

# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **TITLE** | **The Future of Gilestone Farm** |
| **DATE** | **29 January 2024** |
| **BY** | **Vaughan Gething MS, Minister for Economy** |

As stated on September 14th, the Welsh Government was surprised and delighted to learn in August last year that a pair of ospreys had decided to nest on the Gilestone Farm site. Ospreys are a *Schedule 1 species* protected under the *Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981* and it is first time they have observed this far south in Wales in around 200 years.

Given the historic significant of this development, the birds’ welfare and that of the nest are of course of paramount importance. To protect them, we ensured that initial surveillance and site security was installed at the site in partnership with local bird recorders. Last year we also appointed the UK’s leading expert on ospreys to undertake an ‘Osprey Conservation Plan’ for Gilestone Farm. This was to advise on how we can best manage the site going forward, alongside our continued ambitions for sustainable economic development, including the potential for rural tourism opportunities that support employment opportunities for young people.

I received the expert adviser’s report in December and after taking its recommendations into consideration, and discussing these with the Leader of Powys and Green Man it is clear that the full commercial and charitable objectives of the Green Man Group, as set out in its business plan for the use of Gilestone Farm, can no longer be realised. This is because the report advises that a 750m restricted zone around the nest must be in place on the farm within which only very limited human activity can take place. Protecting the environment for the birds is and will remain paramount.

As stated previously, the ambition set out in Green Man’s business plan represents a positive opportunity for jobs in and investment in rural Wales that matches the strategic priorities - agreed by the UK Government, Welsh Government and local authorities - in the *Growing Mid Wales* partnership action plan. The Partnership’s vision document sets *Strategic Growth Priorities* which include tourism, agriculture, food and drink, research and innovation, support for enterprise and skills and employment which are clearly aligned to the proposed areas of activity set out by Green Man to date.

Green Man is a great commercial and cultural asset for Wales. The multi-award-winning, independent Welsh business, that is dedicated to sustainability, is a firm partner of the Welsh Government and we are excited about the opportunities we have to align the strength of their brand with an expanded business vision. We are committed to continuing our work with Green Man to help the company secure a suitable long-term base in Wales, where its strong potential can be realised; my officials will continue to work with them and our wider partners to help achieve this aim, just as we work with a broad range of other key Welsh and overseas investors in regions across Wales.

It is important that investors feel confident about the Welsh Government’s determination to maximise the jobs and opportunities that can help rural communities thrive, especially those that enable more young people to plan a varietyof ambitious futures closer to home – a core tenet of our *Economic Mission*. It is also important that investors can have confidence in the strength of that commitment when it is tested by aggressive lobbying efforts to change government policy. We are always willing to listen, but Welsh Ministers do not change decisions based on threats issued by third parties, including where attempts are made to raise matters that are entirely unrelated to the policy objectives in question. It is a matter of regret that discussions about Gilestone Farm have sometimes fallen into this category.

It is equally disappointing that elected officials and business partners have been subject to sustained and personal attacks regarding this matter. As the First Minister has stated in the Senedd, the Welsh Government takes these matters very seriously and it is concerning that women in particular have borne the brunt of personal and abusive criticism that has no place in our society.

The arrival of the ospreys, and the presence of their nest, is a hugely significant development from a nature perspective, but despite the exclusion zone now in place at Gilestone Farm, there still remain opportunities for sustainable farming and economic development at the site. We are engaging with relevant partner organisations around the potential to develop these opportunities for the longer term. While we undertake this work, we will continue to manage the farm appropriately. We are also extending the existing Farm Business Tenancy to allow conversations around future potential uses for the site to take place. The Welsh Government’s well-established principles for use and disposal of land and property assets will provide a basis for making decisions about the future of the farm.

My officials are meeting with community representatives at Talybont-on-Usk to discuss the Osprey Conservation Plan and the next steps around the future management of the site.

The known behaviour of ospreys is for them to return to the same nesting site they have selected and indeed to build their nest out further, and we expect the birds to return to Gilestone Farm during spring of this year. By then I am confident we will have agreed, with partners, a way forward for the site that can help realise the very special, sustainable economic benefits the ospreys potentially bring to the area.