

Small farms, big solutions: Climate crisis prompts investment in future farming

An ageing population of farmers, losses of small and family farms, huge barriers to land ownership and an unprecedented environmental crisis see the social enterprise Ecological Land Cooperative (ELC) announce a new Community Share Investment Offer. The ELC's plans for a mosaic of small ecological farms will regenerate rural areas - putting healthy food and a healthy planet centre stage.

Shockingly perhaps nearly half the land in the UK is owned by just 25,000 people – less than 1% of the population. And much of that land is dominated by industrial methods of production that come at great cost to the natural world. Yet there is another way. There is huge potential for the growth of agroecology - agriculture that works together with natural ecology.

Since 2009 the ELC has worked to develop affordable, low impact, small farms for ecological agriculture that can improve soil health, boost biodiversity and invigorate rural communities. Supporting small-scale, ethically minded farmers, the ELC is the only national organisation in England and Wales to offer residential farms for ecological land users. A member-led social enterprise, the ELC challenges the twin barriers facing new entrants to farming: high land prices and legal permission (planning consent).

Oli Rodker, Site Development Director, for the ELC, says: "For far too long land ownership has been concentrated and land skills have been lost. We need more people involved in ecological food production and more people working the land in rural communities.

The climate crisis and nature crisis tell us we need to act urgently to improve how we manage land. ELC's passionate and innovative farmers can do this, while producing the healthy food that we need. Small agro-ecological farms allow for a better understanding of nature and are cornerstones in reversing environmental ruin.

By backing our vision and investing in our 2020 share offer you are giving us the chance to create more farms, protect land and speed up this transition to agro-ecological land use. By supporting us you are supporting rural communities, nature and the climate."

Access to Land

There are five ELC sites: from Cornwall to East Sussex and the Gower to Somerset. In 2017, £440,000 was raised to create these farms. The aim for the 2020 appeal is raise up to £400,000 to develop more sites - with a target of creating 18 new small farms on six new sites by the end of 2023. By doing so ecological agriculture becomes a recognised and practical way to address the issues of climate change, rural underdevelopment and getting new entrants into farming.

There are multiple small farms on each site – enabling skill sharing, community and diversity of production. A variety of products are grown from salad and veg to herbal medicine, goats cheese and apple trees with 99 acres of land so far returned to eco farming practices.

Sinead and Adam are two new ELC farmers. Growing up in the urban context of London and Essex, the prospect of farming was a distant dream for them.

Yet their deep interest in the natural world and where our food comes from propelled them to volunteer at the urban farm Audacious Veg in South London. It turned out that growing was infectious, and their hobby soon became a career when they took over operations on the farm.

Impassioned about the urgent need for more ecological agriculture in the UK, that can fix our broken system and provide healthy food to local communities, they set their hearts on farming their own land as a profession and way of life. The pure joy that the diversity of plant life, colour and insect population brought to them stirred a deep longing to do more. But with land prices at £9000/acre their aspiration seemed impossible.

Thanks to the support of the ELC, they can now start their enterprise to grow an astonishing array of edible flowers, cut flowers, herbs, heritage veg and leafy greens on their farm in East Sussex. This is all done through regenerative farming practices like "no-dig' which works to undo the damage of intensive farming by rebuilding soil structure and locking carbon into the soil. These methods reduce the need for pesticides and fertilisers whilst boosting biodiversity and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

"It's no secret that access into farming for new entrants is really hard in the UK," says Sinead. "Given our backgrounds growing up in cities with no links to food and farming, the chances of us being able to pursue livelihoods in this sector were going to be slim."

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Ecological Land Cooperative is the trading name of Ecological Land Limited, registered with the FCA under the Cooperative and Community Benefit Societies

Act 2014, Reg. No 30770R.

Sinead and Adam are just two of an increasing number of custodians of ELC land, growing, nurturing and harvesting for what they passionately believe is a better future. With help from the new round of financing the hard work of the ELC can spread to other rural areas. The model allows the ELC to keep costs low, both through buying larger sites at a lower price per acre, and through distributing the cost of infrastructure, planning applications and subsequent site monitoring across a number of farms. The model allows the farmers to work and learn together and to provide mutual support. The cooperative retains the freehold on each farm in order to protect it for affordable agricultural and ecological use in perpetuity.

An ethical yet smart investment

It works for investors too who are offered a 3% interest on share capital annually. One investor commented: "I felt compelled to support the ELC, even if a small contribution. It seems to be the only organisation dedicated to tackling the major causes of our current social, environmental and economic predicament. ELC is dedicated to supporting ordinary people to access land, and to manage it in an ecological way, which most people could not afford to do on their own. Not only that, the land is nurtured to grow local, healthy, environmentally-sound food and regenerate the local economy. The ELC is also structured as a horizontal, democratically accountable cooperative, with a proven record in helping people achieve these aims - a very sound investment for the future."

The ELC 2020 Share offer is looking to raise between £120,000 and £400,000 in ten weeks. Working with Ethex, a socially conscious savings and investment platform, the share offer will raise finance for the development of ecological small farms for new entrant farmers - those that wouldn't otherwise be able to afford to access land and start farming.

ENDS

+++ EDITORS NOTES +++

VISIT THE SHARE OFFER at www.ethex.org.uk/elc2020

[Download the full media pack here](#)

[Photos available here.](#)

[Interviewees available on request](#)

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The Ecological Land Cooperative (ELC) is a community benefit society, co-operative in structure.

The Ecological Land Cooperative is supported by the Ecological Land Trust which is a registered charity no. 1158032.

The ELC is the only organisation in England & Wales to offer residential small farms for ecological land users. A democratic social enterprise, the ELC challenges the twin barriers that face new entrants to farming: high land prices and legal permission (planning consent).

Set up in 2009, the ELC's core business model is the acquisition of land, securing planning permission and installing infrastructure for clusters of three or more affordable residential small farms.

Farmers are provided with permission to build their own sustainable home with off-grid utilities and road access. Applying for planning permission for agriculturally tied, rural workers' dwellings enables a new generation of agroecological farmers to thrive and survive on the land.

The ELC's first project, Greenham Reach, in mid-Devon, was granted temporary planning permission in 2013 and now has permanent permission. [More about Greenham Reach and the farms here](#)

The ELC's second site in East Sussex has secured temporary planning permission with new entrant farmers moving on site in December 2019. The ELC has also purchased its third, fourth and fifth sites on the Gower Peninsular in South Wales, in Sparkford, South Somerset and in North Cornwall with planning applications in process.

Read the case studies on our steward members [Aweside Farm](#), [Fanfield Farm](#) and [Cae Tan CSA](#).

For more about the ELC business model:

'Our Model' <https://ecologicalland.coop/our-model>

Find the ELC's booklet on 'Small Farm Profit' at <https://ecologicalland.coop/small-farm-profits>

Website: <https://ecologicalland.coop/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ecolandcoop>

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