

Furzehill Green Community Meeting Write Up

On Wednesday 17th July 2019, we held a community meeting for Gower residents where we presented and discussed our plans to create a cluster of three residential small and ecological farms accompanying land-based businesses. Each would have an agricultural tie committing the smallholders to operate farm businesses, bringing local food, employment and diversity - both ecologically and agriculturally - to the area.

The Ecological Land Cooperative works to create affordable ecological smallholdings for new entrants to farming – those who would ordinarily be unable to afford a house in the countryside yet who wish to earn a living through farming.

At the meeting, we presented our vision and aims, our business model, our legal structure and presented the examples of our other sites and farm businesses. To read a summary of this information you can read our pamphlet [here](#). We also showed a short film about our work which you can watch [here](#).

We have conducted research into the financial viability of small scale farms. You can read our research report '[Small is Successful](#)' [here](#), and a booklet of ten case studies of profitable small farms can be read [here](#).

After the presentation, we opened the floor for questions. Below is a summary of the points that were discussed during the meeting.

Visual Impact & Development

We will ensure that any negative visual impact is minimised and screened where appropriate. Our existing sites prove that over the first few years the additional trees and shelterbelts we will plant will create a beneficial visual impact.

To mitigate the visual impact caused by structures, we have proposed the following:

- The location proposed for the barn and dwellings has been sited close to the western boundary in one development zone to restrict sprawl, and to minimise any potential visual intrusion in the open landscape.
- To plant shelterbelt trees on the western and northern boundary of the development zone in 'pit park' field to create a visual screen from the West and North.
- An effort would be made to set polytunnels into the landscape with the use of careful placement and plantings, which they will need for shelter anyway

There will not be a solar park development on the ELC land. There will be solar panels attached to the barn roof to provide an off grid electricity source for the small farms.

The existing agricultural buildings (barn and polytunnel) have been built under permitted development rights and have been granted planning permission by Swansea Council.

Some covered growing (polytunnel) is essential in this country to extend the growing season, given our climate. We will not allow any of the holdings to become entirely covered growing areas. However, vast amounts of the food currently consumed in the UK is produced under plastic in semi-desert areas of Spain and Morocco, with the attendant problems of water shortages and near slavery work conditions. On balance we believe it is better for us to grow food here in the UK where we can monitor the production.

We take the AONB classification very seriously and believe that our small farms can add to the beauty, biodiversity and economy of the area. We have instructed a Landscape Architect to ensure that all development and landscaping is carefully designed and sensitively situated and that our proposals therefore conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area.

Any permanent dwellings will have to meet ecological building criteria. These would need to be moderate in size (not larger than 140m² with a height limit of 5.5m) and in keeping with the landscape character. The ELC would also require the dwellings to be made predominantly of natural materials.

Any temporary accommodation will comply with planning requirements and will not be so large or high as to affect local landscape amenity. The most likely forms will be mobile homes or timber cabins. If needed we will require screening with natural materials.

Traffic & Access

We will be consulting with the highways department at the council and will ensure the lane is suitable and safe for accessing the holdings.

We will create an off-road parking area for visitors to the site. We will also look into whether we can include space for a school coach turning circle.

At this point in our process we believe that the existing access points into the fields are sufficient and we do not have any plans to create a new access point in Furzehill Lane.

The issue of Cae Tan workers parking on the road has been addressed and all Cae Tan workers are now parking on the fields.

Protection of the Agriculture Tie / Section 106

It is paramount that if the ELC is granted planning permission that the smallholdings are: used for an ecological agricultural business; occupied by the person(s) operating the small farm business; and kept affordable.

The agricultural tie is essential to seeing that the land is used productively and we will not seek to remove it unless there is another policy instrument that better protects the land for productive and ecological management. As the ELC maintains the freehold of the land and issues lease which enshrine the agricultural tie it is not possible for any individual smallholder to ask for it to be removed.

We retain the freehold on our smallholdings and offer a strict tenancy agreement to our smallholders. Just as with county farms, the farm business tenancy that we use allows the ELC to evict a smallholder if they are in breach of their tenancy agreement. The tenancy agreement requires smallholders to operate a farm business on their holding, and adhere to the site's Management Plan. The Plan places obligations on the smallholder, including to manage the land ecologically. The ELC carry out annual monitoring to ensure tenants are following the management plan. Fortunately the ELC has not had to enforce this right to date.

Tenants cannot receive a windfall from their properties: if a tenant wishes to sell the lease to their holding, their tenancy requires that it must be offered back to the ELC in the first instance and in all cases must be sold at the re-sale value provided in their tenancy agreement, based on their improvements and not the housing market, with a strict cap to maintain affordability for the next leaseholder. Tenants cannot sub-let, and any future tenants would still be governed by the lease and management plan. There is provision in the lease for the tenant to retire from farming and continue to live on the land, as long as the land is being well looked after.

The ELC is a member-led organisation whose members care passionately about ecological agriculture. Our members would not allow us to fail on one of our core objectives and watch land go to ruin or be taken out of agriculture.

If we have gone through the planning system with no positive results, we will discuss the situation with Cae Tan, who will continue to produce food from the fields, and the local community before taking any decisions about our next steps.

We are also looking into the existing provision of any agriculturally tied houses within close proximity to the site - it is important to us that we understand the local housing provision for rural workers dwellings. We have not as yet found any in our searches but are continuing this work as we prepare our plans for the site.

The Businesses & Financial Viability of Small Farms

In 2010 we commissioned research into the viability of ecological holdings on less than 10 acres. The report, [Small is Successful](#), was published in 2011. This study of eight enterprises found smallholder annual wages to be in the range of £12,000 – £16,000 on established holdings.

In 2018 we conducted further research and compiled a booklet of ten case studies of

farms making a profit on small acreages from across the UK – with the highest level of income at £80,000 per acre. [You can read about the case studies here.](#)

It would be against our values to conflict with existing local businesses – instead we aim to provide a supply of local foods and products that are lacking in the local area, or where the demand outweighs current supply. We look to collaborate with existing businesses where possible and work together to improve provision of good local food for the local community and rural economy.

Operations such as battery chicken, or other intensive livestock farming would go against our ecological and ethical values and would not be permitted under our whole site management plan. The ELC monitors each plot against the management plan and reports to the council annually.

Example business from our other sites are vegetable box scheme, salad bags, cut flowers, sheep & pigs, herbs, micro goat dairy and fruit tree grafting.

There is substantial local support for our work from existing food producers, new entrant farmers, potential applicants as well as local people working in the food sustainability sector.

The ELC's creation of ecological small farms are not a money making development. We are motivated by environmental issues, and concern for local economies and rural regeneration. The ELC sell 150 year leases on the land in order to recoup the money spent on buying the land and creating the smallholdings. The smallholding leases are sold at well below market rate to keep them affordable for new entrants to farming.

The success of our endeavours will be measured by well managed businesses, increases in biodiversity and wildlife, and people contributing healthy produce for the local community

One Planet Development Planning Policy

The ELC is currently researching the best route to seek planning permission for the smallholdings and will include understanding One Planet Development policy in this research.

Land Quality

The land at Furzehill is good quality land and not marginal. We talk about marginal land in our publicity because we believe we can sometimes take on land that is perceived to be marginal and improve it using ecological methods.

Hedge Management

We will be looking after the hedges, allowing them to grow out where that is relevant, and planting extra shelter belts for visual and weather purposes, where necessary.

Application Process

[You can read about our open application process here.](#)

Where all other things are equal and criteria are met, we will give weight to applications from people with pre-existing local connections over those from further away. As a cooperative we believe strongly in equality and our recruitment process for new tenants for our farms looks at their passion and capability to do a good job building an ecological small farm business above all else.

Each holding must provide a minimum of one full-time-equivalent worker. Each holding may use volunteers or trainees as additional labour at certain times.

If you are a local resident and have a concern that hasn't been raised, please contact sonia@ecologicalland.coop or on 01273 766 672.

If you would like to register your interest for applying to be a farmer with us then please email Oliver at members@ecologicalland.coop and read our [information about the open application process.](#)

If you would like to join our cooperative as a local investor member please find out more [here](#).