Takeover of the town

The UK government aims to double the size of the co-operative sector. Can community ownership successfully scale up? By *Sarah Langford*

As a way to spend a weekend in midwinter, planting trees on someone else's land may not be an obvious choice. Those who volunteer to spend their Saturdays digging holes at the 128-acre Fordhall Farm in Shropshire, however, have other reasons than achieving cold hands and a warm heart. For many of them, this is their farm too.

Fordhall stakes a claim as England's first community-owned farm; it was established in 2006, just 24 hours before the tenants were due to be evicted. Siblings Ben and Charlotte Hollins had returned from university to their childhood home to find the organic farm – the tenancy of which had been held by the family for four generations – broke, with buildings in disrepair and their father left with few choices. Necessity being the mother of invention, they decided to offer £50 "community shares" to anyone who wanted to buy them. Good press coverage and committed door-knocking raised their £800,000 target in six months. Twenty years later, Charlotte Hollins runs the Fordhall Community Land Initiative, a charitable Community Benefit Society (CBS), while her brother rents the farm and buildings under a conditional 100-year tenancy from the more than 8,000 shareholders.

This radical way of co-owning a farm in a country where less than 1 per cent of the population owns half the land seems to be catching on. Community ownership has grown by 59 per cent over the past decade, according to a 2025 report published by the Plunkett Foundation, a charity supporting rural areas to own and run their own businesses.

For the UK government, "community ownership" has become something of a buzzword. From a manifesto commitment to replace a community Right to Bid with Right to Buy and promises of £5bn under the Pride in Place scheme, it aims to double the size of the co-operative sector. A new Cabinet Office-based role was created in November 2025 with a remit that includes an intention to "scale up" the impact of investment in local communities. Meanwhile, the 2025 English devolution and community empowerment bill is making its way through parliament – it makes clear its intent in its name: giving "more power to local communities to purchase assets of community value". But can any of this really disrupt an extractive development model; one accused of stripping assets and profits from communities? Or are communities indeed being empowered to prove that where there is the will, there is now also the way?

Community ownership under a CBS, the model used by Fordhall Farm, is increasingly being embraced by fired-up groups to buy land and take it out of the speculative developer market. Funds raised by selling shares are used to buy land and assets. Shareholders don't need to be local: while the majority of Fordhall's hail from the West Midlands, shares have been bought by citizens from more than 20 different countries. Many CBSs are also a community land trust, which is governed by charitable law, but a CBS is also overseen by the Financial Conduct Authority. Its one-member-one-vote system is deliberately democratic: more money will not buy more influence. Shareholders can earn limited interest and can, at the discretion of the board, withdraw their shares at nominal value together with any accrued, approved interest. They cannot trade them.

The goal is social, not financial, capital. A CBS must consider the benefit of the wider community, unlike a co-operative or a charitable trust which must only consider its members. Any profit must be reinvested in community-focused enterprises and an asset lock means land and buildings can be held essentially in perpetuity by the community body or trustees.

Clockwise from main: Mayday Saxonvale, Somerset; Mayday's vision; Hardwick Estate, Oxfordshire; Fordhall Farm, Shropshire

The key difference in this increasingly popular mode of community ownership seems to be the scale of ambition. Many new groups want their communities to own, manage and profit from enterprises far larger than the pubs and post offices once associated with community control. They want to take on the town.

This is the ambition behind the group that wants to develop a 12.7-acre brownfield site in the heart of Frome, Somerset. The former Mendip District Council bought the site in August 2018 after it had been largely neglected for decades, and entered into a contract with Acorn Property Group. Six years after planning permission was granted to develop the site into 300 high-density apartments – which attracted more than 500 public objections – the developer had neither started construction nor purchased the land. On May Day in 2019 a small group of locals set up the group Mayday Saxonvale to offer a community-led alternative. Wresting the site back from Acorn has, says Mayday executive director Holly Lawton, been "a battle".

In 2023 the group's director, Damon Moore, secured a historic victory when the High Court upheld a judicial review that quashed Acorn's planning consent. After assessing competing proposals, Somerset Council again granted Acorn the contract at a public meeting; the news was met with jeers and boos from some Frome residents. In an unexpected twist, Acorn pulled out just 24 hours later saying that the community had made it clear they wouldn't work with it. Somerset Council agreed exclusivity to Mayday. The high was short-lived; major delays to Mayday's funding saw the council vote to withdraw exclusivity and put the site back on the open market this spring.

"It shouldn't be so hard," says Lawton. "Communities taking charge of their future and their economic stability: it is everything the council wants to do, everything the government wants to do." The cost of detailed planning – often required before securing development finance – is prohibitive, she says. Even at this stage, "You just think, what else are we going to have to fight against?"

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That site was once industrial, though it now looks over rolling hills and ancient hedgerows, with an ancient ox drive track running through it and the

Tuckey's reticence when faced with designing a new house – alongside the modesty of the clients, who have asked not to be named – shows through.

[illegible] looks like an English pastoral vision; the design is strikingly modern: the striated, sedimented surface – Joe Stephenson

[illegible] Each successive layer looks a little different from the last, which results in a complex, sedimented surface. It's a very beautiful material and one which works as both structure and finish (many

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The energy keeping the group going comes, she says, from a belief that "we can do something different. Private developers [don't] deliver what communities need because it's not profitable for them. Communities need public realm – places for people to come together. Our model is to keep profit in the town."

This January, Mayday announced that it had secured £1.2mn from the Resonance Community Developers Fund, backed by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. It has formed its own CBS and will soon launch a community share offer, enabling anyone to buy shares in the Mayday scheme for a minimum of £250. The hope is to build upon Resonance's funding and so put forward a competitive bid when the site is back on the market.

Mayday's master plan offers a vision not just of new homes and community assets – including flexible workspaces, a lido, performance space and riverside park – but more than 10,000 square metres of commercial and community space, a boutique hotel and the conversion of a former abattoir into a spa using the area's natural underground springs. Under CBS rules the site's community assets will remain in permanent community ownership and any profit reinvested. If successful, it will be the largest project of its kind in the UK.

The community-ownership model is not only being used by those who need to raise funds to buy land. It is also being used to give it away. A new generation inheriting large estates is starting to see value in handing power – and land – over to local communities.

The approach calls for agile thinking. In the Chiltern Hills, the incumbents of the 900-acre Hardwick Estate faced unexpected challenges when, in 2022, they began attempting a transition from private to community ownership, aiming to create England's first community-led estate. The organic land includes multiple farming and educational enterprises, 430 acres of forest and rented homes. "We feel uncomfortable with aristocratic ownership," says Miriam Rose, who manages the Hardwick Estate with her father Sir Julian and her brother Lawrence. "It isn't a secure model – it depends on one person." Gifting the estate as a charity to the community "who love it as much as we do" is the best way to safeguard its ecological and ethical ethos, she believes. Her family are now working with a community-led interim board to set up the charity that will receive the gift of the estate and its assets, and will then become the first trustees of the community-owned estate.

The journey has been, says Rose, "a long road". Despite a shift in thinking, Rose says the move from a benevolent aristocratic model to community ownership is as much a cultural change as a legal one. Initial reluctance from locals surprised her, but she believes it reveals why the change matters: "We won't feel connected to the land unless we feel responsible for it."

Like others, Rose looked to Scotland as an aspirational precedent for what new law might achieve. The Scottish Land Fund was established in 2001 to help rural communities buy land and assets. Community estates – from Eigg to Assynt and Gigha – that were once

'It keeps land and assets in the hands of people who care – and who now have a stake in its future'

privately owned have flourished. Statutes in 2015 and 2016 built on this success with legislation allowing communities to force land into collective ownership, sometimes from unwilling sellers. The Office for National Statistics estimates that more than 200,000 hectares and more than 840 assets are now community owned in Scotland.

In England, while the law can help organise and fund bids, no equivalent right exists. While the 2014 Act governing community ownership applies across Britain, the surrounding land law differs sharply in impact. Tom Chance is chief executive of the Community Land Trust Network, a charity set up in 2010 with an aim to "rewire the system". It now advises community land trusts, of which there are more than 300 across England and Wales. Chance describes English groups as "frustrated at every turn by our housing and land systems".

Scottish law, he notes, includes a presumption in favour of community acquisition unless a strong case can be made otherwise, reversing the burden of proof. In England the 2011 Localism Act allows communities to nominate assets of community value, but owners are not obliged to sell to them. Councils may transfer public land below market value but are under no obligation to do so. The 2021 Community Ownership Fund provided grants and match funding to community groups to buy at-risk assets, but stopped short of structural reform. Despite £15mn of unallocated funds, it was ended in 2024 by a newly elected Labour government which said it needed the money for other priorities.

Will new legislation change anything south of the border? Chance warns that the proposed community right to buy in the new English devolution and community empowerment bill "could be a fantastic opportunity" but one "that risks being squandered". The majority of the proposed law, new planning legislation and multibillion-pound budgets for investment in housing, regeneration and employment "don't really consider the role of community organisations at all", Chance says, despite the capacity of these groups to act as brokers between the public and private sectors.

"There are potentially billions of pounds of capital flowing through communities," he says, "but they can't access it, while being offered dribs and drabs from schemes like Pride in Place." He would like to see a legal presumption in favour of community ownership in large developments. "If community ownership was required for, say, 10 per cent of homes and all public amenities in new towns, that's suddenly a huge number of assets and projects in which communities have agency." To achieve this, Chance says, "the government could simply direct this centrally through legislation, planning policy or funding".

Chance is keen to stress that while this legal change would "have a big impact", success does not always require new law. In Devon, community land trusts now account for more than half of rural affordable housing supply, he says, supported by councils, communities and public funding body Homes England. "It hasn't required national legislation. It's been about putting the right conditions in place to meet local needs," he says, "not just housing, but village halls, rewilding, orchards. With the right will, you can make things happen."

For now, while many choose the trust route, it seems community ownership through a CBS is becoming a promising legal model empowering communities to raise both funds and a sense of community investment. While it may seem odd to ask people to invest in shares legally barred from delivering maximum profit, investing in the desirability of an area can be a financially savvy move.

Proof that a rising tide lifts all boats, even at a small scale, can be found on the Pembrokeshire coast. The CBS regenerative seaweed and shellfish farm Car-y-Mor has generated a reported £300,000 in turnover since 2019, created 20 year-round jobs and increased local crop yields by 24 per cent through a seaweed-based bio stimulant trial. The initiative is projected to create more than 1,000 jobs while also restoring marine and soil biodiversity. Shares in its community ownership can be bought for £1.

Community enterprises are also resilient, according to the 2025 Plunkett report: they have a 95 per cent long-term survival rate, compared with 39 per cent for other SMEs. Whether this can scale to towns, estates and farms remains to be seen. Fordhall Farm's latest news may offer a clue. The initiative has just been gifted a 170-acre organic beef and sheep farm in Devon, with ownership transferring to the community on the donor's retirement in 2027.

There may also be a less tangible benefit to becoming a CBS shareholder. Charlotte Hollins speaks with bemusement and gratitude about city dwellers who turn up on freezing February mornings to plant hedges. One shareholder helped hang a gate, then returned with his family to show them his work. "He had seen so much land built on," she says. "He just wanted to keep green fields green – and stop corporates taking over farmland." It is this, says Hollins, that to her means community ownership "not only keeps land and assets in the hands of people who care – it also means building wonderful relationships with people who now have a stake in its future".

Brother and sister Charlotte and Ben Hollins of Fordhall Farm, Shropshire

Sarah Langford is the author of 'Rooted: How Regenerative Farming Can Change the World' (Penguin)