

CABINET RESPONSE TO RURAL ESTATES TASK GROUP REPORT

Cabinet note para 1.4 in the recommendations section of the Task Force report, that: *“Members make the following recommendations to be considered as part of the SEP review, with an overall intention of contributing to producing a revised Plan which provides a clear and pragmatic direction of travel....”*

RECOMMENDATION 1 – Revised Mission Statement

To revise the mission statement of the County Farm Estate as follows: The Gloucestershire County Farms Estate plays a strategically important role in sustaining rural communities by providing gateway opportunities into agriculture and ancillary businesses. It is a significant contributor to profitable agricultural production, environmental sustainability, and climate change management within the County, with sound environmental practices, food security, innovation, and technology at its core. The estate aims to provide diverse, well-equipped farm and business opportunities, which facilitate tenants to establish and develop sustainable, dynamic businesses, which deliver a holistic approach to economic, socio-economic, and environmental development whilst promoting increased public understanding of agriculture and the countryside. NB: The definition of ‘strategically important’ is not a reference to the overall size of the rural estate but to the opportunity that the estate facilitates in delivering a multitude of diverse aims.

Cabinet response –

Cabinet is committed to providing a gateway into agriculture for new entrants. Cabinet wishes to place on record that the authority’s capacity to have a strategic impact is inevitably constrained given the limited size of the estate, making up just 1.25% of Gloucestershire’s farmland. Cabinet welcomes the proposed revised mission statement which we agree better reflects the multiple outcomes that the rural estate is now being challenged to deliver. Likewise, we should all be proud that Gloucestershire is home to two world-leading centres of agricultural learning and innovation, the Royal Agricultural University and Hartpury University.

RECOMMENDATION 2 – Maintaining the County Farm Estate

The Task Group recognise the need to secure capital receipts through identified development opportunities, and to sell assets such as old buildings, to make a better overall investment opportunity. They also recognise however that the current Rural Estate Strategic Estate Plan (SEP) and policy of progressive rationalisation is leading to an unclear future for the Estate.

The Task Group therefore recommends that:

- a) the future SEP takes into account the need to maintain, protect and enhance the scale and quality of land and soil grade as a whole and assets available to the County Farms Estate through the acquisition of land and avoidance of sale in line with agreed business case and financial parameters. To achieve this approach, there is a need for a longer-term strategic view of the Estate’s future.
- b) a more flexible approach is adopted across the wider rural land portfolio when

reviewing and assessing potential options, for example, to investigate the retention or part retention of holdings currently identified for disposal within the 2016 SEP in light of other opportunities detailed in the following recommendations.

c) the current objective outlined in the 2016 SEP to reduce the Estate to 5,600 acres is revoked and the future SEP identifies maintaining the current acreage as a minimum core estate, noting that this acreage may not be the same configuration that currently exists across the Estate.

Cabinet response –

a) Cabinet acknowledges the Task Group view that the future SEP needs to maintain, protect, and enhance the scale and quality of land and soil grade. However, Cabinet would highlight that there is a multiplicity of factors that need to be considered regarding the future use of GCC's rural estate land.

b) Cabinet supports flexible approaches to the disposal of land and recent disposals have demonstrated this by disposing of farmhouses with limited amounts of land in order to amalgamate remaining land into other existing holdings thus making them more viable and efficient in the longer term. Cabinet will continue to support this approach where proposals are viable and deliverable.

c) Cabinet is committed to the 2016 SEP. However, Cabinet does recognise some of the development opportunities that GCC has made land available for, are as a direct consequence of strategic purchases over previous decades. Cabinet will therefore ask officers to develop criteria for acquisitions that might ultimately provide capital receipts in the longer term while enabling gateway opportunities for new tenants in the interim.

RECOMMENDATION 3 – Renewable opportunities

The Task Group recommends the following in relation to these two distinct categories:

- Small scale farm building renewable opportunities -
 - a) To actively explore and implement opportunities across the Council Farms Estate for holdings to make use of new technologies for renewable energy, anaerobic digestion, and non-fossil fuel generation, with a view to improving the energy efficiency and sustainability of the individual farm unit, and to contribute toward the Council's overall net zero goal.
- Large scale field based renewable opportunities - These are potential development opportunities, including both battery and PV, that would contribute toward energy security and generate an ongoing revenue income for GCC:
 - b) To develop a clear policy around the future use of such technologies, ensuring any such policy is cognisant of the need to avoid using good quality food growing farmland for this purpose.
 - c) That a pilot field scale development renewable trial be investigated and implemented. And that the subsequent results of the pilot be reported back to scrutiny.

Cabinet response – Cabinet is committed to reducing the council’s carbon footprint and to exploring renewable opportunities where appropriate.

a) Cabinet supports tenants who are seeking to reduce the carbon footprint of their farm enterprise and switch to renewable energy sources, for reasons of sustainability, efficiency and financial viability

b) Cabinet acknowledges the desirability of developing a clear policy around the future use of large scale field based technologies, however, this should come after the proposed trial referred in C below, when the lessons learnt from any pilot project are clear.

c) Cabinet would support investigating opportunities for a pilot field scale renewable energy development.

RECOMMENDATION 4 – Professional support for Tenant farmers

To identify funding to procure targeted, external professional services to best support tenants and deliver, facilitate, and promote specific project delivery with particular reference to: • Wider GCC responsibilities • Climate change / biodiversity • Food Security • Co-ordination & facilitation of funding opportunities • Carbon management.

Cabinet response – Cabinet supports the continued pursuit of external funding, that provides tenants with targeted professional support including Countryside Stewardship, and any future funding streams & initiatives, and would further encourage our officers to strengthen relationships with the Royal Agricultural and Hartpury universities.

RECOMMENDATION 5 – Carbon Management

The Task Group recognise both the national and Council drive towards net zero. It also acknowledges that tenants engage their own specialist advice with regards to individual farm businesses. Working in partnership with tenants, the Estate provides a substantial opportunity to mitigate carbon emissions through land use practices which enable carbon sequestration. It welcomes that all new letting particulars include specific clauses in respect of GCC expectations and, that favourable consideration may be given to applicants proposing systems of farming which assist and contribute towards the Council attaining its proposed reduction in carbon emissions. The Group therefore recommend that officers continue to work alongside local colleagues and businesses with respect to innovative and progressive carbon management initiatives, including the re-commissioning of whole farm plans by FWAG utilising ELM3 trial methodologies and with a particular focus on the use of the Global Farm Metric, Ecosystem Attribution and Developed Sustainability Models, as well as alignment with local universities, and the potential across the estate for the sale of carbon and Biodiversity Net Gain units.

Cabinet response – Whole farm plans will continue to be commissioned subject to funding.

RECOMMENDATION 6 – Local food production

In emphasising the importance of locally produced food, and the potential for Gloucestershire to be a pathfinder in local food schemes, the Group recommend that:

- a) Tenants on the County Farm Estate continue to be encouraged to contribute towards county-wide initiatives such as Made in Gloucestershire and the Gloucestershire Food and Farming Partnership, who are promoting high quality, high welfare, and sustainable food production.
- b) Concepts including the ‘Made in Gloucestershire’ brand should be actively promoted across the estate and tenants recognised and celebrated for positive achievements.
- c) Encourage access to financial assistance to encourage, where possible, more direct sales outlets / enterprises where immediate impacts upon the local circular economy and communities can be achieved.
- d) Thought is given to how the Council can best signpost tenant farmers to opportunities to contribute towards local projects, local procurement initiatives and promote examples of positive achievements within the farming community.

Cabinet response – Cabinet supports local food production.

- a) Cabinet supports tenants who participate in county-wide initiatives that promote high quality, high welfare, sustainable and efficient food production.
- b) Cabinet supports appropriate marketing promotions, particularly where they celebrate the positive achievement of tenants.
- c) Cabinet notes that several tenants have established farm shops and direct sale of their produce and celebrates their entrepreneurial enterprise.
- d) Cabinet will ask officers to consider how best to signpost tenant farmers toward appropriate opportunities.

RECOMMENDATION 7 – Diversity of Enterprise

The Task Group recognises the importance of promoting diversity of enterprise across the County Farm Estate. There is potential to facilitate wider community opportunities using identified holdings for education or rehabilitation schemes, as well as the use of identified buildings to create workshops, rural hubs, and apprenticeship/college programmes. There are established tourism-based diversifications across the estate which positively contribute to the local economy in several ways. The importance of maintaining the County’s public rights of way network was also recognised in terms of promoting general health and wellbeing amongst those living within the County. It is therefore recommended that officers consider opportunities to diversify use of the County Farm Estate, this should include

exploring what other local authorities are doing in this area and ensuring that when opportunities for tenancy become available, these are advertised as widely as possible, to ensure they reach a diverse audience.

Cabinet response – Cabinet recognise that this recommendation has multiple facets and would respond as follows:

- Cabinet will ask the Rural Estate Manager to explore the potential use of a holding to pilot an education or rehabilitation schemes.
- Cabinet recognises that there already established tourism-based diversifications across the estate which positively contribute to the local economy.
- Cabinet recognises the importance of maintaining the public rights of way network and the benefits it brings in terms of promoting the general health and wellbeing of our residents.
- Cabinet will task officers to explore what other local authority and private estates are doing around diversification.
- Cabinet acknowledges the desirability of having a diversity of tenants, coupled with the need for all tenants to have the appropriate level of qualification; experience to run a farm business and a desire to run a viable and productive holding.

RECOMMENDATION 8 – Financial reinvestment

The Task Group recognises that currently the significant majority of money generated, through capital or revenue, by the County Farm Estate is spent in other areas of the council's responsibility and acknowledge that this was not a sustainable approach in the long term. The Task Group therefore recommends that: The agricultural value of any sale (land and/or buildings) is reinvested back into the County Farm Estate. Officers should agree a set formula for calculating the agricultural value and should explore how other local authorities fund their Farm Estates.

Cabinet response – Investment in the Farm Estate is ongoing, during the past three years **£496k** has been reinvested and a further £3.6m is included in the capital programme which will be spent over the next three years. This represents significantly more than what would have been generated as 'agricultural value' of the land disposed of. Cabinet determines capital investment across all services in order to prioritise where it is best spent and will continue to do this based on carefully considered business cases.

RECOMMENDATION 9 – Flood Alleviation

For officers to continue to explore the opportunity to use the County Farm Estate for flood alleviation opportunities, particularly for Natural Flood Management schemes.

Cabinet response – GCC’s rural estate manager will continue to work closely with the county flood risk management team and the district drainage and flood officers.

RECOMMENDATION 10 – Internal officer support

The Task Group recognised that the Council’s Rural Estate team is uniquely well staffed and in view of ensuring this is retained, it is recommended that the views of the Rural Estate Manager are sought on what support the team needs and how best it can be provided, noting previous reference to the procuring external providers/organisations in Recommendation 4 & 5.

Cabinet response – AMPs regularly reviews its staffing requirements in order to manage the estate efficiently and effectively. A new appointment has recently been made adding capacity to undertake this years asset valuation and other valuable work on the farm estate. Amps is actively planning for additional resilience within the team and recognises that it relies on one or two outstanding officers who manage the service on a day to day basis. AMPs are also in the process of developing a relationships with the Royal Agricultural University in Cirencester and Hartpury University to provide work placements for its students.

RECOMMENDATION 11 – Member engagement

To establish ongoing member involvement in the management of the County Farm Estate through the form of an advice group or Forum. This will enable members to remain up to date on the progress of the Strategic Estate Plan and also be sighted on any future decisions in relation to it. (The detail of this should be explored with Democratic Services).

Cabinet response - Cabinet acknowledges the ongoing level of Member interest in the Rural Estate. Cabinet would endorse an annual farm visit and an annual question and answer session for members. Cabinet will task Democratic Services officers to arrange these sessions in conjunction with the Rural Estate Manager.

Finally

Cabinet wishes to add its appreciation to all the County’s hardworking farmers and endorses the move towards a more sustainable future and helping to deliver great-quality food for the people of Gloucestershire and much wider.