



SUSTAINABLE GROWTH AND ENVIRONMENT CAPITAL SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

A Report from the Task and Finish Group to Review and
Develop a Strategy for the Councils Farms Estate

17 March 2015

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Task and Finish Group to Review and Develop a Strategy for the Councils Farms Estate was established by the Sustainable Growth and Environment Capital Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 20 January 2014. The purpose of the Group was to look at a range of matters affecting the future management of the Councils farms estate and to help inform and develop a long term strategy for the development of the estate.

The cross party Task and Finish group comprised of the following members:



**Cllr David Harrington, Independent
Newborough Ward**



**Cllr Judy Fox, Independent
Werrington North Ward**



**Councillor Ed Murphy, Labour and Cooperative,
Ravensthorpe Ward**

Officers supporting the Task and Finish Group were:

- Jonathan Lewis, Assistant Director for Education, Resources and Corporate Property
- Jo Gresty, Farms Manager
- Dania Castagliuolo, Democratic Services Officer

The Task and Finish Group would like to thank the Officers who have worked with them, for all of their guidance and support.

2. SCOPE AND TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE TASK AND FINISH GROUP

The Task and Finish Group was established to raise the profile of the Council's Farms Estate by Investigating and developing a strategy.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

- Ensure that the profile of the farms estate is raised, within the council and to members, also to the public including the key role it has played for the City over a number of years going back to 1913.
- Develop a strategy for the farms estate and its use into the future.
- Consider options around realising maximum value from the estate, including financial, social and environmental returns. Financial considerations include options for sale, expansion, rental levels, alternative uses, attracting external funding or invest to save proposals.

3. PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY USED FOR THE INVESTIGATION

3.1 Methodology

- Research
- 1:1 interviews with key witnesses/technical specialists
- Information from special interest groups
- Consultation with tenant farmers
- Co-opted members from the Tenant Farmers Association Group
- Data from CIPFA
- An initial presentation on the background and history of the farms estate and a tour around the Councils Farms Estate

The work of the Group has been undertaken through the following activities:

- Attending facilitated meetings
- Observation through an initial visit to the farms estate
- Presentation on the background and history of the farms estate
- Direct contact with tenant farmers
- Consultation with tenant farmers
- Researching other local authorities strategies
- Exploring the educational aspect of farming

3.2 Process

The timetable of the events leading to the production of this report are set out below:

The Group has met on 8 occasions. Meetings concentrated on developing the Strategy for the Retention and Development of the Farms Estate.

Meeting Date	Items discussed
29 April 2014	Purpose of the Group and Terms of Reference Methodology of the Review Identification of Key Witnesses Identification of Research and Background Information Required Agreed Timescales of Review Reporting timetable Frequency of Meetings and Dates
3 June 2014	Visit to the Farms Estate Meeting with Tenant Farmers
15 July 2014	Draft Farms Estate Strategy Financial and non-financial review of the farm estate including potential disposal value. Terms of Reference
9 September 2014	Development of the Farms Estate Strategy
27 October 2014	Draft Strategy with an Outline of the Three and Ten Year Plan Discussion with Key Witnesses
2 December 2014	Update on the Draft Farms Estate Strategy
13 January 2015	The Draft Report and Strategy presented to the Sustainable Growth and Environment Capital Scrutiny Committee for Comments.
21 January 2015	Meeting to consider comments from the Sustainable Growth and Environment Capital Scrutiny Committee and to amend the Strategy in line with the comments.

3.3 Key Witnesses / Expert Advisers interviewed:

A key part of the Group's work has been to undertake visits to the Farms Estate and discuss the strategy with tenant farmers. These have included:

- William and Margaret Cave (Eardely Grange Farm, Speechleys Drove)
- Jonathan Woodroffe (Eardely Grange Farm, Wrights Drove)
- Alan Skeels (Hurn Farm)
- John Harris (Lodge Farm, Thorney)

The Task and Finish Group would like to thank everybody who assisted them during the course of the investigation for their support and openness. This assistance was greatly appreciated.

4. BACKGROUND

The Peterborough Farms Estate was purchased by the Council approximately 100 years ago. It is a statutory smallholdings estate held by the Council under the provisions of the Agriculture Act 1970. Section 39 of the Act states;

"In the performance of their functions under this Part of this Act smallholding authorities, having regard to the general interest of agriculture and of good estate management, shall make it their general aim to provide opportunities for persons to be farmers on their own account".

Central government policy is to encourage all smallholdings authorities, such as Peterborough, to retain and develop their farms estates with the following aims:

- To provide opportunities for new entrants into farming
- To provide examples of best practice
- To provide a positive link between the city and the surrounding rural land
- To support the local rural economy

The most recent government report *The Importance of the County Farms Estate to the Rural Economy*, November 2008, made a number of key recommendations, including:

- Regional Economic Strategies should recognise the importance of the County Farm structure as a crucial entry point for new entrants to agriculture
- Local authorities should take a longer-term view when considering sale of land to seek to maximise revenue for development whilst not undermining the principle objectives of the estates
- Local authorities should develop the wider benefits of their holding with particular regard to renewable energy, local food, public access, education, employment and the broader rural economy

The farms estate consists of a total land area of 1,217 hectares (3,007 acres) consisting of :

- 15 equipped holdings (with house and buildings)
- 7 holdings with land and some buildings (no dwelling)
- 12 bare-land lettings (no buildings)

The estate is located in three areas of the city: Newborough, Thorney and Fengate. Newborough has by far the largest number of assets and accounts for nearly 90% of the estate by area.

The farm estate the council retains is a valued and important aspect of the work of the city council and the character of the authority. It is a long term holding, held for the benefit of the City of Peterborough. The council needs to protect these assets whilst maximising their financial benefit of these assets and enhancing the rural economy. There has not been a significant review of the farm estate for many years and at the meeting of the committee on the 20th January, it was proposed to establish a task and finish group to develop a formal strategy.

The Task and Finish group has been given a detailed oversight of the farm estate including its history, opportunities, challenges and potential future options for its use. This has include a tour of the estates and two meetings with representatives from the Peterborough City Council Tenant Farmers Associations and the National Farmers Union (NFU).

At the Scruinty meeting on the 13th January, a number of queries were raised as to the work undertaken.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Effective ownership of an agricultural estate requires a longterm view to ensure sustainable management. Decisions made can affect the estate for many years and decades. Without a clear understanding of the aims of the Council with regard to the estate, effective management is handicapped. On occasion quick decisions are required to take advantage of events. In recent years there has not been an agreed strategy for the estate to enable such decisions to be made, resulting in lost opportunities. A clear strategy also should act as a means of informing the Council so that it has an understanding of the asset and the reasons for its ownership.

The strategy which has been developed takes account of the benefits retaining the farm estate gives the council.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Task and Finish Group recommends to the Sustainable Growth and Environment Capital Scrutiny Committee to endorse the Strategy and recommend it to Cabinet for approval.

7. LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS AND RESEARCH SOURCES USED DURING THE INVESTIGATION

House of Commons Library Standard Note SN/SC/1337 *Tenant Farmers* 19 May 2010
Agricultural property rights and the county farms estate in England and Wales – Nick Prince
March 2012
RICS/RAU rural land market survey data quarterly reports

Further information on this report is available from:

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