

Weston Big Wood Ecology Appraisal

The land surrounding Weston Big Wood (WBW) continues to be a target for housing developers with nearly all parcels of land having a developer interest attached to them. In recent time we have witnessed survey activity around Tower Farm and drainage exploration work on the Clevedon Road fields.

Weston Big Wood is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and the surrounding land is designated as Green Belt so has a high level of protection from development. Despite this, developers continue to lobby NSC hard to make exceptions within the Green Belt, with expensively put together reports attempting to justify their case.

Current Government Planning Policy is to protect the Green Belt but given the UK-wide housing shortage there is always a risk that the Government position could change.

The view of the vast majority of the local community, expressed through various consultations, is that WBW, a woodland since the last ice age, and its surrounding area located within the Gordano Valley is a special place with exceptional biodiversity value and should be retained and enhanced as a natural area.

The Portishead Neighbourhood Plan, after consultation with residents, has proposed additional protection for Weston Big Wood in the form of a 150 (one hundred and fifty) metre exclusion buffer around the woods. Current Government Planning Legislation only allows for a 15 (fifteen) metre buffer.

However, the biodiversity and habitat data needed to justify a 150-metre buffer and protection of buffer zones and wildlife corridors to link to the wider Gordano Valley and its protected sites is out of date. The last full ecology study of the Gordano Valley was carried out in 1988 by Avon Wildlife Trust.

To firstly prove the importance of Weston Big Wood and the vital role it plays in maintaining the integrity of the wider Gordano valley and secondly provide the basis for a comparison with the situation described in the 1988 report, PTC has requested a number of Ecology companies, recommended by Avon Wildlife Trust (who do not have the resource to do this type of study themselves) to provide an ecology appraisal of WBW and the wider area to include:

- Assessment and justification of the most suitable buffer zone
- Analysis of the interconnections of WBW to other SSSI's and nationally important habitats
- A strategic level assessment of the wider area and connectivity between the protected sites in the area. (SAC's, SPA's, Ramsar, SSI's and LNR's)
- The impact of previous development on the ecology of the area
- Mapping the habitat within the areas in scope.

Three Companies were asked to tender. One of them undertook a three-hour site visit accompanied by two local experts on the area, Peter Burden and Chris Sperring along with Cllr Paul Gardner. The other two companies despite several chasers each, declined to attend a site visit or send a proposal. We only have one quote to review.

PTC has previously budgeted £20,000 for this work in FY22-23. The quote received is for £9290. It fully meets requirements articulated.

Circa £10k of funding is available should there be a need for more detailed follow up work in certain areas as a result of the report received.

If approved, work would be carried out in Autumn 2022.

Paul Gardner August 2022