

NEWS

From Cambridgeshire County Council

January 8, 2019

Tenancy of Manor Farm, Girton – answers to questions put by John Elworthy Editor, Cambs Times, Wisbech Standard and Ely Standard.

1: Can you provide the county council advertisement for the tenancy of Manor Farm, Manor Farm Road, Girton, CB3 0RX detailing when it was advertised, who was responsible for marketing it, and copies of the specifications for ingoing tenants?

- 2017 re-lettings advert attached [here](#).
- Manor Farm, Girton particulars attached [here](#).

It was advertised locally (Cambridge Evening News- 27th Jan 2017, Peterborough Evening Telegraph 26 Jan 2017 the week of the 27th Jan 201) and nationally in the Farmers Weekly on the 27th Jan 2017. Also put online on CCC's website that week.

- Closing date for the applications was 10th March 2017.

2: Can you provide please the number of applicants for the tenancy (I understand there were 9 applicants) and the selection criteria adopted to short list and then award the tenancy in the early part of 2017 to Councillor Roger Hickford?

The Council received nine applications for the tenancy. 5 livestock enterprises and 2 equestrian enterprises which would require a change of use and 1 hobby farm which did not include a business element to the proposed use. The lettings criteria are available on our website- <https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/business/business-with-the-council/countyfarms/>

3: Can you confirm that the date a working group review team was established to explore options for the county estates? I understand over the years there have been several reviews but the one I specifically have in mind during the chairmanship of Cllr Hickford, ie from 10/05/2016 - 03/05/2017.

A Member working group met on 3rd February 2017 when Cllr Hickford was Chair of the Assets and Investment Committee.

Following the 2017 Council elections and changes to Council Committees, it met as a sub group of the Commercial and Investment Committee on 3rd October 2017 with Cllr Hickford attending although not as a Committee Member.

After that it was taken over by the Council's Outcome Focused Review.

4: Can you confirm that when Cllr Hickford attended a tenant farmers' meeting in Peterborough in early 2017 he did so as chairman of the assets committee?

According to the council newsletter: "The meetings were chaired by Councillor Roger Hickford, Chair of the Council's Assets and Investments Committee, who provided a Member's view alongside the general estate update from Hugo Mallaby. This was followed by a lively question and answer session at each venue, particularly regarding the strategic review. The meetings are important, and we look forward to seeing lots of you at next year's meetings. Please do let us know if there are any topics that you would like to see covered." At any point during those meetings did Cllr Hickford announce he was about to become a tenant or had applied to become a tenant?

The date of the 2017 Tenants meetings were Tuesday the 24th and Thursday the 26th January 2017 held in Stow Cum Quy and March. Roger Hickford attended both as Chair of the Assets and Investment Committee. Ten available farms were being advertised during the week of the meetings. The closing date for applications was 10 March 2017.

5: When the tenancy of Manor Farm was advertised was it the council's then policy that limited period leases only were available and that the council's policy at that time was to encourage young people into farming?

All tenancies for advertised holdings are normally limited to a maximum of 5 years unless specifically stated in the letting particulars.

The link to the Council's selection process is shown at 2 above.

6: According to the most recently published information "the current policies encourage new farming entrants onto the estate, with 80 new businesses formed in the last 15 years; new tenants for this period had an average age of 30 when they first started. The estate's rent roll has increased from £2.755 million to £4.024 million since the scrutiny review of 2011 whilst the surplus has increased by 65% to £3.173million in the same period". I can find no recent analysis of the estate – does one exist and can I be provided with it if so?

The surplus for 2017/18 was £4.089 million; the estate income for the year was £5.039 million. These figures were submitted to CIPFA as part of our 2017/18 financial return.

7: According to publicly available information Cllr Hickford has switched his business address (ie his home address) three times in three years, Manor Farm appearing on January 1, 2018. Was this the date he officially became a tenant of the county council or was it earlier?

The tenancy start date was 20th December 2017.

8: It is evident from the public minutes of the assets committee that Cllr Hickford was chairman that the farms estate of the county council were referred to be and discussed on a number of occasions. Did Cllr Hickford declare his interest as a tenant farmer on those occasions – or was this covered, technically, on his register of interests as residing at Manor Farm?

Cllr Hickford was not a Member of the Assets and Investment Committee - which held its last meeting on March 31 2017- at the same time he was a tenant of the County Farms Estate, which was awarded in May 2017.

In May 2017 the Assets and Investment Committee was replaced by the Commercial and Investment Policy and Service Committee from May 2017, it is chaired by Cllr Josh Schumann – and Cllr Hickford has never been a member of this committee.

9: In 2017 Cllr Hickford acquired the tenancy of Manor Farm but it was only days before Christmas 2018 that many of his council colleagues realised this after he declared an interest during a meeting of the general purposes committee and left the room. Are there previously recorded instances of Cllr Hickford having declared an interest?

Following the election in May, Councillor Hickford submitted a Register of Members' Disclosable Pecuniary Interest Form dated 19 May 2017 which states he is a tenant of Manor Farm. This information is publically available on the Council's website.

There is no requirement for him to declare an interest if it is on his Register of Members' Disclosable Pecuniary Interest Form which is published on the Council's website. If he is a member of a meeting where an issue which may be of financial benefit to him is to be discussed he must leave the room and cannot take part in the decision. This is the process followed at the only meeting he attended where issues to do with his tenancy were discussed.

10: Can you confirm the following dates?

- May 27 2016: Cllr Hickford appointed chair of the assets committee
Correct. Please note this committee was replaced following the May 2017 elections with Commercial and Investment Policy and Service Committee –chaired by Cllr Joshua Schumann and on which Cllr Hickford has never been a member.
- Jan/Feb 2017: The committee holds two meetings of the strategic review working group. Cllr Hickford attends tenancy meeting to discuss matters including strategic review with tenants.
Correct. Both meetings were held before the advertised lettings' viewing day.
- April 2017: Manor Farm, Girton, advertised in council magazine as being available to tent
Incorrect. Tenants were advised of Manor Farm's availability in the December 2016 newsletter.
- April/May 2017: Cllr Hickford awarded five year tenancy on Manor Farm, Girton.
Correct
- May 2017: Cllr Hickford records Manor Farm on his register of interests at county council - Correct
- September 2017: Newly constituted commercial and investment committee appoints Cllr Hickford as one of two last minute members on county farms estate working group, or as they put it to look at "Outcome Focussed Reviews" on County Farms." Don't understand reference to "last minute" as all six cross party Members were appointed at the same time. Minute from 15 September 2017:

40. COUNTY FARMS ESTATE WORKING GROUP

Members considered a report that sought to formalise a working group that would review issues that related to the County Farms Estate.

The Chairman proposed with the agreement of Members that the membership of the Working Group be increased to 6 Members and that the appointment of a Member Champion for the County Farms Estate would be made by the Working Group. Paragraph 4.1 of the terms of reference was amended with the agreement of the Committee to replace the word 'decisions' with 'proposals'.

Appointed to the Working Group were Councillors J Schumann, A Hay, R Hickford, T Rogers, L Nethsingha and L Jones.

It was resolved unanimously to:

- Agree the Working Group's Terms of Reference;
- Agree the Working Group's membership;
- Consider whether it appropriate to nominate a Member Champion for the County Farms Estate

11: The minutes of the commercial and investment committee of October 20, 2017 record that Councillor R Hickford was appointed to the 'outcome focused review' of the county farm estate. Was the committee informed that by this stage Cllr Hickford was actually himself a tenant farmer of the county council?

Officers do not know whether Cllr Hickford informed the Committee that terms for a tenancy on the estate were being finalised, but the tenancy did not begin until December 2017

12: Specifically in relation to the money agreed by the general purposes committee to the proposed works to be undertaken at Manor Farm, Girton, by Cllr Hickford, could you provide answers to the following:

- What work is the £183,000 designed to cover?
Professional fees (architects, structural engineers, building regulations), the build costs and a contingency fund.
- Is there more investment down the line on house and/or barn conversion?
Not that the council has been asked to fund
- Would it have been more than £183k if the larger, earlier house extension had been accepted?
The earlier extension was larger, so it is likely that its cost would be greater.
- Does any of the £183k cover the barn extension?
No
- What are the details of CCC's prudential borrowing? How much borrowed, from whom, for how long, interest rate, fixed or variable?
Any investments of this nature form a very small element of the Councils overall capital programme. The Council does not borrow for individual projects. The level of interest on current 20 year borrowing is 2.77%
- What are details of amount Cllr Hickford will repay? When do payments start? (if work not completed for year or two, effective loan is longer), Does repayment cost to Cllr Hickford cover interest paid by CCC to lender?
It's not a repayment it is an investment in our asset, the precise amount will depend on the final cost of the works, but will be based on the council's standard commercial return. The work will not start until planning permission is granted for change of use. The increase on rent will begin on completion of the investment to the house.
- Is Cllr Hickford paying back at a higher – more commercial rate?
It's not a repayment it is an investment in our asset, but yes, the increase of rent will be 7% of the investment made. At the end of the term the tenant neither owns the asset nor the improvements to the asset.

- Would Cllr Hickford be able to secure a business loan over 14/15 years (given his age) on the open market?
This is irrelevant as the Council would not accept a separate charge over one of their assets.
- What security/collateral is Cllr Hickford offering CCC against non-payment?
As the investment improves the value of an asset owned by the Council there is no separate security. This is exactly the same approach on all loans of this nature made to tenants.
- Are there plans for Cllr Hickford to buy the house and/or barn at any stage?
No
- Has CCC played any part in lending to Cllr Hickford in respect of the barn conversion, which is his application (rather than the authority's application)? If so, please provide details.
A commercial investment has been made in the building to remove asbestos. The building has also been repaired to maintain its condition.
- What is the total financial benefit in kind to Cllr Hickford from non-commercial loan(s) from CCC or related entities to Cllr Hickford that he would not get on the open market?
None: this is an investment in an asset owned by the Council for which it receives a commercial return through increased rent.

Extra requests – 9.33 Monday, 07 January 2019.

1: Can you explain why the council appointed Cllr Hickford as 'farms champion' in the summer of 2018 – surely this would have been a conflict of interest given the fact he had been a tenant for over a year by this date?

Commercial and Investment committee appointed Cllr Hickford as 'county farms champion' in October 2017 – after he had been awarded the tenancy of Manor Farm – but before the tenancy began. The role has no decision making powers and these special interest Member champions receive no additional financial benefits for their role.

2: Was the terms of the loan agreed by the county council general purposes committee in December dependent upon change of use? I note an application for change of use is yet to be determined by South Cambs Council.

Yes, the investment is conditional on receipt of change of use planning permission for the building.

3: Did the business plan put forward by Cllr Hickford set out his plans for a dog grooming/canine training centre? If so why wasn't planning permission for change of use not put forward earlier?

The application included the creation of a dog grooming and canine training centre, but was not dependent on the barn building forming part of the tenancy. Subsequently a commercial agreement was reached with Cllr Hickford to include the barn and at that time, October 2017, planning consultants were instructed. Cllr Hickford instructed his own consultants in March/April 2018.

4: Given the fact 18 months have elapsed since he acquired the tenancy was a delay of around two years prior to the farm being self-sustainable part of that business plan?

The business plan was put forward on the basis that the canine day centre is a new business which would be built up over time.

5: Who sat on the interview panel that offered Cllr Hickford the tenancy? Were any other county councillors on that panel?

Following its normal procedure, there were two interviews held by Officers. The initial interview included the Asset Manager (Rural); the second was chaired by the Council's Group Asset Manager.

6: Can you confirm there were eight other applicants for the tenancy of Manor Farm? Did any of those applicants propose change of use?

Yes eight other applications. Five livestock enterprises, two equestrian enterprises which would require a change of use and one hobby farm which was not suitable as there was no business element to the proposed use.

7: According to Cllr Hickford's declared addresses in recent years he has lived in a Suffolk farm house and a substantial house in Shelford. Was the council satisfied that he qualified for the policy of the county council estates which is to encourage new and young entrants into farming?

An applicant's previous address is not relevant. The Council wishes to encourage new businesses onto the estate. The nature of these will vary in line with the opportunities. The estate has 80 tenants or thereabouts who have non-farming income as part of their businesses, including some who are wholly non-agricultural.

We have taken on 100 new entrants to the estate since 2000. Our preferred age range for new tenants is 23 to 40, but we have appointed tenants who are both younger and older than this range during this time.

8: How did the council justify a major extension to Manor Farm given that the length of tenancy and creation of a large country home – and a barn conversion to a business – would make it impossible ever again to be considered as part of a starter unit for new entrants to farming?

Rural business opportunities provided by the Council are not necessarily starter units for new entrants to farming. There is a significant range of sizes and facilities. In 2017 the largest farm offered was for 493 acres and the smallest (Manor Farm) is nine acres.

Ends