

11 June 2024

Dear

ATISN 19583 Agendas and minutes of five meetings between the then-Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd and Natural Resources Wales

Information requested

Thank you for your request which I received on 15 May 2024. You asked for:

Agendas and minutes for meetings between the then-Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd and Natural Resources Wales held on:

- 12 October 2023
- 15 November 2023
- 7 December 2023
- 8 February 2024
- 22 February 2024

Our response

A copy of the information I have decided to release is enclosed at Annex B.

I have decided that some of the information is exempt from disclosure under s.40 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 as it constitutes personal information and is therefore withheld. The reasons for applying these exemptions are set out in full at Annex A to this letter.

Next steps

If you are dissatisfied with the Welsh Government's handling of your request, you can ask for an internal review within 40 working days of the date of this response. Requests for an internal review should be addressed to the Welsh Government's Freedom of Information Officer at: Information Rights Unit, Welsh Government, Cathays Park, Cardiff, CF10 3NQ or Email: Freedom.ofinformation@gov.wales

Please remember to quote the ATISN reference number above.

You also have the right to complain to the Information Commissioner. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at:

Information Commissioner's Office,
Wycliffe House,
Water Lane,
Wilmslow,
Cheshire,
SK9 5AF

However, please note that the Commissioner will not normally investigate a complaint until it has been through our own internal review process.

Yours sincerely

Annex A: Engagement of S40(2) – Personal Data

The Welsh Government believes the personal data contained in the information being released with this request should be exempt from disclosure

Section 40(2) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA), together with the conditions in section 40(3)(a)(i) or 40(3)(b), provides an absolute exemption if disclosure of the personal data would breach any of the data protection principles.

'Personal data' is defined in sections 3(2) and (3) of the Data Protection Act 2018 ('the DPA 2018') and means any information relating to an identified or identifiable living individual. An identifiable living individual is one who can be identified, directly or indirectly, in particular by reference to an identifier such as a name, an identification number, location data, an online identifier or to one or more factors specific to the physical, physiological, genetic, mental, economic, cultural or social identity of the individual.

We have concluded that, in this instance, some of the information contained within the meeting minutes caught by your request contains third party personal data. Specifically, this relates to confirmation of meeting attendees within the minutes containing the name of officials (both Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales) and their job title – both of which could be used to identify the individuals concerned.

Under Section 40(2) of the FOIA, personal data is exempt from release if disclosure would breach one of the data protection principles set out in Article 5 of the UK GDPR. We consider the principle being most relevant in this instance as being the first. This states that personal data must be:

“processed lawfully, fairly and in a transparent manner in relation to the data subject”

The lawful basis that is most relevant in relation to a request for information under the FOIA is Article 6(1)(f) of the UK GDPR. This states:

“processing is necessary for the purposes of the legitimate interests pursued by the controller or by a third party except where such interests are overridden by the interests or fundamental rights and freedoms of the data subject which require protection of personal data, in particular where the data subject is a child”.

In considering the application of Article 6(1)(f) in the context of a request for information under FOIA it is necessary to consider the following three-part test:

1. The Legitimate interest test: Whether a legitimate interest is being pursued in the request for information;
2. The Necessity test: Whether disclosure of the information/confirmation or denial that it is held is necessary to meet the legitimate interest in question;
3. The Balancing test: Whether the above interests override the interests, fundamental rights and freedoms of the data subject.

Our consideration of these tests is set out below:

1. Legitimate Interest Test

The Welsh Government recognises there is a legitimate interest in being able to identify the parties involved in any meeting in order to follow the flow of that meeting and to understand the views and positions expressed by each party. We do not believe, however, there is any legitimate reason why the personal data would need to be released in order to follow and understand the views expressed during those meetings. The views expressed in the meetings are those of the respective organisations rather than those of the individuals concerned. As such it is irrelevant as to who made those comments. The Welsh Government cannot identify any other legitimate interest in you or the public receiving the personal data captured by your request.

2. Is disclosure necessary?

The Welsh Government is of the view that it is not necessary to disclose the personal information caught by your request. It is straight forward, even when withholding the personal data, to follow the discussions and to identify the views expressed by each organisation. As such we do not believe it is necessary to disclose the personal data to allow the conversations to be followed.

Nor do we believe it is necessary to disclose the personal data in order to allow members of the public to contribute to this, or future discussions on this or any other matter. There are mechanisms by which the public can contact the relevant policy areas, such as generic mailboxes, public consultations, or writing to a Minister, etc.

3. The Balancing Test

As it has been concluded that there is no necessity to disclose the personal data of another individual, the fundamental rights and freedoms of the affected third party prevail in this instance and releasing the information cannot be justified under Article 6(1)(f).

Conclusion

To conclude, as release of the information would not be legitimate under Article 6(1)(f), and as no other condition of Article 6 is deemed to apply, release of the information would not be lawful within the meaning of the first data protection principle. It has therefore been withheld under section 40 of the Freedom of Information Act. Section 40 is an absolute exemption and not subject to the public interest test.

Annex B

Agendas for meetings

1. Agenda for: 12/10/2023 – “Meeting with NRW”
 1. Introduction
 2. Overview
 3. Communications and Engagement
 4. Evidence Gathering
 5. Natural Beauty Mapping
 6. Recent meeting with WG Planning & Renewable Energy – key points
 7. Questions

2. Agenda for: - 15/11/2023 – “Meeting with NRW”
 1. Summary of recent activity and forthcoming engagement activity.
 2. Synopsis of early responses to the questionnaire with some statistics.
 3. Key themes and emerging issues
 4. Questions / Discussion

3. Agenda for: - 07/12/2023 – “Meeting with NRW”
 1. Introduction
 2. Engagement Period
 3. Evidence Gathering
 4. Overview & Next steps
 5. Questions

4. Agenda for: 08/02/2024 - "NRW"
 1. Introduction
 2. Engagement Phase and Report
 3. Evidence gathering: Forces for Change and Management Options
 4. Next steps and General Overview
 5. Questions

5. Agenda for: 22/02/2024 - "NRW representatives, following cancelled visit"

N/a. There was no official agenda for this meeting as it was rearranged at short notice following the cancellation of a planned visit. The visit agenda was:

12:00: arrival and introductions, refreshments
12:05: Informal briefing and discussion
12:45: Depart

Minutes of Meetings:

1. Minutes of Meeting: 12/10/2023 – “Meeting with NRW”

Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd’s Fifth Bi-monthly meeting with NRW to discuss progress on the new National Park designation in NE Wales

09:45 – 10:30, Thursday 12 October 2023 (MS Teams)

Meeting note

Attendees:

Natural Resources Wales

[six NRW officials]

Welsh Government

- Lesley Griffiths MS, Minister for RANWT

[five WG officials]

Further detail is provided in the Powerpoint presentation appended to these minutes.

1. The Minister welcomed attendees to the meeting.

Overview

2. NRW gave an update on progress, touching on key developments, milestones and timelines. The designation process remains on target and on budget. Several key points emerging from the previous meeting in August were addressed:

- NRW has entered the engagement period of the process and a number of public events have been arranged.
- The special qualities assessment is close to completion; NRW is arranging extra online workshops for those who were unable to attend initial sessions. The contractor will be preparing a report by the end of October. Land Use Consultants (LUC) have been commissioned to undertake the Forces for Change work.
- At present, NRW consider the main risks to the timely completion of the designation process are an objection from one of the constituent local authorities, lack of clarity on the transitional arrangement and funding for the new National Park, and the necessary extension of the grant to NRW to complete the formal designation work. MRANWT explained that it isn’t possible to provide financial assurances at present while budgets are still under discussion.

Communications and Engagement

3. Initial engagement with affected Local Authorities is complete and a series of engagement events during which the Area of Search map would be shared with the public have begun. NRW has issued a press release promoting the events, released a questionnaire, updated the designation website and has embarked on a social media campaign to raise awareness. A total of twelve events (seven webinars and five drop-in events) will be held during this engagement process.

4. A meeting with elected representatives was held on 9 October and although turnout was disappointing (11 attendees, although the event had clashed with the

Labour Conference) the conversations had been constructive as well as challenging. One participant queried why existing Eryri designation could not simply be extended. The first of the public engagement events had taken place in Glyn Ceiriog the previous day and was well attended (72 present). Similar themes had been raised as in the elected representatives meeting, as well as more local issues such as off-roading and access (e.g. maintenance of paths, signage etc.). Robust conversations were held with farmers from the upper Ceiriog valley.

5. Action: The Minister suggested that NRW provide an update to Members of the Senedd (primarily those based in north Wales) towards the middle of the engagement period – potentially an online presentation.

6. It was agreed (action) an additional meeting between the Minister and NRW would be held during the engagement period (*action completed - the meeting will take place on 15 November*).

Evidence Gathering

7. There are two elements to the evidence gathering: natural beauty and opportunities for outdoor recreation. These will be framed in the context of Welsh legislation. This phase will be key to identifying the benefits of designation, focussing on the wellbeing of communities as well as the environment.

8. NRW has awarded a contract to LUC for an analysis of the forces for change and management options for the new National Park. This will be assessed against the impact on the special qualities of the area in question.

Welsh Natural Beauty Mapping

9. A short update was provided; the project was on target. The mapping work is identifying options for possible future interventions, including on a landscape scale. There are four main themes: natural beauty; nature recovery; resilience to climate change; and well-being. The technical advice group is scoping evidence in relation to the identified themes.

Recent meeting with WG Planning & Renewable Energy – key points

10. The meeting had highlighted two areas which have been prevalent in conversations with Local Authorities, namely the viability of existing and future planning services were an additional Planning Authority to be created, and the importance of early identification of transitional arrangements which would help give the LAs clarity on funding and other issues. Those arrangements will be analysed by NRW earlier in the process than would normally be the case and they will maintain a dialogue with LAs in identifying a way forward.

Questions

11. The Minister thanked NRW and asked the following questions:

- *Enquired as to whether Ken Skates MS had attended the meeting with elected representatives.* He had not, and the Minister would speak to him, recognising the importance of keeping him informed.

- *Asked whether press coverage had been positive or negative.* NRW noted that the press had largely adopted a factual, neutral tone, including clarifying that the map which has been made public is an area of search rather than the final boundary.
- *Asked whether there was anything NRW needed from WG following the meeting with Planning colleagues.* NRW is developing a workplan to address the issues raised, working closely with Renewable Energy leads as well as Planning.

12. The Minister thanked NRW for the update and closed the meeting.

2. Minutes of: 15/11/2023 – “Meeting with NRW”

Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd’s requested update meeting with NRW to discuss progress on the new National Park designation in NE Wales

11:00 – 11:30, Wednesday 15th November (MS Teams)

Meeting note

Attendees:

Natural Resources Wales

[Four NRW officials]

Welsh Government

- Lesley Griffiths MS, Minister for RANWT

[Five WG officials]

Meeting commenced at 11:00

1. The Minister welcomed attendees to the meeting.

Update on engagement period

2. NRW gave an update on their progress focusing on activities arising since the group’s previous session.
3. [NRW official] provided an update of recent engagement and forthcoming activity, an analysis of questionnaire responses, response themes and emerging issues arising during the period of engagement; details of which can be found in the attached presentation.

Further detail is provided in the Powerpoint presentation appended to these minutes.

Discussion regarding the update

4. The group discussed the summarised feedback themes, which were largely as expected but also included some more unexpected concerns (e.g. illegal off- roading).
5. The theme of *mistrust of officialdom and resistance to change* was discussed. [NRW official] highlighted a general misunderstanding of the process involved, governance structures for NPAs and the roles of Welsh Ministers, Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales. There was also a perceived divide between north and south Wales, with some seeing the new National Park as an imposition from policy makers from outside the area.
6. [NRW official] highlighted that the next steps, after the engagement period closes, are to identify the opportunities, benefits and issues raised with NRW and produce guidance on some issues that have been less well understood by participants, such as planning controls and access rights within National Parks. It was noted many issues raised so far, including over-tourism, could be managed more effectively in an integrated way by a NPA (rather than on an issue or reactive basis).
7. MRANWT asked whether the information gathered within NRW’s engagement phase will help the process go forward? [NRW official] explained how he thought the

process had been invaluable to establish and capture a clear narrative of benefits and concerns for individual and stakeholder groups, which may otherwise present a risk to the process. He outlined the key themes from Local Authority stakeholders centred around planning, governance interface between authorities and sustainable funding for a new NPA.

8. To mediate these concerns NRW are utilising their MOU with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) to identify and find working solutions to the issues raised. He outlined the need to work very closely with officials within DLCA and Welsh Government, with and alongside the WLGA.

9. Although concerns have been raised, the majority of feedback has been positive and welcoming towards the proposed National Park. [NRW official] explained that general support for the Park remains strong and when reasonable processes or mitigations are suggested, they are well received.

10. MRANWT queried whether NRW would have predicted this distribution of supporters and opponents for the Park? [NRW official] explained his thoughts on how the responses may be skewed as it is more likely for people with strong concerns or issues to raise them with NRW in their engagement sessions. Stakeholders who feel a general support for the Park may not engage directly at this point – but even with this in mind the majority of people who have spoken with NRW are positive or at least open minded to learn more.

11. [NRW official] highlighted the pronounced support from within the environment sector, who envisage the Park's creation as an opportunity to contribute towards the UK's international commitments to protect 30% of land and sea by 2030 – in a way which works with local communities and farmers.

12. MRANWT asked about the farming community's feedback. [NRW official] explained concerns raised on how the WG will deliver the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS). It is a time of uncertainty following the UK's EU exit, the development and future implementation of the SFS. Further engagement is needed with the farming community. [NRW official] outlined Eryri's engagement team, which has been very successful in bridging the authority with local farmers, landowners, and land managers. He highlighted it would be beneficial to replicate Eryri's grass roots approach.

13. [NRW official] explained feedback from the Corporate Joint Committee in North Wales has identified potential solutions to traffic management issues. The emerging Regional Transport Strategy will help to identify, mitigate and manage recreational traffic pressures. NRW will continue to engage with the committee going forward.

14. [NRW official] explained that at the next meeting with MRANWT NRW would be able to provide further updates on the latter stages of the engagement process. Collation and analysis of the engagement stage would begin in December and run into January.

15. [NRW official] flagged with the group the BBC's plans to run a significant article on the new NP, which is due to be published on Monday 20th November. A link is provided [here](#).

16. The group discussed the planned MS engagement event on the 24th November. MRANWT confirmed she would give an introduction to the event and would be in attendance.

17. **MRANWT thanked all participants and the meeting closed at 11:30.**

3.Minutes of: 07/12/2023 – “Meeting with NRW”

Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd’s Sixth Bi-monthly meeting with NRW to discuss progress on the new National Park designation in NE Wales

16:15 – 16:45, Thursday 7 December 2023 (MS Teams)

Meeting note

Attendees:

Natural Resources Wales

[Six NRW officials]

Welsh Government

- Lesley Griffiths MS, Minister for RANWT

[Five WG officials]

Further detail is provided in the Powerpoint presentation appended to these minutes.

1. The Minister welcomed attendees to the meeting and thanked them for their flexibility in attending at the rearranged time.
2. Minutes of the previous meeting:
 - Action 1: The Minister’s additional update session during the engagement period had taken place on 15 November.
 - Action 2: This action surrounded legal considerations of the size requirements of a National Park. Discussions would need to take place between NRW and WG lawyers and this would be discussed in more detail during NRW’s weekly update with WG officials the following day.
 - Action 3: The continuing requirement for a letter of comfort or budget assurance for NRW for the programme to continue beyond March 2025 was noted.

Engagement Period

3. NRW gave a detailed update on attendance at in-person and virtual engagement events both for the public and stakeholders. Over 700 people had attended these events, and around 1,000 people had filled in a questionnaire, including 170 handwritten responses which NRW expected to compile by the end of the week. NRW would now be analysing the information gathered and summarising it in an engagement summary report. The report would be shared with key stakeholders and published on the designation website in early 2024.

4. NRW were pleased with attendance figures and the volume of questionnaire responses, observing that the response had been significantly greater than in engagement on the extension of the Clwydian Range AONB to include the Dee Valley completed in 2011.

Evidence Gathering

5. NRW is compiling and has commissioned four critical pieces of evidence which will inform the next stages of the designation process:

- 1) Analysis of the engagement response – as indicated at paragraph 3 above
- 2) Special Qualities – Two workshops had taken place in September to help refine the ‘Special Landscape Qualities’ of the Area of Search. This had been facilitated by the appointed contractor [named individual] of ‘Cragattack’. A wide cross section of participation had been achieved, including all five affected Local Authorities (LAs), CR&DV AONB, farmers’ union representatives, recreational groups, landscape specialists, a geologist and community council representatives. These events had helped inform the ‘Special Landscape Qualities’ report which had since been completed and which had identified six qualities – as detailed in the attached presentation.
- 3) Forces for Change, and 4) Management Options – the programme had procured Land Use Consultants to deliver assessments on the ‘Forces for Change’ and ‘Management Options’ elements of the designation process. Contractual arrangements had been finalised and an inception meeting had taken place in early October. An online workshop with stakeholders had taken place the previous day. Another workshop, concentrating on Forces for Change as well as a general briefing on the designation process, will take place with WG officials from relevant policy areas in January 2024.

Overview and Next Steps

6. Overall, the designation process remains on target.
7. Procurement for the next contract, exploring supplier capability and capacity for the ‘Evaluation Areas and Candidate Areas’ assessments is underway with the chosen contractor due to start work around April 2024.
8. At the midway point of this Financial Year the programme team had spent approx. 40% of its annual budget – which was as anticipated.
9. There would need to be clarity on the transition and funding arrangements by the time of the formal presentation of NRW’s proposal in late 2025, as this would be key to Local Authorities’ decision on whether to oppose the designation or not.
10. NRW informed the Minister of the outcome of a motion presented to the Powys County Council full meeting earlier that afternoon by the leader of the Plaid Cymru Group. 34 Councillors had voted in favour of the motion to formally oppose the inclusion of areas of Powys within the new NP area, four had voted against and there had been 16 abstentions. This was a clear indication of the degree of opposition in Powys CC, which had already been identified as the biggest current risk in terms of opposition to the proposal. The Minister noted the information.
11. The meeting with MSs due to take place on 24 November had been postponed due to urgent Ministerial meetings. **Action: The Minister suggested that the meeting be rearranged to take place on a Friday in early January. Given the news from Powys, the Minister recommended that Jane Dodds MS be invited to the meeting.**

12. It was agreed **(action)** that an update be provided to the First Minister following the session with MSs, and this could be achieved by inviting him to a future bimonthly meeting.

4. Minutes of: - 08/02/2024 – “NRW”

Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd’s Seventh Bi-monthly meeting with NRW to discuss progress on the new National Park designation in NE Wales

13:30 – 14:00, Thursday 8 February 2024 (MS Teams)

Meeting note

Attendees:

Natural Resources Wales

[Seven NRW officials]

Welsh Government

• Lesley Griffiths MS, Minister for RANWT

[Seven WG officials]

Further detail is provided in the presentation appended to these minutes.

1. The Minister welcomed attendees to the meeting.
2. Minutes of the previous meeting:
 - Action 1: The update to MSs had taken place on 19 January.
 - Action 2: The update to the FM had been scheduled to take place at Loggerheads Country Park on 22 February. NRW is discussing the arrangements with officials.
 - Action 3: NRW and WG lawyers are continuing to discuss the sharing of NRW’s legal advice on the minimum size requirement of a new National Park. It is hoped a Common Interest Privilege agreement can be used to share the advice.
 - Action 4: The continuing requirement for a letter of comfort or budget assurance for NRW for the programme to continue beyond March 2025 was noted.

Engagement Period

3. NRW gave a detailed update on the findings of engagement responses (as per slides 4-7 in the attached presentation) following completion of their coding in January; the majority of which had been positive. 75% of respondents had provided their e-mails addresses, providing NRW with an extensive mailing list with which to share further information on the designation process. NRW is working on the engagement report, which is due to be completed in March and disseminated to LAs, on the designation website and via the mailing list and social media.
4. NRW is arranging technical and senior advisory groups with Local Authorities, ensuring they are well engaged in the designation process and to mitigate the risks of instances such as the Powys motion on the proposed National Park boundary.

Evidence Gathering

5. NRW had provided an online briefing and workshop for WG colleagues on 17 January which was attended by over 70 colleagues. The briefing had raised awareness and understanding of the designation process among WG staff as well as

an understanding of respective roles. The workshop focussed on the **Forces for Change** and afforded an opportunity for NRW to engage with officials from a variety of policy areas, including three key policy areas, namely:

- planning (land use planning, interface with an NPA with planning powers and the capacity of the planning services of existing Local Authorities);
- opportunities for renewable energy within a new National Park; and
- the interface between a new National Park Authority and the delivery of wider public services – e.g. governance and funding arrangements.

A dialogue would be maintained with those policy areas in the coming weeks and months to discuss those areas in greater detail.

6. Land Use Consultants will analyse the different options coming out of the Forces for Change work to identify **management options** for the running of a potential new National Park Authority which NRW will themselves analyse before presenting their own options.

7. The **evaluation and candidate area specification** work will involve a detailed technical assessment of natural beauty within the Area of Search. These will form the building blocks for the designation. The contract to deliver that evidence base would go out to tender the following week.

8. NRW is required to conduct **Impact Assessments** to ensure all voices are heard at each stage in the designation process. Health Impact Assessments are currently voluntary but are the subject of current consultation (due to end 29 March). Strategic environmental assessments and habitat assessments will also inform decisions at relevant stages. All evidence will be considered in the context of the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources.

Overview and Next Steps

9. All milestones for financial year 2023-24 have been completed or (in the case of the Forces for Change and Management Options milestones) are on track to be completed by the end of March. It is anticipated NRW will spend its budget allocation for the designation work in 2023-24 in full.

10. NRW outlined a potential public inquiry, extension of its grant for the designation programme to include 2025-26 and transition and funding arrangements for the new National Park Authority as the main risks at present.

11. Action: MRANWT asked NRW to share the infographic on the designation process with the FM during his visit to Loggerheads Country Park on 22 February. She also noted the need to provide more clarity to LAs on funding arrangements for the new NPA by the consultation phase and asked that this also be raised with the FM.

Questions

12. MRANWT asked whether there had been subsequent questions from MSs following the update session on 19 January, to which NRW replied there had not.

MRANWT agreed with NRW's suggestion that similar, periodic sessions be held with MSs at appropriate stages during the designation process.

13. MRANWT was pleased at the engagement with WG policy leads held on 17 January and NRW agreed it had been very constructive. As well as the aforementioned three key policy areas, there had been valuable contributions on CJs (e.g. regional transport strategies), benefits to communities and considerations surrounding culture, heritage and the Welsh language; all of which would be made central to the contextual analysis.

5.Minutes of: - 22/02/2024 – “NRW representatives, following cancelled visit”

First Minister and Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd's update meeting with NRW to discuss progress on the new National Park designation in NE Wales

12:00 – 12:45, Thursday 22 February 2024 (MS Teams)

Meeting note

Attendees:

Natural Resources Wales

[Three NRW officials]

Welsh Government

- Mark Drakeford MS, First Minister
- Lesley Griffiths MS, Minister for RANWT

[Six WG officials]

Further detail is provided in the presentation appended to these minutes.

1. The First Minister welcomed attendees to the meeting and thanked them for agreeing to meet via MS Teams (the intended visit to Loggerheads Country Park had been cancelled).
2. [NRW official], sent her apologies.

Progress and Next Steps

3. [NRW official] discussed the **Area of Search**, explaining this is not a boundary for the new National Park but rather a framework to inform the gathering of evidence before the boundary is refined. It is based on LANDMAP evidence and gives a steer on natural beauty: for example, the Berwyn and Vyrnwy areas are marked blue, indicating that the areas are of outstanding natural beauty (explaining why parts of Powys are included in the Area of Search). The Area of Search does not include the Pre-assessed Areas for Renewable Energy (which had not met the assessment criteria), which had been discussed earlier in the designation process.
4. NRW completed the mapping of the initial Area of Search in Summer 2023 and the more detailed evidence gathering and evaluation stages are well underway.
5. This has three key stages – to establish the Special Landscape Qualities of the new National Park (complete), to determine the Forces for Change affecting the landscape; and, to examine the most appropriate Management Options to manage the new Park. Two workshops had taken place in September to help refine the '**Special Landscape Qualities**' of the Area of Search. A wide cross section of participation was achieved, including all five affected Local Authorities (LAs) and CR&DV AONB. These helped inform the 'Special Landscape Qualities' report which is providing the baseline for other evidence gathering.
6. The '**Forces for Change**' are the economic, environmental, social and cultural trends that could affect the Special Qualities of the area. NRW has procured Land Use

Consultants (LUC) to deliver assessments on the Forces for Change and Management Options elements of the designation procedure. NRW and LUC hosted a briefing and workshop with WG colleagues on 17 January which was attended by over 70 colleagues. This updated a wide range of policy teams on progress to date and the timetable for the remaining process; the workshop focussed on the Forces for Change. DLCA officials and NRW would maintain a dialogue with those colleagues over the coming weeks and months to discuss some specific aspects of the designation in more detail. The FM considered the Welsh Government to be a Force for Change in itself, given the new National Park was a Programme for Government commitment. [NRW official] confirmed that this was reflected in the Forces for Change report.

7. Analysis of the **management options** for the new National Park is progressing well and will be complete by the end of the financial year, including options on how the new National Park's planning functions could work.

8. During the next financial year NRW will undertake a detailed assessment of natural beauty and recreational opportunities to ascertain which areas within the Area of Search will meet the key designation criteria, following which a draft boundary will be finalised prior to formal consultation.

9. **Impact Assessments** are adding to the evidence gathering and are being developed in the context of Welsh legislation (e.g. WFG Act) and SMNR principles. This phase will also capture the benefits of the new National Park, not only to the local area but more widely.

Engagement

10. NRW gave a detailed update on the findings of engagement responses (as per slides 6-9 in the attached presentation) following completion of their coding in January. Views were polarised with a slight majority positive. 75% of respondents had provided their e-mail addresses, providing NRW with an extensive mailing list with which to share further information on the designation process. NRW is working on the engagement report, which is due to be completed in March and disseminated to LAs, on the designation website and via the mailing list and social media.

11. NRW is arranging technical and senior advisory groups with Local Authorities, ensuring they are well engaged in the designation process and to mitigate the risks of instances such as the Powys motion on the proposed National Park boundary.

Key challenges and risks

12. NRW indicated some of the challenges and risks are contextual, e.g. the cost of living and the future of public services. They stressed the need to provide as much certainty as possible on the interface between the National Park and the services provided by the LAs, particularly in relation to planning. Clarity and certainty would also be needed on the transitional arrangements between the AONB and National Park. Other challenges/risks identified include calls for more certainty on SFS, and the inter-relationship of National Park status with the development of renewable energy.

13. Confirmation of NRW's budget for the final year of the designation process was also highlighted as a risk. The FM explained it was not possible to give assurances on the budget for 2025-26 at this stage but **(Action:) was keen that a letter of comfort be provided to NRW.**

Next Steps

14. Work on the management options will be complete by the end of March and the evaluation and candidate areas work will begin in April.

15. Issues raised during the engagement phase are being addressed. For example, the engagement report due to be completed in March will enable NRW to prepare robust answers on issues raised; ensuring LAs are fully invested in the process going forward will mitigate the risk of a public inquiry; and NRW will reach out to all areas of society during its consultation phase in the autumn (including young people, who were underrepresented in last year's engagement phase).

Questions

16. MRANWT was pleased with progress made to complete the programme during this Senedd term. She highlighted the importance of maintaining a dialogue with policy leads in relevant areas and drew attention to an enthusiastic letter received from Hirwaun Primary School supporting a new National Park.

17. The FM indicated he would have expected some concerns to be raised during the engagement phase and therefore felt that a majority in favour of the new National Park was very encouraging; and that majority would be increased following additional engagement with young people.

18. Action: The FM emphasised the importance of officials across Welsh Government engaging fully in relevant aspects of the designation process and would discuss it with the Perm Sec.

19. The FM highlighted the importance of regular engagement with the LAs.

20. The FM felt that the approach to funding the new National Park might need to be different to the previous model. Rather than look at how much funding the new National Park would need and then identifying that funding, it may be necessary to identify the funding available and then consider what can be achieved with that amount; potentially adding to it incrementally over time.

21. Action: NRW had intended to provide the FM and MRANWT with information packs during the visit to Loggerheads. These would be forwarded to them.