



Ecological Land Co-op

Many *PM* readers will be all too familiar with the difficulties in securing affordable access to land in the UK for ecological horticulture and agriculture, especially for those who seek to live on the land. Between extortionate land prices and the intricate absurdities of the planning permission system, the simple aim of living on a piece of land while working it can seem an unattainable dream. What is to be done?

This common plight led to energetic discussions in the spring of 2005 between members of Chapter 7 (the ecological planning consultancy), Radical Routes (a secondary co-operative of co-operatives working for social change), Somerset Co-operative Services (a co-op development body) and farms and eco-communities like Landmatters, Lammas, Highbury Farm and Five Penny Farm.

We were yearning for a vibrant, living countryside in which humans flourish alongside our cherished landscapes and natural biodiversity, with

Shaun Chamberlin describes a co-operative that helps people gain access to affordable low impact smallholdings

small land-based enterprises providing meaningful employment whilst allowing residents to be rooted in rural communities and play a crucial role in ensuring food and energy sovereignty. We were longing for a proliferation of happy rural lifestyles, helping to maintain traditional skills and improve ecological literacy whilst providing access to local, sustainable crafts and food, as well as educational opportunities for urban visitors.

And, as so often when such breathy, passionate desires are unleashed, a child was eventually born – the Ecological Land Co-operative, a project created to provide affordable opportunities for new viable, ecologically beneficial projects to find land. This

seems an essential role not only because demand so outstrips supply, but also because we believe that the creation of sustainable land-based livelihoods is key to ameliorating the pressing environmental and social problems of our times.

'RESCUING' LAND

The basic idea of the Co-operative is that it buys land that has been, or is at risk of being, intensively managed, then uses its expertise and experience to oversee the process of securing planning permission for low impact residences on site. Once this is achieved, the land is made available at an affordable price to people who have the skills to manage it ecologically



but who could not otherwise afford to do so. The money received when the new residents buy their land is then used to purchase another intensively managed site, where the same process can begin, allowing more land to be ‘rescued’ from industrial agriculture.

Prospective residents of a piece of land are only asked to buy in once planning permission for their homes is secured, but they do have to sign up to a strict management plan which requires that the land is always managed to maintain and enhance habitats, species diversity and landscape quality, and to facilitate the provision of low impact livelihoods. There are also conditions stipulating that if they ever want to sell up and move on, the land must be sold on at an affordable price, so that the land is never priced out of reach. Beyond that, the land will be theirs to run as they see fit.

That was the idea. How about the reality?

Well, as an informal group, we received some early funding from the Co-operative Group in the South West for scoping and feasibility work, and at later stages in our development from the Co-operative Fund, Business Link and the Polden-Puckham Charitable Foundation. These helped us find our feet and put basic organisational

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structures in place.

In 2009 we sold community shares to finance the purchase of our first land, an 8.9 hectare (22 acre) site on the Devon/Somerset border which we christened Greenham Reach. We have divided this land into three plots, in order to allow each of three ‘clustered’ smallholdings the independence to build their own dwelling and manage

their land as they wish, while also enjoying the benefits of a small community for tool sharing, sociability, mutual support etc. Accordingly, we also plan to provide some infrastructure to be shared between the three smallholdings – a timber barn with solar PV array and rainwater collection, improved access, a biological waste water treatment system and pathways linking the plots.

CHALLENGES

Unfortunately, shortly after our land purchase, the setbacks began. Firstly, our planning agent appears to have misled us and failed to submit valid planning applications on our behalf on three separate occasions.

This depressing episode set the project back by around a year, but we will definitely be wiser next time around.

Our original hopes to secure planning permission for the site before inviting applications from potential plottolders were also thwarted, as the District Council informed us that they wanted to see individual business plans from the prospective residents



before they would consider granting permission. Accordingly, we advertised and went through a selection process last year, selecting from the applicants on a number of criteria including their farming and horticultural expertise, vision and plans for the land, experience of low impact living and connection with the locality.

Together with our new intended ploholders, we then submitted the full applications for the three plots at the turn of the year, doing it ourselves this time. They ran to over 400 pages of careful documentation, and more than sixty letters of support were also received by the Council, including from experienced organic smallholders; local residents; the Devon Wildlife Trust; the Soil Association; the Transition Network; Sustrans; Colin Tudge's Campaign for Real Farming; Food Policy Professor Tim Lang and other academics; three MPs and even the Scottish Crofting Federation. A particularly heartening letter came from a planner of over 30 years' experience, who described our work as "by some way the most carefully prepared applications for either an agricultural and/or low impact

dwelling I have considered".

Nonetheless, much like every other similar low impact proposal, in June we attended a hearing to witness the rejection of our applications by the councillors on Mid Devon District Council's planning committee. The vote for rejection (by a six to two majority, with three abstaining) was based on their vague statements that smallholdings are not 'serious farming', that the business plans (despite being carefully reviewed by a number of agricultural experts) 'do not stack up' and that off grid renewables are 'not practical'. None of these are valid planning considerations, and we have good reasons to believe that we may win on appeal, as others have; not least because we are one of the few applications of this type to win the support of both the local Parish Council and the planning officers who spent the best part of a year carefully going through our applications. Going through the appeal process is of course more work and more delay, but it will all be worth it to ultimately see (quite literally) the fruits of our labours.



SMALL IS SUCCESSFUL

Our spirits have also been bolstered by grateful contact from others who have found it helpful to use and amend the documentation that we have produced for our applications (available on our website) in their own efforts to secure planning permission for land-based projects. We have also produced the *Small is Successful* report, which examined eight existing smallholdings with land-based businesses on 10 acres or less. These documented examples demonstrate that economically viable and highly sustainable land-based livelihoods can be created on such smallholdings, without the need for the subsidies on which large farms so often rely. The Research Council UK showcased *Small is Successful* as one of a hundred pieces of UK research 'that will have a profound effect on our future', and we have also presented our message at the House of Commons, to the All Party Parliamentary Group for Agroecology.

All in all, it has been a long struggle since those idealistic conversations seven years ago, but we believe that we are now closing in on the great satisfaction of having something simple and solid to show for our efforts – smallholders living on and working the land who would otherwise have been unable to do so. Appeal inspector permitting, we expect to reach this landmark early next year.

It will be a small beginning, perhaps, but we are already looking to apply the invaluable experience gained to date by finding further suitable land to make available in future. We dare to dream that it could be the start of a real solution to the thorny problem of land access here in the UK 🌍

FURTHER INFORMATION

<http://ecologicaland.coop>

Follow us on Twitter: @EcoLandCoop
Any offers of assistance greatly appreciated, or to join our mailing list email: zoe@ecologicaland.coop

Shaun Chamberlin became a director of the ELC earlier this year. He has also been involved with the Transition Network since its inception, co-founding Transition Town Kingston and authoring the movement's second book, The Transition Timeline.

His website is www.darkoptimism.org