

Protesters given only six weeks to save Tyting Farm

by Mike Russell

AMPAIGNERS fighting to stop a council owned farm being sold have been given six weeks to find an alternative solution.

Tyting Farm in St Martha's, which is an area of outstanding natural beauty, has already been marketed by Guildford Borough Council (GBC), and bids have been received for all or part of the 117-acre site.

However, at a meeting of its decision making Executive, the council stepped back from pressing ahead with the sale while another search is carried out for a farmer who might take on the land.

The possibility of Surrey Wildlife Trust - a charity that works to conserve wildlife in the county - taking over the management of Tyting Farm will also be explored, ahead of

another council meeting on May 25.

Guildford Council, with financial help from Surrey County Council, bought the farm in 1942.

The prospect of off-loading the farm, which would be expected to fetch around £2.25 million, was raised after the council ruled 19 months ago that it was "too small to be a viable agricultural enterprise in isolation".

In January, a group opposed to the sale, Save Tyting Farm Campaign, was formed and a 2,000-signature petition was presented to the Executive's meeting on Thursday night last week.

Two leading members of the campaign group, as well as five other people representing various organisations that are opposed to the sale, addressed the meeting.

John Rigg, chairman of the campaign, highlighted there

were 2,000 people against the sale who wanted Tyting Farm to remain in public ownership.

"We believe that what was a good and right decision in 1942 is still a good and right decision today," he told the Executive.

GBC is sure that no major developments, such as house building, would take place on the farmland if sold off as it is in the green belt.

However, Mr Rigg added that, as a chartered surveyor with 50 years' experience, he had concerns about Tyting Farm's long-term future if it was sold off.

"I spend my days with an army of professionals who break planning restrictions and secure development," Mr Rigg warned.

GBC has put a clawback clause into any agreement for the sale of Tyting Farm.

This would see a purchaser pay the authority a slice of any increased value if the farm was

ever granted planning permission.

Believed to be set at around 30%, Patrick Gloyens, the campaign's legal representative and also a property solicitor, slammed the clawback as being set too low.

At the meeting, he said: "The indication is that this is a nod and a wink to a developer that you [the council] would share in any profits."

Mr Gloyens said that, to be a true deterrent, the clawback needed to be set at around 75%.

The Executive, and in particular its member for the environment, Councillor Jenny Wicks, strongly refuted Mr Gloyens' "nod and a wink" accusation.

In agreeing to hold off on a decision to sell until the end of next month, council leader Andrew Hodges said: "It is quite clear that various aspects need investigating."

The publicly owned green belt land is likely to fall into hands of private sector

IVE options exist for the future of Tyting Farm, which has been in public ownership for 64 years.

Although Guildford Borough Council (GBC) has said it will consider control being given to charitable trust or a sale to a

farmer, the front runner remains a sale on the open market.

At last week's meeting, Cllr Andrew French, deputy leader of the council, made it plain the authority was willing to make more investigations, but that an open market sale was

still the most likely outcome.

"I would take a great deal of persuading that an arrangement with Surrey Wildlife Trust or a local farmer is possible," said Cllr French, who's also Executive member for housing.

A sale could take two farms -

the sale of the whole site to one bidder or several sales with the farm being split into six lots.

Although unlikely after having spent 18 months exploring the possibilities of selling the farm, Guildford Council could decide to do



General views of Tyting Farm that is being sold by Guildford Borough Council, Halfpenny Lane, St Martha's, Guildford.

nothing and just sell the land.

At last week's meeting, Jill Barton from Surrey Wildlife Trust told the Executive that if the charity took control, this would build up its management portfolio which includes neighbouring St Martha's Hill

and Newlands Corner. "We'd help in taking on the management responsibilities for farming the land," she said.

"We would work with farmers. We'd talk to tenant farmers and try to come up with an agreement with them for

working the whole 115 acres."

Part of the plan would see the old farmhouse renovated and used as accommodation for farm workers.

John Rigg, chairman of the Save Tyting Farm Campaign, raised the prospect of a farmer

taking on the land. GBC had previously tried to get farmers interested in taking on the farm but had drawn a blank.

Mr Rigg said he will be meeting "a leading farmer in Surrey" this week to talk about the prospect of him taking control