

Former rugby international wins praise for farming vision

Former Scotland rugby international Alasdair Dickinson has won his fight to live on farm land in Midlothian after councillors praised his vision for its sustainable future.

The retired rugby prop had been refused permission to site an eco lodge on Willow Farm, Newlandrig, near Gorebridge, by council planners who said he had not proved the business required someone living there full time.

However a meeting of Midlothian Council's Local Review Body this week saw the decision overturned after councillors praised the regeneration of the land and egg business which has already been created there.

And they said the plans for the farm fitted with their aims for a greener county.

Mr Dickinson told the meeting he and his wife planned to sell their home and move into a pre-built timber lodge which would be placed on the land, initially for five years.

A letter of support for the sustainable farming approach he plans for the land was submitted from David Cunningham, bio-agronomist and director of seeds merchants Dods of Haddington.

He said he had been working with the Dickinsons for a number of years as they developed their regenerative farming approach which aims to create an outdoor, purely grass fed system of rotationally grazed cattle alongside their current egg business.

Mr Dickinson told the meeting he was committed to putting everything into the farm which he said would provide local employment as well as local produce.

He said: "We are willing to be held accountable that in five years the business will support multiple salaries, significant improvement to the immediate environment, landscape and continue to provide a service to the people of Midlothian.

"My 25-year career in professional sport results in being accustomed to accountability for my performance. It will be no different in this circumstance."

Councillor Connor McManus thanked Mr Dickinson for being willing to farm and said that during a site visit to the farm they had witnessed locals coming to buy eggs who had been left disappointed as they were sold out, adding: "We were only there five minutes".

He said: "I think it is fantastic that someone is going into farming in this day and age. It is not common, especially when it is sustainable farming and the fact you are willing to take that risk to invest in something you believe in is something we should support."

The review body unanimously approve the home on the land.

By Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter