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South Plaza  
Marlborough Street  
Bristol BS1 3NX

t +44 (0)117 314 5000  
www.soilassociation.org

🐦 @SoilAssociation

📘 facebook.com/soilassociation

To whom it may concern

Dear Sir / Madam

## Letter of support for the Ecological Land Cooperative

I write in support of the Ecological Land Cooperative's planning application. I have worked for over five years with the Ecological Land Cooperative, supporting their initial project and collaborating with them on various working groups, initiatives and events to encourage low impact, agro-ecological farming, opportunities for new entrants to farming and access to land and rural housing issues. They are an innovative and proactive organisation that is pioneering new ways of addressing some of the most challenging issues facing the development of better food and farming in the UK.

The Soil Association is pleased to be able to support the Ecological Land Cooperative's proposal for the development of small holdings on the site at Arlington.

The Soil Association is the UK's leading membership charity campaigning for healthy, humane and sustainable food, farming and land use. Our certification body certifies 1800 farms as organic, however we work with farmers across the board to help them reduce their impacts on the environment and to farm in ways that support wildlife, soils, human health and local economies.

Organic and agroecological farming offers a direct connection between our our health and how the food we eat is produced placing a strong emphasis on the protection of wildlife and the environment. It is widely recognised that local and organic farming systems, such as those advocated by the Ecological Land Cooperative provide positive benefits on a wide range of issues, as outlined below.

### Benefits to biodiversity

Organic and low input farming depends on encouraging a diverse ecosystem to maintain soil fertility and to keep pests under control naturally. It does this by encouraging nature's own predators by maintaining hedgerows and creating open, 'wild' spaces at the side of fields, and changing the crops planted each season, to keep soil fertile and avoid the need for chemicals. Organic farming uses mainly natural methods, developing good soil and healthy crops which have a strong natural resistance to pests and diseases.

A *2005 review of studies* found that organic systems have a third more species than non-organic, as well as around 50% more abundant wildlife<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Bengtsson, J., Ahnstrom, J. and Weibull A-C. (2005) 'The effects of organic agriculture on biodiversity and abundance: a meta-analysis' *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 42(2), 461-269

A more recent, 2014 *peer-reviewed meta-analysis*<sup>2</sup> published in the Journal of Applied Ecology reviewed nearly 100 international studies and confirmed that organic farms have on average a third more species, including nearly 50% more species of pollinators, 75% more species of plants and over 20% more species of birds.

### **Benefits to soil health and soil carbon sequestration**

IPCC advisors say soil carbon sequestration represents 89% of agriculture's greenhouse gas mitigation potential. The Soil Association's 2009 report '*Soil Carbon and Organic Farming*' shows that organic farming increases soil carbon levels, by producing additional sources of organic matter, integrating crop and livestock systems, and by increasing the proportion of vegetation cover which supports helpful soil micro-organisms. All significant factors that increase soil carbon sequestration and help to mitigate agriculture's greenhouse gas emissions.

The Organic Research Centre produced a report in 2011 that shows that organic cropping systems have considerable potential for increasing soil carbon and combating climate change '*Soil Carbon Sequestration and Organic Farming: An overview of current evidence*'.

A 2012 *peer-reviewed meta-analysis*<sup>3</sup> of international studies published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) backed up the findings of both these reports. It found that organic farming systems on average sequestered up to 450 kg more atmospheric carbon per hectare than non-organic farms.

### **The impact of maize on soils**

The Ecological Land Cooperative's proposal to develop land that has previously been used to produce maize crops will have a significant positive impact on the land management of that area, particularly in reducing impacts on public goods such as soils and fresh water.

The Soil Association's 2015 report *Runaway Maize*<sup>4</sup> detailed how maize crops cause water run-off from compacted and damaged fields, polluting waterways with pesticides and nutrients, and causing floods. Estimates suggest that during the storms and heavy rainfall in the winter of 2013/14, every 10 hectare block of damaged land under maize stubble produced the equivalent of 15 Olympic swimming pools (more than 375 million litres) of additional runoff. Research published in 2014 found that 75% of late harvested maize sites showed high or severe levels of soil degradation.

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<sup>2</sup> Tuck et al, (2014) Land-use intensity and the effects of organic farming on biodiversity: a hierarchical meta-analysis', is published in the Journal of Applied Ecology <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1365-2664.12219/abstract>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.fibl.org/en/media/media-archive/media-archive12/media-release12/article/organic-farming-enhances-soil-carbon.html>

<sup>4</sup> Farnworth, G., Melchett, P. (2015) 'Runaway maize', Soil Association

The overall financial cost of annual flooding in the United Kingdom is estimated to be somewhere in the region of £1.1 billion; a cost to the public to which maize will be making an increasing contribution.

### **Overcoming barriers to access to land**

The Soil Association and in particular the Soil Association Land Trust is active in promoting access to land for agroecological farmers and raising the issues around loss of farmland, increasing prices and land consolidation as the key obstacles to the development of local, sustainable agriculture. Our Future Growers scheme trains new organic growers, many of whom face significant difficulties in finding affordable and available land to set up their own enterprises after they have completed their training.

Eurostat data shows that between 2003 and 2010, the number of farms in the EU dropped from 15 to 12.2 million, i.e. a loss of about 19%<sup>5</sup>. Today, out of EU 12 million farms, 3% are large farms (over 100 hectares), which control 50 % of farmland<sup>6</sup>. This increasing concentration of land in large farms causes loss of jobs, reduced opportunities for new farmers to take on small farmers and the decline of vibrant rural communities, as well as impacting negatively on biodiversity.

Huge increases in land values over the past decade have also pushed land ownership out of reach of many farmers. Between 1992 and 2006, sales price indices rose by 100% in the UK.<sup>7</sup> This high price makes farmland inaccessible for many new entrants.

By providing alternative land ownership models for small farms with accommodation and infrastructure, the Ecological Land Cooperative is able to create new opportunities for new and young farmers that are otherwise not available, as it has done so at its Greenham Reach site.

For the reasons outlined above the Soil Association believes that the Ecological Land Cooperative's proposal to develop smallholdings at Arlington would make an important contribution to the social, economic and environmental fabric of the local area.

Please do contact me if you would like further information.

Yours sincerely



Rachel Harries  
Producer Skills Manager  
Soil Association  
rharries@soilassociation.org

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<sup>5</sup> Eurostat, 2010 <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Study on the functioning of land markets in the EU member states under the influence of measures applied under the Common Agricultural Policy, 2008, p61, 100-2 and 197 (figure 3), available on : <http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/analysis/external/landmarkets>

