

This letter is from an individual member of the Council and is not written on behalf of the Devon County Council.



The Rt Hon George Eustice MP
Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural
Affairs
House of Commons
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Dear Minister

**THE DEVON COUNTY FARMS ESTATE
THE PATH TO SUSTAINABLE FARMING: AN AGRICULTURAL TRANSITION PLAN 2021 TO
2024 – NEW ENTRANTS SUPPORT SCHEME**

In my capacity as a County Councillor, one of my most privileged roles is to chair the County Farms Estate Committee.

As you may already be aware, the Devon County Farms Estate extends to 9,580 acres in total and primarily consists of 65 residential equipped dairy and mixed livestock holdings. Most farms have diversified in one way or another providing valuable products, skills and services and generating significant employment opportunities, as well as increasing GDP within the local rural economy. You may have noted that the size of the estate reported herein is 36 acres larger than recorded in the 2019/20 CIPFA Stats. This is because we have been able to buy some land next to one of our holdings this financial year.

Our estate is blessed with many award winning, innovative and entrepreneurial tenants. We are incredibly proud of the almost daily achievements being attained by our tenants and after building such a strong tenant base over the last fifteen or so years, we are now reaping the rewards as private and institutional landlords increasingly turn to our estate as the 'nursery' for their next generation of tenant farmers. This, in our mind, is the perfect 'farming ladder' model best suited to serving the needs of new entrants.

In terms of the service we have provided over the last 10 years, I am proud to say we have let 37 fully equipped residential farms to new entrants; provided 7 internal progression opportunities and 25 tenants have successfully progressed beyond the estate by either securing tenancies in the private sector or purchasing their own holdings. We can report that the level of interest from highly competent, innovative and business minded young people is unprecedented. Based on the level of demand, we could have let many more farms during this period had we had them.

I would note that the feedback we have received from prospective new entrants to the dairy and livestock sector is that they want and need tenancy agreements of residential, equipped holdings of a viable size and scale to establish their own enterprises and provide the proven and stable financial platform for the long term. Many have explored alternative business models such as share and contract farming agreements, but these are perceived by new entrants as high risk, less financially rewarding and often short term.

We have diversified the estate over time to provide a greater range of farm size and type and we have kept a very open mind to some quite imaginative diversification enterprises. We have even let some assets on '54 Act leases as small rural business 'start up' units and given landlords consent to agricultural tenants to sublet surplus buildings for small rural business uses. We are very keen to broaden the scope and scale of the estate further in innovative and creative ways but this would require capital we simply don't currently have.

I enclose for your reading a copy of our most recent estate newsletter which speaks volumes for the excellent service Devon County Council is providing and the calibre of new entrant tenants we are privileged to be able to support.

At our last committee meeting in December 2020, my committee and I were pleased to consider a paper on the new Agriculture Act 2020 and, in particular, we welcomed the commitment within it to support new entrants. We have been made aware of the more detailed proposals contained in the Agricultural Transition Plan and we are looking forward to reviewing the Transition Plan at our next meeting in February. We particularly welcome the commitment to work with Council farms to provide innovative new entrant opportunities.

I committed to writing to DEFRA imploring the Department to not overlook the excellent new entrant service Councils have voluntarily provided over many decades without financial assistance. The austerity measures have undoubtedly placed a substantial financial strain on Local Authorities, and it is a huge ongoing challenge to maintain these estates as a financially viable and fit for purpose service.

For many of us in the livestock sectors, this burden has been exacerbated in recent times by the rapid ramping up of environmental protection measures such as the NVZ legislation and now the Clean Air Strategy. Whilst undoubtedly of critical importance for our environment, ensuring the estate can meet this legislative change has come at a significant capital cost. As an example, we have just completed the construction of yet another NVZ compliant slurry store on a dairy farm and this investment alone has cost over £300,000.

The estate has had to sell assets to raise the capital required for investment in statutory compliance infrastructure and there is still a huge amount of capital investment required to ensure the estate remains fit for purpose for the long term. We have managed to achieve all this without selling off substantial swathes of the Estate, whereas other Local Authorities have been less fortunate. For well managed Council farms providing the vast majority of the new entrant opportunities over at least the last three decades without any form of financial support, to now not receive a significant proportion of the promised funding between 2022 and 2024 would, in my opinion, be morally incomprehensible.

We implore you to focus efforts and funding support on the provision of Council farms and to retain, develop, adapt and innovate its service to ensure it is a viable proposition for Local Authorities for generations to come.

Our proverbial door is always open, and should you wish to discuss this matter in more detail we would be happy to meet in the 'new normal' way of zoom or, if Covid-19 movement restrictions are lifted and it becomes safe to do so, we would gladly host you in person.

Yours sincerely



pp **Councillor Richard Edgell**

**County Councillor for Chulmleigh and Swimbridge,
Chair of the Farms Estate Committee**

Encl. Winter newsletter 2020

cc. Henry Leveson-Gower, DEFRA (email only) - Henry.Leveson-Gower@defra.gov.uk
and george.eustice.mp@parliament.uk