

A National Wildflower Farm

Landlife's proposal for development of Inglenook Farm

Background

Landlife is a wildlife charity established in 1975. It has been running a wholly owned wildflower seed and plant trading arm, Landlife Wildflowers, since 1982. All profits from the trading company are covenanted back to the charity. In 2000 Landlife opened the £4m National Wildflower Centre in Court Hey Park, Knowsley where we are based and from where we operate our seed processing, sales and marketing activities. Our 100 acres of production fields for wildflower seed are currently located around Merseyside on different sites.

Landlife Wildflowers markets wildflower seeds nationally to create new wildflower landscapes, through a mail order catalogue, on-line store and retail outlets. It has been a supplier to Sainsbury Homebase stores, the BBC and the Eden project.

Its work in developing the wildflower industry on Merseyside was selected as best practice by the European Commission in 2006.

We have established over almost 10 years the successful branding and operation of the National Wildflower Centre, which is the recipient of a number of high profile awards.

Introduction

Landlife has been seeking a location to bring its 100 acres of production fields into a farm setting. Sites currently managed are scattered across Merseyside from Halewood in Knowsley to Lunt in Sefton. One site will bring with it economies of scale, ease of operations and better harvesting logistics. We also believe this could create a stunning attraction to enhance the Borough's image, give a focus to its Rural Business Development Strategy, City Growth Strategy and contribute to key biodiversity and sustainability indicators. These are important for local people and wildlife and carry important messages for changing climate adaptation techniques that could put St Helens at the forefront of regional action alongside the work in Knowsley at the National Wildflower Centre.

The Wildflower Farm Proposal

We propose to enter a lease arrangement with Knowsley Hall Estate to relocate our 100 acres of wildflower production fields to Inglenook Farm, Rainford. This will take place as a phased operation as we assess the suitability of the farmland and release our tenancies on existing sites.

Around 40 native wildflower species will be grown in single species blocks, creating an impressive wildflower display from April through to August. Landlife contracts with and supervises local farmers to undertake cultivation, herbiciding and seed drilling operations. Harvesting will be carried out by Landlife using specially adapted combine harvesters. The crops will be dried at the farm, prior to processing and storage at the National Wildflower Centre.

Inglenook Farm

Inglenook Farm is an ideal location for a wildflower farm. It is a land holding of suitable scale for our purposes and has the ideal soils, access and proximity to the National Wildflower Centre to facilitate operations. Thirty acres of the site are highly visible from the road and easily accessed from the village.

The two large barns on site will be used to store combine harvesters and agricultural equipment and be used for drying the seed harvest.

The farmstead and its courtyard outbuildings will be part of the Phytobotanica proposal, but will provide facilities for Landlife staff and as the project develops, visitors from the National Wildflower Centre who wish to experience and learn from our agricultural production operations.

Wider Benefits

The Wildflower Farm has enormous potential to become a major environmental and tourism resource with other significant benefits.

The Farm will:

- Supply the raw materials for the growing regional and national markets in new habitat creation, in response to climate change, declining biodiversity and environmental justice
- Establish an attractive nature, education and tourism resource for people in St Helens and beyond
- Secure a key project in the revised City Growth Strategy as part of Theme C: Physical Transformation of St Helens
- Support healthy living programmes in the borough by encouraging outdoor activities and better relationships with natural environments
- Contribute to a regional Centre of Excellence to promote the economic value of the natural economy

- Create a significant regional site for biodiversity action plan species such as Hare, Barn Owl and Farmland Birds, and for more survey data on other wildlife
- Demonstrate the Borough's commitment to developing small rural businesses

A Shared Development with Phytobotanica

Landlife is delighted that Phytobotanica propose relocating its lavender and other essential oil crops, processing and visitor education facilities at Inglenook Farm. This brings substantial added value to the Farm, with a complementary business operation and reinforces the commercial, educational and environmental value of plants.

Landlife will work with Phytobotanica using its experience and skills gained from developing the National Wildflower Centre, (winners of the North West *Sustainable Green Tourism award 2007*) to plan and advise on visitor facilities such as the shop, café, event planning and group organization. Once in operation, we will signpost appropriate National Wildflower Centre visitors to the Farm. We also currently manage The Mersey Partnership Green Tourism website and will ensure inclusion of the Farm in its cluster of environmental attractions that are key assets to the region.

Our existing sites and wildflower displays at the National Wildflower Centre are regularly used for guided tours and independent visits by a wide and diverse range of groups and individuals. These include international practitioners attending conferences, education and community groups, in particular those who are normally excluded or have difficulty accessing nature locally. However, our sites are split and some have difficult access. Landlife believes the new education facility proposed by Phytobotanica is a valuable resource that can be used in partnership to extend our educational and research programmes. The facilities proposed by Phytobotanica would also dovetail with our objectives of involving local people by providing a high value environmentally-based attraction, and hospitality facilities. We would also support its shop with wildflower seeds and plant sales.

We believe that the establishment of this new Centre of Excellence in partnership with Phytobotanica and Knowsley Estate at Inglenook Farm will be a significant asset to Brand New St Helens.

Timescales

Landlife will be agreeing terms with the Knowsley Hall Estate to secure land and barns for its agricultural operations at the earliest opportunity. We will drill seed in Spring 2008 and take tenancy of 100 acres over a phased period, starting with 30 acres to the east of the dual carriageway in 2008. First sowings will include cornfield annuals, which will give a striking floristic display in June next year with perennials coming into bloom the following year.

Two barns will be used in year one as drying and equipment storage facilities.