# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **TITLE**  | **Taking Action to Better Protect and Manage the Gwent Levels** |
| **DATE**  | **01 July 2021** |
| **BY** | **Julie James Minister for Climate Change** |

Following the decision not to proceed with the M4 Relief Road and my recent decision to remove the route corridor protection, I would like to update members on work underway to enable the better protection and management of the Gwent Levels through which the road was originally planned to pass.

The Gwent Levels are nationally important for their biodiversity, designated by a series of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI’s) for their network of ditches or reens, fen and reed bed habitats and for a number of priority species. The historic development of the Gwent Levels from the Roman period has also led to its designation as a Landscape of Outstanding Historic Interest in Wales, while its interest and location adjacent to two large population centres in South Wales makes it a valued recreational asset by both locals and visitors alike.

Over the years the location of the Gwent Levels has also made them vulnerable to encroachment by built development and infrastructure, whilst pollution of air, water and soils coupled with scrub invasion along many of its reens has been eroding away this unique interest.

As part of our heightened response to the climate change and nature emergencies I am keen to ensure that areas like the Gwent Levels are better protected and managed for the future. This will require additional action to maintain and enhance biodiversity and build resilient ecosystems and some difficult choices around the location of renewable energy projects which are also drawn to the flat coastal geography of the levels.

On the back of our decision on the M4 in 2019, the Welsh Government convened a Gwent Levels Working Group chaired by John Griffiths MS to explore how the levels could be better protected and managed. The group includes representation from the Welsh Government, Natural Resources Wales, local government, environmental NGO’s and other stakeholders. It has met three times and a Strategic Action Plan is being developed by the group to take forward this work.

The key priorities identified by the group include:

* Ensuring that the excellent work the **Living Levels Partnership** is currently doing at scale on habitat restoration, land owner and public engagement through a RSPB and Gwent Wildlife Trust lead Heritage Lottery funded project is continued. With its funding due to end in March 2022, the Living Levels Partnership have now appointed a consultant to help the partners plan a successor to the Living Levels Landscape project. This will include stakeholder mapping of current and potential partners, a vision to 2050 and a 5 year action plan as well as advice on funding and governance models. The draft deliverables will be available by mid-September and a final plan by the beginning of December.
* **Additional planning guidance** across the three local authorities involvedto better enable the right developments in the right place and to avoid further unacceptable biodiversity and landscape impacts on the Gwent levels. Policy 9 in Future Wales encourages Local Planning Authorities to work with stakeholders, including NRW to develop policies for key areas and the Gwent levels has been identified as one of the nine National Natural Resources Areas in Future Wales. This will require better evidence on the relative impacts of different types of development on the features of the levels. Welsh Government will catalyse this action as a pilot for National Natural Resource Management Areas and Future Wales Policy 9.
* To renew and increase the coverage of **Land Management Agreements** whichare a key tool to enable land owners and managers to carry out important habitat management work to maintain and enhance the biodiversity features of SSSI’s. These require negotiation with, and payments to, land managers such as farmers by NRW which are quite resource intensive. To speed up this process and get many more of our SSSI’s into a favourable condition, Welsh Government has recently provided NRW with an additional £2.75M to increase this activity. This will include land on the Gwent Levels.

I believe this is a very powerful model for how action in areas like the Gwent Levels can be taken forward jointly by stakeholders and I am also very keen to join John Griffiths MS at one these working group meetings to meet its members and find out more about its work. I would ask all members of the Senedd to consider whether they know of other areas that would benefit from a similar approach.

Our work on the Gwent Levels is just part of a wider response to the climate change and nature emergencies in Wales. The Nature Recovery Action Plan for Wales (NRAP) was refreshed with our partners at the end of 2020 to take into account the growing evidence around the scale of biodiversity loss and ecosystem damage.

It seeks to build resilient ecological networks across our landscapes and sea to safeguard species and habitats and the benefits they provide, address the root causes of biodiversity loss, and target interventions to help species recovery. The NRAP will be revised to take account of the new global biodiversity framework once it has been agreed as part of COP 15 later this year. Welsh Government is implementing NRAP priorities through the new Nature Networks Fund, the National Forest and the National Peatland Action Programme. We are also supporting specific action to safeguard threatened species by co-funding the Natur am Byth project.

Through our £9.8M Nature Networks Fund with Heritage Lottery we are improving the condition, connectivity and resilience of Wales’ marine and terrestrial protected sites. This will enable them to function better at the heart of nature networks which are vital areas of ecological resilience in which habitats and species can thrive and expand. Part of this funding is also available to support the active involvement of communities with these sites, through for example, increasing and diversifying volunteer bases or undertaking citizen science projects.

Given the difficulties in delivering single year largely capital-based programmes, we are also developing a Multi-Year Programme for our protected sites. This will ensure we are able to prioritise scarce resources and develop essential shorter-term interventions as part of a coherent longer-term program for our protected sites. NRW have issued a contract for ADAS to undertake this work and will be producing a final report by the end of the year.

Restoring nature and mitigating the impact of climate change are top priorities for this government. We demonstrated this by our decision on the M4 Relief Road and will continue to do so through our work on the Gwent Levels and across Wales. Every area of government, every sector of our economy and every community in Wales has a role to play in responding to the climate and nature emergency. I hope members of the Senedd will welcome the progress being made in the protection and enhancement of the Gwent Levels and will support us in expanding this approach to safeguard Wales’ rich natural heritage for present and future generations.