Wales Climate Change and Resilience Summit – wildfires

22 October 2026

Agenda Item 4 – Immediate causes of wildfire, human behaviour and health issues

Preventing actions that ignite wildfires in Wales

This paper sets out key points to support discussion under agenda item 4 and consider how the actions that ignite wildfires in Wales can be prevented and how health impacts can be kept to a minimum when fires do occur. Attendees are invited to reflect on the issues raised and identify practical, deliverable actions to take forward after the Summit. In doing so, attendees are encouraged to build on existing activity, partnerships and good practice across Wales and beyond, helping to avoid duplication and support a coordinated approach.

Wildfires impact people's health and wellbeing in many ways, beyond the immediate **threat to life**. The smoke can exacerbate **respiratory conditions**, deter people from ventilating their properties, cause widespread worry and worsen people's **mental health**. Damage to property and livestock can impact people's **livelihoods**, which in turn can have impacts on their long-term physical and mental health. There are also potential health risks associated with **drinking water quality** following wildfires, particularly for communities that rely on private water supplies. And when a fire has occurred once, it is reasonable for people to worry about whether it could happen again and be worse the next time.

Almost all wildfires, excepting only a very small number started by lightning, are ignited as a result of human action (e.g. malicious ignition, or lawful burning by landowners spreading out of control) or negligence (e.g. careless disposal of smokers' materials or barbecue fuel). **This means that almost all wildfires – and their impacts on people and nature – are avoidable.**

The risks of negligent ignition increase markedly during the peak season for tourism and outdoor recreation, including this summer's heatwaves.

Measures to raise public awareness and promote behaviour change

Attendees are invited to consider how, between us, we can best raise public awareness of:

i. the impacts of wildfires on the lives of people and animals (establishing it as a 'One Health' issue), and
ii. the activities that risk starting wildfires; and promoting and supporting behaviour change.

As part of this, attendees are invited to consider what wider role education and communication could play to reach a younger audience in addition to seasonal campaigns. In particular, attendees' views are sought on the effectiveness of current **youth intervention schemes and engagement with schools**, and where a multi-agency approach could complement and strengthen outcomes.

Attendees are invited to consider the possibility of **multi-agency prevention campaigns ahead of next spring/summer that involve behaviour change**

approaches, potentially aligned with related work being taken forward by the UK Government.

Now that many Welsh communities and landowners have had widespread recent experience of wildfires on their land and near their homes, affecting their lives, attendees are invited to consider whether and how we should **make use of that lived experience to reinforce our public-facing messaging**.

Regulation of high-risk activities

In August of this year, the UK Government announced a ban (which remains in force) on the sale of disposable barbecues, as a means of reducing the risk of wildfires starting accidentally or through negligence. That and similar consumer protection and sale of goods measures are not devolved; however, it could be possible to **regulate, restrict or prohibit high-risk activities in high-risk areas** in Wales. This has been an approach that has long been adopted in other countries such as Canada, where "fire bans" (covering all forms of outdoor burning) are routinely imposed in national and provincial parks during the summer months. However, that has been the case for many years, and such bans are now widely understood, accepted and observed by Canadians. Introducing them for the first time here would raise issues of awareness and enforcement – as well as restrictions on personal choice.

Deterrence, diversion and prosecution

Historically – and quite possibly this summer – many wildfires in Wales have been started deliberately and maliciously. It has long been thought that children and young people were particularly prone to such behaviour; and there was some evidence from social media this summer of that still being the case.

The Fire and Rescue Service delivers programmes that raise **awareness of wildfire risks** among young people, and (for those at risk of offending) more intensive **programmes promoting positive behaviour change**. Attendees may wish to consider if there may be potential for the Service and other partners to expand this work.

Deliberately starting a wildfire (or any fire, other than on one's own property) generally amounts to arson and can be charged and prosecuted as such. While criminal justice is currently not devolved, attendees may wish to consider any steps that might **facilitate identification and prosecution of offenders**.

Minimising the health impacts of wildfires

Preventing exposure to wildfire smoke is based on evidence-based public health advice to shelter, but this can be challenging when smoke sits over an area for a prolonged period.

We have heard that there were some perceptions this summer that the shelter advice for wildfires was contradictory to advice to manage heat exposures. The

advice for reducing the health effects of wildfire smoke and heat takes the same form, i.e. to keep doors and windows closed when smoke is present / during the hottest part of the day and open them again when the smoke passes / when the day starts to cool. However, this advice can sometimes be challenging to follow, for example if smoke settles into valleys at night.

Attendees are invited to consider how we can involve communities in actions to increase their preparedness ahead of wildfires occurring and **minimise health impacts** when they do occur, including during heatwaves.