

Oak Tree Low Carbon Farm Annual Meeting – 3rd July 2014.

Present: lots of lovely members. Facilitated by: Steve Marsden. Notes: Kirsty Wilmot (all errors are with apologies!)

Joanne started by giving a **farm update**. New this year were the low carbon cut flower shares, lots of new members (now 54), the start of the farm's Preserving Group, the laying of a new irrigation system, the arrival of cows, the departure of Tom as a worker (who remains a director) and the joining (and candlelit birthday of) Eric. Joanne outlined the goal of the farm which the Directors had put to paper this year, partly due to the need to show funders.

She reiterated (for new members particularly) **how the farm is set up** – a Community Interest Company (CIC) manages the farm's CSA scheme. It has small membership, with 3 directors (Joanne, Tom and Eric), who make collective decisions for the farm. Joanne, as landowner leases the land to the CIC, and retains overall control of it. They decided on this model because decision-making by consensus is not quick and decisive enough, however the farm holds these annual meetings to consult members and inform the overall direction of things.

Joanne presented some **inspiring quotes** by leading academics, which have helped shape the goals of the farm. These have financial viability and environmental sustainability at the core. Tim Lang's quote highlighted the carbon and water footprints of farming, and the use of grass fed animals to help sequester carbon. Colin Tudge, who has visited the farm and is supportive of our work, is one of the academics working in this area. The Oak Tree is part of the bigger movement they're involved in. We are a living experiment and are putting ideas into practice.

Joanne presented a slide about the **low carbon ethos** of the Oak Tree. With the help of Steve, we're working towards renewing our Suffolk Carbon Charter Gold Status, and early soil test results suggest we are actually significantly carbon negative. Steve will help us reapply for this status. Part of how we have achieved this is the use of grass fed ruminants which are moved regularly. This is a fairly new approach in UK agriculture, and Eric is an expert in it (yippee! – ed).

Joanne then went on to talk about the **farm finances**. We had £30,000 of grants last year, from the Esme Fairbairn Foundation and National Lottery. However we are currently still losing £500 a month at the moment, and projections suggest we will run out of money come February unless some more income is found.

Joanne explained **why we are struggling financially**. Regulations are stringent. Raising animals to high welfare standards is expensive. Our larger farming competitors are subsidised. We cannot get subsidies because we are too small and the paperwork is too burdensome. Land is expensive, approximately £8k an acre. Planning permission is needed on small plots like ours (under 5ha). Food - and particularly fossil fuelled food - is cheap! Our soil condition is still poor, despite efforts to increase fertility. In short, we are struggling. But what we're doing is new and untested.

Joanne went on to talk about her **policy work**, which she does in her spare time because she really cares about changing this situation for small farmers. She's helping set up a national network for CSAs, she's met with politicians (in the Department of Energy and Climate Change, and the local MP), and she's active in the Land Workers' Alliance. She's also going on an EU funded research trip to France to contribute to research into this type of farming.

Joanne outlined some other **key points about the finances** to ensure new members understood the set-up:

- Herself and Eric are earning £850 a month, which is less than minimum wage.
- Joanne's rent (paid from the CIC to her, to cover the cost of the interest she is paying on a loan for part of the field) is just covering interest. It's not paying a return. She's hoping the farm will one day allow her to recoup the pension money she used to buy it.
- The eggs are losing money – although she hopes this will change. They are adding fertility to the soil.
- The vegetable CSA boxes are £8 a week – and will remain so for the rest of the CSA year until May 2015.
- The pigs are not always profitable – sometimes the vet's bills etc tip the balance.
- The geese are being sold as the cows will do a better job adding fertility etc.
- We have one armchair member – Inga – who pays more for her veg. This was an option in the early days but only Inga took us up on it – we have “grandfathered” this option for her.
- We have 2 stockmen (Paulette and Dave) who look after the animals on regular days (saving Eric and Joanne a great deal of work) and are thanked with a free share of pork.
- Joanne is no longer freelance writing but is doing some consultancy work, which boosts CIC income.

Joanne presented **some alternative scenarios** to help with the cash flow forecast for next year:

The first saw Jo and Eric earn minimum wage and the boxes stay at £8 a week. We will still lose money but we will go bust far more quickly. The second saw the boxes increase to £9 a week. We break even under this scenario.

The third was Jo and Eric's **suggested proposal**, for 2015 and 2016. From June 2015:

- The boxes increase to £8.50 a week.
- We expand membership to 60 members (from 54, so a small increase)
- Jo and Eric remain on £850 a month.

From June 2016 (which is obviously a long way off so the proposal is still fairly speculative):

- We keep the box price at £8.50 a week
- We expand from 60 shares to 72 shares
- Jo and Eric receive minimum wage.

Under this planned scenario, finances are better but the income for the farm would still dip below zero in early 2015. At the start of the year there's lots of outgoings (e.g. insurance £700, seeds £1000) – and this won't change.

Joanne finished by talking about **the future**. She first and foremost wants the farm to survive! If this happens, she hopes to see some more positive developments. These include:

- Getting a farm building, with members' space, a kitchen, proper toilets, solar panels and an office space.
- The forest garden can come into production and the fruit shares can be offered to members.
- The cut flowers can be expanded, to help with income generation. Weddings are a possibility.
- An apprentice can be taken on, to allow Jo and Eric to be freed up from some of the physical growers' work.

Discussion followed; facilitated by Steve. Questions and comments were made on the following topics:

Wages/ living wage: Based on the proposal outlined, can Jo and Eric survive on less than minimum wage for the next 2 years? Yes – they have both paid their mortgages off and can manage but obviously would like a living wage in the long term. There was discussion about the minimum wage going up and agricultural minimum wages being higher than the standard. It was generally agreed we should aim for a fair living wage in the long term. This is £7.65 an hour currently. Joanne stressed she didn't want the living wage aspiration to lead to increased box prices and therefore an exclusivity of members. She wants the farm to be accessible to as wide a range of people as possible. It is however important that we get to a position where we can take an apprentice on (who would obviously need at least the minimum wage) for the long term sustainability of the farm.

Non-member 'shares' and fundraising: The idea to offer non-members 'shares' in the farm, like some other companies give, was suggested. They wouldn't get anything in return but would be making a statement of support. Joanne was keen to emphasise she wanted the farm to be seen as a viable alternative producing food, rather than a charity. We don't want to rely on grants. However she'd consider an emergency crowd-funding campaign.

Reducing overheads: This was raised in relation to the eggs not being profitable and a question about why. Joanne and Eric are trying to reduce these and are making progress – e.g. trying to source more waste food from the town.

Capital investment to improve infrastructure: Can we get more of this to get a building etc? We can if we apply for more grant money, but this takes time.

Educational angle: Can we show school groups around the farm? Wouldn't this fit with our ethos and goals? Yes – Tom is happy to be involved in this in the future, but at the moment we need to focus on getting proper toilet facilities to allow us to. This means a building which is a big project. Schools pay a premium for these kinds of activities so there is a potential income stream for the future.

Forest Garden / Pick Your Own: Can we have some sort of fruit Pick Your Own? Could this be extended to veg boxes too? It seems the main time drain is harvesting so this could help reduce this? It would be too complicated and would be tricky to manage in terms of supply and demand. Some members are now getting involved with harvesting regularly, which is taking the load off considerably.

Expanding growing area? Is it needed for the small membership expansion next year? No – we can use the area we have better.

Community as a resource: We have a diverse community with lots of skills between us. Can these be better used to make our contributions more useful? Yes – some people already are (e.g. in helping write grant applications). Jo would be delighted for offers of specialist help – she will ask more! We can also use our own personal networks to find useful people.

Waiting lists / recruitment: Do we have one currently? Did we have one before? And should we keep one in a less formal way to reduce the amount of leafleting we do each year? Joanne felt waiting lists gave people on it sometimes unrealistic expectations. And often found those on it were no longer interested when she returned to them. Some members felt we should keep a list anyway. Can social media help? Facebook advertising has helped.

Flowers: There's big income potential here. Some veg growers switch solely to flowers because of this. Jo wants to do more but there hasn't been the time capacity this year.

External newsletter: Should we have one? To keep interested parties in the loop? Could this contribute to recruitment? Joanne doesn't do this at the moment but it is something a farm member could do using CSA hours. They'd need to pick out some non-sensitive bits from Joanne's email updates to members. Joanne to ask for members' help (Jason Wildlife Gadget Man perhaps...?) with this.

What is working well?

Members were invited to tell the group what they liked about the farm. These were:

- Preserving Group – fun sessions.
- Boxes are great and getting better.
- The atmosphere at the farm – relaxing and enjoyable.
- Work parties are busy and vibrant
- It's real – it's a viable project – it does what it says on the tin!
- Members are helping with the harvest more which is working very well. Juliet is the lettuce queen! Mike says it's great fun. Eric asked how more people could be encouraged to help. Joanne reiterated there is a bit of commitment but not as much as some people had believed.
- It is enjoyable meeting people in an unusual context. You have such interesting conversations with people!
- It's been enjoyable seeing the place develop, especially now there are more animals to learn about.
- Children really enjoy coming here. It's a great place for them too.

What isn't working so well?

- There were some concerns over the use of the work log and whether people were filling it in correctly.
- One member was worried about uncompleted hours at the end of the season – is everyone doing their fair share of the hours? Were people given an easy opt-out by being able to buy time saving equipment, especially at the low 'hourly rate' of £3 an hour?

Joanne explained the background to the £3 an hour calculation, which was based on the purchase of time saving equipment. This was discussed on the now defunct online forum where there was agreement in principle for offering this option to members who were behind on their hours.

The option of paying 'armchair member' rate for the months a member is behind was suggested. A new member talked about the turn-around time for him to get his head around the hours and doing them. Sometimes people have other big things happening in their lives which can prevent them from doing the hours to certain timeframe.

Joanne was asked how many members are seriously behind. Now that she has rebalanced the hours outstanding based on when new members joined, it is only about 3 shares – so about 5%. Many members felt this was a positive thing, and quite impressive when put into context of other similar projects which rely on volunteers. We are a community who want to support each other through difficult times, not hassle each other for not doing their hours. Joanne's approach (individual chats with members to sort out problems) was acknowledged as a good one.

- More clarity on farm tasks and how long they take was asked for. One member suggested giving people a clearer idea of how long each task takes. E.g. 10 trays of beans takes 10 hours to plant. This may give members who dip in and out more of a holistic view. It may also encourage people to finish the tasks they start if they can, instead of clocking in and out for piecemeal hours.

Joanne's emails, marking urgent weekly workparty tasks were good at doing this to some extent. The 2 hours a week was highlighted as a minimum! It would be great if members felt moved to stay a whole day and finish whole tasks! It was reiterated for new members that they are welcome to bring family and friends to the farm to help them do their hours, within reason (e.g. no large tours which could undermine our annual farm tour, or our customised group tours for which we charge).

We finished by getting excited about the farm party on Saturday. The Stoa Solar Disco will provide excellent musical entertainment, and members were encouraged to bring their MP3 players, CDs, voices and instruments, along with some food and drink to share. Joanne thanked Eric and Tom for their hard work, and the members for theirs. We all thanked Jo 😊.