



Marketing material that accompanied an auction for farmland in Hertfordshire

## Farmers feel tricked as ‘conservation firm’ CLC sells off green belt land

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A business that claims to be a conservation group is buying land from farmers and trying to sell it on at auction to property developers — even though the land is on the green belt or on heritage sites.

Country Land Conservation (CLC) convinces landowners to sell fields, ancient woodlands and floodplains by offering double the usual value.

Its marketing material claims that the farmers should sell to the so-called conservation group because it will help them to “retake control of rural landscapes” and to “manage and establish habitats where they have been lost”.

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heard of it. Tracts of text on its website are identical to the website of the site of the Forestry Commission. The addresses listed on its website and marketing material are the same as a mailbox company in London and a solicitor in Dublin.

Once it buys plots of land, CLC divides them into small slices, which it tries to auction off for a higher price. Listings are accompanied by computer-generated images of housing developments superimposed over the sites.

The group has purchased a large plot in Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire, which has been put up for auction in smaller parcels. It has also sent letters to several farmers in the southeast of England asking to buy their land.

Robert Sherriff, a farmer from near Welwyn, said he had been “fooled hook, line and sinker” by CLC. He accepted an offer for two fields of nine acres attached to his farm at £20,000 an acre — double the going rate for agricultural land that had been used only for grazing. It is believed the total he received was between £180,000 and £200,000, although he would not confirm this.

“The literature they provided and their sales pitch was convincing, and it seemed to me they genuinely were going to do environmental conservation work there,” he said. The land is on green belt land in the shadow of a grade II\* listed viaduct.

Despite this, CLC listed it for auction with Exclusive Property Sales, an estate agency based in south London, accompanied by pictures of a potential property development. The land was divided into four plots with a guide price of £50,000 for each half-acre. The images were removed from the Exclusive Property Sales website after an intervention by Hertfordshire Trading Standards, and the plot went unsold at auction.



time split into seven parts, with three listed as already sold elsewhere. A description on the sale says: “Buyers may wish to consider the option of future development prospects but are deemed to rely on their own inquiries in this regard.”

A spokesman for the Digswell residents association, a group of people who live near the Welwyn farmland, said: “What is most disturbing is the apparent deception in claiming to buy the land for conservation and then marketing the land for potential residential development.”

Jonathan Lloyd, an auctioneer at Exclusive Property Sales, said: “It is not correct to say that building on green belt land is an impossibility, otherwise you would not see any buildings on green belt land. As set out in the National Planning Policy Framework, some flexibility is applied to allow limited in-filling in villages whilst adhering to the local planning and the redevelopment of brownfield sites within the green belt as long as this does not mitigate the openness of the green belt. Under specific circumstances planning can and has been granted.”

CLC did not respond to requests for comment. After we contacted the company, its website was taken down. Its properties were listed as up for auction at the time of going to press.

Barnard Marcus said: “This land is being sold for amenity, recreational and grazing use.” It repeated its claim that buyers considering developing the sites must do their own research.

Environment

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