



PUCKLECHURCH PARISH COUNCIL

POSITION PAPER/POLICY ON LEIGH FARMS

Pucklechurch parish council resolved to adopt this proposal as a position paper/policy and to encourage South Gloucestershire Council (SGC) to protect and use Leigh Farm 1 to help address its commitment to climate change through the development of its wildflower/hay meadows and by creating a woodland to provide a wildlife haven.

South Gloucestershire Council (SGC) have ended the tenancy agreements on Leigh Farms 1 & 2 and have placed the lands (but not the buildings) in the hands of agents for short term lease which it was argued represents both a threat to our parish and a lost opportunity both to SGC and to the parish.

SGC have pledged in recent years to address climate change and ensure our natural environments are protected for future generations. In July 2019, SGC declared a Climate Emergency claiming it would be become carbon neutral by 2030. This will require SGC “to deliver larger reductions at a faster scale than the UK as a whole” (South Gloucestershire Council Climate Emergency University Advisory Group Review of Year One of the Climate Emergency Action Plan 2020).

As well as carbon neutral, SGC pledged to ensure nature is more protected, connected and healthy and that biodiversity is increased and the tree canopy doubled by 2030. Since then, the draft ‘Green Infrastructure Strategy’ (2021) talks of a vision to improve the environment, creating more habitat for nature with:

- habitats for pollinating insects who we need to pollinate our crops and fruit trees
- space for nature to thrive
- natural flood management

whilst the ‘Greener Places’ consultation is predicated on ‘greener places where people and nature thrive’ by protecting and restoring nature and valuing healthy landscapes.

The damaging impact of climate change needs urgent immediate action. The IPCC report shows the extent of how human-induced climate change is already affecting climate extremes in every region across the globe with unprecedented and in some cases ‘irreversible’ changes occurring. In all likelihood, global warming will increase temperatures by 1.5C imminently with fires, droughts and severe flooding all increasing.



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However, whilst on one hand SGC may be expressing commendable green aspirations, on the other hand it is quietly undermining its green credentials by potentially looking to sell off/develop/over-look one of its fantastic natural resources.

Leigh Farm I & II, at Leigh Lane, Pucklechurch BS37 8RE is grade 2 and 3 agricultural land (total area 224.56 ac / 90.87 Ha) distributed on both sides of the M4 motorway. This land has been included in the call for sites reference SG845 <https://hosted.southglos.gov.uk/callforsites/SG845.pdf> as a potential area for development (Residential, residential – self-build and custom-build, office, research & development, light industrial (B1), general industrial (B2) / warehousing (B8), sports / leisure, gypsy and travellers / travelling show-people sites and others. The accompanying comments state “Future stakeholder engagement to identify appropriate uses and development. Opportunities to explore positive impacts on environmental, green infrastructure and climate emergency projects in line with the Councils Climate Emergency Declaration and initiatives and to explore provision for some of the new homes and jobs needed in South Gloucestershire”.

Whilst it could be argued that this is all tentative and subject to consultation, it demonstrates that SGC may not realise the true value of one of its assets and is prepared to seriously consider releasing this land for what would be short-term gains whereas this could be a fantastic asset in the fight against climate change and real gem that should be nurtured and protected for wildlife for the long term.

According to the SGC Landscape Character Assessment Area 6 for Pucklechurch Ridge and Boyd Valley, these fields are part of a patchwork of calcareous and neutral grassland supporting a diverse range of flora and areas of species-rich grassland and form the setting for the western edge of the Cotswold AONB. Much of the land on the Pucklechurch side is maintained as hay meadow.

An estimated 98% of British hay meadows has been lost since the Second World War. These figures are supported by The National Trust and Plantlife who stress having lost over 97% of wildflower meadows since the 1930s, we need to appreciate “the incredible value of flower-rich meadows and pastures – for livestock, for wildlife and for us – and recognise their breath-taking beauty” (Good meadow guide 2021). The Natural History Museum also highlights how farming, building, industry and road networks have “made the UK one of the most nature-depleted countries in Europe” (Davis 2020) reducing the wildlife to a point hardly seen elsewhere and just how important it is to protect species-rich landscapes.



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Leigh Farm has benefitted from “under-investment” (meaning farming methods have not really changed for decades) and thus on a warm evening walk, the whole area erupts with butterflies, moths and grasshoppers in season. It is worthwhile also making a comparison with another local asset, the National Trust’s Whitefield flower meadow at Dyrham Park, which shows what could be achieved if SGC was minded to aspire to be a trail blazer for nature. It too could have meadows with “orchids, daisies, clover, wild grasses from late May, June and early July” which is when meadows like Whitefield are at their finest (there may not be orchids in these fields yet but there are orchids in the parish council woodland just across the road).

As has already been mooted, in the fields adjacent to M4 on the Westerleigh side there is the potential to contribute to SGC’s commitment to developing renewable energy generation for the community using solar PV and wind. A scheme was forwarded a while ago to develop a solar farm here, so we should encourage SGC to show ambition and re-investigating if this land is suitable for local energy generation? All of the issues raised can directly contribute to targets within the Climate Emergency strategy 2020-2030 by unlocking the great potential to restore nature to:

- showcase what SGC can do with its own land to enhance bio-diversity by using Leigh Farm for nature recovery.
- complement projects such as the restoration pilot on Westerleigh Common rather than just being an aim the action plan or a policy statement.
- improve local habitat, preventing the loss of key wildlife
- protect and restoring landscapes including meadows
- increase the amount of land managed to benefit nature and biodiversity,
- create nature networks which enable nature to thrive and withstand other changes
- support pollinating insects and other wildlife,
- ensure land management to benefit nature.

Above all, these actions to help the natural world in turn help us, who are all guardians of this beautiful landscape. We all need to protect, preserve and maybe even re-wild Leigh Farm for both nature and for future generations. Another treasure within this farmland is the thick, overgrown hedges and frequent hedgerow trees between fields, which provide protection to a range of mammals, springtime nesting and wintertime foraging opportunities for farmland birds, and connectivity between wooded areas on the Pucklechurch Ridge and in the Boyd Valley. Indeed, in season the fields are awash with butterflies including meadow and woodland brown, brimstone, marble and large white, peacock, painted ladies and common blue. Dragonflies can also often be seen. In addition, there is a small herd of deer,



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buzzards and kestrels (and one hunting red kite) and foxes. There are badgers in the area and owls can be heard. In these and surrounding fields larks are seen, heard and nest! One of the smaller fields is less diverse, indeed one corner acts as a sump and the small pool grows to collect flood water during periods of heavy rain. The rest of this field which is adjacent to the remains of Peg Lane could easily be a location for a small woodland where substantial tree planting is possible to contribute to carbon capture. Although it is now acknowledged that rich wildflower meadows are as efficient a carbon sink as woodland.

SGC claim to be aware that areas such as this matter to people. Jon Munslow's presentation to the Town and Parish Forum January 2021 on Greener Places South Gloucestershire Green Infrastructure Strategy included public comments:

"I am concerned for loss of wildlife habitat, love seeing birds and wildflowers"

"Make sure, as far as possible, that areas of green space including fields, woods, paths, rivers and trackways, are safeguarded"

"We could do with more green spaces, for them to be looked after and to have more trees."

"Last year during the covid lock-down the number of butterflies was the highest I've seen for years. This was mainly due to the meadow areas not being cut - something that should be encouraged wherever possible"

"Can't emphasise enough that the protection of green space is so important to residents and employees of local business"

Here is a great site and a fantastic opportunity for both SGC and Pucklechurch pc to be a trailblazer and exemplar councils where they can lead, enable and inspire and put words into actions and demonstrate SGC's commitment to:

- Responding to the nature crisis and climate emergency
- Conserving and enhancing our landscape, heritage and culture
- Working together.



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