

Mr Mark Isherwood, MS Chair
Public Accounts and Public Administration Committee
Senedd Wales

28th August 2023

Dear Mark Isherwood MS,

Re: Gilestone Farm

I am writing to you in relation to your committee's scrutiny of the Welsh Government's acquisition of Gilestone Farm. I am the Managing Director of Green Man, the company behind the Green Man festival and the prospective tenants for the Welsh Government's property called Gilestone Farm.

After watching their last session of the committee on 5 July 2023, I thought it would be helpful to your committee's evidence gathering if I were to clarify a number of points raised by your colleagues on the committee and also provide you with more detail about our proposals for the farm.

The Purchase of a farm by the Welsh Government

The Government of the United Kingdom frequently purchases property if it will improve the social and economic environment of the citizens in their care. My view is that this is the role of a good government.

The relationship between the Gilestone Project and the Welsh Government will be the same as any usual commercial landlord-tenant relationship. This is a typical arrangement for many other Welsh Government projects such as the [recent purchase in Bridgend](#) that will support Wales' transition to Net Zero, or a site in [Baglan Bay](#) which was also recently acquired by the Welsh Government to support the local economy. The Welsh Government also acquired warehouses for another creative company - Bad Wolf production company - to generate jobs and income into the Welsh economy. [One of the largest film and TV studios in Wales is set to be created in Cardiff.](#)

The intended financial relationship between myself and the Welsh Government will be through the tenancy of the property. As with all property tenancies if I cannot pay the rent, I will have to vacate and the Welsh Government will retain the property which they can either re-lease or sell on to a new owner and take the uplift from the sale.

Unlike the housing market, farm property still seems to retain its value. [Here is an article from Farmers Weekly reflecting this.](#)

The legal obligations for leasing the Welsh Government's property will be clearly defined in the lease as with all tenant landlord relationships. We have and will continue to ensure that our plans meet the obligations and legal requirements of the relevant statutory bodies. As a Powys SME we have been operating in this region of Wales for 21 years, only 5 miles from Gilestone Farm and have a successful and productive record of working with many official agencies.

I would have preferred to purchase Gilestone Farm, but unfortunately do not have the funds to achieve this. At the onset of this venture the intention was for me to purchase part of the property with the remaining purchased by the Welsh Government and leased back on a

commercial tenancy until I could afford to buy the property outright. Knight Frank rural surveyors, who were acting on behalf of the Welsh Government, advised that a property division could decrease the value of the property and this was subsequently denied. I was not offered a loan arrangement; only a commercial lease was discussed.

Gilestone Farm was valued by Knight Frank Rural Surveyors at £4,350,000 - £100,000.00 over the sale price of £4,250,000 - indicating that there has been an uplift in the Welsh Government's property asset at the point of sale. The Welsh Government have received rental income from their current Gilestone Farm tenant since they purchased their property in 2022.

Discussions between the Welsh and UK Government and my organisation regarding building on the success of Green Man have been ongoing for many years. The need for a permanent base in Wales was seen as a logical next step to activate this. Monmouthshire County Council and the constituency of Montgomeryshire also searched for a suitable property as they also recognised the potential of Green Man to create jobs and opportunities for their constituents. However, they were not able to find a suitable property in these areas.

The Welsh Government purchased Gilestone Farm for the following reasons:

- it is a commercial mixed-use working farm
- it offers tourism and events with a 1,500 person capacity
- it has close transport connections to the A40 and train links
- it lets space to 20 local businesses

The current business operation of this property can be built on and adapted to deliver the business and charitable objectives of Green Man locally, and can also offer a base for extending these both across Wales and internationally.

Corporate structure / governance

There was some discussion about the corporate structure and the viability and record of our business. The Green Man and its affiliated companies have been successfully operating in Wales for many years; we are a well run ethical business with a robust balance sheet. Our account filing is open for public scrutiny at Companies House. Cwningar Ltd (of which I am the principal owner) will be the signatory on the proposed lease with the Welsh Government and I will be accountable to the Welsh Government as its tenant. As mentioned by Gerwyn Evans, Deputy Director of Creative Wales (who attended your meeting), it is usual for businesses to set up new companies for new ventures.

Funding

There was discussion about public funding and questions were asked whether I was receiving any. I felt from the discussion that there is a belief that I was in receipt of funding in relation to Gilestone Farm or I had been gifted the property. To clarify, this is **not** the case. Legally and commercially the Welsh Government decided to purchase a farm, which it now owns outright, and intend to operate their property asset with a commercial lease arrangement. They may have purchased the farm with the intention of building on the success of the Green Man brand to create jobs and opportunities in rural Wales. But Gilestone Farm remains a Welsh Government property asset belonging to them alone.

The Welsh Government is considering entering a commercial lease arrangement with my business based on 21 years of Green Man's success, our vision document (stage 1 business plan), followed by a robust business plan which has been scrutinised by appropriate sectors of the Welsh Government.

There is also recognition that developing business in rural Wales is challenging due to the natural ecology, poor transport links and the sensitivity of the landscape which makes property development permissions rare. Our business works within these parameters:

- **ecological** - any business operation taking place within the farmland will be in temporary structures for short periods of time which can work around and support ecological challenges such as biodiversity and rare species
- **transport** - as standard working hours are challenging to adopt in a location with limited transport links, our flexible working patterns fits within these parameters
- **permission to build** - we are not planning to build any new properties and won't require planning permission

The Welsh Government has concluded that my business and proposition is highly credible and would make a positive contribution in helping deliver its policies addressing the growing socio-economic issues such as the wealth and age gap in rural Wales. This view is also supported by Powys County Council and Bannau Brycheiniog National Park.

At the meeting in Brecon with Powys County Council and the Bannau Brycheiniog National Park Authority on 17th March 2023, Caroline Meeling Jones CEO Bannau Brycheiniog National Park and James Gibson Watts Leader of Powys County Council expressed deep concerns about the future of the Bannau Brycheiniog National Park and Powys as a result of these negative trends not being addressed. They recognised and agreed that the plan delivered on government objectives, commenting that: "if not this [plan] then what would be acceptable?"

In addition to my Green Man business activities I have played an active role in supporting the future economic development of Mid Wales as Chair of the Economic Strategy Group of the Mid Wales Growth Deal. The group comprised leading Mid Wales businesses including Green Man. This was a voluntary role for all involved and despite the challenges of the businesses involved during the pandemic we were able to secure £110,000,000 in funding for the region.

Green Man has played its part in helping to deliver on all of the Mid Wales Growth Deal targets without receiving or requesting **any** funding from the Mid Wales Growth Deal funding allocation.

Mid Wales has an ageing population which is contributing to a dwindling economy, while younger residents migrate in search of education and employment opportunities. Nearly 20% of children in the region are living in poverty, while 24% of residents are paid under the national living wage. The wealth and age gap in Powys is increasing. Mid Wales has identified areas of potential growth including agriculture, food, tourism and manufacturing. Our project will harness these areas to diversify and grow the local economy, and widen our business ambitions to include a creative hub and connect to businesses across Wales and internationally.

Communication

A number of points were raised by the committee in relation to communications with the local community. From our perspective we have sought to positively engage with the local community. Engagement has been made more difficult by the hostility, misogyny and bullying behaviour by a small minority of objectors. Despite this difficult backdrop we have continued to engage with local people. There have been a number of meetings with local representatives and bodies, these are detailed below:

May 17th 2022 - in person meeting with Talybont Community Council and the Powys County Councillor of Talybont on Usk, first available opportunity following the Powys County Council elections.

The meeting covered:

- confirmation that the Welsh Government had purchased Gilestone Farm
- that the previous owner was now the tenant of the Welsh Government and would be operating Gilestone Farm (farming, tourism, events and business rental premises) until an alternative solution was agreed by the Welsh Government
- confirmation that the Green Man Festival would not move to Gilestone Farm, that the farm was not suitable for events the size of the Green Man Festival
- confirmation that Gilestone Farm would remain a working farm
- confirmation that Gilestone Farm would not be used just for tree planting
- the objective of the Gilestone Project was to build on Green Man's success and diversify the brand
- that operations would include food and beverages, training, live experiences, science engagement, tourism and a creative hub
- that a period of due diligence would be undertaken by the Welsh Government, and that I could not confirm anything until this had taken place. Meanwhile, I would keep the Community Council informed as things progressed
- there was an open invitation to the people of Talybont to attend Green Man 2022 as my guests so that they could better understand what we offered

I started to update Talybont Community Council through the Community Council Secretary, but a wider campaign of misinformation had begun through a splinter group of people against the Gilestone Project. This later became the Usk Valley Conservation Group, a charity registered in June 2022 which seemed specifically set up to stop the Gilestone Project from happening. My communication to the Community Council was spun, ignored or disbelieved by this wider group and used to support the campaign of objection. It became clear that productive communication was impossible, and I became concerned about the wellbeing of the members of the Community Council as they seemed to be coming under intense pressure from the splinter group.

I attempted to start communications again with the Talybont Community Council in September 2022 but the then Chair of the Community Council (there have been two resignations since then) refused to meet me until the Welsh Government had made a decision about the business plan.

I also offered to join the Welsh Government at the in-person meeting with the Talybont Community Council at Talybont on Usk on the 17th of November 2022, but the Community Council requested that I not attend the meeting.

Green Man, my company and Gilestone Farm are located in the constituency of Brecon and Radnorshire. I have offered meetings to discuss Gilestone Farm with my Senedd representative James Evans MS, and Member of Parliament Fay Jones MP on the 2nd of June 2022, but neither has yet accepted my offer.

More recently, along with the Welsh Government, we met with representatives of the Community Council, Powys County Council and the Bannau Brycheiniog National Park Authority on the 17th March 2023, for an update on the project's progress.

In my view, the relationship with some of the residents has been soured by a well funded, negative scaremongering campaign which has deliberately sought to spread misinformation, confuse and frighten local residents, while discrediting me and my business. There is also evidence of bullying of local residents and members of the Community Council, Bannau

Brycheiniog National Park, and Powys County Council by the opponents of the Gilestone Farm Project. This behaviour was raised by those present and minuted at our last meeting with residents and Government representatives on the 17th March 2023.

I have been increasingly concerned about the wellbeing of the residents of Talybont on Usk who support the Gilestone Project or who don't agree with the methods and behaviour of the objectors.

The toxic atmosphere created by objectors has resulted in multiple resignations from the Talybont Community Council, including the second Chair in the last 12 months. Anyone who does not support the anti Gilestone project group has stood down and been replaced with people who do not want Green Man in Talybont or for the Gilestone Project to take place.

Anita Cartwright, Talybont on Usk Powys County Councillor, has taken extended sick leave following the bullying and harassment she experienced. Powys County Council cover of Talybont on Usk is currently being supported by Councillors who represent other Powys constituencies.

In May 2023, Vaughan Gething, Minister of Economy, agreed to our business plan in principle, and we commenced a more formal large-scale community engagement. This involved directly connecting with local community groups and organisations, sending out 4,000 information leaflets to households in the area, launching a website with information, FAQ's, a questionnaire and contact details through which we can be contacted directly at any time. Through this process we received comments, views and questions from local people, many of which are helpful and constructive. This has now been live for eleven weeks and has proven to be highly effective with many small local companies, organisations and individuals wishing to engage with the Gilestone Project in the future.

However, due to the hostility and inappropriate behaviour towards those supporting the Gilestone Farm Project (or who are associated with it) the Welsh Government and Bannau Brycheiniog National Park Authority did not attend the public meeting called by James Evans, MS on 8th June 2023. Powys County Council also refused the invitation due to other reasons. No representatives from my organisation were invited to this meeting.

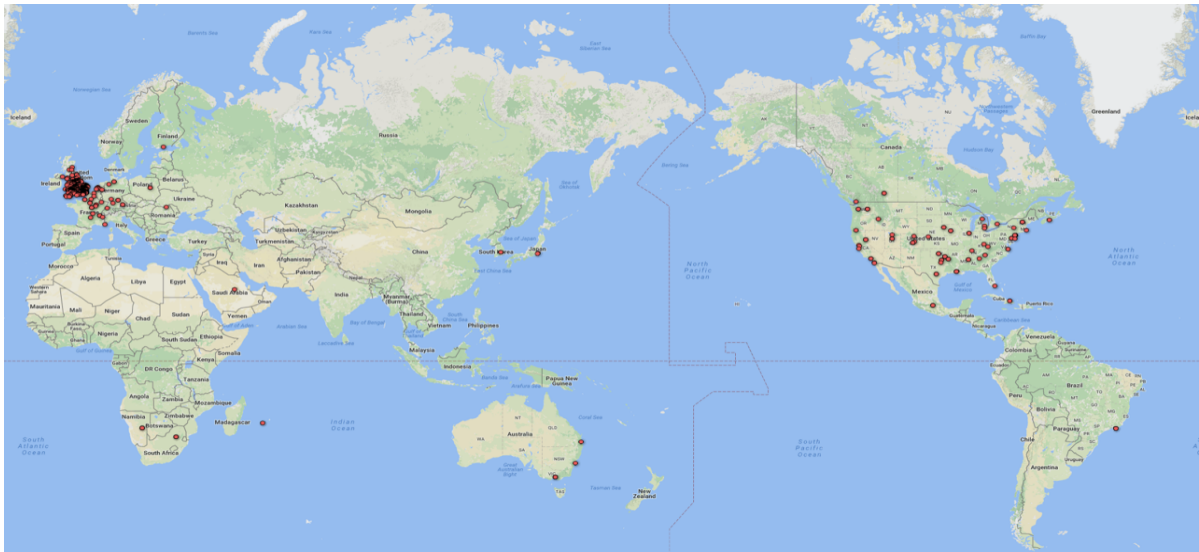
Despite the hostility, local people are coming forward to express support or show genuine interest in finding out more about the project.

(DHG) Direct Health Group

One area of questioning we are concerned about was in relation to a business called Direct Health Group. We are trying to understand why a company based some 30 miles away has any interest or concerns about our proposals for Gilestone Farm. Clarification on this point would be welcome, although I read this [article](#) in Nation Cymru with interest. I will also raise this issue directly with Natasha Asghar.

Welsh made and Welsh Grown International Impact of the Green Man brand

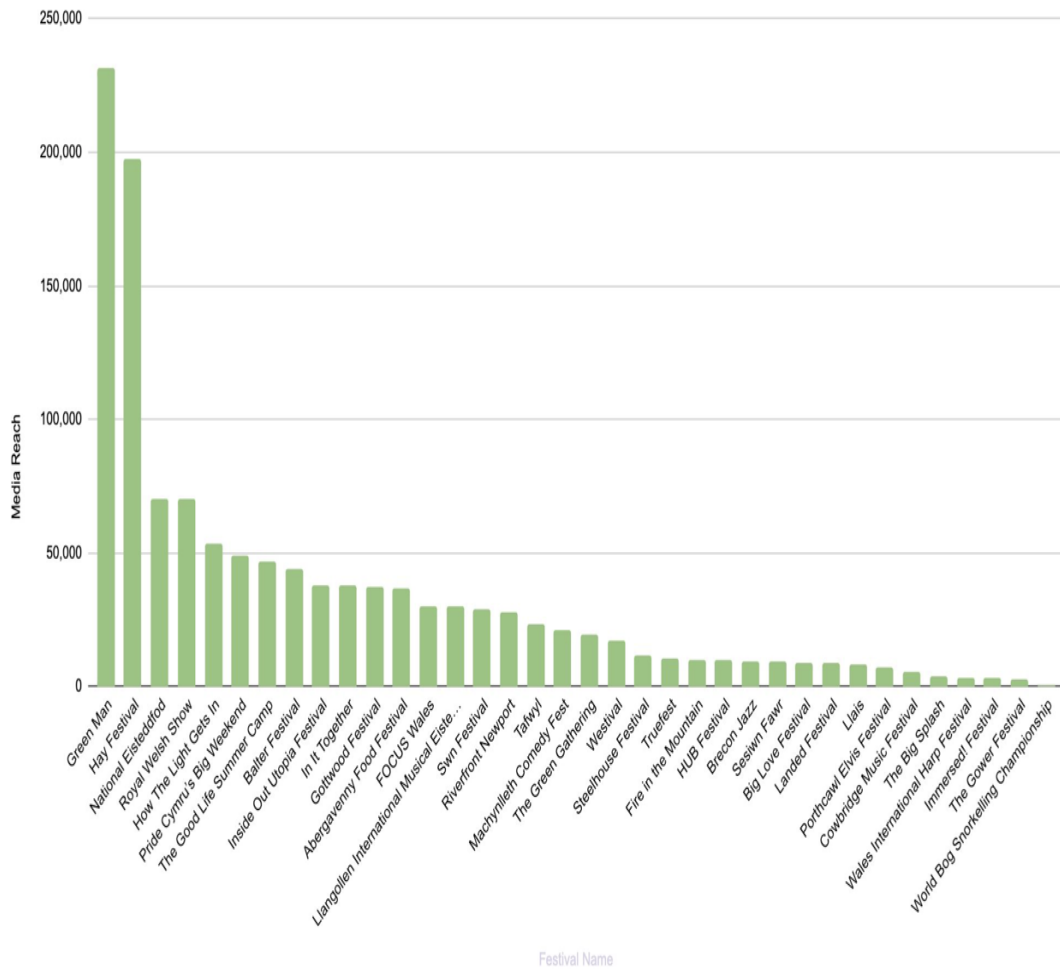
Green Man attendee destinations 5% attend from outside the UK



Data Supplied Ticketline

Positioning of Green Man within Welsh Festivals media reach.

Algorithm - combined online media following (twitter, instagram, facebook)



Business Plan

As you are aware, we have submitted a detailed business plan to the Welsh Government and have shared some details with the local community. This can be viewed on our website www.gilestonefarmproject.co.uk. For ease I have detailed our plans below.

Gilestone Farm will be a base to further develop our business interests and charitable engagement locally, across Wales and internationally.

Our plan will create a more diversified business that supports existing farming activities by engaging with experienced members of the farming community interested in fostering new ideas and activities.

The Gilestone Farm Project seeks to unlock local opportunities in Welsh growth sectors and be the springboard for sustainable economic growth across the region. We will create a flourishing economic environment that Mid Wales residents want to stay in, thrive in and contribute towards.

Gilestone Farm will boost **tourism** in the local area year-round as a green Eco-Retreat. Our plans include new glamping and rented accommodation for short visitor stays, supporting the local visitor economy. This will also create extensive local employment opportunities in hospitality.

The influence of the Green Man brand in attracting tourism to Mid-Wales is clear, with 89% of attendees agreeing that they are more likely to visit Wales as a result of attending Green Man. The Gilestone Farm Project will build on this with a year-round offer.

We will also be supporting the aspirations of the Bannau Brycheiniog (Brecon Beacons) National Park Sustainable Tourism Strategy:

- a proud example of a sustainable destination supported by its communities
- a 'good neighbour' adding significant value to the regional offer and economy
- vibrant private and voluntary sectors taking a lead in tourism delivery and visitor welcome
- more reasons to visit more often across the National Park and across the year

Gilestone Farm will continue to be a **working farm** but with more sustainable farming practices and with a greater focus on enhancing the local environment, particularly the River Usk. This will include minimising the impact of the farm's operations on the local environment through creating a carbon neutral business with increased biodiversity on site. We will join the Welsh Government's Sustainable Farming Scheme and adopt a regenerative approach to farming, including reducing phosphates entering the water system; supporting and preserving the much-depleted River Usk for our future generations.

There are significant opportunities for greater **food and beverage production** on the farm, supporting new local businesses and skills development. Our plans include establishing a new brewery, bakery and baking school at Gilestone Farm, championing local produce and providing new opportunities such as apprenticeships. Welsh produce is a key pillar of the food and beverage offering at Green Man Festival and could provide a permanent base for new and existing suppliers who can expand and sell their produce at local markets and provide live experiences at Gilestone Farm.

Gilestone Farm will act as an **anchor and hub** for start-up creative businesses, as well as growth for established businesses. Crucially, this will create new opportunities for young people and encourage them to remain living and working in the area.

We will support local hospitality businesses, food and beverage producers and creatives with live experiences. The Farm already hosts events, and our plans include:

- **family experiences** focused on health and wellbeing, science and the arts
- to make the most out of the new **outdoor wedding** rules that have been recently legalised and allow civil ceremonies to take place in the open air; we've got the chance to offer the ultimate wedding experience in stunning natural surroundings.
- **to amplify Welsh talent in the creative industries** while developing and showcasing talented emerging artists and producers

Our charity, the [Green Man Trust](#) will also be based at Gilestone Farm and will work with the local community to support young people to access creative and arts sectors. The Trust has been in operation since 2013 and has supported more than 10,000 people, providing 168 grants and inspiring positive change in Welsh communities. Our mission is to:

- work with communities locally and across Wales to inspire positive change
- cultivate training opportunities within the creative industries, wellness and science
- develop and showcase talented emerging artists, with particular focus on music, design, performing arts and visual arts.
- encourage engagement with science particularly in relation to health and climate change

Sustainability

There has been some discussion around the sustainability of our proposal and its impact on the environment. We firmly believe that our project is a force for good, for the local environment, the economy and the wider community. At the core of the Gilestone Farm project is a commitment to sustainability. We are developing these principles in line with local, national and international development policies in mind, such as the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act and UN's Sustainable Development Agenda.

"The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act is about improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales" The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act – An essential Guide published by Welsh Government

"A global plan of action to drive economic prosperity and social wellbeing while protecting the environment" - UN Sustainable Development Goals

Our plans are being designed to meet and support 14* of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. These include:

1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
7. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
8. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation
9. Reduce inequality within and among countries

10. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
11. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
12. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
13. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
14. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

*The remaining three development goals relate to energy, maritime and justice which are not part of the plans for Gilestone Farm

This is an all-encompassing mission with the environment, society and the economy all considered and safeguarded throughout our plans.

The Gilestone Farm Project creates an exciting opportunity to protect and restore the local environment through our business operations. We will work with ecology and sustainability experts to help us plan and manage our activity at Gilestone farm.

Farming

Gilestone Farm will remain a working farm. However, some farming practices can be harmful to the environment. We will seek to address this early on, bringing in farming professionals who are experienced in adopting regenerative farming methods to actively manage the land and preserve it for food growing for generations.

We will sign up to the Welsh Government's Sustainable Farming Scheme from the outset and aim to use the strength of the Green Man brand to support the promotion and amplification of sustainable farming practices across Wales.

Our long-term goal is to move the farming practices to a permaculture-led farm which will reduce phosphates entering the water system and support the recovery of the Usk River.

Live Experiences

Green Man's sustainable approach to diversifying the farm will have an overall positive impact on the environment and ecology compared with purely agricultural use. Our plan is to create a carbon neutral event site. Our events will be powered entirely by alternative energy sources. The scale of any live experiences that take place at Gilestone Farm will be designed to ensure they have no harmful impacts on the sensitive ecological areas within the farm. If structures are required they will be temporary, movable and used for short periods of time offering the agility to work around any issues relating to biodiversity or protected species. Licenced events are strongly regulated and require permissions from a wide range of government service professionals to take place.

Stewardship

We take our stewardship responsibilities very seriously and will employ a Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management registered ecologist to undertake a biodiversity and ecological survey of the Farm that can guide our active management and restoration of the land. Experts will support us to:

- protect and safeguard the local SSSI and the nature that lives there
- improve biodiversity, ecology and the natural environment across the farm
- restore local waterways by reducing harm to the Usk

- respect important local landscapes with the whole project delivered without the need for new permanent buildings to protect natural surroundings of the farm

Social Wellbeing

The Gilestone Farm Project was founded to promote social and economic inclusion in an area where social and economic exclusion is rising. We're aligned with the Welsh Government's mission to address rural poverty and reverse the decline in rural living standards. We'll do this by:

- creating skills and employment opportunities for young people
- providing social and emotional support through the Green Man Trust who are currently working to create a Mental Health Guide, signposting support, as we did throughout the Covid-19 pandemic
- championing principles of equality and diversity and particularly supporting cultural diversity
- leading from the front, as the only large commercial festival in the UK owned and run by a female CEO. The first UK festival to achieve a 50/50 gender music line-up. The only UK festival to have a Pride March celebrating members of the queer community who attend. The only UK festival to offer training to refugees and asylum seekers. We want to empower all people who are under-represented within our communities into leadership and entrepreneurial roles
- continuing to improve our accessibility for all - we were awarded the Gold Charter by Attitude is Everything for improving disabled people's access to music. One of 16 gold charters awarded in the UK, we were the first Welsh music festival recipient

Economic Empowerment

Gilestone Farm will act as an anchor and hub for new start-up businesses while supporting those already established with opportunities for growth and diversification. We will provide opportunities for local people to train and learn new skills in sectors we're leading in, such as science, wellness and the creative sectors. We'll proactively target young people for training and jobs, encouraging them to stay and contribute to the area. It will also be the base for engaging with and starting new ventures, while developing our current relationships with businesses across Wales and globally.

I hope our submission is helpful. Should you need any further points of clarification please do get in touch.

Yours sincerely,



Fiona Stewart
Managing Director
Green Man