



Canalside Community Food

a community supported agriculture scheme

AGM Canalside Community Food September 30 2023

Chairman Ben Cowan

Minutes Judy Steele

Steering Group Members present:

Gareth Davies, Judy Steele, Roger Daley, Craig Barnes, Ben Cowan, Helen Maiden, Judy Steele, Magali Fowler

Introduction and welcome

Ben Cowan welcomed members to the meeting. His introduction touched on issues of infrastructure improvement, energy and water that needed to be balanced against the Cost of Living Crisis. Canalside Community Food CBS [Community Benefit Society] wants to be open to the community. The main concerns facing the company are finances for business development, member engagement and staff resilience.

Canalside is nearly 20 years old and we need energetic people to take it through the next 20 years.

1. Quorum

The Quorum was met with 54 people present.

2 Apologies

Apologies were received from: Catherine Steele, Paula Palade, Louise Gracia, Jane Ingall, John Ingall, Elaine Newman, Rebecca Earle, Jennifer Munden, Ioana Mateias, Di Sinclair, Nikki Cooper, Ruth Leary, Keith Harvey, Bernadette Robins, Dave Fenton, Christine Fenton, Kate Hartshorn, Sukhi Dillon, Pat Forster, Clare Viney, Lisa Lawrence, Felicity Rock, Chris Philpott, Steve Edwards, Christine Edwards, Dianne Robinson, Sally Hunt, Kevin Hunt, Olly Hyde, Sophie Hyde, Liz Thiebe, Dave Male, Angus Alton, Martin Lloyd, Angela Lloyd, Tom Hamilton, Massimo Cavallaro, Carrie Worrall, Ruth Walwyn, Nihan Sakarya, Sally Cooper, Marsha Collins, Becca Sugisaka, Quentin Coret, Madeleine Hardus, Susan Littlewood, Gabi Siemon, Xandra Gilchrist, Tom Ingall

3 Approval of the Minutes of the last AGM

Approved

4. Update on the affairs of the Society.

Lena Sucker of the growing team reported that the team was heading towards a time of reflection in November when the workload was less. Review and changes are needed. The aim was to strengthen the team approach and avoid burn-out. [Added after the meeting: The growers worked very hard in spring and summer and used a lot of energy in that time, and although the sharing of responsibilities has worked, the season has run down the energy reserves of the team. There is a need to create space for reflection and adapting new practices for the farm and its infrastructure, layout and the community involvement, mainly

because the business has changed and grown a lot since it started. The energy of the early days has naturally left and we need to reignite that energy into the community.]

The start of the years' growing include re-skinning the polytunnel which had split because of the weight of snow over Christmas. This year has seen very sharp ups and downs of weather which look as if they will continue. Wet weather in spring meant a late start, followed by a long dry period in June, far less sunshine than usual in a wet July and patchy August weather. The result was that onions had largely failed, squash were smaller, potato yield was below the maximum, with some blight, and courgettes had not been so plentiful. However, tomatoes had been abundant and brassicas, celeriac, carrots, parsnips and beet were looking good for the winter. Because of the huge range of crops grown at Canalside there are always some things that do well even if others fail.

There's an increasing need to plan for the possible sharp turns in the weather conditions.

Précis of Questions and answers

Q: Are any crops less susceptible to ups and downs?

A: The team is looking at perennial vegetables which would be more resilient

Q: Would more polytunnels help and how could they be funded?

A: Increased protected cropping is always useful.

Crowdfunding was mentioned and there was always the possibility of buying on Ebay.

Q: How is the irrigation doing?

A: Capital investment is needed. However some investment this year meant each field now has a set of sprinklers which means less moving of equipment. Each set of sprinklers waters 10 beds at a time.

Q: Is water storage possible?

A: So much water is needed for the fields that it is unlikely we could store enough to meet our needs. A bore-hole has been investigated, but so far seems unlikely to be possible.

Q: If there is new infrastructure which needs labour to complete a project could this come from a member event?

A: This is possible

Q: Is it possible to have more flexible days and times for people who wish to volunteer?

A: At the moment only Wednesday or Saturday is available, but this could change. [see also info re. work mornings from later in the meeting]

Q: Could experienced volunteers manage other volunteers?

A: That could be considered.

Q: Could summer Tuesday evenings work?

A: This is something that can be considered.

Q: Is it possible to do part of a work morning?

A: That's possible. People can arrive at break time at 11.30 or any other time and can do part of the morning.

Comment from Chair

Suggestions are appreciated and noted. The staff team is pausing Saturday work mornings. Less frequent but larger member work events every 4-6 weeks are being considered, encouraging more community members onto the farm.

We are re-thinking how volunteers are integrated into work mornings.

Sign-in sheets were available for volunteers to pack and deliver to Gaia among other things.

Member Comment – larger work mornings are a good idea, but the company would lose 17.5 hours of work from volunteer workshares and probably another 10 from other volunteer workers if weekly Saturday work mornings are dropped.

Response – Celia Russell is doing a review of staff/volunteer roles and is reporting to the steering group at the next meeting where it will be discussed.

Member Comment – It would be useful to include more days of the week when people can volunteer, but it's important to include weekends too as people may be working Monday-Friday.

Member Comment – Canalside is important for my mental health and I would be very sad to lose a Saturday work morning.

Member Comment – organising work mornings occupies a lot of grower time so I fully support the pause.

Q: Is a poll of the membership possible to see which are the best days for volunteer working?

A: Yes that's possible.

Q: Gaia customers pay extra for bagging to help pay growers for the extra work involved. Is that still the case?

A: Yes there is still an extra charge. The bags are mostly packed by volunteers early on Wednesdays and then driven to Gaia. Sometimes the growers still have to pack if volunteers are not available. [Added after the meeting: It is fairly standard practice to charge for bagging and delivery.]

Q: Volunteer management takes time from growing so could you consider having a volunteer co-ordinator to concentrate on that? They would probably need growing experience and would need to liaise very closely with growers.

A: This is an idea which could be looked at.

Thanks

Member expressed their appreciation for the work of the grower team.

5 Update on the work of the Willows by Celia Russell

The Willows very much appreciates its relationship with Canalside.

It serves adults with a range of different needs.

The latest development is a new cabin with lighting and a wood burning stove.

This is one of the changes that has been the result of having to take down the polytunnel because of its proximity to the gas main, but most of the changes have been positive. A new accessible garden with raised beds has been donated by her family in memory of Ella, a Willows participant who sadly died last year.

The Willows has planted beds by the first two Canalside polytunnels with perennial herbs that Canalside members can pick.

More volunteers are welcome.

There are spaces for more adults to take part in whole day Wednesdays and Fridays, so members are urged to recommend the Willows to family and friends.

Angus, Annie and Simon are regulars at the Wednesday farm work mornings.

Thanks to the Ingalls for access to the pond – wildlife spotting there adds to the range of activities available.

5. Finance

Gareth Davies presented the report which had been sent to all members, pointing out that the bulk of the outgoings were for labour, and that although wages were not high a pension was included as well as the usual National Insurance.

Official accounts had been circulated. Fixed assets, the bulk of which is the land, amounts to around £130,000. Current assets are £40,000. There are reserves for three months' trading which is normal company policy – currently £39,000, although it could be lower at £27,000. Net assets £173,000.

There are £105,000 of community shares. Up to total of £5000 could be paid back by members' shares being sold back to the company.

Income covers costs but not by enough to keep the society resilient. A resilience plan has been drawn up for steering group consideration. At its core it has three aims – staff welfare, ecological resilience and the promotion of community benefit and involvement.

Questions on Finance

Q: What does the investment needed look like in terms of short, medium and long term and how can members support this?

A: The investment needed could be as much as £50,000. We may need to ask for grants from DEFRA and others. There may be grants for ecological resilience. A member has offered to help research grants and any other help from members with such expertise would be welcome.

Q: I'd like to suggest an extraordinary general meeting in the next six months maybe invigorating the whole project?

A: The probable timetable for a resilience plan is to have steering group discussions during the meetings before Christmas, a steering group 'away day' in January, with an extraordinary general meeting to present plans to the membership in February or March.

Thanks

Members expressed thanks to Gareth for his work on finance

7. Vote on disapplication of audit

An audit is not essential for a company of our size. If we are applying for grants it is possible that a funder might require audited accounts, but this can be done if necessary.

Agreed that audit should be disapplied.

8. Vote to appoint Harris CIC as accountants

Agreed

9. Resolution to ask members if we should pay 2% interest this year on shares and process for members to sell back shares

Agreed that 2% interest is paid which is added to members' share-holding value

Agreed to limit the buying back of shares from members to £5000

10 Standing down, Nomination and Election of Steering Committee members

Current members were all willing to stand again, and were re-elected. An invitation was issued for any further interested members to email Canalside if they wished to join the group.

Thanks

Members expressed their appreciation of the work of the steering group

11. Any other business

There was no other business and the meeting was closed.