

burnishing the family silver



As cuts to local government funding take hold, councils are casting around for sources of income that remain in their control to mitigate the impact of the cuts or to protect a particularly prized service.

One area that a number of county councils have their beady eyes on are their smallholdings. With a few exceptions such as Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire, where they are a major component of the council's presence in the county, these have been something of a Cinderella service – out of sight and out of mind. These days, councils largely see them as a 'land bank' – a valuable asset, 'family silver' to be disposed of at times of hardship. Hence the pressure at the moment to sell off significant parts of their estate to cover funding shortfalls. For example, Somerset County Council has plans to sell off 35 of its 62 holdings to help plug the hole in its finances.

County farms and smallholdings have been a significant part of what rural local authorities do for nearly 100 years – since the 1908 Smallholdings and Allotments Act, which enabled local authorities to purchase land to create small farms to provide employment for ex-servicemen and other unemployed people. The process was enhanced by the 1919 Land Settlement (Facilities) Act, whose objective was to create a 'farming ladder' by which 'experienced and otherwise suitable agricultural workers can rise from the ranks and become farmers on their own account'.

In Warwickshire, the process of assembling the estate began in 1909, with the acquisition of Northfields Farm, Priors Marston, which the County Council still owns. By the 1930s the estate had grown to several hundred smallholdings typically on 5-15 acre plots, totalling almost 6,700 acres.

However, the focus on rural communities in general and on farming in particular declined over time. Smallholding tenants enjoyed life-time



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Above

Recently commissioned wind turbine on County estate land at Old House Farm, Snitterfield, Warwickshire

tenancies – which had the effect of stifling opportunities for new entrants. The estates of many councils stagnated. Warwickshire's was no exception. The smallholdings estate was allowed to run down and become inward-looking, with elderly tenants hanging onto subsidised tenancies and keeping unwelcome visitors at arm's length. The introduction of Farm Business Tenancies in the late 1990s began to break the log-jam of 'tenancies for life', with starter tenancies re-creating the concept of county farms as 'starter' holdings.

The financial pressures on councils, combined with the potentially substantial capital windfalls that come from the sale of holdings on urban fringes have led to something of a reassessment of the role and value of smallholdings and estates.

Some councils have used the opportunity to sell off most or even all their estate to developers and land management companies, obtain a significant capital receipt and get recalcitrant and time-consuming tenants off their hands, Gloucestershire and North Yorkshire among them. The emphasis on getting value for money for the Council Tax payer has focused minds.

However a managed approach to the drawing down of capital receipts (the 'land bank') to support council priorities can be combined with a much more proactive approach to the management of the estate itself – enabling the Council Tax payer to benefit from both perspectives.

There is an opportunity to capitalise on the revival in interest in animal welfare, sustainable agriculture, 'food miles', community orchards and allotments, re-focusing the purpose of the estate away from a previously inward looking perspective and opening it up as part of a more positive approach – promoting the resilience of rural communities, enhancing landscape and biodiversity, and encouraging initiatives in sustainable agriculture and food production.

In Warwickshire, this new direction has been seized. A new 15-year strategy was agreed by elected members last year, and a series of initiatives have been developed. The estate has shrunk since its heyday, but is still over 5,000 acres in extent – accounting for 1.3% of the total farmed area in the county, and including 46 equipped farms and smallholdings. Interestingly, it also includes eight 'horticultural strips' just outside Bidford-on-Avon in the Vale of Evesham – an extraordinary relic of pre-industrial agriculture. At about an acre each (far bigger than an allotment but much smaller than the smallest smallholdings), these strips are being cultivated by tenants to produce fruit and vegetables, supplying extended families and local businesses, including pubs and shops.

The new outward-focused approach has led to partnerships with Parish Councils to provide allotments in Hurley, Moreton Morrell, Harbury, and Salford Priors; land for affordable housing with a local housing association on the edge of Ilmington; the development of a community orchard in partnership with Garden Organic at Weston-under-Wetherley; and the letting of fishing rights to local angling clubs on stretches of the River Avon.

Farmers themselves have been encouraged to take a new look at their activities, resulting in several farm shops and renewable energy initiatives, including an on-farm anaerobic digester and the installation of a wind turbine at Snitterfield, school visits, 'open farm Sundays', and bed and breakfast accommodation.

None of this would have been possible without clear political commitment to support and diversify a farm estate which from some perspectives may look like an anachronistic hangover from another age. In truth, its preservation and development provides opportunities to engage, in a rural context, with the key issues of the day – employment, housing, food production and sustainable development – in a way that disposal would never have allowed.

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