

# Tyting Farm gets new lease of life



A campaign to save Tyting Farm from being sold has been won with Guildford Borough Council keeping the freehold.

by Mike Russell

A RUNNING battle to keep a council farm in public ownership has been won after a move to sell it to the private sector was abandoned.

Tyting Farm had been earmarked for sale, either as a whole or in individual plots, since the new year.

However, a group of senior decision-making councillors at Guildford Borough Council performed a u-turn last week and research is being conducted into renting the farm with the authority keeping the freehold.

Although the process for how the land will be put up for rent is not yet clear, front runners to take on Tyting Farm are Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT) and county farmer Laurence Matthews.

A SWT project at the farm wedged between St Marthas and Newlands Corner could see around 20 to 30 cattle grazing the land.

SWT has also pledged to make

a variety of environmental, wildlife and countryside improvements to the land while paying a peppercorn rent.

Although run as a charity with the aim of conserving wildlife and countryside in Surrey, Jill Barton from SWT told a meeting of Guildford council's Executive on Thursday last week that Tyting Farm would remain true to its roots under the trust's plan.

"Our aim is to work with the council to keep it as a farm," she explained. "It's vital we keep farmers in Surrey."

Part of any SWT project could see some of the land sublet to a farmer.

Meanwhile, Mr Matthews, one of Surrey's most successful farmers, is likely to graze around 80 cattle, possibly more, and run Tyting Farm as part of his agricultural business which also operates in other parts of the county.

Mr Matthews could offer

conservation benefits at Tyting Farm as he already runs six environmental projects.

His is the latest offer away from a sale of the site to have been made to the council.

Mr Matthews' track record in farming and what he could achieve at Tyting Farm has been praised by National Farmers' Union South East regional director William White.

Andy Marshall, chairman of the Surrey County Agricultural Society, also praised Mr Matthews' farming ability at the council meeting.

He also pushed hard for those at the head of agriculture in Surrey to be given an equal opportunity.

"I would ask you (the council) to be prepared to allow interested farmers to outline

their proposals," Mr Marshall added.

Since Tyting Farm was threatened with being sold, a large campaign group has built up with the aim of preventing the move, which could have seen the land offloaded for around £2.25 million.

Chairman of the Save Tyting Farm Campaign, John Rigg, described staving off the sale in favour of a lease as a fantastic outcome.

"Surrey Wildlife Trust and Laurence Matthews, a highly respected and successful local farmer, both put forward really exciting proposals to completely restore and renovate the farm and keep it in farming," Mr Rigg said.

"Obviously we will keep a careful eye on the progress of any lease negotiations."

## Interested tenants press for action plan

THE fairest way that Tyting Farm can be put up for rent will be examined this week.

Straight after the meeting which spared the farm from being sold, concern was raised that a process for it to be leased needed to be put in place.

A move by Lib Dem councillor Vivienne Johnson to "call in" the Tyting Farm decision means other councillors will get the chance to examine how a leasing process will run.

As chairman of the Community Development Scrutiny Committee, Cllr

Johnson has said "further clarification is needed of the decision, the objectives and the process if the council is to achieve its aims for the farm".

Surrey farmer Laurence Matthews said he would be keen to take on a lease to farm the land.

"The council needs to make it clear what it would be looking for out of any lease arrangement," Mr Matthews said.

"I'm definitely interested in leasing the farm but so far it seems to be wrong to me that the council has only been talking

exclusively to Surrey Wildlife Trust regarding any lease or tenancy arrangements."

With the prospect of the farm being sold removed, Jill Barton from Surrey Wildlife Trust said it would hold discussions this week about its bid for the lease.

"We want to start pulling together our ideas as soon as possible," she added.

The Community Development Scrutiny Committee was due to meet last night (Thursday) to discuss how the lease process should proceed.