. While the cause of the recent fire remains a matter for the appropriate authorities to determine, residents noted that campfires had been lit in the area by individuals camping there around the time of the incident. There is a widespread concern within the community that, without intervention, a similar or even more serious incident could occur again. Concerns regarding unauthorised camping, campfires, repeated fires, damage to infrastructure and public safety risks have been discussed in local reports and community meetings.

Of particular concern is the fact that the fire threatened far more than countryside and vegetation. Critical infrastructure in the area is also vulnerable, including water supply assets and electrical infrastructure that serve not only Pendine but wider communities. Local assessments have identified the potential risk to pumping station infrastructure and utility access in the event of a larger wildfire.

Had weather conditions differed, or had local intervention not prevented further escalation, there is a genuine concern that essential services could have been disrupted for multiple communities. Such consequences would extend well beyond environmental damage, potentially affecting water supplies,

electricity networks, public safety, emergency response capability and community resilience. The prospect of losing essential services created considerable anxiety amongst residents and contributed significantly to the fear expressed at the public meeting.

The recent events therefore raise a number of important questions which I believe warrant consideration by the Welsh Government.

Firstly, I would welcome scrutiny of the emergency powers available to local authorities and other public bodies where repeated fire-setting, unlawful occupation of land, rural crime or other activity places public safety, critical infrastructure or protected environmental sites at risk. Residents have asked whether the current powers available to authorities enable sufficiently rapid and effective intervention when warning signs are repeatedly identified before a serious incident occurs.

Secondly, there is a clear need to strengthen the protection of critical utilities and environmentally sensitive sites, including Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). These incidents do not merely threaten habitats and wildlife; they can also threaten infrastructure upon which communities depend. Local reports have specifically identified the risks posed to utility infrastructure and sensitive habitats by repeated incidents of fire-setting and associated behaviour.

Thirdly, I believe consideration should be given to the financial burden currently placed upon community councils. Small community councils often find themselves at the forefront of responding to issues that have regional or even national significance, despite having limited resources. It cannot be right that local taxpayers alone should bear the costs associated with protecting critical infrastructure, environmentally protected land and public safety where the consequences of failure extend far beyond individual communities.

Fourthly, I believe there is a strong case for the development of a formal multi-agency rural crime and resilience framework for Wales. Local reports have already highlighted the importance of coordinated action involving Natural Resources Wales, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water, local authorities, the Fire and Rescue Service, Police and community representatives. A national framework could assist in ensuring that intelligence, enforcement, prevention measures and emergency planning are coordinated effectively across Wales, particularly in rural areas where similar issues are emerging.

Finally, I would welcome your views on whether the current legislative framework adequately reflects the seriousness of deliberate or reckless actions that place critical utility infrastructure at risk.

I fully appreciate that the legal definition of terrorism is a reserved matter and is determined by legislation enacted by the UK Parliament. However, residents repeatedly described the fear and insecurity they experienced as a result of the recent events. Many felt terrorised by the prospect that essential services, public safety and local livelihoods could be placed in jeopardy through the actions of a small number of individuals.

While not every act of deliberate fire-setting would fall within the legal definition of terrorism, there is nevertheless a legitimate public policy question as to whether deliberate actions that knowingly threaten water supplies, electricity networks, emergency access, public safety and critical infrastructure should attract enhanced sanctions and enable stronger emergency interventions. Where actions create widespread fear, threaten essential services and undermine the resilience of entire communities, there is a compelling argument that Government should review whether existing powers are sufficient and whether additional measures may be required to protect vulnerable rural communities.

I would therefore be grateful if you could outline what consideration the Welsh Government is giving to:

1. The adequacy of local authority emergency powers in response to repeated rural fire risks.
2. The protection of critical rural utility infrastructure and SSSI-designated land.
3. Financial support for community councils facing disproportionate costs arising from such incidents.
4. The establishment of a Wales-wide multi-agency rural crime and resilience framework.
5. Whether the Welsh Government intends to engage with the UK Government on the question of enhanced legal protections and emergency powers where deliberate actions threaten critical infrastructure and essential public services.

I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Gareth Beer MS

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