

Thank you for inviting the Stop Gilestone Farm Project (SGFP) community group to give evidence to the Public Accounts and Public Administration Committee's inquiry into the Welsh Government's purchase of Gilestone Farm.

SGFP would like to submit a written statement to the Chair and committee members as follows:

1. The decision to purchase Gilestone Farm was taken without a public consultation. The decision appears to have been made based on the availability of the property, rather than on whether the local community would support, or could sustain, development of the kind proposed by the Green Man music festival organisation. Numerous opportunities to de-risk the project for the taxpayer were missed.
2. Had the community been consulted prior to the purchase, the Welsh Government would have had early warning of a number of issues which led to delays over the project commencing and ultimately to it being abandoned in January 2024.
3. An effective and inclusive local consultation would have made Welsh Government officials aware of the sensitivities around rare wildlife and habitats at the farm. There was local knowledge of osprey sightings at Gilestone Farm prior to the purchase, and this information could have been available to ministers before they decided to go ahead.
4. The River corridor , which forms the eastern Boundary to Gilestone, is both an SSSI and also SAC(Special Area of Conservation). This provides a natural and undisturbed habitat for numerous rare and indigenous species- both aquatic and land living. The Environment (Wales) Act (2016) lists at least 40 protected species – which live in this section of the river. Equally the same Act " Requires ministers to take all reasonable steps to maintain and enhance these species and to encourage others to take such steps".
5. Ospreys are not the only rare and protected species at Gilestone Farm. Local people have worked with wildlife charities over many years to protect biodiversity at Gilestone Farm and its surroundings. Their extensive knowledge of the site was overlooked in the Welsh Government's haste to complete the purchase before financial year end.
6. Legally agreed and long-established sporting rights (including shooting and angling rights) at Gilestone Farm appear to have been overlooked at the time of the purchase. No contact was made at all either before the exchange of contracts, or after the exchange of contracts to the legal owner of these rights. He had to make contact with the civil servants himself.

7. No meaningful attempt was made to reconcile these sporting rights with the activities proposed by the Green Man at Gilestone Farm. If the scheme had not been abandoned in early 2024, the issue of sporting rights at the farm represented an ongoing risk to the Welsh Government. Estimates of the likely costs of resolving this issue – if these estimates exist – have not been made public.

8. SGFP was concerned at how far the project was allowed to advance before a business case had been presented to the Welsh Government. Even when an outline business case was submitted, no assessment of the likely impact of the development on existing local enterprises appears to have been made.

9. The outline business case was based on a series of claims which were not always supported by published evidence. These included a claim the project would generate £23 million for the local economy. However, people in the community were not told how the Green Man had arrived at this figure; other claims were equally unsubstantiated but used as material evidence for the business case.

10. Roads in Talybont-on-Usk and the surrounding area struggle to cope with current vehicle movements, particularly in the summer. No assessment of how increased traffic associated with the development would affect local roads was communicated to the local community, if such an assessment existed.

11. The Welsh Government was slow to recognise there was a marked lack of community support for the Green Man's proposed development of Gilestone Farm. Evidence of community concerns was clearly demonstrated in a survey conducted by the community council and published in August 2023[1]. We believe far too little was done to recognise or address these concerns.

12. Repeated requests for greater public consultation and engagement were not responded to; letters remained unanswered, and the refusal to engage became an indictment of the process. By opting to liaise exclusively with the community council, several individuals experienced undue pressure and unpleasant behaviour from supporters of the proposals.

13. Allegations of threats and intimidation were made against those opposing the scheme by representatives of the Green Man Trust. These allegations were not properly investigated, and no evidence to support them has been made public..

14. Because the allegations were highly generalised, and regularly repeated, they put at risk the reputations of members of the community who were raising legitimate concerns about the Green Man proposals in an entirely respectful and courteous way.

15. The allegations were cited – again without any investigation or evidence – by the Minister for the Economy when he announced the winding up of the project in January 2024.

16. SGFP believes the way in which these allegations were dealt with by the Minister for the Economy and the Green Man Trust caused unnecessary distress and damaged community cohesion in our part of Powys.

17. SGFP and other members of the local community have not been told whether any leaseholders or operators other than the Green Man organisation were considered for the site once it became a public asset. A clear and established process exists for allocating publicly owned farm tenancies in Powys. If any comparable process was considered for Gilestone Farm, it was not communicated to local people.

18. As a grass roots community organisation, SGFP remains concerned the Welsh Government was prepared to fund this proposal without researching the likely impact on local people and the environment, and at a time of unprecedented pressure on public finances and services in Wales. Although the presence of nesting ospreys has been cited as the deciding factor in abandoning the scheme, the failure to consult led the Welsh Government to commit to Gilestone Farm despite the site being unsuitable for a wide range of reasons.

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