



Worcestershire
Wildlife Trust

Lower Smite
Farm, Smite Hill,
Hindlip, Worcester
WR3 8SZ

13.8.2026
Jamie Sloan
Corporate Policy Officer
Wyre Forest District Council
Wyre Forest House
Finepoint Way
Kidderminster
DY11 7WF
By email to jamie.sloan@wyreforestdc.gov.uk.

Dear Jamie,

RE: Notice of Proposed Disposal of Open Space - Land: Local Government Act 1972, section 123(1) and (2A)

Proposed disposal of areas of land forming part of Burlish Country Park (also known as Burlish Meadows) by way of freehold to Kidderminster Harriers Football Club to enable an expansion of the provision of football pitches.

Set out below is our response to the proposed disposal of part of Burlish Meadows. The Trust objects most strongly to this proposal and we wish to make clear that we have also had an exceptional number of contacts from local residents and Trust members, all of whom have expressed similar concerns. Worcestershire Wildlife Trust believes that no part of Burlish Meadows should be for sale.

We were pleased to secure meetings with Ian Miller, the Chief Executive of Wyre Forest District Council and, subsequently, with Ostap Paparega, Deputy Chief Executive and councillors Marcus Hart and David Ross, to discuss this matter. Sadly, these discussions did not allay our fears for the future of the site or deliver any meaningful security in terms of likely protections for the wildlife currently present on the meadows. We have also raised these issues with the local MP, Mark Garnier, and explained the extent and substance of our concerns.

At this point we wish to make it absolutely clear we are not in any way anti-football nor do we wish to hamper the Harriers progress or overall plans for expansion. However, Burlish Meadows is not the correct location for development. The specific issues we wish to raise at this consultation stage are set out below. We will have a wider range of objections should the proposal progress to a planning application, as set out in the Cabinet paper recommendations. At present we wish to object on the following grounds.



1. Burlish Meadows are incredibly important to both wildlife and people and yet the Council's approach and the comments we heard in the July Cabinet meeting and our own conversations, appear to undermine that to a significant degree. The area proposed for disposal has exceptional intrinsic value as acid grassland, one of the rarest habitats in the county. It will have a range of associated species that are likely to be of restricted distribution and so the loss of any part of the site, regardless of size would be significant. The loss of 21% (8.5ha) is, therefore, of a scale that should not be seen as limited, small or insignificant, which is very much how it seems to be perceived by councillors and senior managers at the Council. The impact of any future development here would be stark and we encourage all councillors to visit the site before making a decision.

In this context, it is an important foundational ecological theory that larger areas of habitat are more resilient to pressures than smaller ones. Eroding the overall block of habitat in this area would, therefore, be a serious and retrograde step, especially considering the ongoing efforts to continue its improvement. Yet this has been seriously underplayed in both the July Cabinet paper and subsequent councillor comments.

Should the Council be minded to progress with the disposal process, we recommend that additional ecological survey work be done to robustly determine the importance of the site prior to moving forward. Doing so would help to demonstrate that the Council is serious about the biodiversity commitments set out in the Cabinet paper from section 4.14 onwards. We are astonished that para 4.15 starts with the line *'At this stage it is not entirely clear how the proposed disposal of the site for KHFC's proposed development would contribute to the achievement of the general biodiversity objective'*. This is a legislative requirement covering all public body decisions and, in this case, the proposed disposal. The Council cannot leave consideration of this point until a later planning application and so further consideration must be given to this aspect of the proposed disposal now. We recommend that this be revisited in detail before the Council progresses to the next stage. Failure to be clear on this point may expose the Council to risks in terms of its failure to properly implement its legal obligations.

Furthermore, Burlish Meadows also acts as an important recreational space, taking pressure off more ecologically sensitive features at Burlish Top Local Nature Reserve (LNR) and the Site of Special Scientific interest (SSSI) complex at the Rifle Range and The Devil's Spittleful nature reserves. It is our view that the scale of loss anticipated in the proposed disposal would have an impact on current site users, potentially leading more of them to visit the SSSI/LNR. This may result in deleterious impacts on the SSSI/LNR complex, which would need to be considered. No meaningful thought appears to have been given to this so far even though the Council, as a S28 Authority under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/69/section/28G>), has a statutory duty to consider the impacts of their actions on SSSIs. Further work on this is required prior to progressing the disposal to meet the requirements of the legislation. Any failure to rigorously consider potential effects would be a serious flaw in the current disposal process that may well mean the Council is unable to meet its statutory obligations. Importantly, this is not a matter that can be left to a planning application, which is a separate decision-making process and which should not be used to abdicate responsibility here.

Notwithstanding the commentary set out above, we also wish to state that we are not persuaded by the Council's proposals for offsetting ecological harm through a subsequent planning application. It seems very likely to us that offsite Biodiversity Net Gain will be required alongside on-site mitigation in line with the planning process. However, it is certain that replacing lost areas of acid grassland is extremely challenging as it requires the right soil, landscape and management to be effective. There are very limited opportunities for meaningful compensation offsite and even fewer that are nearby. This has meaningful implications for the principle of disposal, which should not leave consideration of such important matters to a later stage. Similarly, though WFDC propose to deposit receipts from the sale of the land into their Evergreen Investment Fund, we have no certainty over how this would be spent. The fund may be disbursed for a range of uses, which may include but would not necessarily be ring-fenced for acid grassland restoration or improvement. Furthermore, the point was made to us in at our meeting with councillors that they cannot fetter or predict future councillor decisions. As a result, there can be no certainty about future disbursement of funds, which would be required to partially offset harm resulting from this disposal.

2. Significant public money has been spent on this site since 2019. This has been used to create freely accessible public open space that is increasingly important for nature and for visitors. Support through Worcestershire County Council and Worcestershire Wildlife Trust's Natural Networks programme offered both grant funding (amounting to circa £10,000 according to para 5.1 of the associated Cabinet report) and extensive staff time to support this work. Natural Networks has very few examples of site owners reneging on agreements to continue management after site enhancements have been implemented. We therefore consider the proposed disposal of this land for development to be a gross breach of trust between our organisations. It is agreed at the point of grant that owners will manage their Natural Networks land for 10 years and so we cannot believe that the Wyre Forest DC, who should be among the most trustworthy of partners, is proposing to step away from that agreement at this point. We are also of the view that doing so severely undermines the excellent efforts of the Council's own staff, who have been instrumental in managing the site to a high standard and helping turn it into the valuable asset it is today. More detail celebrating the importance of the site can be found in the Council's own web pages at <https://www.wyreforestdc.gov.uk/things-to-see-do-and-visit/countryside-and-nature/nature-reserves/burlish-meadows/> and our case study at <https://www.worcswildlifetrust.co.uk/burlish-golf-course-natural-networks> and it seems perverse for the Council to undo this work now. While there is mention of a potential need to repay grant money in the Cabinet paper seen by councillors this is only part of the consideration. We recommend that for this reason, if no other, the matter is discussed by the full Council rather than just Cabinet. It is clear that the Cabinet members have expressed views in favour of the disposal but wide-ranging issues like the reputation of the Council deserve the involvement of all councillors.
3. While our primary focus is on the biodiversity implications of the proposed disposal it is also important to reflect on the importance of the site for local people. The volume of comments on social media and in response to news and blogs about this matter have demonstrated that this free and accessible open green space is highly valued by the local community. We commend the efforts of Friends of Burlish Meadows, Stourport Civic Society, West Midlands Butterflies

and Moths Society, Plantlife and others to raise awareness and help concerned residents to provide effective comments to this consultation.

The site clearly delivers a wide range of physical, mental health and wellbeing benefits to many and it is very difficult to see why this value has not been more rigorously considered. This contrasts with the weight given to the health benefits of the Kidderminster Harriers proposal that were set out in cabinet papers with no counterbalancing consideration of the negative impact on health and wellbeing of losing areas of public green space. While further work could be completed prior to a planning application, we are of the view that the site's health and community value should be considered properly now. It is a fundamental issue that should be weighed in the balance prior to progressing the disposal of public open space for development. Noting that some of the proposed pitches would perhaps be available, they would be unlikely to be free, open at all times or, indeed, of value to all members of the community. Despite their obvious benefits to health, they would not be of commensurate value to freely accessible space that is capable of a range of uses. To suggest that the loss of 21% of Burlish Meadows would have a limited impact and that people would just use other parts of the park without evidence or any on-site consultation to back-up this view is another flaw in the decision-making process. The Council should take a rigorous approach to understanding the current use of the park before councillors vote to progress with the disposal process.

4. Considering the commentary set out in the relevant Cabinet paper and comments made by some councillors at the Cabinet meeting on the 9th of July, we have serious concerns about the relative weight being given to both biodiversity and freely available public access in the Council's deliberations thus far. At a time of biodiversity and climate emergencies, great weight should be placed upon the multiple benefits provided by this land, which is managed as a nature reserve. A loss of 21% is not the small proportion it has been made out to be. 8.5 hectares/20 acres of this important habitat is significant and should not be underestimated. The same can be said for the benefits provided to a diverse range of users, some of whom would not benefit from a change of use to football pitches. These issues are especially telling at a time when local government reorganisation is expected to bring more power to a new North Worcestershire unitary authority. Councillors today must show leadership and commitment to protection of the environment and community assets alongside the need for development in the right place. Community wellbeing and the natural environment underpin economic growth and so cases like this represent fundamental choices about the direction of travel for the north of Worcestershire. We look to councillors to do the right thing and give appropriate weight to these matters.
5. As it stands, the apparent lack of consideration for the environmental benefits also gives rise to serious concerns about the future of other parts of Burlish Meadows. While we have not been informed of any immediate plans to dispose of more land at Burlish Meadows, councillors explained to us that they cannot control decisions made by future members or that of the soon-to-be formed North Worcestershire Unitary Authority. The wider site therefore has no long-term protections and we remain concerned that any disposal of areas at Burlish Meadows would inevitably increase the risk of a larger loss of public green space and rare acid grassland.

6. The Cabinet papers make clear that WFDC has not undertaken any appraisal of other potential options for Kidderminster Harriers to expand their training facilities without leading to the loss of 8.5 hectares of Burlish Meadows. However, other options that are worthy of further investigation were put forward at the meeting by one member of Cabinet. We recommend that WFDC consider a full options appraisal for expanding Kidderminster Harriers training facilities. I have written to Richard Lane, owner of Kidderminster Harriers, through the Club and via LinkedIn requesting a meeting to discuss our concerns. We have not received a reply from Mr Lane to date and so we have been unable to explain our position to him or to see if alternatives can be sought.
7. The Trust is supportive of Stourport Civic Society's decision to register Burlish Meadows as an Asset of Community Value (ACV). Burlish Meadows clearly meets the ACV definition due to its public access and public use that many people benefit from. We were surprised, however, to discover that WFDC believe that the Notice of Proposed Disposal of Open Space Land is sufficient to trigger the initial six-week protected period under the ACV legal provisions.

This decision by WFDC has been taken despite it being said many times by various WFDC sources that the final decision has not yet been made. It is also unclear how this decision responds to the duty of WFDC to consider all feedback before making a final decision. It was also surprising to see how quickly the application from Stourport Civic Society to register Burlish Meadows as an ACV was approved. This process can take up to eight weeks and often takes all or most of this permitted time due to the processes required within Local Authorities to assess and approve applications to list ACV. WFDC will be no doubt be aware that the Community Right to Bid, originally legislated through the Localism Act 2021, is in the process of being strengthened through the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 and extended powers are due to be in place in a matter of weeks. While now law, the extended powers that will give eligible groups one year, extended from six months, to raise funds to save at risk ACV have not yet been brought into force. This exacerbates concern that this process is being rushed through and that the decision to dispose of 8.5 hectares of Burlish Meadows has largely been made.

It would be helpful for the Council to clarify whether the knowledge of ACV powers being extended was a factor in WFDC's unusually fast turnaround of Stourport Civic Society's application. Furthermore, it would be helpful to understand whether the usual process within WFDC had to be shortened or amended to achieve a faster decision.

In view of the objections set out above we strongly believe that the Council should abandon the proposed disposal of this land at the earliest opportunity. However, if having considered our comments, Cabinet is still minded to progress with the process, it will be essential to gather considerably more information to underpin any final decision. Failure to effectively respond to the statutory obligations set out above would be a serious matter that the Council would obviously wish to avoid. That being the case we would anticipate a delay and further consultation prior to Cabinet's decision.

In either case, we would like to reserve the right to speak to councillors at the Overview and Scrutiny and Cabinet meetings when this matter is debated. In the meantime, I hope that these comments are of use to you. We would be pleased to discuss any of the

issues raised in our response so please do not hesitate to contact the Trust if we can be of further assistance.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Mike Perry', with a stylized, cursive script.

Mike Perry
Chief Executive
Worcestershire Wildlife Trust