

Farm's future rests on sale or lease options

by Mike Russell

THE future of a council-owned farm under threat of being sold off will be back in the spotlight next week.

Tyting Farm has been earmarked for sale by Guildford Borough Council since the new year, but in-depth research has been carried out into the prospect of it being leased to Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT).

A meeting of the council's Executive next Thursday is likely to be decided on the fate of the farm at St Martha.

Councillors will weigh up the merits of keeping ownership of the farm, with SWT having day-to-day management, or pressing ahead with a sale.

In the report, which will be put before the Executive, the benefits of a lease with the council as landlord are spelled out.

"The main benefit of retaining the land in council ownership is the additional control afforded to the council as landlord under the terms of the lease, which guarantees that the land remains in use for agricultural purposes," the report states.

As part of the option of SWT managing the site would be the trust establishing a new grazing project at Tyting Farm.

With the possibility of the council backing SWT with a 50-year lease on the farm, it could also be open to the charity to sub-let the land to a farmer.

Guildford Council has also revealed that interest in Tyting Farm has come from a newly formed group called the Halow Project.

With the aim of becoming a registered charity, the Halow Project is a group of parents of children with special needs, who would use the farm as a site for assisted living for young adults with special needs.

Discussions have taken place between the Halow Project and SWT with a view to a possible collaboration.

However, lawyers within the council raised the prospect that leasing the farm to SWT with a peppercorn rent could fall foul of European laws.

Legislation agreed in Brussels could be breached,

according to the council report, if it was leased at a low rent without advertising it and allowing fair competition.

Described as state aid, the law does not necessarily apply in schemes to restore existing monuments and landmarks of cultural and historical value.

"The Tyting Farm proposals would appear to satisfy these conditions," the council report explains. "It is one of the few farms in the areas which reflect farming as it was in the 1940s."

"In the circumstances, it is considered that the reasonableness of such a conclusion is unlikely to be successfully challenged."

In its bid to sell off the site, the council has been faced with an ever-growing pressure

group, the Save Tyting Farm Campaign. Last month the Tory Executive stepped back from a decision to sell while other avenues were explored, including a deal with SWT.

Barbara Winkworth, secretary of the Save Tyting Farm Campaign said she was pleased so much progress had been made with the SWT proposal in just six weeks.

"Having the SWT plans going to the council is a huge improvement," she added.

"SWT have a fantastic track record with a variety of projects and the campaign is really hopeful the Executive will come to the right decision."

The council's Executive meeting is on Thursday at 7pm at Millmead.