



The Community Farm Case study

Introduction

The Community Farm is a Community Benefit Society (CBS), owned and democratically controlled by its members. It currently rents and cultivates 28 acres of land from a local farmer in the Chew Valley between Bristol and Bath. The farm started trading in April 2011 having bought out an existing vegetable growing scheme, box and wholesale business from The Better Food Company, raising the funds to do so through community investment and shares. Through a subsequent share offer they raised an additional £58, 000 for equipment, facilities and educational work.

The team now has 500 members, for whom they hold an annual AGM and Harvest festival.

Through community activities, courses, volunteering opportunities and events local people are enabled to have access to the farm and locally grown organic vegetables and fruit. They now have funding from Esmee Fairburn foundation to employ a Community Farmer who develops training and the volunteering activities.

Getting Started

The motivation to start a CSA came from committed farmer Luke Hasell, and owner of The Better Food Company, Phil Haughton, along with others involved in sustainability and with a passion for transforming farming.

Initial meetings were set up and a steering group formed, consisting of the landowners, growers and local professional people. The project was fortunate enough to receive a £20,000 donation to employ a project officer in June 2010 to launch the share offer and help develop the project. One member of the Board works for the Soil Association, and in the early stages before the CBS was established another Soil Association staff member was involved in establishing the project, so the initial project received strong support and advice on publicity, promotion and general queries.

The steering group worked together with the aim of building social capital for the future and creating a community farm supplying certified organic, local, seasonal produce that has community engagement and environmental sustainability at its heart. The farm's aim was to provide a direct link between the production and consumption of food and create a mutually supportive relationship between local farmers, growers and the diverse range of local communities in the surrounding area.

£126,126 was successfully raised through the launch of a community share offer, which allowed the team to buy out the existing box scheme, growing and wholesale business from The Better Food Company. About three years after the initial idea, the farm began trading.

The project was promoted through local and national networks, information evenings, email, Facebook, websites, local media contacts and coverage on both local television news on BBC and ITV.

Funding and Admin

In addition to the money raised through the initial share offer, the project was given a small grant from Bath & North East Somerset Council for some tools, to run a number of tree grafting events and towards the costs of the Harvest celebration and other events.

The farm are extremely keen to find additional funds in order to bring residents, from the more deprived areas of Bristol and Bath, out to the farm to get involved. This will require partnership working with local groups, organisations and agencies.

The Community Farm received three days of free enterprise support via the Plunkett Foundation through the Making Local Food Work programme, during which a consultant advised on the business plan and the community share offer. Insurance cover is currently through the NFU although membership of the Tenant Farmers Association has recently been taken out so other options for insurance through the TFA are being investigated.

The Board oversees the whole project, and the Chair, a solicitor, has provided legal advice. Financial support is provided through another Board member who works closely with the Operations Director. The Project Director has responsibility for grant applications, promotion and membership.

There is a separate bank account for the money raised through community shares and any funding applications to ensure that this does not get absorbed into day-to-day running costs and is only used for the approved purposes. There is another account for the day-to-day suppliers, staff wages etc.

Legal structure

The Farm is a Community Benefit Society (CBS) incorporated under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 1965. The assistance of Wessex Community Assets was enlisted, who provided advice, support and submitted the application to become a CBS on the Farm's behalf. The cost of registering as a CBS was £500 plus VAT.

Membership

From 18th August 2011 the CSA had 409 founder members who invested in the first community share offer, membership now stands at 500.

Some members volunteer regularly at the farm, or come along to specific volunteer days, some attend events and others are just happy knowing that they are supporting a community project. The work of the volunteers on the farm is essential to support the work of the farm.

Communication is maintained by monthly newsletters which include updates and details of future volunteer days. There are online booking forms and members are able to provide feedback at anytime. Quarterly seasonal newsletters will be produced, and a new website, Facebook page and Twitter page are being created. Although day to day decisions will be made by farm staff and board, strategic decisions will be taken to members for consultation and voting.

Land and produce

Currently 28 acres of land are under cultivation. The land is rented from the farmer with a five year tenancy agreement and the potential to increase this to 10 years. There are 2 large polytunnels and one smaller one, one basic compost loo with plans to build a better facility.

Produce includes organic vegetables and soft fruit. There are plans to plant an orchard and get some sheep - subject to the funds raised through the next share offer.

The core group is looking at agricultural buildings subject to funding and planning permission, but has not yet applied for planning permission for any additional buildings on site.

The main grower is supported by two other growers and a horticultural adviser one day a week. Decisions are made between these people and the Operations Director.

Boxes are delivered to both members and non-members. Non-members do not receive the 10% discount.

Staff

There are now approximately 22 staff (11 FTE). These include; three growers who are employed by the farm, Community Farmer (Esmee funded), trainee mentor and 5 trainees (from disadvantaged backgrounds), Community Learning Officer. All the staff are highly committed and many do more work than their contracted hours. The Board members all work voluntarily and do a substantial amount of voluntary work for the organisation, particularly in promotion. There are regular volunteers at the farm itself and helping out at promotional events.

The CSA pays rent to the landowner giving him a guaranteed income from the land.

Community

The Community farm team is working towards bringing disadvantaged groups out to the farm, to explore the well documented benefits that horticulture and good food have on mental health and general well-being.

There have been lots of community events organised over the past year. An investor day was held in the spring, a midsummer picnic was arranged and a harvest celebration is planned for the autumn. Volunteer days happen regularly throughout the year for smaller numbers of people.

There have been huge benefits all round for the wide variety of people involved. Wildlife surveys were carried out by the Avon Wildlife Trust and the project has a relationship with local transition networks, but this needs to be developed further in Chew Valley, Bristol and Bath.

Achievements, obstacles and future plans

The CSA team view their main accomplishment as the raising of the funds to take over the existing business, and keeping a strong team together to progress the project. They have attracted a good number of members, successfully organised volunteer days, and deliver quality boxes on time every week.

There are ongoing difficulties with the decrease in the number of boxes ordered over the holiday period and also as a result of the recession.

Over the next year the project will develop links with organisations that could benefit from visits to the farm, including schools when facilities allow for this.

The project has worked really hard to engage the community and it has been very successful. There is a lot of enthusiasm for the project reflected in the popularity of the volunteer days, social events and of course initial investment.

www.thecommunityfarm.co.uk

Last updated June 2014