

# **Save Gorgie Farm Forever continues its survey while council moves to appoint new operator**

**The Education Committee discussed the ongoing issue of Gorgie Farm when it met on Tuesday, with councillors insisting that any future developments are notified to them regularly.**

**The committee heard from a deputation presented by Save Gorgie Farm Forever (SGFF), that the council is in discussions with a third party operator who could not be named for commercial reasons.**

The general feeling of the meeting was that whoever takes over Gorgie Farm will have to be very aware of its importance to the city, and enter any agreement with the council with a business plan that will secure its longterm sustainability.

SGFF do not intend to make any bid to run the farm – they just want to represent the views of the local community, and perhaps have some input in the decision about any new

operator.

The funding which SGFF gathered to make a temporary rescue, and look after the animals was not used. We were told by SGFF that: "LOVE pulled out and moved all animals off site before having any discussions with us. To our knowledge larger animals have been transferred to zoos and some smaller animals were taken home by staff and volunteers."

The council confirmed that it did not own any of the animals and that LOVE has moved them all off site.

**Chair, Martin Young, said: "SGFF has been formed by the people of the local community most affected by the closure of Gorgie City Farm. We implore the City of Edinburgh Council and its officers to come up with a solution to reopen Gorgie City Farm as quickly as possible.**

"The farm represents an important part of the lives of so many people across the city, both the volunteers who work there and the people of the local community, who depend upon the area as its only major green space.

"Many people, especially those with learning difficulties, who have volunteered at the farm over the years have greatly benefited from their experience interacting with the animals. We have met several people who have told us that Gorgie Farm "literally saved their lives."

"It is important to also remember that Gorgie Farm and its attendant gardens represent the largest accessible green area

in Gorgie. Gorgie-Sighthill is one of the most disadvantaged wards in the city. Gorgie does not have an Inverleith Park or Meadows. People in Gorgie rely on the farm for their leisure and recreation. It must not only be preserved as a green space, but one that is also accessible and affordable and recognises the role the farm plays in the lives of the people of Gorgie.

“We must also recognise the staff and the suffering they have endured since the abrupt departure of their current employer, LOVE Gorgie. We implore the council to make sure whatever solution is found to reopening the farm considers the previous staff and, where possible, looks to bring the same people back in.

“The SGFF campaign wishes to work with the council in selecting a new bidder that can meet the needs and expectations of the area while delivering a sustainable business model that can ensure the long-term viability of Gorgie City Farm.”

## **WHAT NOW?**

The purpose of referring the matter to Tuesday’s Education Committee was that it falls squarely within their remit, due to the educational nature of volunteer roles at the farm.

The committee had been instructed to take on the full time equivalent of two members of staff on the basis of the Transfer of Undertakings rules (TUPE). The cost was to be covered by monies held in the discretionary grant fund which we believe to be around £250,000. But events overtook such an arrangement, as LOVE Learning, the charity which was running the farm, moved out on Wednesday 18 January and all staff were made redundant the following day. Whether TUPE rules can still be used if any staff are eventually re-engaged is questionable.

There have been various meetings held since the matter was raised at the City Chambers using emergency powers just a few weeks ago. Legal discussions are ongoing about taking back the site, and also employing any members of staff. The charity LOVE Learning – [which is in breach of financial obligations with the charity regulator](#) – remains a party in an ongoing year to year lease which can only be brought to an end by agreement, and which is not otherwise due to end until November 2023.



At the opening of the farm under LOVE Learning PHOTO Ian Georgeson

**SGFF have launched a public consultation programme with the public – an online survey for the**

**people of Edinburgh to share their views on what they would like to see from any new operator of the farm.**

**There have been 400 respondents to the survey since Sunday and will continue until 5 February 2023. Mr Young said: “The campaign has begun consultations with people in the area and people who have worked there.”**

The campaign asks as many people as possible in the city to show their support for the Farm by participating in the Survey. Anyone can do this [by clicking here](#). The campaign has also reached out to previous staff and volunteers at Gorgie Farm and will conduct focus groups to get as much detail as possible from them, to help inform future bidders of what is needed to replicate the same spirit of Gorgie farm that has helped so many people in the past.

Mr Young said: “It is important for us to gain as much information as possible from the staff and volunteers at Gorgie Farm to preserve their knowledge and understanding of what worked at the farm and what did not. We have been overwhelmed by the number of people taking up our survey with over 200 participants on the first day alone.

“This is the best way to demonstrate to the council how important Gorgie Farm is to the community and why we need it reopened as quickly as possible. This response gave us fresh

impetus for our deputation with the council's Education, Children and Families Committee to put as much pressure on the council as possible to move forward with the new proposals and shorten this period of uncertainty the community is suffering through.

"The main impact of the farm is on the volunteers – around 100 with a substantial waiting list. Volunteers benefitted specifically from helping animals, but also moved into a place they felt safe. We have nearly twice as many people who want free admission as want to continue adult education programme."

Asked about the future running of the farm, Mr Young said SGFF would like a more sustainable business model brought in. He said: "The previous operator had issues around food and beverage – but this could be run commercially alongside a controlled admission policy. From our perspective we would like to see a coalition to make the farm viable for the longer term. We don't want to be in this position ever again."

Fiona O'Brien, an additional support needs teacher and a member of SGFF, outlined specific details of the survey. She said: "It was done properly on Survey Monkey. We asked about the importance of education – 92% so far have said this is "very important or extremely important". We are probably saving the council a lot of money in social care costs by having the farm there."

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Cllr Ross McKenzie, who also represents this Ward, said: “Since the farm closed we have heard from councillors on the social benefits that the farm provided. If you look back to the full council of November 2019 when the farm collapsed, Cllr Corbett brought forward a motion. You will hear similar chat and a broad consensus across the council that it had a role in protecting the future of the farm. Yet, when the opportunity came to hand it over to LOVE and to wash our hands of it, such an opportunity was lost due to funding pressures.

“The last two and a half years of the farm’s existence were the first years in its history that there was no council funding.”

Whether or not LOVE did not want the funding at the beginning is open to question, but Cllr McKenzie maintains that by the

time LOVE Learning wrote “to the Convener of this committee and copied in the Chief Executive requesting an urgent meeting they had by that time left a trail of emails requesting council engagement”.

Cllr McKenzie said that the CEO of LOVE [wrote to the council](#) on 6 December advising that they had finalised their 20-21 accounts and anticipated that it would have to “serve notice on Gorgie Farm”. They sought an urgent meeting. He also pointed out that nothing then came to public notice until 30 December and he asked why that call was not answered with “the urgency it clearly demanded”.

The councillor said that regardless of who takes over the farm, a governance structure between the council, the operator and the community is vital in future.

He said: “Today the gates are closed, the animals have been removed, staff and volunteers are in limbo. My fear is that allowing it to sit empty for two or three months, and potentially handing it over to a commercial operator puts the social and community benefits at risk for the long term.”

Cllr McKenzie also worried that any process seemed to have stalled. He said: “This report is a bit thin. We don’t know who the third party operator mentioned by the council is, though I understand there are commercial sensitivity reasons for that.” He urged the council to take responsibility as only they can ensure the social community benefits are maintained for future generations.

Amanda Hatton Executive Director of Education admitted that it is a complex situation legally.

She said: “What we are trying to do is work with a community group to work on what a sustainable future looks like, so that the farm remains an asset for the community. Any party interested must realise what they are taking on in terms of the site and the staff. That information has taken time to

come, and only last night we now have that from LOVE.

“The third party has a board meeting next week and they already have agreement in principle to take this to that board.”

Ms Hatton also confirmed that in future arrangements along with the third party, the council and community would be represented.

Sumita Kumar queried that the council had heard about LOVE wanting to leave the farm on 6 December, saying “Why are we in this situation now and we did not have any time to respond?”

She was told that the situation changed quickly and LOVE had decided they wanted to cease trading by the time the council spoke to them.

The committee agreed to keep ward councillors and group Education spokespeople regularly updated, and Cllr David Key asked that the matter is then referred to full council after it is discussed at the Education Committee.

After the meeting the Council leader, Cammy Day told the Local Democracy Reporting Service: “There are ongoing positive discussions with a third party organisation who would work with the council, the community and local campaign groups to ensure the future of the site. I was really disappointed that the farm closed its doors this month but there’s been a tremendous amount of work taking place to take forward plans and I’m hopeful of positive news next week.

“Everyone acknowledges it’s really important that it remains a community resource, not just for Gorgie but for everyone across the city.”

So it is a case of watch this space. Everyone wants to have a city farm, but certain steps have to be taken before it can be taken over by a new operator and opened to the public.



