# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE** | **Deliberate Grass Fires** |
| **DATE** | **20 May 2019** |
| **BY** | **Julie James, Minister for Housing and Local Government** |

Members will be aware that Wales and other parts of the UK traditionally experience a spate of deliberately-set grass fires if a period of warm and dry weather coincides with the Easter school holidays. Whilst this year was no exception, the number of grass fires we experienced in Wales during April this year was modest in comparison to the severe outbreaks we had in April 2015, the last time a late Easter coincided with a period of fine weather.

As a result of the outbreaks in 2015 the then First Minister convened a Grass Fires Summit. This proved to be a turning point for collaborative working between partners, to address the issue. The summit brought together key organisations to formulate a co-ordinated programme of action to address the issue of grass fires in the short, medium and long term, based on education, land management and deterrence. It also established a multi-agency task force, ‘Dawns Glaw’, comprising of key representatives from the Police, Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs), Natural Resources Wales, Local Authorities and the Welsh Government. There is no doubt that ‘Dawns Glaw’ and other programmes have contributed to the reduction and severity of grass fires across Wales over the past four years.

Initial figures from the FRAs for 2019 indicate there were 566 deliberate grass fires in April this year compared to 1,292 in April 2015, a reduction of 56%. Primary grass fires – those which require 5 or more fire appliances to tackle them – also fell by more than half from 50 to 24.

However, deliberately-set grass fires of any scope or size are totally unacceptable. They are irresponsible, dangerous and criminal. They destroy our beautiful countryside, kill wildlife and livestock, and put communities and the lives of our firefighters tackling them, at serious risk. They can be unpredictable and quickly spread out of control. Firefighters are often battling them in dangerous and challenging conditions. I pay tribute to our firefighters who work tirelessly to prevent deliberately-set grass fires and put them out when they happen.

Grass fires tie up valuable resources which can mean it can take the fire services longer to respond to emergencies like house fires or road traffic collisions if they are tied up tackling grass fires. This is one of the key messages the fire services convey.

South Wales FRA is working closely with South Wales Police to ensure that people are aware of the severity of deliberate fire setting and that those caught doing so are rightly punished. Arson is a serious criminal offence which can lead to imprisonment and will always lead to a criminal record. I commend the work of both firefighters and the police in the actions they have taken in bringing perpetrators to justice. Two people were arrested in North Wales in connection with a major grass fire near Blaenau Ffestiniog on Easter Monday.

However it is very hard to catch perpetrators in the act. If people are motivated to set grass fires, the means and the opportunities to do so are very easily available, given the proximity of towns to uncultivated grassland or forestry in many part of Wales. The key therefore has to be to remove the motivation in the first place.

This is what we and partners have been doing. The FRAs deliver several programmes throughout the year to divert children and young people away from deliberately setting fires. These include hard-hitting educational campaigns as well as intensive interventions with known or likely offenders. They are delivered in full collaboration with schools, police and other agencies and have proved successful. Some of the more intensive programmes, such as ‘Crimes and Consequences’ and ‘Phoenix’, work with small groups at risk of offending. They almost invariably succeed in instilling more positive and socially responsible behaviours in these young people. Very few reoffend and many go on to employment, some in the fire service, and further education that they might otherwise not have pursued. These programmes are fully funded by the Welsh Government and I am pleased to have been able to support them again this financial year with almost £400,000 of funding.

However, we should not fall into the trap of blaming only children and young people for this problem. There is evidence of some large fires being started by landowners who wish to clear land outside the permitted burning season, which in upland areas ends on 31 March. This behaviour is just as irresponsible and illegal as a young person setting a fire out of a misguided sense of fun or adventure. And such fires can all too easily spread out of control, leading to large areas of land being completely unusable for any agricultural purpose. Landowners can also contribute positively, by managing their land in ways which make it harder for others to set fires. We and our partners have also been engaging with the farming community to spread these messages.

The figures show clearly that all these initiatives are working; but we will never eliminate grass fires completely. So we have also worked to ensure our fire and rescue services can deal with them swiftly and effectively. We have funded specialised off-road vehicles and protective gear for fighting grass fires, as well as drones which provide vital intelligence about the spread of fires. South Wales FRA in particular has an internationally-renowned reputation for its expertise in this area, and its crews have been trained in countries like Spain and South Africa, where the risk and scale of wildfires dwarfs ours. I want to see further reductions in this annual menace – but I also want to assure people that our emergency services are more than capable of tackling it.