



Stroud Common Wealth Community Farm Land Trust Project

Case Study

Wye Community Farm

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Summary

This case study shows how hard it is for even a well resourced, connected and professionally highly competent potential community farm land trust to lease or buy land. Sheer dogged determination has led to the founding of Wye Community Farm with grazing rights on the Downs as a practical way forward, laying the basis of a community farm business that can later lease charitable owned land, or purchase. The recent Big Lottery Local Food Programme allows grants of up to £350,000 for land purchase, which could be very timely help for such projects.

Story: The trigger and the community's response

When Imperial College took over Wye College, Kent, its attempts to develop the historic Wye College Farm in an AONB under the North Downs for upmarket housing was defeated by local people and Wye alumni from all over the world. The Wye Community Land Trust, trading as Wye Community Farm (WCF), was formed in 2007 to make a bid for the tenancy of the Wye College farmland. This bid, though backed by a comprehensive farm business plan and 1,200 supporters, was unsuccessful against local agribusiness bids. One person described their outrage and sense of loss as follows:

'The cows have now gone, replaced by rows of machinery awaiting the dispersal sale on 22 September. For the next 10 years the 650 acres the WCF tendered for will be in continuous arable production, farmed from a distance, with not a soul on the farm from one day to the next. This industrialisation of another small corner of UK agriculture can be seen as Imperial College London's farewell gift to Wye, society's just reward for demanding "cheap" food, or both.'

The WCF steering group, consisting of local residents and Wye alumni, put together a bold community bid and thorough business plan for the 758acre (307Ha) tenancy. Projected activities included: direct sales of farm produce, both through in-house businesses (e.g. milk processing and bottling) and partnership arrangements with local farms. School visits, vocational training, and volunteering opportunities. Agri-

environment schemes and public access programmes – the entire farm is in the North Downs AONB.

However, the enthusiasm and support for continuing the project was so strong – with over 1,200 people pledging support – that the WCF directors and steering group sought other land on which they might set up a community farm.

January 2008 update

In January 2008, the WCF received confirmation that it would be given the grazing rights to land on the National Nature Reserve (NNR) on the edge of the North Downs overlooking Wye, about a mile-and-a-half from the centre of the village. The 40 acres of land have very high wildlife and amenity value, and include the iconic Devil's Kneading Trough. The WCF is planning, at first, to keep around 12 cattle on the land.

While the agreement is of a much smaller scale than the WCF's original Wye College plan, it gives the organisation a chance to "get mud on its boots," and to get the feel – without a large initial investment – of running a community farm. The grazing agreement also enables the WCF to pursue all of the organisation's primary objectives set out in 2007, namely:

- Supporting a wide range of agricultural enterprises, producing 'local food for local people'.
- Managing the land sympathetically to protect and enhance Wye's biodiversity and landscape quality.
- Providing employment, training and volunteering opportunities.
- Forming close links with schools and acting as an 'outdoor classroom'.

It was originally planned that the WCF would be funded primarily through the sale of shares. Since the NNR grazing project will not require a large amount of capital, the funds needed are being raised through donations and interest-free loans.

The WCF hopes to expand its operations over the next few years, and will, when necessary, look again at issuing shares in the enterprise.

Organisation

WCF Limited has been incorporated as an Industrial and Provident Society (IPS) for the benefit of the community, regulated under the Industrial and Provident Societies Acts 1965-2003.

There is a steering group, drawn from a wide variety of local organisations, the community, and with people with a variety of relevant skills, including as of January 2008, Richard Bartley, Richard Boden, Jasper Bouverie, Jamie Clifford, Paul Cobb, Sean Furey, Tammy Furey, Jeff Higgins, Richard Honey, Mark Hudson, Jim Little, Martin Mackey, Graham Potts, Chris Reynolds, Jonathan Spencer, David Terry, Louise Tonkin, Dan Tuson, Phil Ward. (All acting in an individual capacity. Chairman: Dr Jonathan Spencer. Patron: Amanda Cottrell. Partner and supporting organisations include the Kent Downs AONB Unit and the Kent branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE Kent).

Finances

The Wye Community Farm has received financial support from the Kent Downs AONB unit, CPRE Kent and Kent County Council, as well as a very large number of individual donors. What are the intended benefits WCF will offer?

The WCF wants to reconnect people to the landscape which has sustained them for millennia. By establishing a community farm, however small, we can get local people involved in producing food, provide tours for schoolchildren and look after the wildlife and landscape quality of a truly stunning part of Kent's countryside. We are looking at various sites on which the WCF might expand its operations in the future, both with livestock and arable farming. In the meantime, after 14 months of work we are extremely glad to be actively farming the land.

Learning

1. The tremendous response of 1,200 people from the locality, throughout the UK and worldwide who were prepared to buy shares in the original community farm bid for Wye College Farm is an indication of both people's affection for the farm, the strength of feeling to develop a community accessible farm, and to reconnect with local food growing.
2. The WCLT bid failed because of the hostile attitude of the owners, Imperial College London, its lack of vision, and the fact that the diversified, sustainable community farm proposal was outbid in financial terms. Highest price for bids will usually win out against highest food, community, heritage, soil-fertility preservation, educational, historical and farming value under the current British system.
3. For the steering group, the experience of putting together a bid for the farm – as well as promoting it to the local and wider population and incorporating the organisation as an IPS – was extremely valuable. When the WCF is in a position to expand to the extent that shares need to be issued and large sums raised, the steering group will be able to plan and promote the enterprise in the most effective way possible.

If you support the Wye Community Farm's vision and have not yet registered your interest, please do so by contacting us:
info@wyecommunityfarm.org.uk or online at:
www.wyecommunityfarm.org.uk

Resources

1. Wye Community Farm is incorporated as an IPS for Community Benefits: for legal structure and articles see website.
2. For 2007 Wye College Farm Business Plan see www.wyecommunityfarm.org.uk
3. www.cprekent.org.uk www.kentdowns.org.uk
4. Blog
5. Articles:

<http://www.fwi.co.uk/Articles/2007/06/22/104653/farmers-urged-to-back-wye-college-farm-tenancy-bid.html>

<http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2007/09/380626.html>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wye>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/kent/6987992.stm>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2007/jul/11/food.environment>