

Minutes - Stroud Community Agriculture AGM - Brookthorpe Village Hall - 21<sup>st</sup> March 2010

Members present: 23

The meeting began with a brief introduction from the Chair (Molly Scott-Cato) and a chance for all members to introduce themselves.

Apologies: Alison Parfit, Carol Mathews, Nick Weir, David MacGregor, Sue Day, Uma Tul, Greg Pilley

## 1. Core Group Report

Molly presented the report, which had been circulated to all members before the meeting. As Molly is stepping down at this AGM she used the opportunity to say how much she would miss being on the core group but was optimistic about the benefits of having a changing group.

Comments/Questions from the members present: *“Great!” “It’s in good hands”*

## 2. Farm reports

Mark Harrison presented both the Animal and Vegetable reports, as Sam Hardiman was unable to attend due to illness.

Both reports had been circulated to members in advance. Mark added the following information regarding animals:

There are cows now on 3 sites, with those destined for slaughter housed at Eastington. We are reducing the size of the herd. As the report describes there were some problems with the pigs, with some piglets escaping and the sow who we had hoped to get in pig being unable to conceive. We have since bought 3 pigs from another farm. 2 horses are now housed for the winter at Brookthorpe. SCA does not pay for their keep or feed them and their owner is delighted to have the opportunity to house them with us.

Further to the information in the Vegetables report, Mark added that in summary last year was a successful year except for the bad slug damage affecting the potatoes and carrot root fly affecting much of the crop. The most recent harvest of carrots has been given to the cows to supplement their feed. So far this year the fields have been ploughed in readiness for planting and we will be operating at full capacity soon, including full capacity in the walled garden at Brookthorpe. We are planting the same

range of crops again as last year, but more of them. We will not need to buy in as much veg as we have had to during the last year.

Comments/Questions from the members present:

- *Will there be the same rotation of crops?* Yes
- *What can be done to prevent the slug damage?* Potatoes need to be lifted earlier. We have changed the variety to one that is more resistant to slug damage. However the soils at Hawkwood and Brookthorpe are not ideal for growing potatoes – the ideal soil would be a mixture of the two!
- *What can be done to prevent carrot root fly?* The crop needs to be covered over the summer months when the flies attack. Only some of the crop has been covered in the past as it is unsightly and time-consuming to manage. This year however Mark intends to cover the whole crop to avoid the damage suffered last year. Mixing the crop with a crop of onions (a possible solution proposed by a member) is not feasible with our scale of planting.
- *Has the condition of the soil been improving?* Yes! It contains more organic matter. Brookthorpe in particular has enjoyed significant improvement in just one year. Members suggested that this is due to the cultivation work, love, energy and the biodynamic preparations that the SCA team has put into the soil.
- *Who ate all the lamb legs?* !This is the first year we have reared and butchered lamb and the legs sold very quickly. No one present claimed to have eaten them!
- *Are farmers happy?* Mark gave an enthusiastic 'Yes'. He said they have a good team including a good apprentice.

### 3. Membership report

Carol Matthews was not present but had circulated a very thorough report in advance.

Comments/Questions from the members present:

- *Mark said that he really appreciated the level of detail included in the report as it puts into perspective what can appear to be a steady loss of members on a weekly basis. There is a steady turnover of members, with roughly the same number joining as leaving each month, although this is not always apparent on a day-to-day basis. It is especially encouraging that we have slightly increased our membership over the past year while most vegetable box schemes have seen customer numbers fall by around 40%.*

- *Are we making the best use of our bursary fund? Not many people ask for support.* Ute has spoken to potential members who state price as a barrier to joining – It could be that those on low incomes are embarrassed to ask for support due to the stigma they perceive is attached. It could also be simply that they use the price of a share as an excuse to not join, but have other reasons that aren't as easy to express. Maybe it isn't known about enough – information about the bursary fund should be included in the next newsletter. Some members think that the term is perhaps part of the problem – can we think of a better name for it?
- *David Drew MP has recently stated that he is joining and he has written about it publicly - this could help us become better known.*
- *Existing members need to spread the word to encourage more people to join as word-of-mouth is the most effective promotional tool. We only need 10 more people to reach our target of 200 members.*

#### 4. Treasurer's report

Richard Swann presented the report, part of which had been circulated in advance with the full report available during the meeting. There is only one amendment to be made to the summary that was circulated: the damage to the polytunnel/machinery occurred in the Spring of 2009, not the Autumn. Overall the past year has been one of consolidation and growth and Richard gave credit to the team for a job well done.

Comments/Questions from the members present:

- *Has the increase in the price of fuel been a problem?* Not really as fuel costs are such a minor proportion of our costs.

#### 5. Finance report and budget for 2010

Mark Harrison presented the report, which had been circulated in advance. There is one slight change to the report circulated however – the total amount listed under the outflows due to labour costs should be slightly lower, giving us an increased surplus forecast for 2010.

One other change that is not in the report is that we have agreed to employ a self-employed labourer (Siggy) at 2 days per week. She will be taking the place of a student who has finished their work placement with us so this doesn't represent an increase in labour hours overall.

Comments/Questions from the members present:

- *Does the move to salaries involve pension provision?* No, as we have less than 5 employees we are not legally obliged to pay pension contributions.
- *No contracts have been completed yet and details such as sick pay and holiday pay still have to be finalised. The team will start receiving their first salaried pay from the 1<sup>st</sup> April nonetheless.*
- *Are the rates of pay to be received under the new arrangements roughly the same as what the team was earning as self-employed labourers?* Yes, broadly speaking, as the salaries were worked out on the basis of what employees were already earning. The major difference is the additional security of sick pay and paid holidays.
- *Tim will be leaving us soon and is going on to help establish a new CSA near Bristol - an example of how beneficial to the greater good his apprenticeship has been.*
- *There are lots of CSAs starting up around the region and many of them have been inspired by SCA. We have lots to be proud of!*

**The accounts as presented in the report circulated during the meeting were approved by all present.** Proposed by Richard Swan, seconded by John Meletiou

MH proposed that from now on we do not need to incur the cost of having the accounts audited. All present discussed the risks and rewards:

- *How can we prevent fraud if they accounts are not audited?* The accounts, drawn up by MH, must be checked by the treasurer and the core group in all circumstances anyway. The accountants also oversee what is happening. It seems therefore an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy to have the accounts audited as well.

**All present voted in favour of not having the accounts audited next year.**

Richard presented the farm team present with cheques relating to the bonuses that were agreed to be awarded by the core group in recognition of the successful year that SCA has enjoyed thanks to their hard work.

## 6. Children's report

Kate Dougherty was not present but had circulated a report in advance. There were no comments or questions and no one volunteered to replace Kate as the person responsible for children's activities. This remains an outstanding position that needs to be filled.

## 7. Constitutional changes

Justin Tait presented the proposed constitutional changes that had been circulated in advance. He gave a brief explanation of the justification for each proposed change.

### Rule 24 proposed change:

The Co-operative shall have a Committee comprising not less than five and not more than nine persons. The initial Committee members from incorporation until the first Annual General Meeting shall be appointed by the founder members of the Co-operative.

### All present voted in favour of this change

### Rule 35 proposed change:

A Committee member shall, subject to Rule 42, ideally hold office for a period of a minimum of two years up to a maximum of four years. Each year a third of the Committee will stand down, starting with the longest serving. Retiring members will be able to stand for re-election after one year from standing down.

### All present voted in favour of this change

### Rule 59 proposed change:

Proposed in order to exclude the possibility of paying dividends and therefore improve opportunities to bid for public funds (SCA is currently unable to bid for some types of funding because it has the option in the primary rules to pay a dividend):

The profits of the Co-operative shall be applied as follows in such proportions and in such manner as may be decided by the Co-operative at the Annual General Meeting:

- (a) First, to a general reserve for the continuation and development of the Co-operative;
- (b) Secondly, in making payments for social or charitable purposes within the community served by the Co-operative.

- *Jade Bashford described the reasons why the rule had initially allowed for dividends to be paid out as therefore enabling the group to allow members to make an investment, for example in order to buy new land or another significant purchase, and then collect dividends from their investment.*

- *It was agreed that the benefit of changing the rule (ability to apply for grants as a 'not for profit' organisation) outweighed the disadvantage of not being able to utilise members' investments. If such investments were needed in the future we could create a separate trust to manage it.*

## **All present voted in favour of this change**

### Changes to Secondary rules

#### Paragraph 2 proposed change:

The project is managed by a voluntary "Core Group" of members, which carries out day-to-day administration and planning on behalf of all members. Under the primary rules all core group members carry the responsibilities of directors of the SCA Industrial Provident Society for the duration of their time on the core group.

- *This is a major change as it means that members of the core group will now become legally responsible for the activities of SCA and liable for the finances. It was considered that this may put some people off from joining the core group. In balance, the new arrangement is significantly better than the existing one, whereby directors currently have no direct involvement with the running of the SCA and are not elected.*

## **All present voted in favour of this change**

### Paragraph 8 proposed change:

Any surplus produce not needed by the members is sold through local retail and wholesale channels. The proceeds from these sales go into the Stroud Community Agriculture bank account and are put towards running costs & capital development (e.g. polytunnels, equipment, etc). SCA primary rules also allow for the use of surplus funds to be used to make payments to social or charitable causes.

## **All present voted in favour of this change**

### Paragraph 10 proposed change:

The core group can only spend up to one third of the total value of the last published balance sheet or up to a maximum of £5000, whichever is the lesser, on any one item. Higher value purchases will require consultation with the membership. The core group will not borrow money without first consulting members.

- *Discussion ensued regarding whether or not £5000 was enough, what types of purchases were likely to be necessary, what exactly 'consultation with membership' means etc.*
- *Since SCA began we have never needed to make any purchases over £5000, so the change is primarily to create consistency between the primary and secondary rules.*

The proposal was abandoned and it was agreed that we would maintain the existing wording for now. The core group needs to work on this paragraph and propose a new change at the next AGM, unless anything urgent created the need for an EGM.

## 8. Any other comments or questions?

- *What does 'Van' refer to on the budget for 2010?* SCA will take on the running expenses of MH's van, including fuel. If MH uses his van for private use, he will pay SCA a rate of 40p per mile. Likewise, Sam will charge SCA 40p per mile each time he uses his own private vehicle for work-related journeys.

- *Do we have enough cash reserved to cover sick pay obligations under the new contracts?* This is an ongoing discussion in the core group and no final decisions have been made. We need to consider whether our cash reserves could be 'better' used as savings in the Triodos account, helping other ethical businesses, or spent on purchases to improve the farm. We should also consider whether it would be more efficient to pay an insurance premium for this specific purpose, although members expressed concern that they would prefer premiums to be paid to an ethical insurance provider.

- *Does the core group have any targets or goals for the year ahead?* The core group has focussed on consolidating the business over the past year, with a lot of work going into the arrangements for salaried employees, contracts and constitutional clarification. A lot of energy was put into a bid for £100'000 of grant funding that would have been spent on a rainwater harvesting system, polytunnel, various pieces of equipment, website development and time to respond to the many enquiries we get about how to run a successful CSA. We didn't get the grant due to the technical inconsistencies in our primary and secondary rules so it was disheartening. We need to agree on new goals and make fresh applications for grants.

- *Joining Cooperatives UK was another major piece of work that has occupied the core group's time.* It has already brought benefits, with their help to identify the constitutional changes that are needed and the 'strategy day' which will be taken forward with the new core group.

## 9. Core group changes

Molly Scott Cato is standing down but will remain actively involved in SCA projects. Sue Baker is also standing down. Both were thanked for their hard work. Tamsyn Widdon was welcomed onto the core group after she gave a brief introduction to herself.

Kevin Ashby was not present but had sent a statement introducing himself and setting out his hopes for what he can achieve on the core group.

## 10. Orchard group

Nadine Szmykatzkloss asked for members' opinions on whether we should graft new fruit trees to plant at Brookthorpe or maintain the existing trees. MH explained that the farm team, at Tim's instigation, has had an orchard expert look at the site and they have decided to plant new trees. Root stock has already been bought and the orchard has been planned.

Discussion ensued with some members expressing their disappointment that no wassailing, apple days or pruning was organised last year. It was made clear that these activities were not an obligation of the farm team to organise, but were the initiative of particular members.

Nadine, Molly, Clare and Paul Sheridan, Sue Dance and Sue Baker all volunteered to organise activities related to celebrating the orchard.

The farm team will coordinate orchard activities but will keep the membership informed of any opportunities to get involved – for example pruning.

Francis requested that Molly's timetable of events be sent to him so that he could advertise them at appropriate times through the newsletter. He also asked all members to send items to include in the newsletter – for example recipes.

## 11. Final comments

One new member asked about the possibilities of milk production, bee hives and sowing wheat (as part of the 'Sowing the future' project). The farm team explained that regarding milk, we did not have sufficient acreage for milk production and other locally produced milk is available. Bee hives already exist at Hawkwood, but are not managed by SCA. The owner of those hives will be moving them elsewhere soon and SCA is happy for anyone else to manage hives on our land, as long as this does not add to the workload of the farm team. Sue Dance and Sue Baker both have links with an interest in bee-keeping groups so they will pursue this idea. Simon Hanks expressed an interest in the wheat cultivation, but the farm team pointed out that the acre required wasn't available on SCA land.

The meeting was concluded by Molly who invited everyone to a marvellous collection of cake.