

30.04.2021



Statement on the Gomm Valley,
Wycombe, Buckinghamshire

Developer Human Nature says the Gomm Valley should be re-wilded and turned into a nature reserve

Developer Human Nature - the principal architect, promoter and prospective development partner to landowner Aviva for a sustainable new community in the 70 hectare Gomm Valley in Wycombe - today announced that its partner had decided to sell its land, without conditions, to an anonymous PLC. This is after four years crafting an extremely sensitive eco-development, bespoke to the valley, with a planning application submitted and awaiting determination.

Human Nature stated that with Aviva deciding to extract as much money as possible from the scheme for its land and selling to the highest bidding non-values-driven developer, there is now little or no prospect of a bespoke elegant solution for a genuinely sustainable community in the last unbuilt Chiltern Valley in Wycombe.

Human Nature, today called for the valley to be re-wilded and turned into a nature reserve for the regeneration of important chalk grassland and woodland habitats, for wildlife and as a biodiverse new parkland for the enjoyment of local people.

On 25th April, Aviva CEO Amanda Blanc wrote to inform Human Nature that her colleagues in Aviva Investors had decided to sell its land in the valley, without conditions, to an anonymous development PLC. This was despite a counter offer made by Human Nature and contrary to assurances given over many years to local people and organisations that this project was, for once, not simply a land speculation.

Jonathan Smales, CEO of Human Nature said, "this brings to an end a four year exercise in which we and a group of highly dedicated, expert, passionate and deeply thoughtful specialists have been immersed in planning and designing with the intent to build a new kind of genuinely sustainable development. Our

intent has been to house families well while respecting and honouring the valley setting and establishing new standards of ecological, low impact design across the entire scheme. Our team is heartbroken.

"Our proposals included the regeneration of precious chalk grassland, the planting of thousands of semi-mature trees, protecting ancient woodland and the Site of Special Scientific Interest, securing long term management through a local trust, making beautiful walkable streets that wind slowly along the contours of the valley and with a cycle lane for children rather than building a race-track for through traffic, and designing and building a wide range of elegant zero carbon homes for people of all backgrounds and incomes.

"While the scheme as proposed is profitable, the costs of achieving this level of sustainability meant that the future land receipt to Aviva was, while still substantial, less than it had originally hoped for. They called on us to cut cost allocations for these essential landscape and ecological features and dumb down the public realm – streets, public spaces and facilities - so that they could make more money. But the Gomm Valley is no normal 'development' site, nor do we live in normal times - we face a climate emergency and a crisis in the natural world. This is not a place, or a time, for the crass land speculation this now appears to be.

"We believe that we and our team have been used as a Trojan Horse, our values abused, our promises to and bonds with local organisations and people broken, so that Aviva can wash its hands of a challenging scheme and pocket the cash under cover of what it calls its 'fiduciary duty' to its own investors. We think their investors should be horrified. The banal and abstract nature of the term 'fiduciary duty', wielded by real estate bureaucrats from a tower in Central London, belies a cynical manoeuvre without a thought for the valley, the climate, nature, people who live nearby and the people who might live there in the future."

Human Nature believes that duties to the environment generally, to the Gomm Valley in particular, and to public trust have to outweigh narrow, short term financial gain. Aviva itself appears to agree though only in principle.

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Joanna Yarrow of Human Nature said, "it is preposterous in this day and age and in particular after everything that Aviva has said about sustainability, for them to then separate their Environmental and Social Governance (ESG) rhetoric and commitments from their appetite to cash-in at the expense of a fragile and beautiful valley.

"Steve Waygood, Head of Responsible Investment at Aviva Investors, speaks of, 'integrating ESG factors into every investment decision...challenging big names... changing the way things are done and pushing targets to be more ambitious...turning talk into action'. Moreover, he argues for the need, 'to get capital flowing in the right direction so that it actually rewards companies that are more sustainable'. He even makes a case for 're-thinking capitalism'.

Now is the time to translate those fine words from strategy documents and conferences and put them into practice: time for Steve to roll up his sleeves with his real estate and development colleagues to transform their culture and how they operate. Unless and until he does, they will continue with their carefree destructive practice."

After years of working on the economic appraisal for the Gomm Valley, Human Nature believes that with Aviva planning to take so much money out of the scheme for its land, there is now almost no prospect of the bespoke, elegant and genuinely sustainable development, with the corresponding investment in the landscape and habitats, promised to Wycombe planners and communities.

There is still less prospect of a unique approach to the design and durable quality of sympathetic, adaptable, long-life, low carbon homes. **And therefore Human Nature calls upon Aviva to do the right thing - before the legals complete on its sale to its anonymous PLC buyer - and abandon the sale of the Gomm Valley and instead make a gift of the land to local and regional conservation charities.**

There are many brilliant local environmental and conservation groups active in the area, such as the

Chiltern Rangers, the Wildlife Trust and the Chiltern Society and Conservation Board. They have the ability and expertise to re-wild the valley creating a beautiful resource for wildlife to thrive and local people to enjoy. If Aviva or the new owner refuse to do this, Human Nature believes the public authorities should obligate them to do so in policy, or instead locate new homes where anything-goes, business-as-usual, development by volume housebuilders will do less harm.

Human Nature sees this as a missed opportunity for a benchmark development in the county and pretty much anywhere else: housing families in potentially 'the greenest and most elegant new settlement in England'. This opportunity appears to have passed and the local community that has been so roundly betrayed must dig in, as will Human Nature, to prevent a disastrous fate for the last unbuilt Chiltern Valley in Wycombe.

*Jonathan Smales & Michael Manolson
Founders, CEO and Chairman*

*Human Nature
77 High Street
Lewes
East Sussex
BN7 1XN*

*Contact: Jonathan Smales 07968 190560
Jonathan@humannature-places.com*

*Contact: Chelsea Renton 07818 064456
chelsea.renton@humannature-places.com*