



**The Beacon Farms Journey -
Four approaches to securing land**

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Introduction to Beacon Farms

Beacon Farms was formed as a Community Benefit Society in 2012. Its aim is to protect and safeguard some of the best agricultural land in the area, known as the Blue Finger, which snakes its way through the peri-urban sprawl across the Bristol and South Gloucestershire Council border. Our focus was primarily on larger pieces of Grade 1 soil, or other 'best and most versatile' land in and around the city, with the aim of putting it to use for growing food and supporting new land based enterprises and producers.

A piece of land in Winterbourne inspired the name, through its location off Beacon Lane. The land was envisioned as just one site in a wider vision, providing 'Farm Hubs' to help address many of the barriers that new entrants to farming face.

This report details our experiences of trying to secure land for our business using four different approaches.

Approach 1: Private Landowner Sale - 64 Acres, Winterbourne

This 64 acre site was the first piece of land that Beacon Farms tried to acquire. It was privately owned by farmers who didn't live in the immediate area, and was being grazed by their son's cows. It had been going on and off the market for the past 8 years but had never sold, with different uses being proposed without success. Beacon Farms became aware that the owners were interested in selling again but had not yet put it in on the market. After consulting with some of the neighbours in Winterbourne, we began conversations with the landowners who seemed open to the idea.

Our business plan was based around a communal farm hub in the centre of the land with starter farms clustered around it, helping people to get growing all the way up the ladder from the start of their growing training to establishing their own successful businesses. We secured financial support from the A-Team Foundation, who were willing to lend us money for both the land purchase and start-up capital (a low interest loan totalling £800,000, which we would pay back within 6 years through share offers, thus bringing the farm into community ownership). Then suddenly the landowners decided they didn't want to sell after all and the sale fell through.

This was very disappointing as the land had looked promising and the finance was lined up – the owners were also still interested in selling at some point, just not yet! When the sale fell through, Beacon Farms looked at the neighbouring piece of land: 16 acres owned by South Gloucestershire Council.

Approach 2: Council Lease - 16 Acres, Winterbourne

This 16 acre site with road access and mains water was also potentially high quality land, although the soil had not been looked after and was thin in places; there had also (anecdotally) been some dumping of waste soil on the site in the past near the river, possibly to prevent flooding. South Gloucestershire Council were already planning to give the current grazing tenant his leave, so the timing seemed ideal.

In the end we had to wait a year for the site to come up, as the council missed the window for giving the tenant his notice; when they finally advertised the lease through David James we put in a proposal based on conversations we had already had with their rural assets manager. The contact we had had over the course of the year had seemed promising and no concerns about us putting forward a proposal had been raised.

We identified all the things in the South Gloucestershire core strategy and climate change plans that our project would help to achieve, demonstrating it would be put to good use while still providing the flood protection the site provided. We scaled down our business plan to be based

around supporting 5 growers to set up their own businesses, with us providing support and help with accessing funding for shared infrastructure, soil care and biodiversity improvements. We carried out a survey and some interviews to establish the support needs of growers, such as how much land they needed and what infrastructure they would require.

The particulars for the land stated “The term will ideally be for 3 years although consideration for a longer term tenancy will be given, subject to statutory rent review provisions”. In our proposal we asked for a 10+ year lease from the council, clearly stating why three years wouldn’t have been long enough to provide enough security to make the investment in both the soil and the horticultural infrastructure worthwhile for either us or our tenants. We hoped the council would be comfortable working with a longer time span than a private landlord and quoted the Tenant Farmers Association 10Year+ campaign as a wider context for our request. We felt this longer lease would allow us to have the reassurance that the money we would be putting into temporary structures, such as polytunnels and a tool shed, would be worthwhile, as well as giving security to the people we were trying to support.

The council said no. When pressed their reasons included not wanting to give a longer lease, in case another use came along for the land. They also expressed some concern that flooding on the site might interfere with our project (something we had already taken into account in our plans and were not concerned about). It is possible that the more complex arrangement of leasing to us and then us working with 5 other sub-tenants was off putting to them. Overall it seemed they simply wanted to give it to someone less risky or high profile who would accept a short term lease and wouldn’t come with any community buy-in or, conversely, objections. The length of lease effectively ruled out any horticultural use and scorched our plans.

Approach 3: Buy at auction - 7 Acres, Frenchay

Simultaneously, over the past year, we’d been involved with the Blue Finger Alliance who were concerned with a large piece of high profile and high quality Bristol City Council owned land along the M32 that was destined to have a Metrobus junction and/or park and ride built on it. This land was home to Feed Bristol, an Avon Wildlife Trust growing project, as well as a number of council smallholdings.

It came to our attention that a couple of small pieces of privately owned land alongside the M32 motorway were up for auction. This land totalled no more than 7 acres, so was too small to do anything like the business plan we’d put together, but would have been large enough for a couple of growers to get started on. We only found out about the sale four days before the auction, however we felt that we had to try to secure it for growing; the situation seemed endemic of what’s going on with the Blue Finger, with farmland sold off bit by bit, piece by piece, for other purposes. Although the land was in an area clearly zoned in the Bristol 20 year plan as not available for houses to be built on, we suspected there would be interest from investors in speculatively securing the land for future development.

In the four days before the auction we did an emergency pioneer share offer. We secured press coverage, we called people, we used social media; it was four days of solid work. We raised £23,000, enough to put down a deposit so we could take part in the auction, with Becky Marshall of the Community Land Advisory Service acting as our representative. We knew we didn’t have much of a chance, but we had to try because this is what Beacon Farms was established to do and we felt it provided a good opportunity to raise the profile of the issues the Blue Finger Alliance was campaigning on.

The average cost for agricultural land is around £7k an acre, and we set a limit of £15k/acre for ourselves; we were willing to pay over the odds, but we refused to be party to raising land prices artificially by paying ridiculous sums for small pieces of land that you could never make your

money back on through farming. The land eventually went for an alarming £38k an acre – one small piece selling to a private individual and the larger piece selling to the local Christmas tree farm.

When we lost at auction we returned all the money we had raised to the contributors. Although we were disappointed the experience showed us how much support we had in the local community and also the sort of fiscal pressures would-be-farmers face when trying to secure even small pieces of peri-urban land on the open market.

Approach 4: Community Asset Transfer - 35 Acres, French

Thrice disappointed we returned our attention to the Metrobus site, where the public had been protesting about the proposals, both through the planning system and when this was rebuffed through direct action. The mayor, George Ferguson, decided he would like to do something to safeguard the council owned Blue Finger land in Frenchay around the Metrobus site. There was acknowledgement that while the council have done some great things regarding land use over the last 6 years, they may not be the best people to protect it as a food growing site, care for the soil and ensure it is used to maximum potential in the long term. Ferguson recognised the economic potential of it becoming a cohesive site and a hub for food production or land based skills and tasked the Assets team to make a very long term (999 year) lease of Community Asset Transfer work.

The plan was for us to work with the Blue Finger Alliance who have the political vision, and the Avon Wildlife Trust who contribute their focus on conservation and run the Feed Bristol project on the site. Beacon Farms would provide the land- and lease-management, and in the long term ensure the land was used by new entrants to farming to provide food and other land based enterprises. The shorter term situation was that the land came with sitting small holding tenants on it which we had no intention of removing – so we recognised that we might only get access to small plots initially, but that once it was safeguarded the very long term lease (essentially a Community Asset Transfer) would enable us to invest in the site and build up land based enterprises as the existing tenancies ended (a majority of existing tenants are at or approaching retirement age so this was potentially viable). We had our own internal struggles about whether we could manage a business plan where we had almost no income for the first few years, whilst shouldering the responsibility of maintaining the land; ultimately we felt it was worth the risk, (working with the support of Feed Bristol and AWT, and existing tenants like Sims Hill Shared Harvest) to achieve long term security for the site for the sake of Bristol's food production and natural environment.

The offer of a 999 year lease was presented, and we were told with confidence that October 2016 was when we could realistically be signing a lease. The head of the Assets department was involved and we were given a personal contact to work with. However, in the mayoral election in May 2016, George Ferguson was not re-elected. At this point, contact with the council officers began to go drop off. A few months later, the 999 year lease was completely removed from the table and we were offered short leases on small parts of the land instead, with an apparent lack of understanding about the larger context of what we were trying to achieve. Technical difficulties with some of the tenancies were identified, but we felt that none of them were insurmountable with enough political will – unfortunately this will no longer existed in the Council under the new Labour mayor Marvin Rees.

What have we learnt from this process?

1) Acquiring land is hard

Land ownership provides unique challenges. Land owners understand that their land should have monetary value, but the people who can use rural farm land (i.e. farmers) usually don't have the sums of money required to buy it. There's a massive disconnect between what land can be worth (especially in peri-urban zones) and what money can be made from it when it is being used for farming or nature conservation. Private landowners find it hard to resist accepting a market rate for their asset rather than selling it to someone who is going to farm it; this is even the case when they are retired farmers, and perhaps especially so as they are in need of a pension fund. Those landowners not yet ready to sell are often willing to lease the land at agricultural rates (£80-£100/acre) to keep it in good condition, but they are often not keen on long leases and therefore can't provide good security for a developing horticultural business, for instance.

If we can't rely on the magnanimity of private land owners then how about Councils? Bristol City Council have done some promising things, moving pieces of land from derelict shrub land to food production through projects like Feed Bristol and Sims Hill Shared Harvest. However, this ultimately was thanks to the vision of one council officer – someone willing to take a calculated risk by putting land in the hands of people who have a plan for them and can make them work. The council itself doesn't have policies to allocate priority to food production, soil protection or land based enterprise; this makes it tricky for individual officers to navigate confidently and allocate land in any consistent way. In the latest round of council cuts, the post of the officer responsible for enabling most of Bristol's growing endeavours has also been cut and he has been moved into a different role, making the possibility of future land allocations for food production even more tenuous.

In the end it often comes down to individuals and relationships; people in councils **can** get things done, but often they don't due to the obstacles they face. Growers can exert pressure (sometimes public pressure) on council officers and can get their way, but often the pain doesn't seem worth the gain. Relationships and trust need to be built and developed, and this takes time and is vulnerable to the vagaries of redundancies, retirements and changes of regime. Good people inside and outside of the council; political will throughout the hierarchy; suitable policies to leverage support; capacity, time and trust: when all these are aligned good things can happen.

2) Land is not sufficiently protected

Less than 3% of the UK is of Grade 1 agricultural quality, in brief meaning you can grow vegetables all year round and it doesn't get too soggy or dry out. This land is such an important asset for food production and food security. People in authority do recognise this superficially, but any amount of technical, legal, or financial difficulty around protecting it soon persuades them to conveniently forget it.

We've been surprised by how unprotected the Blue Finger land is. The council put it in their plans that it can't be built on, but it's not recognised as a protected resource for our food production. You can't build on it now (according to the plan to 2020), but as we have seen first-hand there's nothing in place to stop people doing land grabs and paying way over the odds for it in the hope that they can build houses on it in the future. This best and most versatile land is not 'just' green belt, it's our green lungs and our food security, and it needs protecting in law in order to hold those in charge of safeguarding it to account.

3) These things take a long time

It's immensely difficult to get any traction within a limited timeframe. When we started, we gave ourselves 3 years; we knew it could take time even though at the time we had already identified a piece of land that was available. We've come a long way and learnt a lot of things, but unfortunately we haven't secured any land ourselves for new growers. We've tried four different approaches and all of them have moved at a snail's pace and all of them we've had to draw a line under after putting in time, resources and all our energy. This is draining and tiring, although we have been luckier than some in the support we have received both in kind and in funds. If anyone's trying to embark on this, we'd encourage them to do it because at some point the stars will align and it will work; but do it with your eyes open, don't expect it to happen in 6 months, have a good support team around you, and make sure you are financially supported and not giving up your day job until you have the contracts signed!

4) We're not giving up

We've hit all the obstacles (and some bad luck), but Beacon Farms has also brought about many positive things. It has helped to raise the profile of the issues on the Blue Finger both locally and nationally, it has given the community a focus through which to express their support for action to protect it, it has brought people together to imagine thriving horticultural businesses in the area again, and it has initiated conversations with farmers, landowners and growers that may in time bear their own fruit. It has resulted in research into the needs of new entrants into horticulture through our Land Seekers Survey which will provide data for other organisations seeking to help this sector. Best of all has been the initiation of Bristol Food Producers (www.bristolfoodproducers.uk).

While we were waiting for our land to transpire, we were able to put some of our resources into submitting a (successful) funding bid to the Bristol Green Capital Strategic Grants fund on behalf of a number of Bristol growers and organisations. Thus Bristol Food Producers was launched in January 2015 and in 2016 it incorporated as its own Community Benefit Society, leaving a tangible legacy for Beacon Farms in the Bristol food community.

Beacon Farms are still looking for land that will suit our purposes. We're in conversation with the NHS and the University of the West of England about land they own on the Blue Finger, and we are keeping the doors open for conversations with Bristol City Council. We've also been talking to the University of Bristol about land that they have in and around the city and alongside Bristol Food Producers we continue our support for matching small pieces of available land throughout the area with new entrants, through our Land Seekers' Survey. Perhaps unsurprisingly our hopes are not high that we will have a Farm Hub any time soon, but our time may yet come; and in the meantime we hope to see similar endeavours come to fruition elsewhere in the country.