CASE STUDY



Whistlewood Common

Case Study: Whistlewood Common

This case study has been written for UK-based community groups, charities and co-operatives seeking to buy and manage farmland. Bringing land into community or co-operative ownership in the UK has rarely been simple, but it is possible. This is one of three case studies of community groups and co-operatives who have achieved farmland ownership and management, examining in detail the business models that allowed for their continued success. All case studies can be downloaded from: https://communityfarm.land/.

Last updated: June 2022

Overview

Whistlewood was established to demonstrate that practical local responses to big global threats are possible. It has provided a multi-purpose agroecology facility with education, food growing and the development of appropriate micro-enterprise amongst its primary benefits. The latest initiative (Spring 2022) is a wheelchair accessible community garden.

Established:	2013
Structure:	Community benefit society
Start-up funding:	Grant and two community share offers
Farms owned:	1
Hectares:	4
Plans for growth:	No
Region:	Region: Melbourne in South Derbyshire
Website:	https://www.whistlewoodcommon.org/

Governance Model

The society is mainly composed of its investor and supporter members who have invested a minimum of £50. The members elect a Board of Directors who oversee the strategic direction of the society.

Business Model

Financing

Whistlewood Common has raised finance twice in its history:

- To purchase the land initially for just over £100,000, the group used a combination of a £52,245 grant from the National Forest Company and a community share offer which raised £50,600. Unusually, this initial offer had no detailed business plan. The offer was in effect a stewardship offer: a community purchases the land secure in the knowledge that they have an asset which is equivalent in value to the members' shares. The community can then co-create the onsite business using a lean start-up approach with no pressure to repay a loan or provide a return to members.
- In 2017, the group successfully raised further funds mainly through community shares in order to finance on site infrastructure including the building of a straw bale roundhouse. Financing also included some grants and other fundraising. For this share offer they had a detailed business plan showing how the infrastructure investment would improve their trading model. After successfully raising over £100,000 from shares their membership had doubled to 356 members. Their share offer raise from the community was matched by the Community Shares Booster programme who invested on the same basis as the community.
- Neither share offer has offered to pay interest on members' shares. This is very much an investment to create a sustainable project rather than an opportunity to make money for investors.
- In common with most land-based projects using community investment it was not possible to incentivise investment using tax reliefs that are available to other more eligible trades.
- Whistlewood Common has now moved to an open share offer - anyone can apply to become a member with a minimum investment of £50. An open share offer has the advantage of providing a steady influx of new capital that can allow the gradual withdrawal of other members' shares. Share withdrawal can only be financed from new share capital or from retained profits.
- Whistlewood common has also been the beneficiary of Section 106 money from a nearby housing development.

Trading Model

Whistlewood Common has diverse income streams, including:

- Camping;
- Festivals and events;
- Training and education; and
- Weddings.

The project has low staff costs as it has high levels of volunteer input from the community. In 2020 their turnover was nearly £11,000, which together with grant income gave them a profit of just under £5,000. Their overheads include insurance, routine servicing of equipment such as UV water treatment, and fire safety certification, grass cutting contractor and general maintenance.

Timeline

- **2013** | Melbourne Area Transition Group, were looking at practical ways to make their area more resilient in the face of peak oil, climate change and economic uncertainty. With support from Co-op Culture and The National Forest Company the group raised over £100,000 to purchase 4 hectares of land, with a view to creating community woodland.
- **2017** | After much on site activity, including the planting of many trees, they decided that they needed a building on site to provide a venue for its on-site educational activities. They raised the finance for this and with the help of straw bale co-operative Straw Works their roundhouse was constructed.
- **2022** | Despite the setbacks of COVID the society is thriving and approaching its 10th birthday rapidly.

Resources

- Filed annual reports and accounts on the FCA register: https://mutuals.fca.org.uk/Search/Society/4208
- Whistlewood Common community share offer: https://www.whistlewoodcommon.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Whistlewood-share-offer-document-june-2020-update.pdf

- Whistlewood Common business plan: http://www.whistlewoodcommon.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Whistlewood-business-plan.pdf
- Whistlewood Common marketing plan: https://www.whistlewoodcommon.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Whistlewood-marketing-plan-june-20201.pdf
- Whistlewood Common society rules: http://www.whistlewoodcommon.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Whistlewood-Common-Limited-Rules-2.pdf

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