

CABINET

18th September 2023

COUNTY COUNCIL RURAL ESTATE MATTERS

Purpose: It was unanimously resolved at the Cabinet meeting on the 20th February 2023 that the County Farm Estate be retained and managed under the current policy whilst rationalising and considering development and sale opportunities as they arise. The purpose of this report is to seek Cabinet approval on two current matters relating to the Council's Rural Estate portfolio.

Key decisions required: A Cabinet decision is required for the following:

1. To proceed with the planting of trees and woodland creation on Council land.
2. To proceed with the Food Systems Development Project at Bremenda Isaf Farm, Llanarthney.
- 3.

Reasons:

1. To meet the Council's carbon sequestration aims in relation to its Net Zero Carbon commitment and Nature Emergency aims.
2. To meet the Council's aims of local food production, supporting rural initiatives and enabling diversification on its Farm Estate for the purposes of ensuring future sustainability.

Cabinet Decision Required: YES (Pre Cabinet: 11.09.2023 / Cabinet: 18.09.2023)

Council Decision Required: NO

CABINET MEMBER PORTFOLIO HOLDER: **Cllr. Alun Lenny (Cabinet Member for Resources)**

Directorate: Chief Executives

Name of Head of Service: Jason Jones

Head of Regeneration, Policy and Digital

jajones@sirgar.gov.uk

Report Author: Emily Hughes

Senior Asset Management Surveyor

ehughes@sirgar.gov.uk

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CABINET

18th September 2023

COUNTY COUNCIL RURAL ESTATE MATTERS

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

It was unanimously resolved at the Cabinet meeting on the 20th February 2023 that the County Farm Estate be retained and managed under the current policy whilst rationalising and considering development and sale opportunities as they arise.

There are several advantages of retaining and managing the Rural Estate under the current policy whilst rationalising and considering development and sale opportunities as they arise, to include the following:

- When holdings become vacant, a comprehensive review is undertaken of that farm and an appraisal carried out looking at key factors such as the potential market rent if re-letting was to be considered, the opportunities of establishing new viable agricultural diversification enterprises on the farm, renewable energy and biodiversity opportunities, the continued investment required on the farm and the potential capital receipt if sold.
- It allows for the land on the holdings to be available for renewable energy opportunities to generate further income and reduce the Council's carbon footprint. It also allows opportunity to maximise environmental benefits, including carbon sequestration and diversification. The Council's Strategic Land Use Review is currently underway with a group of officers across the Council reviewing the Council's property holdings in light of requirements emerging from net zero carbon commitments and meeting corporate aims across the Council's services. Phase 1 of the review has been carried out where the Council's Rural Estate was looked at to consider options for energy generation, carbon sequestration, phosphate mitigation, tree planning and opportunities for enhancing biodiversity.
- It will reflect the good practice of having a flexible and vibrant portfolio supporting the rural policies and initiatives consistent with the aims of good estate management.
- A Rural Estate Plan is in the process of being drafted and will be presented to Cabinet over the coming months to highlight the extent and performance of the current portfolio, together with the key issues and future strategy of the Estate to enable the Council to maximise the opportunities available to support its wellbeing objectives. We will also continue to engage with the Climate Change and Nature Emergency Advisory Panel and the Rural Affairs Advisory Panel to consider their views in finalising the Rural Estate Plan.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Tree Planting and Woodland Creation

In February 2019, Carmarthenshire County Council (CCC) declared a Climate Emergency and made a commitment to becoming a Net Zero Carbon local authority by 2030. The Council has since been the first local authority in Wales to publish a Net Zero Carbon action plan, which was endorsed by full Council in February 2020.

CCC and Welsh Government (WG) have both announced a Nature Emergency. The establishment of new woodland on CCC's estate will deliver outcomes against both these emergencies and is consistent with CCC's draft Tree and Woodland Strategy which is progressing through CCC's democratic process. CCC's Ash Dieback project also includes the planting of new woodland to mitigate the loss of ash trees and ash woodland in Carmarthenshire.

Parcels of land across the county have been identified by the Strategic Land Use Group as potential sites for woodland creation (a list of these sites along with plans of the areas can be seen in **Appendix 1**).

Trees help mitigate climate change. They remove carbon dioxide from the air, store carbon in their timber and the soil, and release oxygen into the atmosphere. New woodland planting also addresses the Nature Emergency as it creates new wildlife habitat and provide linkages between existing habitats, building essential ecological connectivity and ecosystem resilience. This approach is consistent with the Resilience Goal of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

At present approximately 5% of CCC and 13% of Carmarthenshire land is woodland. The UK Climate Change Committee recommend that to address the Climate Change Emergency, woodland cover across the UK should be increased to 19%. Consistent with this guidance, CCC's draft Strategy for Trees and Woodlands is proposing that CCC increase the amount of woodland on its estate.

The cost of woodland planting is largely met by Welsh Government grants. At present any short fall and expected maintenance costs would need to be met by other budgets. By managing the Council's trees and woodlands appropriately and by planting more trees and woodland in the right places, for the right reason, the County Council will assist in mitigating the Nature Emergency and the Climate Change Emergency. This approach is also consistent with CCC's Ash Dieback project.

Potential loss of capital value - If all parcels of land are to be planted, there is a potential loss of capital value in the region of £130,000. However, it is likely that any farm entering WG's Sustainable Farming Scheme will be expected to have at least 10% woodland. These parcels could be rented out, as they have been, perhaps to provide the woodland necessary to make farm holdings eligible for WG support.

Potential loss of rental value - The sites identified for tree planting currently generate an annual rental income of £5,144. If all the sites are to be planted, they may no longer provide an income stream to the Council. See also reference to the WG's Sustainable Farming Scheme above. Any such loss in rental income could perhaps be balanced by CCC placing its bare land holdings that are rented on short term tenancies (together with the necessary 10% woodland cover) into WG's Sustainable Farming Scheme, as this would create a new income stream.

The options to consider are outlined below:

Option 1 - To proceed with the planting of trees on all identified sites as proposed by officers as part of CCC's Strategic Land Use Review, and consistent with CCC's draft Tree and Woodland Strategy and with providing an initial response to the Climate and Nature Emergencies.

Option 2 - To proceed with the planting of trees on some of the identified sites to mitigate effect on loss of future development potential (as outlined in the spreadsheet in **Appendix 1**).

Option 3 - Not to proceed with the planting of trees.

Recommendation: It is recommended that a decision is made to plant trees and create woodland on all sites identified to date (as set out within the spreadsheet in **Appendix 1**).

2. Food Systems Development Project at Bremenda Isaf Farm, Llanarthney

Funding has recently been secured from the Shared Prosperity Fund for the Strategic 'Food Systems Development Project'; a multi-partnership application led by Carmarthenshire County Council. The aim of the project is to put in place infrastructure, equipment and skilled staff for the development of a model market to field-scale sustainable fruit and vegetable production site at Bremenda Isaf Farm.

The holding comprises a farmhouse, outbuildings and approximately 100 acres (a plan of Bremenda Isaf Farm can be seen in **Appendix 2**). This is a pilot project with the aim of re-letting the entire holding to a suitable tenant to continue with managing the ongoing venture.

The project objectives are:

- **Create low-carbon infrastructure:** Develop the site to be capable of supporting a 1.5 - 2 acres intensive no-dig agroecological market garden, and wider field-scale cultivated areas of 10 - 15 acres. The market garden will be expected to produce approximately 7 tons per year. The additional cultivated area of the farm would exceed this to provide for further customer demand and would be nested in the wider land asset (approx. 80 acres) managed for optimum biodiversity, carbon sequestration and sustainable food production.
- **Engage with a wide range of stakeholders:** Including schools, green/social prescribers, civil society, community and small-scale growers, public and private sector

customers, as well as local, regional and national interested parties. This will include hosting site tours, recruiting and retaining horticultural volunteers, and training sessions for growers.

- **Grow new local markets for local and sustainable produce:** This will involve building on Social Farms and Gardens' Sustainable Food for Local Prosperity pilot to supply a growing public sector market. One of the findings from this pilot was that there is currently insufficient supply to meet increasing demand. Additionally, to public sector supply, the project will explore sales to hospitality outlets and other local markets. By growing stable markets, the project will provide confidence to local enterprises, new entrants and for on-farm diversification.
- **Develop models of aggregation of supply:** Working with local small-scale horticultural enterprises to develop cooperative ways of working together to increase collective capacity, multi-sector supply and business growth.
- **Develop accredited training pathways:** Social Farms and Gardens and Bwyd Sir Gâr Food to work with local, regional and national partners including University of Wales Trinity Saint Davids, Coleg Sir Gâr, the National Botanic Garden of Wales, Food Sense Wales, Land Workers' Alliance, Tyfu Dyfu, LANTRA, Horticulture Wales, and others. Increasing facilitation capacity on-site for nationally recognised accredited apprenticeships in Sustainable Commercial Horticulture. This diverse training offer will be targeted to support the existing Agri-Food sector with the necessary skills for business diversification ahead of the upcoming Sustainable Farming Scheme, creating a more economically resilient local sector.
- **Measure the benefits:** Evaluate the impact of growing food in a sustainable manner including carbon sequestration, biodiversity enhancement, economic impact, reduced food miles from short supply-chains, and social wellbeing.

Bremenda Isaf Farm became vacant on the 16th May 2023 and remains vacant whilst the potential opportunities to source funding for the Food Systems Development Project is being explored. Now that funding has been secured, the proposed Food Systems Development Project can be explored further.

Recommendation: It is recommended that a decision is made to proceed with the Food Systems Development Project at Bremenda Isaf Farm, Llanarthney.

DETAILED REPORT ATTACHED?

Appendix 1 - Woodland Creation Spreadsheet and Plans
Appendix 2 - Plan of Bremenda Isaf Farm

IMPLICATIONS

I confirm that other than those implications which have been agreed with the appropriate Directors / Heads of Service and are referred to in detail below, there are no other implications associated with this report:

Signed: Jason Jones (Head of Regeneration, Policy and Digital)

Policy, Crime and Disorder and Equalities YES	Legal YES	Finance YES	ICT NONE	Risk Management Issues YES	Staffing Implications NONE	Physical Assets YES
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Policy, Crime and Disorder and Equalities - The Farm Estate seeks to deliver well equipped farm and business opportunities that enable tenants to establish and grow successful businesses which deliver a holistic approach to economic and environmental growth, including promoting health and wellbeing, and enhancing the landscape of Carmarthenshire. Appropriate and robust management of the Farm Estate will support several of the Council’s wellbeing objectives to achieve its vision. By creating a thriving and progressive Council Farms Estate which supports agricultural businesses, the Council enables both environmental and economic growth whilst directly supporting the agricultural sector. Appropriate and robust management of the Rural Estate will support several of the Council’s wellbeing objectives to achieve the above vision by:

- Creating more jobs and growth throughout the County
- Looking after the environment now and for the future
- Promoting Welsh language and culture
- Making better use of resources

The establishment of new woodland on CCC’s estate will deliver against both Climate Change and Nature Emergencies. New woodland planting will create new wildlife habitat and provide linkages between existing habitats, building essential ecological connectivity and ecosystem resilience. This approach is consistent with the Resilience Goal of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

Legal - There is primary legislation in force to enable County Councils to own and operate smallholdings estates but not necessarily an obligation to do so. When a decision is made to re-let or sell assets within the Rural Estate, Legal will be instructed to represent the County Council in dealing with the various transactions.

Finance - Grant aid is expected to cover most tree planting costs with the need for CCC funding from existing budgets to cover any shortfall. Tree planting will affect future capital values with an estimated loss in the region of £130,000.

Risk Management Issues - Failure to establish new woodland on CCC land could compromise its corporate response to both the Climate and Nature Emergencies.

Physical Assets - The creation of new woodland will assist the Council in mitigating the Nature Emergency and the Climate Change Emergency and will address the impacts of Ash Dieback disease in Carmarthenshire.

CONSULTATIONS

I confirm that the appropriate consultations have taken in place and the outcomes are as detailed below:

Signed: Jason Jones (Head of Regeneration, Policy and Digital)

1. Scrutiny Committee request for pre-determination	N/A
If yes include the following information:	
Scrutiny Committee	
Date the report was considered:	
Scrutiny Committee Outcome/Recommendations:	

2. Local Member(s) - Local Member (Cllr. Ann Davies - Llanddarog) has been consulted with in connection with the 'Food Systems Development Project' at Bremenda Isaf Farm and is supportive of the proposal. In relation to the proposed woodland creation, Local Members will be consulted with post Cabinet decision.

3. Community / Town Council - N/A

4. Relevant Partners - Relevant partners will be consulted post Cabinet decision.

5. Staff Side Representatives and other Organisations - N/A

CABINET MEMBER PORTFOLIO HOLDER(S) AWARE / CONSULTED	Yes
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Section 100D Local Government Act, 1972 - Access to Information

List of Background Papers used in the preparation of this report:

Title of Document	Locations that the papers are available for public inspection