

# OATES Project

## Final Report

**September 2000 – February 2002**  
**Funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation**

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Katharine Rayner and Topsy Jewell  
OATES Project Co-ordinators

# Summary

## **Aims**

The project aimed to evaluate the potential of organic agriculture for sustainable rural development and to address the needs of organic farming in Sussex and the surrounding counties.

## **Outcomes**

### ***Research***

Research visits to and network activities with organisations working to promote organic farming and local food links in the UK and France has highlighted best practices and enabled an exchange of information and experiences. It has also led to further partnership activities. We have produced an analysis of the role of organic farming in sustainable rural development in Sussex and the surrounding counties and developed a detailed proposal and business plan with Plumpton College for an Organic Information and Training Centre.

### ***Exchange of information and support for co-operation amongst farmers***

- Participatory workshops with conventional and organic farmers were held to explore the opportunities and obstacles to organic farming in the region.
- Training workshops on municipal composting and on co-operative marketing were well attended by farmers.
- Demonstration farm visits provided farmers with information, advice and shared expertise on organic farming and co-operative marketing and delivery schemes.
- Farmer networks enable farmers to exchange experiences and information and to discuss co-operative partnerships.
- Newsletters: A general newsletters providing local information and the outcomes of the training workshops distributed to organic producers in East and West Sussex, Surrey and Kent. Newsletter for the participants in the farmers' networks informs of the outcomes of meetings, for sale and wanted items and information exchange.
- A web site designed and regularly updated with local information and information about OATES activities and events. Our research reports are also available on the website.
- A database and survey questionnaire designed to produce an audit of the organic and small scale producers in East Sussex. The aim of the audit is to inform ourselves, farmers, retailers, and others of the production, processing and marketing capacity of organic and sustainably produced goods in the area, to help network farmers and to assist in the development of direct marketing of local organic produce.

### *Networking, Partnerships and Investment in Sustainable Farming*

Networking with other organisations in the UK, in Northern France and in the Sussex area; creating new partnerships and strengthening old ones; establishing partnership bids with local authority, farming, health, environmental and community organisations (including a Healthy Living Centre bid, Leader +, and Interreg III); running seminars jointly with the Sussex Local Produce Consortium and with local authorities, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) South East, the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) and Countryside Agency Eat the View South East, the OATES project has helped to:

- Raise the profile of the organic and sustainable farming sector in the region
- Ensure that organic and sustainable farming are on the agenda for funding and decision making in the region
- Increase the link between farmers and local decision makers.
- Exchange information between organisations working in sustainable rural development and local produce.
- Develop strategies and plans for future work by Common Cause to promote sustainable food and farming.

### **Key Findings**

- Regional information and training centres or co-ordinating organisations can play a key role in promoting sustainable farming, organic promotion, farmer networking, and co-operative marketing and distribution.
- There is high demand from farmers for on-farm support, local advice and information and training for production, processing and marketing.
- There is an important role for local demonstration farms and marketing ventures.
- Farmers lack the mechanism for meeting, exchanging information, and initiating co-operation. Farmer networks, farm visits, and trainings organised or facilitated by a local organisation can provide this mechanism.
- There is a lack of accessible up to date information for farmers about where to purchase locally produced inputs.
- There is a lack of accessible up to date information for retailers and customers about where to obtain local produce.
- There is a need for the development of local marketing avenues for organic and other environmental producers including direct markets and local authority and leisure catering.
- Small scale, local production and distribution networks or co-operatives can be financially viable and environmentally sustainable.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The OATES project has researched, initiated and developed key activities to support organic farming and sustainable food production in the Sussex area. We have begun processes that successfully enable farmers to exchange expertise, access local information and to discuss and set up cooperative marketing ventures.

Research has increased our understanding of how best to promote a local, sustainable food economy in our region. We have built invaluable experience and credibility through these initial efforts of the OATES Project, including very positive relationships with the farming community, local authorities and organisations in the regional as well as nationally and internationally.

One of the outcomes of this project is a detailed business plan and proposal for an **Information and Training Centre** to further develop and support the organic and sustainable farming sector in the region. We recommend building on the initiatives started in the OATES project and developing new initiatives co-ordinated through the Centre accessible to farmers in Kent, East and West Sussex and Surrey. Activities include:

- Researching and updating base line data on organic and small scale sustainable farms in the region.
- Advice and training for farmers.
- Developing and supporting farmer networks.
- A web site-bulletin board where farmers can directly post up to date information of available produce for sale.
- Work with East Sussex County Council, caterers, schools, and colleges to support greater links between local produce and public catering.
- Work with the leisure catering sector to increase links between local produce and hotels, pubs and B&Bs.
- Week of open day events on farms, processing units, shops and restaurants aimed at producers, retailers and consumers.
- Regular demonstration farm walks for local farmers, retailers and consumers.
- Supporting and developing new co-operative marketing ventures.
- Courses in sustainable food systems and rural skills for new entrants (particularly for young/unemployed).
  - Feasibility study for a Land Trust.
  - Education, information and publicity material including a web site and a regular newsletter.

# Introduction

Common Cause has been working in East Sussex since 1996 to promote and support the development of a sustainable local food and agriculture economy. We have identified the development of the local produce sector and organic farming as a key mechanism to sustainable rural development. We feel that sustainable rural development should ensure that the local economy is strengthened and that there are environmental and social benefits as well.

## **The OATES project**

The OATES (Organic Agricultural Training in East Sussex) project was initiated in January 2000, initially as a partnership with East Sussex County Council and Plumpton College with funding from the European Social Fund. The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation funded the second phase of the OATES project from September 2000 to February 2002.

The aims of this second phase of the OATES project, which expanded its borders to include West Sussex, Kent and Surrey, were to:

- increase understanding of how best to promote organic agriculture and sustainable rural economic and community development at a local and regional level;
- act as a catalyst to set up processes for farmers to exchange information and access local information to support and encourage organic farming practices;
- to produce a clear and well supported assessment of the local and regional investment needs to support sustainable agriculture;
- build on the work and relationships that Common Cause has established with the farming community, local authorities and other community projects.

## **Substantial Changes to the Original Project Proposal**

The Foot and Mouth crisis meant that many of the planned activities for Spring 2001, which should have been one of the busiest periods for the project, had to be postponed. We decided to follow the example of Plumpton College, and other establishments organizing farmer meetings, and temporarily cease training sessions for farmers in case it encouraged disease to come into the region and cross contamination occurred. Producers supported our decision.

This was a set back for the project since it should have been a crucial time to make contacts with farmers and develop opportunities for activities later in the year (such as the networking groups and farm visits). Instead we had a flurry of activity after the Summer. We received a very positive response from farmers and we extended the project until February 2002 to enable the project to facilitate farm visits and the

establishment of farmer networks. Although we have run one less workshop and one less farm visit than originally proposed, we have set up two farmer networks and developed an audit of organic farms. The networks came out of the enthusiasm of producers to follow up the events we held in the Autumn with regular meetings.

### **Organic Farm Audit**

We identified the need for the audit after realising how little information there is on organic production, processing, and marketing capacity and how this is an obstacle to farmers networking and to generally furthering the objectives of the OATES project.

We were also inspired by an organization that we met with in northern France, *Association A Pro Bio* in the Nord Pas de Calais. This organisation works to promote the consumption of local organic produce. They had undertaken an audit of Organic Farms in their region. The Audit (*Observatoire Economique Production Agrobiologique Nord Pas de Calais, 1999*) provides important base line data of organic production that can be measured for changes over time and information for producers, processors, retailers and the public wanting to source organic produce. After discussions with producers in Sussex, we agreed that an audit of farms was necessary to take the OATES project further.

The audit has involved working with a computer consultant to design a database and with local producers to design the survey questionnaire. To date, the database and the questionnaire have been completed and the questionnaire is being completed by farmers.

### **Report of the Policy Commission on the Future of Food and Farming**

As a result of the Foot and Mouth crisis the Government set up the Policy Commission on the Future of Food and Farming. Their report published in January this year upholds many of our findings and confirms the need for the activities the OATES project has initiated, in particular:

- The key role of farming in delivering sustainable rural development
- Reconnecting food and farming with the rest of the food chain and with consumers
- Demonstration of good practice (demonstration farms)
- Collaborative ventures for farmers
- Adding value through higher animal welfare and environmental standards
- Adding value through processing
- Reducing the supply chain for red meat and vegetables
- Local food marketing
- Developing farmers knowledge and skills

## **Organic Information and Training Centre**

In the course of the project, as a result of our findings and consultations, we have developed ideas for an Organic Information and Training Centre. A detailed report and business plan outlines the key issues, the situation in the South East, the gaps in and opportunities for sustainable rural development, and the role that an Organic Centre could play. The proposal is for a partnership with Plumpton College the High Weald AONB Unit and other environmental and landscape organisations as well as with food and health organisations. The aim of the Centre is to provide co-ordination for initiatives that build on the work of the current OATES project and that expand to new areas of activities to support a sustainable local food and farming economy. For more details see Recommendations and the Business Plan.

# Achieving the Objectives

The project has taken significant steps towards fulfilling its objectives. These were to:

Objective	Comment
<p><b>Increase the environmental sustainability of agricultural production and consumption in East Sussex</b></p>	<p>This objective is an overall aim of the project. It is a long-term process and one that is difficult to evaluate by the project alone. The OATES project has ensured that the needs and role of organic agriculture are included in large partnership bids in the region (including Healthy Living Centre and Leader +) as well as in training opportunities and developments at Plumpton College.</p> <p>The farm audit will provide an important tool to help us to assess changes in organic production over time. It will also enable us to gain an understanding of what farmers need to expand their production and processing and to exploit more local marketing opportunities. Through the farmer networks and farm visits we have linked some producers together to participate in existing or to discuss new collective direct marketing ventures.</p>
<p><b>Support co-operative direct marketing and exchange of information and expertise amongst farmers.</b></p>	<p>We have held workshops in co-operative marketing, a workshop on composting, two farm visits to a cutting room, a farm visit to an organic vegetable co-operative in Devon, and established two Farmer Network Groups. We have produced a general “OATES newsletter” sent to farmers in West and East Sussex, Kent and Surrey and two network group newsletters. We have set up and regularly update a web site.</p>
<p><b>Demonstrate how organic agriculture can benefit sustainable rural and local community development.</b></p>	<p>We have been able to demonstrate the importance of organic agriculture in sustainable rural development through our research, networking, and consultations with producers, environmental and community organisations, and citizens. The findings of our work have been fed into the South East England Development Agency, East Sussex County Council, the Co-operative movement, Sussex Rural Community Council, Plumpton College, and food and health organisations.</p>
<p><b>Strengthen links with organisations elsewhere in the UK and Europe that promote organic agriculture and sustainable rural development.</b></p>	<p>We have initiated new and strengthened existing links with organisations in the UK and France (see section on networking and partnerships).</p>

# Outcomes

Research and Workshop reports, and newsletters are available on request.

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
Research	<p>Research visits to and reports of the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organic Centre Wales, Aberystwyth</li> <li>• East Anglia Food Link, Thetford</li> <li>• Organic farming organisations in Picardie and Nord Pas de Calais, France.</li> </ul> <p>Design of database and questionnaire for audit of organic farms in East Sussex.</p>
Exploratory workshops with farmers using Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques.	<p>Open Meeting on Organic Farming, attended by farmers and representatives of community, environmental and educational organisations.</p>
Raising awareness in the farming community	<p>Workshop on Municipal Green Waste Composting, raising awareness of recycling local green waste, attended by farmers and representatives of community and environmental organisations.</p> <p>Workshops on co-operative marketing raising awareness of the many and varied opportunities for co-operation amongst farmers and local communities.</p> <p>OATES Newsletter with articles on research visits and workshops distributed to organic farmers in W. and E. Sussex, Surrey and Kent.</p> <p>Website</p> <p>Survey of Vets with experience of working with organic livestock</p>
Demonstration farm visits and Farmer Networks to encourage discussion and exchange of expertise amongst farmers.	<p>Visits to the Wealden Farmers' Network cutting room to demonstrate how small farmers can work together and share equipment, inputs and labour to become more financially viable and environmentally sustainable.</p> <p>Visit to Riverford Organic Vegetables in Devon, the marketing arm of a co-operative of organic vegetable producers.</p> <p>Farm networks for livestock farmers (meeting monthly since December) and for vegetable growers (meetings based around farm visits)</p> <p>West Sussex and Surrey Livestock Farmer Network Newsletter distributed to farmers in W. Sussex and Surrey.</p>

## Strategy and Outcomes continued

<p>Using project results and reports and a conference to influence decision makers concerning future policy on rural development and agricultural investment to support sustainable rural development.</p>	<p>A detailed proposal and business plan for an Organic Information and Training Centre outlining the key issues and activities for sustainable rural development. The proposal is for a partnership with Plumpton College the High Weald AONB Unit and other environmental, landscape, and health organisations.</p> <p>Seminars held with the Sussex Local Produce Consortium, Food and Health Partnership, East Sussex County Council, DEFRA, SEEDA and Countryside Agency to address OATES findings, key issues and funding opportunities.</p> <p>A submission outlining our objectives for sustainable rural development for East Sussex County Council’s Economic Development Strategy.</p> <p>Related partnerships and funding proposals.</p>
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# Key Findings

## 1. Research

- Regional information and training centres or co-ordinating organisations can play a key role in promoting sustainable farming, organic promotion, farmer networking, and co-operative marketing and distribution. A strong personalised relationship between the staff of the support programmes and members of the supply chain is important in creating new partnerships between producers, retailers and consumers and encouraging confidence to develop new market routes.
- There is high demand from farmers for on-farm support, local advice and information and training for production, processing and marketing. Farmers want increased access to low cost, local advice and information. A Centre should provide advice over and above that offered by OCIS, provide locally specific information and training and support for local marketing initiatives. The farmers need somewhere that they can call in to receive information and where there are facilities for soil analysis.
- There is an important role for demonstration farms and marketing ventures. Farmers want opportunities for farm visits in the region (most of those offered by other organisations are too far away).
- Local/regional support leads to more farmers converting to organic and to marketing their produce locally.
- Funding for regional organic farmers' associations allows for flexibility in design of research and development work to suit the local and regional needs of organic and sustainably producing farmers.
- Raising awareness of organic food and farming with the general public to increase demand is an integral part of the strategy to help expand the market for local producers. Promotion can take the form of open days, organic weeks of events, advertising, information leaflets, organic markets (urban and rural), regular promotional events, and links with school meal provision.
- Good co-ordination and communication between the different organisations working to support sustainable food and farming is needed to ensure that a wide variety of organisations work effectively and avoid duplication.

## 2. Farmers' Needs

Farmers identified the following needs:

- Mechanisms for farmers to meet and talk to each other eg farmer groups, farm visits, trainings, etc
- Information about organic farmers in the region
- Mechanisms for farmers to source and sell livestock
- Information on the availability of locally produced inputs and wholesale supplies (eg for vegetable boxes)
- Details of seasonal labourers
- More training sessions to raise production, processing and marketing skills
- Support for co-operative marketing and company development
- Marketing ideas to help them through the conversion period eg labelling for 'food in conversion' / local
- Help with form completion for organic conversion
- More information about available government support and how to access grants
- Help with assessing suitability of farm for conversion
- Information on support services for organic farmers, abattoirs, vets, seed source, and marketing outlets
- Financial advice eg cash-flow planning
- A marketing web-site
- Local marketing organisation/ initiative supporting local links for supply information on market demands and trends for developments
- Advice for on-farm processing and added value
- Links with consumers and retailers.

## 3. Co-operative Marketing

There is a need to significantly develop local and regional marketing opportunities, for farmers to avoid competing for the same markets by co-operating, for farmers to provide sufficient product range and volume to access currently inaccessible larger local markets such as public and leisure catering.

Farmers identified the following:

- The need for a register of input and marketing co-operatives in the region
- More regional support services for co-operatives
- A co-op for small scale producers to enable better distribution and better access to local produce eg at farmers market, mobile van, etc.
- Co-op to market surplus and grade-outs to enable growers (eg those currently supplying vegetable box schemes) to diversify markets and access catering markets.
- Meat co-operative in West Sussex
- Audit of retailers and markets for local produce
- Farmer networks to enable producers to get to know each other

- Visit to the Wealden Farmers Network Cutting Room
- The need for a campaign on local radio and TV to help create demand for a local brand (eg a “Local Food” brand comparable with Fair Trade brand).

## 4. Farm Visits

### **Wealden Farmers’ Network**

The Wealden Farmers’ Network is a collective of five livestock farms working together to share a cutting room, product planning, marketing, inputs, and labour. The first visit was so oversubscribed that a second one was organised (with farmers attending from East and West Sussex, Surrey and Kent). The visits included a talk by Plumpton College who manage two of the farms involved in the network and a discussion session that enabled participants to exchange information and experiences.

Key findings included:

- The Network demonstrates the viability and environmental sustainability of small scale, local production and distribution networks.
- The Network is an inspiring example for other producers and offers a model for small farms that are not currently financially viable.
- There is a big demand in the region for alternative marketing and processing routes for organic and small scale livestock producers
- The combination of farm visit and discussion session enabled participating farmers to network.
- One of the participants has been invited to join the network as a result of the visit to provide an outlet for their pork products.
- As a result of the visits and follow up network meetings (see below) a group of farmers in West Sussex are discussing setting up a similar collaborative venture.

### **Organic Vegetable Co-operative**

Vegetable growers with box schemes in Sussex are very concerned that competition from the supermarkets is adversely affecting their businesses. In order to be competitive they must buy in vegetables that they cannot supply from their own farms, often from growers in other parts of the UK. Growers have identified the need for more co-operation to reduce food miles, reduce costs through bulk buying, maintain quality and freshness, and to make their individual enterprises more competitive through a greater range of produce. As a follow up to the co-operative marketing workshops, a two day visit to Riverford, the marketing arm of the South Devon Organic Co-operative, was organised. The visit demonstrated the benefits of:

- Farms diversifying into vegetable production
- a machine pool
- a labour pool
- co-operative wholesaling linked to a strong marketing venture.

## 5. Farmer Networks

A *West Sussex and Surrey Livestock Farmers Network* and an *Organic Vegetable Growers Network* were set up as a result of the Co-operative Marketing workshops. The networks demonstrate that:

- Farmers want to meet and exchange experiences and ideas but don't have the time to organise or facilitate meetings. Most farmers don't know who the other organic farmers are in their area. The initiation and facilitation of network meetings by someone other than the farmers themselves is necessary, at least at the start.
- Participants want to meet regularly (eg monthly)
- The network meetings provide a forum for farmers to discuss opportunities for co-operation including co-operative marketing and trading between members.
- Participants want a newsletter to exchange information and to include a 'for sale' and 'wanted' items. Production and distribution of the newsletter needs to be done by the network facilitator.
- The newsletter is vital for recruiting more members to the network. Four farmers attended the first West Sussex Network; eight attended the third meeting, and fourteen the fourth meeting in response to the interest created by the newsletter.
- The network meetings provide a channel for Common Cause to feed local information about marketing, technical issues, and training opportunities to farmers.
- Participants want to arrange farm visits to each others farms or to demonstration initiatives or enterprises.
- Participants would like the network meetings to provide a forum for experts to talk on specialised issues.
- There are other farmers who have indicated that they would like a network in their area.

## 5. Regional Investment Needs

A detailed analysis of the regional investment needs for sustainable farming in the Sussex area has been produced in the Organic Information and Training Centre Business Plan. A summary includes:

- A comprehensive service to farmers interested in converting to organic farming providing local information and advice on product planning, business planning, and marketing
- The development of local marketing avenues for organic and other environmental producers including direct markets and local authority and leisure catering
- Increased access to local sustainably produced food by all.
- Accessible up to date information for retailers and customers about where to access local produce
- General public's understanding of the role of local produce in enhancing the environment and rural economy
- Support for co-operative marketing ventures

- Support for farmer networks for organic and small scale farming enterprises
- Farmers' information about other farmers in their region and good farming practices
- Training for farm workers in organic farming, horticulture and traditional rural skills
- Training opportunities for the young and unemployed in rural skills
- Business support and access to land for small scale commercial horticulture (eg a Land Trust).

# Networking and Partnerships

During the course of the project we have been able to establish some important partnerships and networking opportunities.

## Specific examples include:

- A partnership with Plumpton College to continue work to support sustainable agricultural production in the region and to develop proposals for an Information and Training Centre.
- A partnership with East Sussex County Council Healthy Living Centre bid to New Opportunities to develop links between local organic producers, school meal provision and other public sector catering.
- A partnership with the School Food Action Group for East Sussex, Brighton and Hove (ESBH) and the ESBH Healthy School Scheme to produce a research report: *Healthy Eating Initiatives and Food provision in Primary and Secondary Schools*, an Audit on healthy eating for schools and a *Good Food Guide* booklet to summaries and make accessible to schools the findings of the research report.
- Partnership with Community Action for Food and the Environment (CAFE) to build a bicycle powered blender to make local fruit milkshakes and smoothies and promote healthy eating. Demonstrated at the ESCC Food Fair and used by schools, local community events, farmers markets, etc.
- Participating in SUSTAIN's network group on Public Sector Catering – opportunities and issues relating to local and organic food.
- Participating with East Anglia Food Link, other Food Link organisations in the South of England and the Soil Association in developing regional and international Co-operative marketing ventures for organic produce.
- Participating in the Co-op Union's Rural Working Party Group.
- A partnership bid with East Sussex County Council to gain Leader + status for East Sussex.
- A partnership with CAFE to produce an evaluation of two weekly local village produce markets.
- Networking with organizations and projects involved in the delivery of projects supporting sustainable agriculture.

**General networking includes:**

In the region:

- Community Action for Food and the Environment (CAFE).
- High Weald AONB Unit and Land Management Initiative
- Sussex Rural Community Council (SRCC)
- Regional Organics South East (ROSE)
- South East Co-op
- Mutual Aid

Nationally:

- Soil Association
- Foundation for Local Food Initiatives
- Sustain
- Pesticide Action Network UK
- Regional Food Link projects
- The Co-op Union

Internationally:

- La Chambre Régionale d'Agriculture de Picardie
- l'Association des Agriculteurs Biologique de Picardie (AABP)
- Association GABNOR (Nord Pas de Calais)
- Association A Pro Bio (Nord Pas de Calais)

# Conclusions

The OATES project has researched, initiated and developed key activities to support organic farming and sustainable food production in the Sussex area. We have begun processes that successfully enable farmers to exchange expertise, access local information and discuss cooperative marketing ventures. Research has increased our understanding of how best to promote a local, sustainable food economy in our region. We have built very positive relationships with the farming community, local authorities, and with community and environmental organisations locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

Some of the clear messages that we have received from farmers over the past seventeen months of work is that farmers want local information and advice, they want to meet each other, they want to participate in co-operative marketing ventures and they want to direct-market their produce. One of the successful outcome of the OATES project has been to initiate mechanisms for organic and small scale farmers to meet and exchange information and to access information and experiences on co-operation. We have also identified how hard it is for local retailers and customers to regularly access local produce. There is both a void in information and infrastructure (particularly delivery mechanisms).

Over the past year, Common Cause has been discussing with Plumpton College, farmers, community and environment organisations ideas to develop an **Organic Information and Training Centre**. The result of these consultations and research is a detailed business plan, proposal, and letters of support. Common Cause has built up invaluable experience and credibility through the initial efforts of the OATES Project. We hope that this can be taken forward in future work.

# Recommendations

We recommend building on the initiatives started in the OATES project and developing new initiatives co-ordinated through an Organic Information and Training Centre accessible to farmers in Kent, East and West Sussex and Surrey. The Centre would provide the staffing infrastructure, information resource, and training facilities and many of the activities would take place on farms, at education establishments, and other locations in the community.

Recommended activities include:

- Researching and updating base line data on organic and small scale sustainable farms in the region.
- Advice and training for farmers.
- Developing and supporting farmer networks.
- A web site-bulletin board where farmers can directly post up to date information of available produce for sale.
- Work with East Sussex County Council, caterers, schools, and colleges to support greater links between local produce and public catering.
- Work with the leisure catering sector to increase links between local produce and hotels, pubs and B&Bs.
- Week of open day events on farms, processing units, shops and restaurants aimed at producers, retailers and consumers.
- Regular demonstration farm walks for local farmers, retailers and consumers.
- Supporting and developing new co-operative marketing ventures.
- Courses in sustainable food systems and rural skills for new entrants (particularly for young/unemployed).
- Feasibility study for a Land Trust.
- Education, information and publicity material including a web site and a regular newsletter.