

# Lower Cwm Harry Land Trust

## Summary

A successful Community Composting Scheme, based on collections of material from residents of Newtown in Powys, sought to find a way to utilise its main product - compost. Through a CSA approach, they complete the loop by providing food, back to residents in the town. Started in spring 2001 the CSA is still very small and has had to overcome major difficulties caused by Foot and Mouth Disease in the area.

## Update November 05

Cwm Harry CSA.

Cwm Harry Land Trust runs a CSA around Newtown, Mid Wales; we are coming to the end of our fifth growing season. The project is linked to the Trust's community composting work, so is grounded on a solid base of compost. The 2005 growing season has been supported by 28 shareholders, who make an annual investment in the project in return for their weekly share of the harvest for 26 weeks a year.

Cwm Harry CSA sources vegetables from 4 growing sites in the area. These are Lower Cwm Harry, where the compost is made; an allotment in Newtown with a polytunnel where volunteers produce intensive crops such as tomatoes, lettuce and cucumbers; Pont farm, who plant field scale vegetables alongside their PYO business and a walled garden at Disserth Hall, where most of our beans, courgettes and old Welsh apple varieties were grown this year. This network of producers allows us to spread the risk of crop failures and stagger times when vegetables are ready. It does however increase our transport costs as we gather vegetables for the weekly delivery and forget tools in the wrong places!

The support and commitment of our shareholders and volunteers has been invaluable in developing this project, which has always been restricted by the amount of vegetables we can produce rather than numbers of people willing to commit to the scheme. We are now beginning a waiting list for the 2006 season and hope to be able to produce enough to feed 40 shareholders.

## History

Cwm Harry Land Trust is a small not-for-profit organisation that has been running a community composting scheme for a number of years. An exemption from having to obtain a Waste Management License from the Environment Agency to handle waste came with the prohibition on supplying the finished compost off the site at which it was composted. It was necessary, therefore, to find a way to utilise it on site. In January 2001 a public meeting was called in Newtown, (involving many residents who already participated in the weekly collections of compostable materials) to test the interest in setting up a CSA. Terms of an agreement and the details (including crops and timetables) were negotiated for the first growing season.

The box scheme is now in its third year. The scheme is determined to supply only fruit and vegetables that have been grown locally - it will not supply foreign fruit. Produce is sourced from three growers on four sites. Some of the original customers have left the area, while others have been inspired to start growing their own vegetables.

## Organisation

A core group made up of local individuals. A core group is made up of any shareholders who wish to be involved (5 of the pioneer 13 formed the original core group). The members of the core group are those who want to be on it. There are no elections as such, but with only 9 shareholders at the moment it would be a bit 'top heavy' doing it in a more organisational way. The core group met in December last year to decide this year's programme. It hasn't met since then and is unlikely to meet again till next January.

Overall membership has been capped at 9 this year because most of the group's time has been

devoted to developing the composting scheme. The aim, however, is to expand to 20 members next year. The grower is keen for the CSA not to expand too quickly as it is a learning experience. Shareholders are all local, ranging in age from 20s to 70s, couples and families.

Richard Northridge, the Trust's project development worker, works on its core activities which include composting and the CSA. Audrey Coben is the trustee with responsibility for the CSA, helped by a couple of shareholders.

The group is keen to run the project on an informal basis: members sign a commitment letter on joining. Agreements are reached by shareholders voting on general issues when necessary, whilst day-to-day issues are left to the grower.

If there is to be future expansion, the relationship between the CSA and the land trust which runs the community composting scheme will need to be changed. The question of CSA scheme ownership needs to be addressed. One way forward might be for the land to be owned by the CSA shareholders. This could be done by creating a Community Interest Company (CIC), which was one of the proposed entities in a recent DTI consultation paper [when they become available]. These mimic a limited liability company but have a lock on assets. It should be possible to attract investment into a CIC. It will be ethical equity investment, possibly linked to some grant income to promote healthy lifestyles, ill-health prevention campaigns, etc. . They could rent the land off the Trust, or any other land for that matter, and farm the land according to its wishes. Otherwise an Industrial and Provident Society (IPS) structure, or some equivalent, might be chosen, enabling shareholders to buy shares in the IPS which then buys the land. The key underlying theme here is ownership which implies control. In the observation of Richard Northridge, the private growers/owners of the land they are working want to retain control, which rather leaves the core group or other management body sidelined. The difficulty lies in how to reflect the central element of the CSA model, which is about spreading risk and control between grower and customer in a more equitable legal and organisational structure.

They have a commitment letter which was designed following an American model which prospective shareholders are asked to sign and send in with their money.

### **Finance**

There are nine shareholders, with a core group of 5 to 3 shareholders and 2 growers. Each pay £150 per share in the form of five post-dated cheques. This gives them 30 boxes with a value of £5.

The core group determined the share price of £150 (based on what they felt people can afford to pay). Four posted-dated cheques are required at the time of joining and one dated at the time, which are paid by 5 instalments at agreed times throughout the year. They are made out to the grower directly. This year 9 shares were sold. The plan is for 20 next year. There used to be the option of having only half a share, but that has now been dropped.

Those members who volunteer physically still have to pay the full price, but they try to recognise this work through 'rewarding' them with a little bit of extra produce.

### **Activities**

The first delivery and collection of vegetables was made on 15 June 2001. This was in spite of the fact that Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) on farms in the North Powys hotspot arose from the Welshpool livestock market cluster of infections in which Cwm Harry found itself in the middle. The presence of FMD so close to Cwm Harry meant that many of the CSA's plans had to be altered accordingly. For instance, a good source of labour was withdrawn from the scheme which meant that much of the labouring on the farm fell to members of the core group volunteering their time. The CSA expects to carry on with deliveries of vegetables and fruit, such as potatoes, lettuce, tomatoes, sweetcorn, peas, beans, cucumbers, grapes and herbs for around 30 weeks, depending on conditions.

A newsletter is produced. There have not been any open days, although a Sieve Your Own Compost Day was held on 22 June 2003, which attracted some shareholders and would-be shareholders.

### **Future Plans**

The possibility of changing the set-up of the scheme to a new type of organisation is being investigated, as explained above.

The first year has been an experiment, in difficult circumstances, with many lessons learnt by the grower, the core group and the shareholders. Despite a small waiting list, the grower is resisting the obvious temptation to expand and wishes to focus on improving quality and yields for a relatively small number of shares. It would be too easy, particularly in light of FMD, to over-stretch their capabilities and leave the whole scheme open to failure through raised expectations, whereas by taking it slowly it is hoped that growth will be more natural and stronger for it.

The scheme aims to get better at growing produce. There are plans to expand the box scheme alongside the community composting scheme in 3 to 5 years. Currently there are about 300 houses in the compost scheme. The intention is to cover 5,600 houses with the composting scheme and eventually convert around 10% to the box scheme. The aim is to create a mosaic of micro-composting sites across North Powys on between 6 to 8 farms, each handling no more than about 200 tonnes per year. Some of these farmers may become interested in growing for the CSA, some may see the CSA as an outlet for sales of lamb and beef, which is what most of them farm.

The farmer feels the composting scheme creates a trusted connection with consumers in a related area. The Trust has been exploring links between sustainable management of biodegradable municipal solid waste (in particular garden green waste) and the development of the local food economy. It believes that one can be used to underpin and support the other. Currently, with the effects of the Landfill Directive filtering through to local government and the obligation to divert substantial tonnages from landfill, there is more money coming into waste management budgets than before, some of which might be utilised to support initiatives such as the one run by the Trust. Landfill tax will continue to ratchet up each year to encourage diversion and this is likely to continue into the future.

Open days are planned for the future, once facilities at Lower Cwm Harry improve.

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