

A guide to setting up and running

Community owned Farms

How the lessons of Fordhall Community
Land Initiative can help and inspire others





This guide has been very kindly put together by Charlotte Hollins, who, together with her brother Ben, were the first people in the country to use community ownership to save their family's farm so that it could be of benefit to everyone. The purpose of the guide is to share Charlotte's experiences of setting up Fordhall Community Land Initiative in a practical way, to help others to do something similar. It is aimed at groups of people looking to set up a community farm, and at farmers who may be interested in developing a different relationship with their local community.

Fordhall Organic Farm is the first community-owned farm in England. It's a very special place, made so by the people involved – Charlotte and Ben and the team at Fordhall along with its 8,000 member-owners and regular volunteers.

The story of Fordhall Organic Farm and how it was saved through community-ownership is one that is known to some who may have seen various newspaper stories or read Charlotte and Ben's book *The Fight for Fordhall Farm*.

What has been achieved and continues to be achieved at Fordhall is a constant source of inspiration to us at the Plunkett Foundation and their work has inspired a range of community food activity through the Making Local Food Work programme. If this guide has inspired you, get in contact as we'd love to hear from you.

Peter Couchman, Chief Executive, Plunkett Foundation



*Charlotte & Ben
(he's the one on the right!)*

About Charlotte



This guide was written by Charlotte Hollins, Manager of the Fordhall Community Land Initiative. Charlotte, along with her brother Ben, led the fight to save Fordhall Organic Farm. The guide was commissioned by the Plunkett Foundation through the Making Local Food Work programme.

Charlotte Hollins grew up at Fordhall Farm in North Shropshire. After leaving university with a first class honours degree in Environmental Management and Mathematics in 2003 she led the high profile campaign that saved Fordhall Farm from development in 2006: raising an amazing £800,000 in less than six months. Fordhall's plight touched people across the world, and 8,000 individuals came forward to purchase a £50 non-profit making share and become a member of England's first ever community-owned farm. The vision of Fordhall is to show that small-scale farming connected to the community can offer a viable way of life for generations to come.

Charlotte works under the strategic direction of 14 voluntary board members elected from the membership annually. She manages their organic restaurant, function room, farm trails and picnic area. She employs 20 staff and works with hundreds of volunteers, all of whom make Fordhall what it is today.

The Fordhall Community Land Initiative has won a number of awards over recent years including the 'Schumacher Award' for their contribution towards sustainable development; 'Planet Award' from Social Enterprise West Midlands; Morgan Foundation 'Against All Odds' award; 'Young Entrepreneur of the Year' Award from The Field, and they are a 'Flagship Social Enterprise' for the West Midlands.

Find out more about Fordhall's incredible story at www.fordhallfarm.com



Charlotte & Poppy



Some of our brilliant volunteers

Introduction

This guide follows the story of Fordhall Organic Farm from 2004 to 2012, providing an insight into what is needed to create a community-owned farm and to keep it going. The aim is to highlight that whatever your skills and experience are, you too can use community ownership to set up or run a farm, or use your farm to create a new relationship with your community. In addition to the real life story of Fordhall Organic Farm, this guide will provide you with some simple tools and handy tips to help along the way. Good luck!

Fordhall Organic Farm is a 140 acre beautiful livestock farm nestled in the North Shropshire countryside. It is one of the longest established sites of continuous organic farming in Britain. In 1929 the organic pioneer, Arthur Hollins, took on the tenancy at Fordhall at the tender age of 14, following the death of his father. Arthur carried out extensive research into soil fertility and the relationship between farming and nature, creating an innovative farming system called 'Foggage' farming.

During this time Fordhall also became one of England's first yoghurt producers. Its yoghurts could be found on market stalls and department stores across the whole country.



Organic pioneer Arthur

Despite this success, in 1991 the farm was hit financially. The landowner wished to sell Fordhall's land to neighbouring industry for development, threatening the livelihood of the Hollins family who had tenanted the land for hundreds of years.

A long legal battle ensued throughout the 1990s. Although the Hollins family had lovingly tendered the land at Fordhall for generations, the prolonged battles soon took their toll and the farm slowly deteriorated, as finances were diverted into professional fees.

Almost 15 years later in 2004, Arthur's youngest children returned from their studies and took up the fight. Last minute changes in planning decisions provided an opportunity for the two young farmers. Charlotte and Ben, at 21 and 19 years respectively, were able to negotiate a new short term 18 month tenancy at Fordhall only 24 hours before the family were due to be evicted in March 2004.

The siblings had no money, no experience and very little inherited assets. In fact, in their entirety their assets amounted to 11 cows, six pigs and six sheep. There was no tractor, no machinery and only run-down farm buildings.

Nevertheless, they did have something much more useful – energy, determination and vision.

Charlotte
says:

“When Ben and I first began the fight to save Fordhall in 2004, everything was an uphill struggle. We had no experience to utilise and no business skills to put into practice, only enthusiasm. This was enough to get us out of bed in the morning, but it was not enough to convince the banks that we were a good investment. They did not care about the vision or the potential, they cared only about ticking boxes and unfortunately with our 11 cows, six pigs and six sheep, we weren’t even close.

After fighting to gain our 18 month tenancy in 2004, our first break came from the Prince’s Trust. On seeing our business plan they generously offered a £2,000 low interest loan to help regenerate the farm business. We knew the only way to get the business profitable again was to sell our produce direct to the consumer. So, one of our six pigs went to the local abattoir and came back as sausages. A small homemade blackboard was parked at the end of the drive,

a chest freezer in a small lean-to was filled with said sausages and we sat, waiting patiently to make our millions. OK, it wasn’t millions, but we did make £50 in that first weekend and we thought we were rich! This was a doddle. Running a business is easy... well that wasn’t quite accurate, but our enthusiasm and determination and probably also our naivety carried us forward.

Eight years later and that fight is a blurred reality. Fordhall has come so far over the years and it is due to one thing – the power of positive action from the community”.



Ben and the Fordhall pigs

What is a community-owned farm?

A community-owned farm can be so many things and can work in many ways. Principally, it is a piece of land used to produce food, which is owned and run by a passionate and committed community of people who cared enough to buy it.

The exciting thing about any community-owned farm is the diversity of the people involved and the benefits the project has both for the wider community and our natural environment. A community-owned farm is safeguarding our landscape for the future, for the benefit of food, the environment and our community.

In anticipation of a tenancy being offered from Imperial College London, a number of local residents, farmers and Wye college graduates came together in autumn 2006 to explore the possibility of a community-led bid for the tenancy in the Kent countryside. They were successful and the tenant is now Wye Community Farm Limited registered as an Industrial and Provident Society (IPS). In this case, the community does not own the land, but it does own the tenancy on it and through that tenancy it runs a number of educational initiatives.

www.wyecomunityfarm.org.uk



What your community-owned farm actually looks like is completely up to you. There is a plethora of legal options out there and within this you need to decide how your community will be involved, what they need out of it and importantly, how your day to day operations will be managed. A lot of this will probably be determined by what initially motivated you to set up your community-owned farm. Either way, it is vital to find a legal framework that fits your needs rather than the other way around. This is something that you should definitely get advice on (see links at the bottom of the page). There are a number of projects in England that can be used as examples and not all will be mentioned in this booklet.

The structure at Fordhall is different and began a new trend. Here the community directly owns the land and buildings, subsequently leasing it to a tenant farmer to manage.



There are many other ways that you may structure your project, such as that operated at Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch farm in East Sussex. Here the land is owned through a trust and the community rents the land and runs the farm enterprise.

(image taken from Tablehurst website).

www.tablehurstandplawhatch.co.uk



Wayfarers planting fruit

Charlotte says:

The Fordhall community-owned farm engages a 'community of interest' whilst providing land, a house and buildings for a young farmer to rent. Our motivation at Fordhall was to safeguard the land from industrial development and to create a place that reignited the relationship between people, their food and the land it comes from. We wanted to create a place that was educational, brought farm and community together, and created long term security for tenant farmers - a rarity in today's agricultural industry.



Growing onions in our community garden

The legal objectives of our society are:

(a) To advance education and provide facilities for recreation and other leisure time occupation in the interests of social welfare for the inhabitants of Market Drayton and the wider community, in organic farming methods, conservation, biodiversity, health, access, country life, heritage, wildlife and related subjects with the object of improving the conditions of life for the said inhabitants.

(b) To ensure farmland is managed sustainably for community benefit with the appropriate management for access, and to research sustainable farming through community land trusteeship, public involvement and other methods.



Big draw and working weekend

How Fordhall operates:

- Fordhall Organic Farm is owned by the 'Fordhall Community Land Initiative' (FCLI), an Industrial and Provident Society (IPS) for community-benefit with charitable status¹.
- The community become members by purchasing £50 non-profit making lifelong shares. Irrelevant of the number of shares held by any individual, it operates as 'one member, one vote' not 'one share, one vote'.

- Each year a voluntary board of 14 is elected from the membership at the AGM.
- Staff are employed by the board of directors and are supported by many volunteers to achieve the organisational objectives.
- The FCLI rents the farmhouse and land to tenant farmer, Ben Hollins.
- Ben has a 100 year tenancy at Fordhall, which includes succession rights for children should they wish to continue the tenancy when he retires.
- The FCLI uses the same land to benefit the community through the provision of volunteering opportunities, community events, educational visits, providing open and free farm access, issuing newsletters and running short courses for all ages and interests.

Five years after placing Fordhall into community ownership, the FCLI now also runs a tearoom, restaurant and function room on the farm, whilst Ben runs the farm shop and butchery, within our beautifully restored old barn. We currently average 400 visitors a week and have over

8,000 non-profit making shareholders, or as we like to call them, landlords.

Since Fordhall established as a community-owned farm new projects are following suit across the country. Recently the community of Ditton Priors in South Shropshire has received ownership of a farm previously owned by Shropshire Council. It is run as a care farm to support adults with learning disabilities. The community is taking on the complete ownership of this farm as an Industrial and Provident Society (IPS) for community-benefit, whilst the council will continue (at least for the short term) to employ the staff who manage it as a care farm through a Community Interest Company.

Whatever your community-owned farm looks like, it will be a place that is engaging, enthusing, inspiring, sustainable and diverse. It will break down countless barriers to ensure farms and communities continue together into the future.

For more information on legal structures see Simply Legal² produced by Co-operatives UK or call the Plunkett Foundation on 01993 810730.

¹ For an introduction to legal structures for community enterprises we recommend using Simply Legal produced by Co-operatives UK – <http://www.uk.coop/simplylegal>.

² Simply Legal – Co-operatives UK - www.uk.coop/simplylegal



A trip round Fordhall

The first steps to engaging your community

You must not carry the burden alone. It is a community project after all and sharing responsibility and joy comes with sharing the workload.

Your community will be the drive for a successful community-owned farm and the first steps in engaging your community will always be the hardest. But don't be put off if this feels like an uphill struggle to begin with; the work you do here will be key in ensuring the success of your project. Furthermore, it is the most valuable and rewarding part of it all. As long as you listen and react to your community, you can't get it wrong. Remember to learn from your mistakes and keep an open mind.

The first step is to ascertain who your community is. Is it a geographical community, i.e. members of your local town, or those who live in your county? Is it a community of interest, i.e. any individual who has an interest in organic farming/vegetable production? Is it both?

It is useful, although not essential, to establish this early on as it will influence how you engage your community. For example, a community of interest may be more engaged by information sharing, whereas a geographical community may be more engaged through events or other tangible benefits and activities.

Whoever your community is you need to involve them with your project

from the outset. There are many ways you can choose to do this; there is no right or wrong answer. If you listen to your community it will guide you. It can be exhausting and it can be hard work, but don't give up on it.

Start with your vision. Share it with wider members of your community and involve them in the development process. Do they agree? Do they want to amend it?

Together you will create a vision that suits everyone and one that ensures your community is catered for.

You will need to remain flexible in amending the detail along the way, but your main vision wants to be fixed and agreed early on with as many active people in your community as possible. This is what your community will be buying into – it should be aspirational and positive.

Charlotte says:

After Ben and I secured the 18 month tenancy at Fordhall in 2004, we had two challenges. The first was to find a way to pay the rent with only a handful of livestock, which was assisted with a small loan from the Prince's Trust and by selling our produce direct from the farm. The second, and by far the greatest challenge, was to find a way to secure Fordhall Farm away from industrial development long term.

In Fordhall's heyday there were many people involved with the farm in many ways, therefore bringing the community back to the farm felt entirely natural.



Forest School



Some tips to engage your community along the way:

- Hold a public meeting to share and develop the vision.
- Agree the vision and ideally your legal structure as a group (your legal structure must help you achieve the overall vision).
- Ask for help and advice from everyone, whether you think they have skills that are useful or not – you never know what skills people have hidden away!
- Create a 'friends of' group to help you organise and fundraise.
- Hold open days and events to allow you to give your community an experience which connects them to the farm/land. These need to be fun, memorable and informative.
- Gather a list of skills from your supporters, and actively look for ways that they can use their existing skills. This will develop their interest and sense of achievement within the project.
- Keep your local press regularly updated with progress. Use any excuse for a press release, e.g. when a lamb is born, when you hold a volunteer weekend, when you hit a milestone with funding.
- Use social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs to update your community on progress on a regular basis.
- Don't overwhelm people with information; keep it relevant and find their point of interest when communicating your ideas/vision.
- Create an email list to keep supporters up to speed. Give them 'inside' information on progress. Be excited and always be positive, even when problems present themselves. People will feed off your positivity.
- Be flexible with the ways that your community can get involved, e.g. financially, by giving their time, or by donating materials/ resources. Each method will suit a different individual. Remember that sometimes it is ok to say no too.
- Make your volunteer experience fun and a social occasion. This is what farming should all be about.
- Adopt a legal structure that facilitates involvement, such as a community share scheme in an Industrial and Provident Society (IPS) – this provides a sense of responsibility and ownership over the farm from your community.
- Some members of your community will not want to be involved – this is OK, focus on the ones that do.
- Be prepared to put in more time and energy into engaging your community than you initially think it will take.
- ALWAYS say thank you and show appreciation to your supporters.



Our first experience of community engagement was with a small group of my university friends who came to volunteer; they tidied up around our run down farm over a weekend. The difference was staggering and they wanted to come back and help again. A small article in the local newspaper encouraged others to join and there began our volunteer weekends. We worked hard during the day and sat around a camp fire in the evening to share food and stories. In fact it was through the volunteer weekends that Ben and I met our wonderful significant others!

Fordhall was rising to its feet with the support of many volunteers, both old and young. Our overall vision to save the farm from development and use it as an educational resource was communicated widely, even though we had no idea exactly how we were going to do it. Momentum was building.

“We first heard about the appeal on a Farming Today programme [a BBC Radio 4 programme about farming], they did a feature about Fordhall Farm.....We were not particularly interested in farming at that time – but the whole programme was about Fordhall and the difficulties they were going through. We discovered that the farm had been a pioneer of organic production. We felt connected because we are very keen [on organic production], and they mentioned the shop, so we went to visit – and there was Charlotte – that had an influence on us – such young people and so dedicated to what they wanted to do but no means of doing it as far as they could see – and we just got hooked, and wanted to do what we could – we just got drawn in to the activities.”

Fordhall shareholder & volunteer.

Our next focus went on organising community events on the farm. These varied from story-telling days, to farmers’ markets, summer fairs, guided tours and art days. Literally anything we could think of that would encourage our local community to visit and enjoy their time at Fordhall.



Fordhall summer school

Every visitor to Fordhall would leave knowing a little more about this small organic farm, they would understand our desire to want to save it from development and they would learn about our vision to involve the community and educate future generations about food and farming. Plus, we’d try our best to get their email addresses so that we could keep in touch with them – Facebook and Twitter were not quite as prevalent back then!

At this point we were not aware of the concept of ‘community-owned farms’, we simply knew that our farm had to be saved for the future and our community needed to be part of it.

We were certainly not strategic. We did not consider who our audience was. We simply spoke to every person we met, gave leaflets out wherever we were and asked everyone and anyone for help and advice. Our audience was everyone!



The momentum generated through our events and volunteer weekends

led to a community meeting held at Fordhall in February 2005, just weeks after dad, Arthur, had sadly passed away aged 89. It was facilitated by Stroud Commonwealth who coincidentally happened to be doing a research project on Community Farm Land Trusts. We had contacted them due to a recommendation from a supporter – perfect timing! We invited everyone who had shown even the slightest degree of interest in our project – they were all roped in. At our meeting we asked the community what their vision for Fordhall was and what they needed from the farm as a community, both now and in the future – what would Fordhall look like if there were no barriers at all? We then integrated this with our needs as farmers. By joining these two visions, the Industrial and Provident Society (IPS) structure was clearly the most appropriate structure to own Fordhall. A tenant farmer would manage it, whilst the wider community utilised the farm for education and accessed it for social purposes. A structure which seemed to marry everyone's needs neatly together. A community-owned farm it would be.

We quickly realised that our community reached further than Market Drayton; what we were doing had wider appeal. After negotiating an option to purchase the farm and eventually incorporating our Industrial and Provident Society (IPS) as the Fordhall Community Land Initiative (FCLI), we had only six months to raise £800,000 to secure the farm away from industrial development. It was a daunting figure for two farmers in their twenties who had no experience of business, fundraising, marketing, community engagement or project management.

We tried to find as many ways as possible that our community could be involved - we didn't want to leave anyone out. Methods of involvement included donating cash or resources such as reams of paper/envelopes, volunteering

time, distributing leaflets, subscribing to newsletters, or simply helping to spread the word, as well as purchasing our £50 shares through our newly formed Industrial and Provident Society (IPS).

Even though the share scheme was our leading focus, everything helped, everything made a difference and every person counted, however they wanted to be involved.

For all the wonderful things that community ownership gives to a farm, that method of consultation and involvement will not always be positive. We had many people doubt the validity of our vision, many people put us down and many did not believe it was possible. Most importantly, we listened to those who did believe in it, and to those who didn't – well, they made us more determined to prove them wrong!

Involving all members of the community with the project especially from a volunteering point of view takes an awful lot of your time and energy. Many volunteers wanted to help in the evening and weekends. With such a large amount of money to raise in such a short period, we could not turn anyone away. Managing this was perhaps the hardest and most draining aspect of the project. However, with no resources of our own we had to take whatever people could offer.

Grant funding for us was impossible. Our project was new and different, there were no trusted models to follow and grant funders were too dubious. In late 2005 we were eventually successful in gaining some funding from the European Leader programme. Their funds could be directed towards 'high risk' projects and saving Fordhall was one such project. The funding covered all our postage and printing through the campaign, but most importantly it covered the cost of a full time post. This went to Sophie, a committed member of our local



community who adopted our campaign with as much passion as we did.



Sophie, Charlotte and Ben with carnival float

The result was that Sophie and I would work from 8am in the morning until 12pm at night every day, seven days a week, whilst Ben managed the farm. On days closer to our deadline, July 1st 2006, we would have over 15 volunteers spread across the farmhouse; all stuffing envelopes, opening post, inputting data to computers and writing share certificates for almost every hour of the day. The campaign to save Fordhall from development became all consuming.

Two weeks before our deadline, and there was over £250,000 still to raise; a tremendous amount of money that incredibly came in within those final two weeks. Our turning point came from an article which appeared in the Telegraph that was then followed by articles in the Guardian, Observer, Country Living, Daily Mail and others. In fact we had two great articles in the Telegraph and both came as a result of us engaging with our community. The first happened when we attended a local event and in true Fordhall fashion we told everyone we met about the fight to save Fordhall from industrial development and place it into

community ownership. Coincidentally, that evening we spoke to the wife of a Telegraph journalist. The second large article came when a gentleman from London came to volunteer at Fordhall, his enthusiasm for the project grew and he told all his friends and family, urging them to support us. He happened to live on the same street as another Telegraph journalist and by knocking on her door and telling her about Fordhall, another article appeared.

These are just two examples of how opening the farm gates, allowing the community to be involved with the farm and by communicating our story wherever we were, took our project down a path to eventual, if last minute, success.

Our community makes our project at Fordhall everything that it is. Our community is now made up of shareholders, volunteers and supporters who live two miles or 20,000 miles away - a community much wider and more committed than we could ever have imagined.

My advice: communicate, communicate and communicate. You never know what helpful connections and interests your audience may have!

See the Fordhall blog for more examples
www.fordhallfarm.com/news



Why would your community want to be involved?

Understanding why your community wants to be involved with your project will help you agree on the best ways to involve them in creating your vision. The fact that 8,000 members of the general public purchased one or more £50 non-profit making shares in Fordhall Farm is a clear indication of the support that exists for the British landscape and agriculture.

Charlotte says:

When we began our fundraising in December 2005 for Fordhall, we had only six months to raise £800,000. At the time we were unaware of the support we may get for our campaign. But as soon as word got out, it seemed to touch a nerve with the general public and the response was overwhelming. We remained positive throughout and we always tried to have fun.



Volunteer tree planting weekend

In fact we found the reaction from strangers across the country to be incredibly passionate, heartfelt and emotional. Our story touched people's hearts and they wanted to be part of it. The £50 community share scheme provided that mechanism for support, especially for those living further away from Fordhall.

12 months after the successful appeal at Fordhall, the society worked with eco-psychologist John Hegarty to conduct a piece of research on its members.

The full paper can be downloaded from the Fordhall Farm website, but there are a few points to highlight here.

It was evident that most people first heard about the appeal from newspapers (51%), and by word of mouth (22%); radio/TV and other sources were infrequent. Most (82%) had bought only one to two shares, which were "primarily for themselves" (76%), rather than as gifts for others, and it "mattered a great deal" to them that buying these shares showed that "people can overcome the largest challenges, against the odds". 68% had "none" or "slight" prior experience with agriculture.

A combination of Ben and Charlotte's youth, their commitment and passion for saving the farm, their fight against developers, their inspirational vision of community land ownership, their desire to re-connect people with agriculture, and a belief in sustainability and organic farming all combined to make the message appealing.

What the shareholders say...



Hereford cattle

"I feel that I have been a part of something bigger and also made a statement that although cheap, mass-produced food does sell in supermarkets, there is a demand and a desire from people for something more sustainable and where people can have a connection with the land and what they are eating."

"I find it inspiring that Charlotte, Ben and Sophie were so passionate about saving the farm, its heritage and its future, taking on 'the giants' to save what they love and to secure a future for the farm."

"I love the sense that a little bit of English countryside has been preserved and a place to visit and take our grandson when he gets a bit older."

"I saw an article in a magazine and I was struck by two such young people fighting a massive battle against major odds. I also dislike the concreting over of green land which I think must be preserved at all costs. I wanted Fordhall Farm to succeed to set a precedent for future cases where people are fighting against the use of green land. Incidentally three of our grandchildren hold shares in Kenya and East Africa."

"It was the personal stories of Charlotte and Ben and Arthur Hollins that really made me feel connected to the place although I live a long way away. I felt very strongly that I would like to help out and it happened that I had just got some money so I decided to give an interest free loan"

"I would particularly like to see this model of community land ownership spreading out much wider than just Fordhall or Shropshire into the rest of the country. This is one of the few optimistic things in farming today so it is really important to take it out and make sure other farmers and potential farmers are at least aware that such things can be done."

The results of this research confirm that they had responded positively to the inspirational vision of the appeal. They wanted to save Fordhall Farm from being bought by developers and were satisfied with their involvement. They valued ongoing contact (for example, by receiving a newsletter) and wanted political and educational action to encourage organic and sustainable farming principles.

The research clearly demonstrates how important it is to tell 'your story'. Let your community into the world of farming; let them share the highs and the lows. This is why your community will want to be involved – your story and vision will bring community-ownership to life.

Everyone likes a feel good story and they will tell others, especially if they feel like they can make a difference. What's your story?



Fordhall farm trail



Accessing land – purchase or lease

The motivation you have for placing land into community-ownership may vary. Generally it becomes an option when the conventional systems fail to work and the land is placed in jeopardy.



A sunny day at Fordhall

Charlotte says:

We had many barriers facing us at Fordhall and many of them were indicative of problems existing across the whole agricultural industry.

Primarily, these problems stem from artificially inflated land values and the dreaded 'development potential'. The results are:

- Land is in increasingly short supply. The potential for development on farm land increases its market value putting it out of reach of new/young farmers.
- It is impossible for any farmer to buy a piece of land and pay that mortgage off on a farmer's income.

- Only short-term tenancies are offered because landowners do not want to tie up their land in case a cash sale opportunity arises. Consequently, tenant farmers have short term thinking directing their farming practices and the land (and soil) ultimately suffers.
- When land or farms do come up for sale (not for development) they are more valuable when fields are sold individually and amalgamated into neighbouring larger farms. Family sized farms are therefore broken up, sold in lots and lost forever as whole farming units.
- Fewer people are able to access the agricultural industry the fewer farms there are, the community becomes more segregated from the land and our farming industry relies on fewer farmers with bigger farms to produce our food.

When we placed Fordhall into community-ownership we wanted to remove as many of the industry barriers as possible, ensuring that young entrants could always have access to affordable farmland with long term thinking and the community could always enjoy it and most importantly remain part of it.



Fordhall pigs

Our landlord wanted to sell Fordhall to our industry neighbour, Muller Dairy; a large multinational company that we could not compete with, well at least not financially. We were living the 'David and Goliath' battle for real.

We were lucky that the focus for Mullers' expansion eventually moved away from Fordhall allowing us to negotiate a purchase offer direct with the landowner in 2005.

Fordhall was valued at approximately £500,000 as a working farm in its run-down state. Splitting the land up and selling it to local farmers with the house separately could push value over £1 million. Our offer price met halfway - £800,000.

After raising funds through the £50 community share scheme the Fordhall Community Land Initiative (FCLI) purchased the farm in 2006 and offered our tenant a 100 year lease. As a direct result of having the land tied up with a long term tenant for 100 years, the 'market value' of the farm plummeted from £800,000 to less than £400,000. For the Fordhall Community Land Initiative this is merely a value in the year end accounts, but for a private landowner it is clear that the incentive to have a long term tenant is non-existent.



Ben Hollins and pigs

We have provided our tenant, Ben Hollins, with the incentive to invest his time and energy into building up the farm and the business. Long after Ben has gone, the FCLI will continue to offer long-term tenancies to new entrants to the agricultural industry, an opportunity which is becoming increasingly hard to find in British agriculture.

The value of land has increased dramatically over recent years and there is nothing to suggest this will change in the foreseeable future. As our planet becomes more populated we need more land for people to live on and more land to produce food for those people.

Land values will influence your choice to buy or rent your community farm. But remember, although the land may be expensive for you to buy now, if you are tenants there will always be the chance that the land will be sold to someone else in the future; possibly for housing or industrial development. If you choose to rent land you need to be happy with the level of long term security that it gives your project and your community.



Adam feeding the pigs whilst on work experience

Ultimately, the most secure option is always to place the land into the ownership of the community for perpetuity. This way you know that it will remain farmed and managed sustainably for the benefit of your community for generations to come. You may have to raise substantial funds in the short term to do so but the share scheme provided through an Industrial and Provident Society (IPS) is the perfect

vehicle to achieve this, simultaneously engaging and empowering your community.

When raising the funds to purchase a piece of land there is always the chance that you may not be successful. To gain trust from your supporters put in provisions at the beginning.

There was always a chance we would not raise the £800,000 by the deadline offered by the landowners. If this happened, we needed a contingency plan. At Fordhall we provided our supporters with options for the funds should our project fail. Thankfully, we did not have to put this into practice.

In the unlikely event of the initiative failing to raise the required amount, where would you like your money to be directed?

Please tick a below :

- Returned to self minus admin costs
- Donated to Shropshire Wildlife Trust
- Donated to Friends of the Earth
- Donated to Harvest Help

Once your land has been placed into community ownership, you need to put policies and procedures in place that facilitate clear communication and smooth progress. It may sound boring and unnecessary when everyone has already bought into the vision and is fully committed to the project, but people can and will change over time. Putting in procedures when everyone agrees is much easier than trying to implement them when they do not! These may be communication policies, land management agreements or access policies, whatever you think you need to ensure your project runs smoothly.

At Fordhall we have additional agreements between the FCLI as the landowner and our tenant farmer, over and above the tenancy agreement.

For example our tenant must:

- ensure the land at Fordhall remains organic grassland
- allow access for educational visits throughout the year
- support the work the FCLI does with volunteers



Fordhall morning boardwalk

- allow access through the farm trails
- provide livestock free fields for an agreed number of annual events

These agreements are an addition to his tenancy agreement and are a consideration within the rent reviews.

The FCLI also agrees that the farmhouse and garden remain as private space for the tenant. On a farm that is owned by over 8,000 members of the wider public, this has to be an important consideration.

Communication between everyone in your project will be key to its success, both as you are setting up and when you are up and running. A great way of achieving this on a practical level is to ensure you have a good mix of people on your board of directors.

We have 14 members on our board of directors of the Fordhall Community Land Initiative. Within that we have three seats which remain permanent; the others rotate on a three year cycle. These permanent seats include one for the tenant farmer, one from a local community group and one from Shropshire Wildlife Trust. This ensures that the views of the farmer, the local community and the environment are always considered on our community-owned farm.

Running a community-owned farm

Running a community-owned farm is one of the most enjoyable and rewarding jobs. Getting the ball rolling and starting your project is exciting, inspiring, enthralling, emotional and enlightening. Keeping it going takes just as much effort and can be just as rewarding. Be careful not to fall into a false sense of security once you have purchased your farm, the hard work is not over - it is only just beginning.

In fact keeping the ball rolling can be more exhausting and require more motivation simply because the excitement of the initial setting up is no longer there.

Charlotte says:

When Fordhall Organic Farm was saved from development in 2006, we certainly felt the pressure: 8,000 members of our community, both local and further afield, had invested in this farm for the future. They had bought into a vision for the future of farming, and now we had to live up to that vision. We had changed one landlord for 8,000 community landlords.



Tractors provide a great attraction for children on farm open days

In setting up your community-owned farm you will have created enthusiasm and you will have inspired members of your community. You need to nurture these relationships and encourage them for your project to succeed into the future.

The most effective way of continuing this support is through continued engagement. It is important to look at the ways you engaged your community when setting up your project, were they successful and are they still relevant to your project once it is up and running or does it need tweaking? Are there new ways you can engage your community now you are on your way?



Fordhall 2004



Fordhall 2010

We had built up enormous momentum and the support was phenomenal. But, without the excitement of our campaign and the deadline to raise the £800,000, how would we maintain this interest? We knew that if we lost the attention of our shareholders we would never be able to regain it, so there was little time for resting; it was straight into action and the seven day weeks were unrelenting.

We continued to organise our events and our volunteer weekends and immediately started to focus our activities and our communication with our members towards stage two. For us, this was establishing our educational programme, improving access to the farm for the community, renovating the farmhouse and renovating our run-down farm buildings, the Old Dairy.

By communicating all of these projects to our members, they knew that we still needed them and their support. Securing the farm from development and placing it into community ownership was the first step along a long journey to achieving our vision. We reiterated this vision in our newsletters, on our website and through all our press releases.

We have also run a number of appeals to our shareholders. These have proven to be pivotal in the progression of Fordhall. In 2008 we ran an appeal raising £8,000 towards the improvements for our farm trail. In 2009 we appealed for funds to replace the roof on the farmhouse raising £50,000 and in 2010 we raised £100,000 towards the renovation of our Old Dairy building.



Educational visit

Fundraising for specific projects such as these allow our shareholders to remain central to the work at Fordhall whilst allowing vital funds to be raised. We also hold a thank you BBQ for all our supporters each year. This is a free event where supporters both local and further afield can visit the farm, have a tour and meet other members.

So what about us? Well, eventually the time came when seven day weeks became the rarity instead of the norm. We got our lives back, we increased staff levels and Fordhall has now reached a steady pace of progression. Having met our respective partners when they were volunteering at Fordhall, the farm is very much part of all our lives, but now at least there is time to take a day off every now and then!

During the first five years of community-ownership we have worked hard to make the transition between an organisation with a reliance on donations and grant aid, to a social enterprise generating our own income streams, where profits can be ploughed back into our educational programmes.

Fundraising for specific capital projects will continue, but funding to cover our core costs will be generated through enterprise. In 2010 we began our plan to renovate the Old Dairy building. 12 months later and it was open to the public. A sustainably renovated barn complete with Photo Voltaic (PV) panels, a green roof, air source heat pump, hemp walls, sheep's



Fordhall June 2011

wool insulation and natural clay paints. The building now holds our office, classrooms, tearoom, restaurant, function rooms, farm shop and butchery. The ability for the FCL to generate its own income is now in full swing.



The Fordhall Farm Shop

Our challenge since opening the buildings at Fordhall has been the transition to a more professional business focus, without losing our welcoming community farm feeling. Visitors can sometimes expect everything to be free because we are charitable, but there have to be lines between activities which generate funds and activities which provide clear community/educational benefit.

This is not the only new progression at Fordhall, we also have a community garden, the beginnings of an orchard, three free farm trails, a pizza oven and a deluxe compost toilet. We run many educational programmes, short courses, and we work with young people who struggle with the conventional educational system and we have developed a share scheme specifically for children.

There is barely time to catch a breath. Our run-down farm has turned into a bustling, lively, presentable focus for the community. And the best thing is that our vision is still evolving.

The key to the smooth running of any community-owned farm will always be good communication. This must remain strong between the management committee, the supporters, volunteers and your farmers. Each stakeholder also needs to be as involved as is practical.

Depending on your project and your business plan, your focus could be many things. You may have decided to fundraise to continue your activities, you may have a vegetable box scheme or farm shop and run as a social enterprise, or you may have regular grant aid. Whatever your financial model, you need to focus and commit to it as well as ensuring it is sustainable for the long haul.

Be careful not to underestimate the administration burden a community farm entails. If you have shareholders, volunteers, subscribers and supporters they could all require separate systems and databases and regular communication. Consider it and plan for it and it won't become a drain on your resources, instead it will become an asset.

Success for your community-owned farm will be secured by revisiting your vision on a regular basis and reacting to the needs of your community; ensuring your project remains interesting, diverse, and active. If you can do this you will continue to gain new supporters and you will maintain the interest of your longstanding supporters.



A BBQ to thank our supporters

Some of the many activities and projects we have at Fordhall initially began as suggestions from our members or visitors. Our vision is always evolving, whether this is through visioning days with board members and staff, asking members at our AGM or through informal conversations with visitors and supporters.

A community-owned farm never stands still, you will never stop learning and the challenges will keep coming – enjoy it.



Volunteers at Fordhall



Poppy through the trees

Next steps

Some useful actions to get you going

- Gather a core group of supporters (management team) who are committed to making it happen with you – you will need it.
- Ask for help, advice and ideas. Sometimes help can be found in the most unlikely of places – if you don't ask, you don't know.
- Speak to your community – start with those who have already shown an interest. What would they like to see if there were no barriers and money was no object? How would they like to be involved? How would they like their children to be involved? Be aspirational. Develop a short and long-term plan.
- Draft your vision on paper – it may be bullet points, diagrams or images. Whatever you feel best portrays it.
- Organise a public meeting. Display your vision. Facilitate discussion, refine the vision and engage your wider community in the vision.
- Organise suitable events and activities to engage your community with your farm/land.
- Speak to Plunkett Foundation for advice.
- Look for organisations that believe in your ethos and begin to build links, even if it is only from an awareness point of view to begin with. They might not all be able to help directly in the first instance, but building a relationship and making links is the first step in creating a useful permanent partnership for both groups.
- Think about your legal structure and investigate the options. Does your chosen structure facilitate long term engagement from your community, such as that offered through an Industrial and Provident Society (IPS) share issue? Does the legal structure compliment your project?
- Create your business plan based on your vision, your barriers and your opportunities. Once you have a supportive community you can start to tackle how to overcome your barriers to achieve your ultimate vision.

Important tips to remember

- You need a strong leader to take the project forward – that person is more than likely you!
- **Remember – what we did at Fordhall was simple. We simply opened the farm gates and allowed the community to get involved, took their ideas on board and made the most of every opportunity that presented itself. You never know where it can lead until you try!**
- Be prepared to work long hours, give up your weekends, go without holidays and work very hard. Be prepared for the cynics, the negative comments and those who will work hard to put barriers in your way. Most importantly, be prepared to meet amazing people and experience generosity beyond belief. Be prepared to achieve your dreams.
- You will need to be constantly positive, diplomatic, fair, welcoming, flexible, committed and enthusiastic. This can consume your life in the early stages of the project. Surround yourself with supporters to ease the pressure and don't be afraid to delegate.
- Be true to your ethos and vision – this will gain you respect and long term support.
- Focus on the small achievable tasks and always remember the big vision – break it down, create a plan.
- Believe it is possible and you'll be amazed what can be achieved.



Good luck!

About Making Local Food Work

Making Local Food Work helped communities across England to take control of their food and where it comes from by supporting a range of community food enterprises. It was a five year programme funded by the Big Lottery Fund and led by the Plunkett Foundation in partnership with the Campaign to Protect Rural England, Co-operatives UK, Country Markets Ltd., FARMA, Soil Association and Sustain.

www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk



The Plunkett Foundation helps rural communities through community-ownership to take control of the issues affecting them. Plunkett supports the network of 286 community-owned shops across the UK alongside a wide range of other community enterprises in rural areas. Plunkett also supports a wide range of community food enterprises and works to influence policy makers, support organisations and funders for the benefit of the communities it supports.

www.plunkett.co.uk



Useful links

Fordhall Organic Farm

www.fordhallfarm.com

Plunkett Foundation

www.plunkett.co.uk

Making Local Food Work

www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk

Co-operatives UK

www.uk.coop

Community Shares

www.communityshares.org.uk

My Community Rights

www.mycommunityrights.org.uk

Report on Community Farm Land Trusts -

**[www.stroudcommonwealth.org.uk/
documents/final_report_-_april_2007.pdf](http://www.stroudcommonwealth.org.uk/documents/final_report_-_april_2007.pdf)**

For further information on how Fordhall Farm was saved, you can purchase the book *The Fight for Fordhall Farm* from Fordhall Organic Farm. If you are interested in Arthur Hollins and his pioneering organic farming methods you can read more in his book *The Farmer, the Plough and the Devil* also available from Fordhall Organic Farm.

Facebook – Fordhall Organic Farm

Twitter – @fordhallfarm

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