



Introduction to **Westhill Farm Project**

Oxford City Council Scrutiny Committee,
Meeting on 7th June 2016

Westhill Farm
SHOTOVER PARK COMMUNITY PROJECT

Westhill Farm comprises a small farmhouse and parcel of land in the Shotover Park within a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The Farm is situated in beautiful ancient woodland three miles from the city centre, and close to some of Oxford's most disadvantaged communities (notably Barton, Wood Farm and Blackbird Leys).

Westhill Farm was home to successive Shotover Park Rangers from 1938 until 2011, however the use of the land as a small-holding goes back many hundreds of years. The farm falls within the planning authority of South Oxford District Council, however the land is owned by Oxford City Council.

Between 1930 and 1937 Oxford Preservation Trust acquired the freehold to over 180 acres of land on the south slopes of the Shotover Hill from Christ Church and Brasenose Colleges. In 1952 the Trust conveyed the land, including Westhill Farm, to the Mayor Aldermen and Citizens of Oxford (now Oxford City Council) to maintain and manage as a public open space, with appropriate restrictive covenants in place to ensure the long term management of Shotover Park for the people of the City.

The covenant states:

"The Council or its assigns will... use and preserve the property hereby conveyed... as and for the purpose of an open space or park in its natural state to which the public may be allowed access and will not use the property hereby conveyed or the said land belonging to the Council in any other manner or at any time erect any buildings of any kind on the said property or land or any part thereof except that such part of the said property or land which is suitable for agricultural purposes may be used for the purpose of agriculture and such use shall not be deemed to be a breach of this covenant."

Oxford City Council vacated the property (it is unclear what alternative plans were in place for the building, but our understanding is a policy change meant the Ranger was no longer allowed to live there), and just a few months later, in May 2011, Westhill farmhouse was subject to an arson attack which left the building without a roof. The property has since been left in a derelict state, without adequate protection from the elements, and what remains of the farmhouse has deteriorated further. The site subsequently has become a liability to the council and a hazard to the public, and is scheduled for demolition in June.

Since 2012 a small, dedicated group of volunteers - to whom Oxford City Council has granted a licence to the land and barn - has developed a vision and business plan to restore the site to be a working model farm, based on permaculture principles. The model farm would become a space for education and training for all ages, for discussion and community events, and a sustainable, productive site.

The full business plan, letters of support, newsletters, reports, articles and other background documents, can be found here:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B6UTdhC6IB4TSWpWNnNrRGk00TA>

SUMMARY: Westhill Farm Project, by and for the Oxford Community
-a not-for-profit community project offering a no-cost benefit for the people of Oxford as well as enhancing the Country Park in accordance with the requirements of Natural England for its management as an SSSI.

Our vision for Westhill Farm is to develop a working farm as a space for active education and life-long learning, as an incubator for new social enterprises and entrepreneurs, as a contribution to the sustainability and biodiversity of Shotover Park, and as a space for community courses and events. The site will be developed to enable activities and services over five phases culminating in the opening of a new eco-build, fit-for-purpose farmhouse/educational facility in 2020.

Demonstrations, courses, apprenticeships and mentoring schemes will be run on site alongside local charities for the benefit of all groups, especially disadvantaged sections of the local community. We hope that the first generation of young adults to work with us will become part of the long-term operation – and to eventually run the project in years to come.

Westhill Farm Project will contribute to the realisation of each of Oxford City Council's corporate objectives, particularly to the creation of *stronger and more active communities, a cleaner and greener Oxford, and a vibrant and sustainable economy*. Westhill Farm Project also fully enables the fulfillment of the Development and Management Plan of the Shotover Country Park, as well as Natural England's strategic priorities, and supports the Oxford Strategic Partnership Programme.

The business case outlines a commercial model that seeks to use both generated income and charitable grants to support socially excluded groups. Many activities will be free to all as they will either be gifted through volunteer support, or as a result of the site's location and development.

Westhill Farm Project proposes to constitute a Community Interest Company (CIC). This enables it to assume ownership of the property and thereby assume full responsibility for the cost of building, renovation and on-going maintenance. It is believed that by assuming this responsibility; it significantly removes the tenancy management implications for OCC.

Our Core Values

Participation and opportunity - To provide opportunities for socially excluded groups to access growing activities –from agriculture to horticulture and gardening; and growing people as they deepen their connection with nature. Emphasis will be on physical and mental wellbeing and outdoor education.

Learning and educational experiences - To provide a facility and participatory activities for the benefit of learning through experience.

Building collaboration – through teamwork and taking this spirit back into the community

History and heritage - To create an historic working farm sympathetic to the history of the site, and re-establish farm activities replicating heritage crafts and traditional skills.

Exemplary design - To create a pioneering learning environment demonstrating the most innovative design methods of agro-ecology, eco buildings and designing for biodiversity; applied with the highest ethical standards.

Key Challenges and areas we require OCC support...

Risks to the Project's success have been identified and assessed in terms of likelihood and potential impact in order to identify priorities that need addressing. The full risk assessment and risk mitigation strategies are detailed in the business plan, available on request, however the following risks represent issues that specifically concern Oxford City Council.

Risk 1. Oxford City Council deny continuation of Rights of Residency for the site

Whilst we are sad to see the old farmhouse removed, we recognise that it represents a risk to the public. However it is important for the site to retain residential rights in order for the project to be

financially and organisationally viable. We are concerned that if permission to replace the farmhouse is not granted, then the city will lose this opportunity altogether.

There are a number of reasons why it is so important to retain residential rights on the farm. First is for security; the site has a history of vandalism and arson. Only last summer the compost toilets built as part of the project were burned down. We strongly believe that having someone living on site is by far the most cost effective way of ensuring security, particularly as more investment is made to restore the farm. Secondly the Shotover Management Plan requires grazing animals to restore the land and make it productive. Keeping a small number of animals on site is only viable if there is someone living there to manage them; once rights to live on site are taken away, the farm may never be fully restored. And thirdly, we strongly believe that by managing the model farm in a sustainable and traditional way - with grazing animals and residency on site - we are conserving and protecting the land as it has been used for centuries. In doing so we are protecting the heritage of the area, in a way that impacts positively on the most deprived and disadvantaged communities in Oxford today.

We request that Oxford City Council grants continuation of the rights of residency on site so that Westhill Farm project might begin a formal planning application with South Oxford District Council BEFORE demolition takes place.

Risk 2. Oxford City Council refuses to grant the Westhill Farm Project a long term lease to the land.

The vision of Westhill Farm project is to make a long term, intergenerational contribution to the Oxford community. Restoring an ecologically fragile site to be productive and resilient takes time, investment and patience. Westhill Farm aims not only to restore the land, but also to facilitate the process of community empowerment, and develop a self-sustaining culture of responsible land stewardship in Oxford.

We request that Oxford City Council grants Westhill Farm Project a Lease of no less than forty years in order to realise long term social and ecological impacts.

Risk 3. Overload to local roads due to increased visitors to the park to attend Westhill Farm activities

Westhill Farm is accessible by road along The Ridings. It is essential that this access remains in order for the site to be fully accessible for less able members of the community. In accordance with our sustainable vision, staff, volunteers and visitors will travel to the farm on bicycles via Brasenose Woods, or walk down the hill from the car park on Old Road. We are committed to not increasing traffic on The Ridings beyond previous usage by the resident park ranger. However road access to Westhill Farm is essential for the project to be accessible and inclusive.

Risk 4. Key stakeholders object to the project

It is possible that various key stakeholders block or in various ways prevent the realisation of Westhill Farm Project. Key influential groups include Oxford City Council, Oxford Preservation Trust, South Oxford District Council, Shotover Preservation Society, Shotover Wildlife Preservation Group, Natural England, and local residents.

All key stakeholders, including but not limited to the above, are considered key strategic partners in Westhill Farm Project and integral to the vision. We will create a stakeholder committee to ensure regular consultation and participation. We believe that our vision and actions are in keeping with the covenant to maintain the farm for public benefit and agricultural use.

We request that Oxford City Council continues to work closely with the Westhill Farm Project, to support the realisation of our business plan, and support our engagement with stakeholders and potential user groups around Oxford.

We hope that Oxford City Council recognises the enormous potential and significant opportunity

that Westhill Farm Project represents.

We hope the Scrutiny Committee will allow us to speak at the forthcoming Committee meeting on 7th June and respectfully request the committee to consider the following questions:

- 1) Is the community asset of Westhill Farm site, and the farmhouse specifically, at risk of further degradation and damage if the farmhouse is not replaced by a building with residential status?
- 2) Would Oxford City Council be willing to give permission for the Westhill Farm project to replace the community asset farmhouse building with a similar size building with residential status if the project manage the liabilities and costs? If so Westhill Farm project request that the decision to demolish the farm building is paused until such time as a response is given to the business plan requirement that the farm building can be rebuilt with residency or OCC commit to support the application of a replacement building.
- 3) If OCC does not agree to the Westhill Farm project business plan what alternative plans does OCC have that will support the OCC strategic objectives to the same extent as the Westhill Farm project business plan.

For more detail please see our full business plan, but if you have any questions please don't hesitate to contact a member of the project Steering Committee.

Finally we would like to take this opportunity to invite you visit the site, to meet with our team, to contribute towards our vision for the farm and project.

Sincerely,

Westhill Farm Steering Committee

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