

Reimagining council farms: a vision for 2040

March 2022







Foreword

by Lord Curry of Kirkharle

We have entered a decade where farming faces a level of change not seen for perhaps a century. At this time, more than ever, we need to create opportunities in agriculture for new people excited by the challenges ahead and passionate about contributing to the future success of the sector.

This report from CPRE, the countryside charity, and its partners, comes at a crucial time to contribute to the very live debate about the extent of change farming must embrace to become environmentally and financially sustainable – and how government in all its forms can support the transition.

The authors present fresh data about how important council farms are acre for acre in giving people the chance to farm in their own right. New analysis also shows how, even on a narrow financial basis, farmland is a secure long-term investment but with further potential

for delivering many other benefits for local people. For these reasons, it urges councils to rethink how their farmland can play a more central role in achieving local objectives.

The value of council farmland of course goes beyond this – as a body the council farm estates across the country represent a vital and strategic national asset. They will be essential for forming a new generation that is skilled and equipped to tackle climate change and many other challenges, amongst which they must secure for us a sustainable supply of wholesome food.

At a time when we are placing ever increasing demands on our land, now is the time for central government and local authorities to seize the moment, to show leadership in the best use of their land and work in partnership with tenants and local people to deliver that transformation.

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Executive summary

This vision sets out the kind of future we would like to see realised for council farms.

In 2019, our report, Reviving county farms,¹ demonstrated the extent to which county farms, now more commonly called council farms, are under threat. The known total area of council farm estates in England has more than halved over the past 40 years with the number of holdings let massively reduced. We argued they are a key part of an ecosystem of farms - from micro to large and of different kinds of tenure, from family farms to large private and institutional estates. We clearly need to retain them if we are to generate a diverse and thriving farming sector. It added that, for them to continue to play an important role within that ecosystem, we need to 'set out a positive vision for county farms in the 21st century: one that recognises their value, rejuvenates their purpose, and puts in place the long-term protection, funding and support to make them flourish'. This report sets out that vision and includes a series of recommendations to start making it achievable.

As the UK begins its greatest agricultural transition since the Second World War's 'Dig for Victory', the need for this varied collection of council farm estates to be valued as a strategic national asset is more compelling and urgent than ever. These are challenging times but land, and how it is used, are now understood as vital for delivering important benefits for the entire population such as carbon storage, abundance of, and access to, nature, and clean, slow water. It is imperative that government

at all levels harnesses the potential of its farmland to support a thriving and sustainable farming sector and to unlock these wider community benefits. For council farms, this will require a renewed sense of purpose and, we believe, modest but sustained investment. If central and local government can act together in this endeavour, then we have reason to hope that this irreplaceable asset can go on to be protected, enhanced and revitalised for the wider benefit of generations to come.

What do we mean by council farms and farmland?

We have chosen to use the term 'council farms' and 'council farmland' to keep terms simple but also because municipal farmland, we argue, has through its ownership, a special status: councils can manage it to support farming and deliver wider public benefits too. Other narrower terms are commonly used such as 'county farms' and 'county smallholdings' linked particularly to land acquired up to a century or more ago primarily to help new young farmers. However, these labels can be confusing as such farms can also be owned and managed by unitary councils or urban boroughs; the farms can also vary from small to large holdings.

Our vision

Council farms that are working better for everyone

In 2040, council farms are valued by local people, are actively contributing to the UK's climate commitments and are identified as high-quality natural assets. They are secured and managed for the benefit of the whole community including prospective, new and existing tenants and others making a living from the land.

Local authorities

In 2040 council-owned farmland is secured by a strong national narrative of taking the holistic best-value approach to municipal assets. It is managed in the public interest to deliver important global, national and local objectives, decided democratically. As a result, its value is fully recognised and councils no longer reduce their estates to tackle short-term budgetary pressures. After 20 years of sustained investment, the national area of council farm estates has grown significantly and most farm estates are stable and expanding. Council farmland hosts a diverse mix of tenants - private and family business but also community enterprise models² - working in partnership with their council to be local beacons of innovative sustainable climate and nature-friendly farming.³

Farmers and growers

Councils are making the most of the potential of their farmland to provide opportunities for people from all backgrounds to work the land in their own right, supporting them to develop sustainable businesses and livelihoods, which benefit the wider local community. This has helped revitalise the land-based sector, by supporting progressive farmers and bringing in new, diverse, resourceful people equipped to produce food sustainably, in tune with nature and delivering net zero and beyond.

Local people

Council farmland is secured for the benefit of the whole community both now and in the future. Local people are meaningfully engaged as key stakeholders directly and through a range of community groups in developing estate management plans, in understanding and valuing the benefits that council farmland provides and engaging with the opportunities it brings. Council farmland is recognised as special for generally giving citizens a stake and a sense of connection with their local farmed countryside and those working and stewarding the land. This is strengthened by council farms, which choose to make supplying food locally, educational and recreational access and other services a part of their approach.



¹ CPRE, Reviving county farms, 2019

² These could include hybrid community enterprise models such as Community Benefit Societies (CBS) with assets such as livestock and equipment held in community ownership but the council retaining the land and acting as landlord.

³ The term 'sustainable, though at risk of overuse and losing meaning, has been retained here to reflect the need for a triple bottom line approach to farming – social, economic and environmental – which, although it addresses the nature and climate crises, also needs to respect other environmental limits including resource use.

Key policy actions needed to realise this 2040 Vision for council farms

To make real our compelling vision for council farms we call for the following actions across central and local government.

Central government should:

- 1** Build consensus around a new unifying purpose for the nation's council farm estate that frames a long-term national strategy and five year action plan which will guide local authorities to optimise management of their farm assets for delivering greater public benefits.
- 2** Support councils in developing new integrated strategies for their farm estates which build on local good practice to join up delivery of national and local social, economic and environmental objectives.
- 3** Harmonise and develop tools to recognise the value of public land which incorporate revenue, financial and natural capital values and wider social, economic and environmental public benefits and support local authorities to deploy these to better manage their farmland estates.
- 4** Reform reporting requirements on council farmland by updating information collected and reported locally and nationally to improve public understanding and scrutiny including on the nature and extent of holdings, support for new and existing tenants and public value including delivery of public goods.
- 5** Join up existing government Future Farming and Countryside Programme and other initiatives to maximise returns on cohesive investment in council farms and their agricultural transition.
- 6** Ensure sustained investment in and enhancement of council farms for the medium to long term by building for example on the government's own New Entrants scheme proposed financing for council estates.
- 7** Give councils a duty to assess wider social, economic and environmental benefits of planned uses in achieving best consideration when disposing of farms and farmland and to involve local communities in setting goals for their council farm estate and how it is to be managed. Ensure local people are properly informed of sales and that local not-for-profit models are considered as preferred options before sale.
- 8** Legislate to give councils a duty to put in place a net gain policy to enable judicious sales and purchases of land which protects and enhances the extent and quality of their farm estates for the future.

With support from central government, local authorities should:

- 9** Increase the access-routes and progression opportunities to work council farm land by developing new incubator and accelerator models to induct and equip more new entrants from all backgrounds to take up new opportunities on council farm estates and elsewhere.
- 10** Help new entrants, existing tenants and others working council farmland to realise local, novel and higher value market opportunities including supply via dynamic local procurement into council facilities.

Introduction

This vision presents the kind of future we would like to see realised for council farms by 2040.

It has been developed when the land based sectors face unprecedented levels of change and challenge. Farming has been affected seriously by policy changes ensuing from the UK leaving the European Union. Some intend to transform farming: especially the shift from direct payments to rewarding farmers for environmental actions and outcomes. But others look likely to cause collateral damage: controls on foreign workers in farming, horticulture and food processing; new trade arrangements with the EU, Australia and New Zealand; possible weakening or undercutting of UK food standards. These are causing huge uncertainty and all have potentially seismic impacts on how people farm, their incomes and who may choose to continue.



The pandemic too has caused shocks to health and the economic systems which affect farming but may also reverberate more widely. Scarcity and rising costs of key resources from energy to fertilisers to materials for farm infrastructure are hitting farms. Other pandemic-related issues call into question current land use, farming and the food supply chain: the need for more green space and nearby countryside for health and wellbeing; balancing public access with farming for food; poor diet influencing health outcomes; the fragility of food supply in just-in-time food mass retail. How long these issues will echo is unclear but a return to the status quo is hard to predict.

Instability and volatility naturally force us to consider climate change and the nexus of environmental issues which threaten the ecological underpinnings of life and our lives. Farming and other land use contributes a not negligible 10-14% of all UK greenhouse gas emissions. As the Dasgupta report shows, the biological foundations of our economy and way of life are threatened by the decline in nature, its diversity and abundance.⁴ Here too land use – with 70% farmed, is seen as culprit. Importantly, farming is also capable of providing many of the solutions to these challenges.

The context for farming and so for this vision is as challenging as it could be. Fortunately, in developing this vision, we have been able to build on the work of others who in less urgent times saw the role for council farms in addressing these challenges. We explore some of their conclusions below, which remain so relevant today.

In 2008, Sir Don Curry's report recognised council farms as 'an important, strategic, national asset' to be retained as 'an essential route into farming for new entrants' but with the potential to support delivery of wider economic and environmental objectives.⁵ Building on this, the Defra Future of Farming Review Report (2013) identified land prices, farm business consolidation and tenancy shortages all as barriers to entering farming and which would impede the flow of talented new people farming would need in the future to compete, be productive and sustainable in the face of serious environmental challenges ahead.⁶

It concluded that only the very few would be able to start their own farm business. It saw county council farms as a 'crucial entry route for new farmers' but recommended their role be reassessed and new guidance and cross council working be developed.

In 2015, key professional bodies did publish new guidance on how councils should manage their rural estates, which advised a more holistic approach to not only increase income but to obtain 'best value' through delivering wider community and environmental benefits such as education, recreation and access, 'care' farming and green energy.⁷ In 2019 the Food Farming and Countryside Commission extended this theme, asking the government to halt further sales, reappraise 'the County Farms Estate' and 'to explore imaginative ways to bring productive land into social ownership for public value'.⁸

Most recently, in December 2019, CPRE's [Reviving county farms](#) report explored the extent of and reasons for continuing decline of council farms.⁹ Standing 'at the crossroads of Brexit and the burgeoning climate and ecological emergencies' we must, it concluded, explore their potential to promote innovation, environmentally sustainable farming in local areas and support a diverse and thriving farm sector. It urged a re-examination of the role of the public sector has to play in supporting British farming in a

"a new positive vision for county farms in the 21st century: one that recognises their value, rejuvenates their purpose, and puts in place the long-term protection, funding and support to make them flourish."

In this report, we set out that vision. It assesses their potential at this critical juncture and we believe sets out a positive new direction of travel for the critical decades ahead, together with a series of recommendations to make it achievable.

CPRE, New Economics Foundation and Shared Assets express their deep thanks to Farming the Future and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for their vital financial support for this work.

Why council farms have a special role

The challenges set out in the introduction are many and profound. Land is inextricably woven into these issues and the urgency of acting argues for an equally profound rethink of our relationship as a society to land and how we use it. Farming has a huge part to play in this by helping to reverse current damaging trends. Logically, this will need a transformation of farming itself but the sector cannot achieve this on its own. Many people will need to act in multiple ways and on many levels. Government at all scales can show leadership in policy, use its convening and investment power, but also should act as a landowner in its own right. It must work together with other landowners, managers and farmers, estates private, institutional, public and semi-public, as well as family farms, including tenants. Farmers of all creeds will need to become agile, to innovate and adapt their practices to run successful enterprises to produce food but also play their full part in achieving the wider needs of society – securing net zero, restoring natural systems to health, supporting healthier people.



Where then does council farmland fit into this vast endeavour?

Council farms in England and Wales cover, as government reports for 2019-2020 show, 98,000 hectares (ha) or around 1% of agricultural land or 2.5% of tenanted land and 3-4% of farm holdings.¹⁰ Other research by CPRE reveals, on a cautious estimate, another 4,500 ha of farms and farmland are held and let by councils and which do not feature in annual reports to Parliament.

Overall, council farmland estates represent a significant area in their own right, but there are further reasons set out below for why we believe council farms can play a special and important role:

- Municipal farmland forms a major block of land whose use can be shaped democratically by council strategies and policies. Government has limits to its powers to pay private owners to deliver public goods, and new national Environmental Land Management schemes will rely on levels of financial incentives attractive enough to secure voluntary uptake. Where government owns land it has the potential to directly show leadership. It can showcase and support the scale up of farming which uses innovative approaches to tackle major challenges including climate change, biodiversity and soil loss and sustainable production of nutritious food. Councils can work in partnership with tenants to set objectives for how land is to be managed sustainably and build this into tenancy agreements.
- Councils, like most larger estates, can act to bring their tenants into collaborative networks enabling knowledge exchange and forms of joint working across farm boundaries to provide support and accelerate landscape scale change; but councils can, in addition, use their convening power to join up their tenants with other local networks such as schools, health, business, community groups to mutual benefit. For example, council farms could become exemplars of local food supply into education, health and care facilities or offer access to farm and countryside for education and therapy, while diversifying could increase their financial resilience and returns.

- Availability of equipped farms to rent in the market is limited but council farm estates are structured to provide mainly land with buildings and/or homes.¹¹ As such and for their scale they have a disproportionate value for supporting the most talented into farming who may lack capital. They play a distinctive public service role to rejuvenate farming and ultimately to de-risk the supply of skilled, resourceful and passionate people into the sector and potentially, if such links could be forged, onto other institutional and private estates.



With all government under significant financial pressure, if councils are to retain and invest in their assets they need to be able to show a sound return. Farmland is a secure, stable and competitive investment on straight commercial grounds and, as a diminishing resource, likely to increase in market value.¹² Logically however, councils, unlike private landowners, should be able to value their assets differently: if they own schools or day care centres the return on them must be measured in wider forms of public value. It seems unclear why the same shouldn't apply to their farmland. National government has made a strong clear case for investing in the nation's farming for so-called public goods. The same logic surely applies to local government and the value of investing in their farms to deliver similar value. By councils choosing to optimise delivery of multiple environmental services and other benefits land can deliver to the locality, its real value to society is bound to be higher. A more holistic assessment of value would be much higher overall if it could combine real financial returns in income, capital appreciation and the significant value in public goods delivery per hectare.¹³

Council farms at risk

Council farms have declined historically and remain seriously at risk. The total area of council farm estates in England we know of from annual official reports has more than halved over the past 40 years from over 170,000 hectares in 1977 down to 82,000 ha by 2020 and has experienced a loss of 10,000 holdings since the mid-1960s.¹⁵

Sales of farms and land have continued in the past decade with around two-thirds of English councils with estates selling land and one third buying. In the four years to 2020, the rate of net loss has quadrupled to over 2,000 ha a year.¹⁶ In Wales the area of land let on council farms has fallen by 25% from 2010–2020 from 17,700 to 13,100 ha.¹⁷

Reduction in the reported let farmed area and number of holdings has lowered the total number of tenancies – in 2020 there were 1752 tenancies across England, down from 2393 in 2010, or a third fewer – and also opportunities for new ones.¹⁸

Research for CPRE has linked recent losses in England to austerity coupled with a perception that council farms belong to the past. Some councils were found to be unwilling to develop new income streams and business models.

Built development of council farm land is also an ongoing risk.

A squeeze on access to land

For those wanting to go into farming and set up a successful business in their own right, getting hold of a farm and land to do so has, in recent decades, only become more difficult. There are several reasons. These include:

- the tripling of the price of farmland in Great Britain since 2001 as many buyers other than farmers have entered the market;¹⁹
- lettings have stagnated since 2003 in the tenanted sector which covers around a third (35%) of the farmed land area;
- instability of tenure as Farm Business Tenancies (FBTs), the main type of tenancy now available, have become typically shorter, averaging 2.9 to 4.5 years since 2010;²⁰
- the rarity of equipped farms, most new FBTs – 9 out of 10 – are for land only.²¹

Council farms supporting new entrants

At around 1% of the farmed area and 2.5% of the let area, the 98,000 ha of council farms provide far more new chances for people to farm hectare for hectare than other let land;²² in 2019, council farms offered:

- more than one in ten of all new tenancies (FBTs)
- over 12% of the total farmland area let that year
- tenancies two years longer on average than by any other type of landowners
- one in six of all the lettings to new entrants
- two-fifths of all of equipped farms with buildings and/or homes.²³

Key vision statements



1. By 2040 council farms are working better for local authorities

Councils are recognised as trusted custodians of council farms; tenants are recognised as stewards running profitable businesses and ensuring the land, soils and water are looked after for current and future generations; and local people are recognised as stakeholders with a role and voice in decisions that affect council farms in their area.

Council farms have clear, holistic objectives that are framed in national legislation and policy and locally owned. These objectives build on those set out in previous agriculture legislation to meet the challenges of the mid-21st century. They support the expansion of council farm estates; increasing the diversity, training and skills of those entering farming; achieving sustainable, net zero or carbon negative farming; delivery of multiple public goods, which improve the quality of life of local people including access to nutritious local food and better engagement with their local countryside.

These objectives underpin council farmland strategies developed by local authorities through wide and inclusive consultation with their local communities, businesses and civil society to be tailored to local needs and the character of the estate. These reinforce the principle that council farmland is held in long-term ownership in the public interest and is managed by landlord and tenant working together to deliver best value to the public.

Council farmland is a secured asset that is valued: for providing annual revenue income to directly support other council services; as a preferred long-term capital investment with potential to provide land for other amenities; and for securing delivery of a range of vital public benefits from stewardship for the common good.

The national council farm estate has expanded steadily as councils have managed and added to their assets carefully. ‘An acre for an acre’ - or no net loss policy - has been replaced widely by a ‘net gain’ policy for council farms or ‘one acre out, two acres in’.

All councils use a shared and comprehensive framework of public value to assess the social, economic and environmental contributions of their farmland holdings to the lives of their citizens. Councils see intelligent ownership of farmland as an effective additional policy tool to meet important council objectives around climate, nature and health, which are otherwise not well delivered by the market. Along with a clear strategy this public value framework supports those making decisions to manage the estate for multiple purposes and to ensure best value to the public. Managers of council farmland estates collaborate through a joined-up network of skilled professionals and have access to shared expertise and advice supporting strategy development and engagement with national policy and programmes.

Councils publicise plans for disposal of estate assets widely and consult on proposals transparently and democratically with the local community. Where they sell land the community is given the chance to raise funds and bid to keep the land in locally-led charitable or community ownership. When land or other farm assets are sold, councils buy farms or land elsewhere in the area to expand their farm estate overall and to maintain delivery of wider estate objectives.



2. By 2040 council farms are working better for farmers, growers and the land-based sector

Councils have structured their estates into land parcels at the right scale for their area, and have equipped farms of all sizes to offer improved opportunities for people with different levels of experience and backgrounds to grow and farm in sustainable ways. A stream of people with new ideas, skills and energy has steadily reinvigorated the land-based sector. New entrants and progressive farmers are embedding sustainable, climate and nature-friendly approaches in their practice. Sustained funding has enabled council farms to encourage and support many more people at different stages in life to start, or switch to, careers on the land and build their own or work in cooperative land-based businesses.

Councils manage their farm estates to support new entrants and actively enable experienced farmers to progress to stable longer-term tenancies or owning their own farm. Councils have built strong local and regional relationships with private landlords and other institutional estates²⁴ and collaborate to provide routes for council tenants to expand onto larger holdings, supplying a pipeline of talented tenants.

Experienced council tenants renew their tenancies and stabilise their businesses by providing parcels of land, mentoring, share-farming or other forms of partnership and support for new entrants. Councils aid succession between generations by providing ‘succession homes’²⁵ on or near the farm to enable existing tenants to eventually retire with dignity.

Councils work in partnership with tenants to identify and develop new opportunities and income streams within a clear strategy to deliver wider public benefits while enabling tenants to add value to their businesses. Councils work with other networks to provide tenant farmers with support, including access to finance, business and land management advice, planning help and new infrastructure.

Tenants are actively encouraged and supported by the council to collaborate within networks of council farms on environmental stewardship, exchange knowledge and good practice, share machinery and infrastructure, collective purchasing, processing and marketing, including of environmental services.

Council farmland now supports a greater variety of types and scales of land-based businesses through establishing networks of smaller-scale incubator holdings and holdings managed by groups working cooperatively. Alongside larger farms, these increase the opportunities to start farming and growing with less capital and to use regenerative²⁶ and agroecological approaches²⁷ to produce food and other goods. They are fostering a new generation of environmentally adept farmers and growers who are strengthening the sustainability, resilience and connectedness of local food networks. Council farms in turn have helped to revitalise local food supply serving local markets with fresh, affordable, seasonal produce – including via community supported agriculture, box schemes and other direct sales and dynamic public procurement – and adding value to the farm businesses.

Councils support their tenants to access government and other support to produce food in climate- and nature-friendly ways and deliver multiple public goods (including clean air and water, restored landscapes and better access routes to the countryside). In return, council tenants feel recognised and valued by the local community as stewards of the land, and for the many and wide-ranging benefits they provide.

3. By 2040 council farms are working better for local people

Council land is valued by local people as an asset held in trust by their council to increase equity and respect the rights of those who helped purchase it, of current beneficiaries, and to secure the wellbeing of future generations.

The community stake in municipal farmland is widely recognised for giving local people greater democratic control over and access to land, itself recognised as a vital asset for local people and their representatives to tackle critical issues including climate change, restoring nature and improving the health and wellbeing of local people.

Everyone has access to clear, reliable and accurate information about the land their council owns, where it is and what it is used for. Citizens are key stakeholders who are well-informed about how the land is stewarded to deliver clear public benefits such as nutritious food, a healthy natural environment, better public access, good quality jobs and storing carbon to support the transition to net zero.

Local people are informed, engaged and meaningfully consulted in deciding the long-term future of council farmland, its purposes and how it should be managed. The disposal of any farmland assets is widely publicised and consulted on; local people have the right to bid to secure the land for the wider public good and the time to raise funds.

There is a greater supply of healthy, fresh, sustainable food available to people through their local supply chains at an affordable price, supplied from a more diverse use of council farmland. Local dynamic public procurement helps council farm tenants supply directly to the council catering services and those in local schools, hospitals, care homes and other public institutions, enabling producers to secure a fair income. Council farms are supported to build connections with schools and other institutions so that those eating the food learn about and have a stronger link to the farm that produced it.

Local people now have more and better opportunities than for many decades previously to train and work on the land in rewarding, fairly-paid jobs and to set up new land-based businesses on council farmland. Councils are working with local organisations and businesses to engage all parts of the community, to support people new to farming and growing with training, skills development, mentoring, access to expertise and other business support.

Councils and tenants are working hand in hand to ensure their land is stewarded to produce zero-carbon and nature-friendly food and other goods and services. Local people understand and value their local council farmers' contribution to tackling climate change, making the land, soils and food supply in their area more resilient, and creating a thriving countryside for them to enjoy for their health and wellbeing.





Case study - Animal Antiks

Manor Farm, North Marston, Buckinghamshire

Nick Sear and Sarah Kettleley moved to the 93-hectare Manor Farm near Aylesbury in September 2017. The couple have worked hard since to get the farm in good shape and, with Countryside Stewardship funding, are restoring the farm's fencing, hedgerows, ponds and tracks.

The farm produces fodder for neighbours' livestock and their own, including a growing flock of sheep they hope will go on to support a young person employed as a shepherd. However, their total 200-plus animals include alpacas, horses, donkeys, pygmy and other goats, Kunekune pigs from New Zealand, chickens, ducks, rabbits, guinea pigs and ferrets.

The animals serve a special purpose: Nick and Sarah's main operation is Animal Antiks – a charity run from the farm offering 'animal assisted learning'. This means encountering, working and walking with animals as a form of alternative day provision for people of all ages who face challenges from mental and physical issues, those outside mainstream education or experiencing social isolation. The farm currently supports around 70 people from 10 to over 60 years of age in various educational and social care activities.

Alpaca walking is a highlight. Groups come to the farm for a couple of hours a week for six weeks to walk with an alpaca round the farm. For those with anxiety, depression or who are socially isolated, the walks are a reason to get up and leave the house. The alpacas complement the benefits of being

outdoors in the countryside by doing what alpacas do, rolling on the ground or dipping into ponds. They provide a focus for conversation but also a channel for people to overcome their wariness, to mix and talk about themselves. The walks are proving so successful the farm is now running continuous groups with up to 17 alpacas every Tuesday and Thursday.

The farm employs around 20 people who help with the alpaca walking and other activities which include training 30 young people in animal care and a regular Country Club for older people used to being outdoors who are suffering from isolation.

Despite wonderful work done at the farm, there are challenges. The farm is rented at commercial rates from Buckinghamshire Council on five-year leases. Although Nick and Sarah have recently renewed, uncertainty over their long-term future restricts what the charity can do. It particularly makes it harder to secure grants for major projects – and therefore limits the number of vulnerable people they can support. Sarah is fully behind the idea that councils should make better use of their farm assets for the benefit of the wider community and, as she says:

"I always wanted this to be a blueprint for what a council farm could be and I'm waiting for people to take me up on that."



Case study – agroforestry in action

Whitehall farm, Cambridgeshire

Whitehall Farm is a 100-hectare farm owned by Cambridgeshire County Council and managed by Stephen Briggs on a 15-year tenancy, alongside another 300 ha. Stephen has taken an innovative agroforestry arable crops approach to build the profitability, resilience and sustainability of the farm. Ten years ago Stephen interplanted arable crops with 4,500 apple trees that now provide income and protect soil. They also protect the growing crops from the risk of extreme weather and increased the capacity of the farm, upwards. They add a cash crop to diversify production while acting as windbreaks to protect the fragile fenland soils from wind blow – a real issue in this relatively hedgeless part of the country. The trees have benefited wildlife, too. Encouraged by an understorey of wildflowers that attract pollinators, beetles and birds, including tree sparrows, reed buntings, yellowhammers, English partridges and owls, nature is flourishing.

In 2017, Stephen and his wife Lynn opened Harvest Barn farm shop and café on the county council farm site. The council invested £200,000 in funding the refurbishment of an existing building and granted them a separate lease on the new premises. Stephen and Lynn invested in storage, the cost of fitting out the shop and café and the development of an education centre.

The outlet now sells local and certified organic fresh fruit and vegetables from the farm as well as locally sourced lamb, beef and pork, cakes and biscuits, jams and preserves. It provides a market for the juice and apples from the apple trees and protects the business against the pressures of selling into the wider food supply chain.

Stephen has a clear rationale to tap into business opportunities that make the farm more resilient to economic challenges. The value of the trees' protective role has become even more apparent – in mid-August 2019 storms battered the area and flattened grain crops just as they were ripening for harvest. Around 20% of the oat crop was lost, at around a tonne or more per hectare worth some £250/tonne. Yet, on the agroforestry land, shelter from the trees cut losses to 10% and saved the business around £8,000.

Stephen thinks that if councils could be more flexible there would be great opportunities for council farms like his to diversify into new businesses such as providing recreation space and supplying food under local procurement contracts to local schools and hospitals; these could build stronger connections to local communities and give them a stake in farming and the environment. But he is very positive about the support from Cambridge County Council:

“Thanks to the county farms system, I have been able to run my own farm and try an innovative and successful soils-based farming approach. The support I have received from my local county council has been invaluable and I would like to see all local authorities encourage farmers like myself to go into agriculture to keep this wonderful resource in the community as a vital asset.”

Key issues and opportunities identified

Our vision seeks to respond to and address directly many important issues, including opportunities for change, raised by stakeholders in a series of workshops and also identified in earlier research for CPRE by Shared Assets, NEF and Who Owns England. Those issues are presented here in summary form and follow the structure of the vision itself in relation to councils, farming and the land-based sector, and local people.



Issues for councils

- **Continued austerity & budget pressures driving farm sales**

Since 2010 an unparalleled reduction in spending powers has led to councils selling assets and cutting non-core services to balance the books.

- **Political short-termism**

Poor understanding of municipal land holdings by the local public and councillors means that land held for generations, can be rapidly disposed of when there is a potentially short-term shift in political attitude and control.

- **Lack of a coherent up-to-date purpose nationally**

Council farms and land were acquired for various reasons and managed under legislation going back to the 1890s; with inherent differences in the estates it's a confusing picture; the 2020 Agriculture Act did not update their role to fit the serious challenges of the 21st century.

- **Conflict between managing for finance and other purposes**

Professional management of council farm estates is a necessity. A decent return on assets to the council is valuable for supporting frontline services. Investment in new farm infrastructure and modernisation can cut across this. There is a risk value is assessed too narrowly on mainly or only financial returns and at that income – even though farmland is a stable property asset with good growth in value, capital appreciation is not reported nationally; a lack of suitable indicators of wider public value means what they do achieve for the area in other public benefits, or could achieve, is not properly assessed or valued.

- **The complexity of integrating land use with other policies**

Land delivers critical ecosystem services such as water quality, flood protection or carbon storage as well as food production, but this ‘multifunctional perspective’ is only just beginning to be embedded in public agricultural policy and is less advanced in other national policy for land; recognition of the potential of council farms to deliver multiple local and national policy objectives and benefits, and to integrate this into council policy, is lagging behind.

The rising value of farmland and council farms

By rising 256% over the past 20 years farmland in England has outperformed most asset classes, FTSE 100 shares and prime London homes included. Yet, neither rising asset values nor capital receipts from sales are reported nationally, only revenues from holdings let.

Straightforward analysis by CPRE based on research by Dr Nick Prince suggests we're missing a trick²⁸. Despite council land disposals of nearly 40,000 hectares in England and Wales, on a conservative estimate, the freehold value of the all council estates nationally went up from £657 million in 1998/99 to £1.56 billion in 2019/20 or by £900 million. If not sold those lost 38,923 ha might have contributed a further £650 million to council balance sheets, or more than £16,700 per ha, as well as rental revenue during that period.

Savills foresee ‘real-term growth of around over 1% per annum (i.e. 1% above inflation)’ for the medium to long term (6+ years) for farmland²⁹ – driven not least by demand for markets for environmental services, such as carbon storage. But without better data and metrics, the worth to councils of retaining their farm land – even on purely financial terms as a secure investment with strong prospects – may well continue to be overlooked.

Issues for the land-based sector

Council farms have long been important for enabling people who lack family connections and/or land to go into farming; the issues identified below link to the changing characteristics of council farms and their ability to continue to support the land based industries:

- **High barriers to entry**

Farming is a high capital sector with low returns; in the early 2010s it was recognised that rising land prices, lack of tenancies and consolidation of farming would make it impossible for all but a few wanting to start their own business to go into the sector. In the 2020s this situation appears to be deteriorating as investors recognise the non-farming potential of land, for example, for renewable energy or tree plantations to tap into markets for carbon offsetting.

- **Ageing of farmers and impact on the sector**

Farm holders are heavily skewed towards older age bands and though a long-standing issue, the picture has worsened since 2000; without rejuvenation of the workforce the ability of the sector to adapt to rapid transition and extreme financial and environmental challenges is in question.

- **Barriers to attracting the right talent and a lack of diversity in farming**

Broadening the pool of talent into farming means providing better opportunities, training and development for those with the right experience, but also building opportunities for people and communities who are underrepresented in the farming sector. Agriculture, alongside forestry and fisheries, is the least diverse business sector and one commentator indicates 98.6% of farm managers and owners identify as white British.³⁰ This raises broader questions around who gets to farm and work the land, of what a more diverse farming sector might achieve and whether it could help tackle the disconnect between wider society and those who work the land.

- **Who benefits from council farm land?**

As numbers of council farms fall, there are growing challenges around who the land should benefit – this includes balancing the vital role to help new entrants with giving sitting tenants the stable tenure to develop their business. By optimising the number of beneficiaries a stronger case can be made for retaining farms and farmland for longer term public benefit. Unfortunately, the term new entrants is ill-defined; public data on who council farms successfully support in their careers and from what background is lacking. Their value to people whether from farming families or outside - and from other experience and backgrounds - isn't promoted.

- **Supporting the transition to sustainable net zero farming**

Farming and wider land use must shift rapidly to cut their greenhouse gas emissions and contribute fully to achieving net zero. Some councils have formally declared climate emergencies and this raises many questions for councils with farmland estates: will they support this transition with the urgency required and, if so, how? Will they support tenants to address and adapt to severe environmental and financial challenges ahead? Will the council support the adoption of the kinds of nature based and systemic approaches – such as regenerative, agroecological, organic, Integrated Farm Management – needed to combine nature recovery, climate resilience and profitable food production? Will they support forms of applied research and development, knowledge exchange, peer to peer learning and mentoring that can drive their take up? Will tenants have the stability and flexibility of tenure to make these changes and make them work? Will councils have the resources to invest and aid the innovation and diversification that may be needed?

Issues for communities

- **Transparency and accountability**

Understanding the landscape of councils (county, unitary, district) is difficult, let alone understanding their landholdings; access to information about these is highly variable and they remain largely under the radar of the public; this hampers effective public engagement in how these assets are used or appreciation of their value locally.

- **Making sense of the value of public assets**

Land plays a vital role in delivering multiple public benefits which are themselves critical (such as regulating climate, recharging and filtering water supply, flood management) but this understanding needs to translate to the local level and to meet local needs. Otherwise, with the public largely disconnected from farming and the land itself, councils need to make a strong case on these wider grounds for maintaining land holdings against very challenging demands to sell assets to deliver other non-discretionary public services such as care, education or social housing.

- **Intergenerational equity**

Equity between generations is a critical aspect of environmental justice and one amplified by the threat of climate catastrophe; previous generations were poorer than ours but made sacrifices to acquire municipal land for public good - yet future

generations may be impoverished and may need land more than we do to provide for local food security, health and wellbeing or carbon capture. Land is easy to sell in a hurry but difficult to replace and reacquire especially in key locations. We owe it to current, past and future generations to think beyond short-term financial issues in decisions about how municipal land as a vital resource should be managed, or indeed whether to retain or sell it.

- **Public land delivering public goods**

Ownership of land confers control on its uses and what it can deliver. When councils and other public bodies own it, then what it is used for becomes a matter of public interest and policy debate as well as enterprise and profit for those directly managing it. There is widespread agreement that the success of new Environmental Land Management schemes will be critical for tackling nature recovery and climate change but ultimately they are voluntary schemes. Local authorities with significant land holdings can show leadership by supporting the success of ELM by working in partnership with their tenants to lock in delivery of public benefits for the long term.



Key policy actions needed to realise this 2040 Vision for council farms

To make real our compelling vision for council farms we call for the following actions across central and local government.

Central government should:

Renew the purpose of a dynamic national council farm estate

1

Build consensus around a unifying purpose for the nation's council farms that frames a long-term national strategy and five year action plan.³¹ These should give clear leadership and guidance to help local authorities to manage and grow their farm assets optimally through the agricultural transition to deliver a wider range of public benefits, including: levelling up opportunities to work on the land; establishing new land-based businesses; moving to net zero farming and beyond; delivering nature recovery, and pump-priming a more diverse, innovative and rejuvenated land-based sector.

2

Support councils in developing new integrated strategies for their farm estates

Strategies should be clearly aligned with UK climate change budgets and councils' own climate emergency plans and targets. They should build on local good practice and join up delivery against a suite of national and local social, economic and environmental objectives – see for example Cornwall's 20 year strategy or the Duchy of Cornwall's integrated approach.³²

3

Recognise the true value of public land

Harmonise the tools used to capture the multiple benefits and public value of optimal land use, integrating revenue recognition, capital appreciation, natural capital value and other social, economic and environmental benefits. Support local authorities and other public landholders in deploying these to improve strategies and decisions on their farmland estates.

4

Improve public understanding, reporting and analysis of the achievements, value and needs of council farmland

Annual reports to local authorities and Parliament on council smallholdings should be expanded to include all council farm land and should include easily accessible information about council holdings and their characteristics, including data on capital values and receipts, rental and other income, length of Farm Business Tenancies, availability of equipped farms, natural assets and benefits of delivering public goods. Local authorities should collect and report relevant standardised data to CIPFA for national reports.³³ Reports should be debated in Parliament and council meetings to foster better public scrutiny and be promoted more widely to improve public understanding of these vital assets.

5

Join up cross-cutting programmes to maximise returns on cohesive investment in council farms

Expand the range of benefits council farms deliver locally by bringing together current programmes and those in development³⁴ to:

- buy out tenancies and offer new ones to restructure estates;
- add to and modernise the built fabric of farms, including farm

houses and outbuildings;

- convert buildings to farm homes to enable easier succession;
- invest in farm processing and retail and other businesses to diversify and add value;
- enable a rapid transition to sustainable low carbon farming;
- ensure council farms become beacons of agricultural transition and delivery of public goods.

6 Build on the proposed New Entrants scheme to ensure sustained investment in council farms for the long term

As an important injection of new finance to some council farm estates the New Entrants scheme in the Agricultural Transition Plan is much needed and a positive step; but the level of funding is expected to be modest and only for 2022-23 to 2023-24 at present.³⁵ Some will be directed towards supporting greater opportunities on council farm estates. This commitment should be extended at least to the end of the plan in 2028 and ideally for the longer term.

Reform the acquisition and disposal of council farmland

Encourage and enable councils to profit from the agricultural transition to increase their farm holdings strategically. Explore new models by which such acquisitions can be rapidly expedited and identify and unblock barriers to that. Give councils a duty to assess wider social, economic and environmental benefits of planned uses in achieving best consideration when acquiring or disposing of farms and farmland and to involve local communities in setting goals for their council farm estate and how it is to be managed. Ensure local people are properly informed in a timely public manner when councils are deciding to sell farmland. Locally-led, not for private profit models should be considered as preferred options and given support to prepare viable proposals before any sale of council farm land is agreed.

Legislate to give councils a duty to put in place a net gain policy

To ensure councils are able to sell land where it is judicious to do so but also to ensure they protect their estates for the future, councils should put in place a net gain policy to, for example, buy two acres of equivalent quality land elsewhere in their boundaries for every acre sold.

**With support from central government,
local authorities should:**

Increase the numbers and diversity of new entrants to council farmland and of access-routes and progression opportunities to work it

Improve understanding of the types of new entrants needed and create new frameworks and models to help them on to council farm holdings. Broaden the range of backgrounds of people wanting, and enabled, to farm and grow in their own right by identifying those with talent from both farming and non-farming backgrounds with transferable skills, including

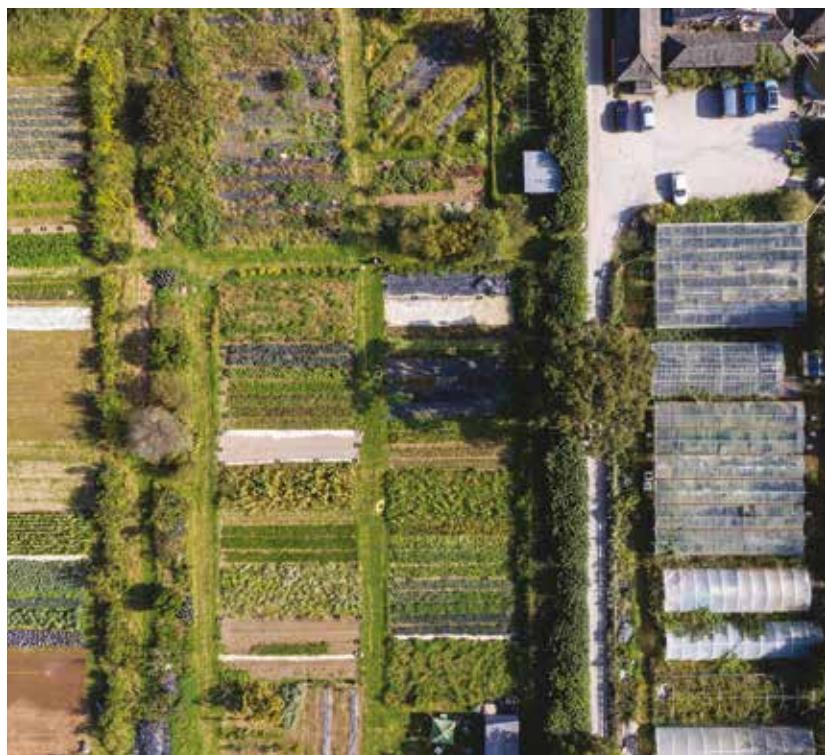
people from under-represented communities. Expand work experience, apprenticeships, mentoring, share-farming and other partnership models to develop the skill base. Introduce an ‘accelerator model’ to provide active training and support programmes to progress established tenants, people farming private land, high achievers and new entrants with high potential to take up new opportunities on the estate.³⁶ Explore mechanisms to support progression on and off council farms such as, via income tax relief to private estates to make new private lets more attractive (based on the successful Irish model).

10

Strengthen council farms’ position and connectivity in local and high-value markets

Help new entrants (in particular), existing tenants and others working council farmland to realise local, novel and higher value market opportunities; anticipating and responding to market trends and guiding them to focus on quality products grown for specific markets (rather than lower-margin volume products for any market). As well as improving the commerciality of council farms, such marketing support will enable stronger more localised food systems and better alignment of council farm estates with: national policy such as the Agricultural Transition Plan, National Food Strategy, National Tree Action Plan and National Adaptation Programme.³⁷

These actions should serve as the basis of an honest, sustained conversation between government, the land-based sector and wider civil society that secures a better future for these vital, vulnerable assets.





Case study – powering Cornwall renewably

Cornwall Council farms biomethane project

Cornwall Council is driving a pioneering project to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from its own farm estate. It is working jointly with local Cornish firm Bennamann, to upgrade slurry lagoons on some of its dairy farms to capture biogas generated from the storage of slurry, a mixture of water and animal manure. The gas is now being processed to produce biomethane fuel for selling on to council-owned Corserv which runs the council's vehicle fleet. The plan is for 58 gas trucks to eventually be powered by this local farm-produced renewable energy.

The pioneering technology to compress the gas into a safe transportable product is the brainchild of Chris Mann, who founded Bennamann in partnership with Michael Bennett in 2011, to develop local sources of affordable clean energy. Based at the Newquay Aerohub Business Park and Chynoweth farm near Truro, the firm has also designed a new type of proprietary cover for slurry lagoons to enable the capture of 'fugitive methane' as it naturally bubbles off the liquid cattle manure. A mobile processing unit then visits the farm, converts it to a 'better than zero carbon' fuel, either in compressed gas or liquid form, that can then power conventional combustion engines cleanly.

Importantly, the process captures all of the biogas leaving behind material in the lagoon that can be turned into a rich biologically enhanced soil conditioner to replace fossil fuel based synthetic fertilisers. Although vehicles fuelled in this way will still emit some CO₂, the amount entering the

atmosphere is the same as that absorbed by the grass the cows ate and secreted in the first place. Building work is under way to complete another two lagoons by autumn 2022 and feasibility and designs are being developed on a further three.

The upgrade of the slurry lagoons in the pilot is fully funded by Cornwall Council and forms one part of the council's Climate Change Action Plan and carbon transition. Forecasts from the project so far suggest the income stream is likely to pay back the capital cost and also help the council's tenant farmers earn extra income, cut input costs and meet the challenge of reducing their carbon footprint. The technology is expected to work for farms with herds of 50 to 200-plus cows. The firm has also designed an innovative retrofit cover to enable farms with good quality slurry stores to adopt the system without extensive building work. Under Defra's Clean Air Strategy, all farms will be expected to cover their slurry stores by 2027 and this technology could help pay the way.³⁸



Case study – leading transformational change

Cornwall Council Farms Estate Strategy 2019-2039

Cornwall Council's farm estate dates back to before the First World War and grew as returning soldiers took up farming. At 4,500 hectares, it covers 1.5% of the county and remains one of the largest council farm estates in the country. With 89 farm lets, it has offered opportunities to 25 new entrants in the past 10 years. There is a variety of dairy, livestock, cereals and some diversified businesses. The estate farms range from 5ha to 90 ha and support an estimated 250 people working on farms with a gross economic contribution of £15 million to the Cornish economy.

Though similar to others around the country, Cornwall's new estate strategy looks to be a model for being forward-looking, joined up and addressing the challenges of the moment. Developed after a full review in 2018 and fully approved in 2019, it reinforces Cornwall's ambition to support new people into farming but, also, to: 'provide a foundation for sustainable, carbon neutral and regenerative agriculture in the 21st century, improving social, environmental and economic well-being in rural communities in Cornwall'.^{39 40}

To do this it sets out four overarching ambitions:

- **Farming futures**

enabling new entrants to farm and grow.

- **Sustainable estate**

building environmentally and financially sustainable businesses using whole farm approaches to be dynamic, innovative, add value and create jobs.

- **Environmental growth**

expressed as 'the net gain of our natural systems' beyond protection⁴¹ and recognising ecosystems as critical for underpinning our lives; this builds on an inventory of estate natural assets from historic landscapes and World Heritage sites to ancient woodland and nature reserves.

- **Vibrant communities**

sees the estate playing a 'major role' in sustaining rural communities with new business opportunities, improved public access for pleasure and health and well-being and promoting innovative models such as forest schools, community orchards and growing spaces.

The strategy builds on these to set out a plan for the management and renewal of the council farms estate over the next decade. Importantly it will work with tenants using Whole Farm Plans that will start to join up these multiple objectives.

The working out of this strategy will be worth observing. As the strategy says:

"The Council Farms Estate has the potential to catalyse and lead the transformational change required within the industry."⁴²

If it succeeds council farms in Cornwall may be better equipped than most to meet the challenges and opportunities of the transitional decade for farming ahead.

Conclusion

In these times of economic, ecological and health crises, the true value of land to society is perhaps becoming clear. Policy now is reflecting the role land plays – from food production to delivering other vital services, from carbon storage, abundant and accessible space for nature to clean, slow water. This public rethinking of land use only increases the urgency of using it differently in future. It is also a major opportunity for those who own land and work it to act. In doing so they can do much towards reversing current damaging trends and make a serious contribution to addressing key global and national challenges.

The government is driving changes to achieve this in what will be the greatest agricultural transition since the Second World War's Dig for Victory. The need for success in this difficult endeavour cannot be doubted. It is critical for farming, the countryside and government itself. The government will need to deploy all the levers at its disposal to deliver it but one lever that has as yet been neglected is government's own land. It can and must lead by example in terms of its own estate. The government at all levels must harness the potential of its farmland to support this transition, to build a thriving and sustainable farming sector and to unlock the wider benefits to society that farmland can deliver.

In this context the need for the farm estates owned by councils to be properly valued is as compelling and urgent as ever. As a collection they remain a national asset of strategic importance. Yet, as we know, these farms remain at risk. Their value to farming and wider value to local people must be part of the case for councils not to opt to sell – and, if they do, fail to replace – them. Indeed, by supporting the very rejuvenation and transformation needed in farming, they can better benefit the whole community, while enabling farms to thrive.

This vision sets out how farms and farmland owned by councils should be valued, secured and managed for the benefit of all. As will be evident this should become a partnership between government at national and local level along with those who farm and the communities they sit within. National government has already signalled its faith and willingness to invest in the future of council estates – alongside other landowners – in delivering innovative schemes to support new people into farming. We hope government will take a leap further. If central and local government can work together to put in place the new shared purpose, framework and sustained investment needed, then we have leave to hope this irreplaceable asset will go on to be protected, enhanced and revitalised for the wider benefit of many generations to come.

Appendix A:

Defining council farms and farmland

In the vision and supporting analysis we use the term ‘council farms’ and ‘farmland’ for two main reasons: because land owned by local government gives it a special status, enabling councils to manage it for the wider public good; and, secondly, to simplify some of the complexities around the term ‘county farms’.

To clarify, ‘county farms’ is the term generally used to refer to farm holdings owned by local authorities and originally intended to be let to young and first-time farmers at below market rates. These were mainly set up under three Acts of Parliament: The Smallholdings Act 1892, The Smallholdings and Allotments Acts of 1908 and 1926. The term is nowadays confusing in some ways. Not all such farms are smallholdings in the sense that, after mergers and enlargement, they are no longer all small by the original definition – defined in the 1892 Act as greater than one acre but smaller than 50. Holding sizes are no longer reported but in 2011 there were 2,719 holdings let by local authorities but of these only 823 (30%) were 20 hectares or less – 49 acres – in size. Another 788 were over 40 hectares.⁴³ Also, we lack reported detail to show whether holdings continue to be let at affordable or below market rents to support new entrants.⁴⁴

The term county is also unhelpful. In the Agriculture Act 1970, the term smallholdings authorities was defined as every county council in England. Since the 1950s, the government has submitted an annual report to Parliament of county farms owned by up to 53 local authorities. Changes to local government means the term and the reports now include county councils like Norfolk, Essex or Devon and unitary authorities like Cornwall and Cheshire East. The report list also includes unitaries which, on the face of it, are mainly urban such as York, Brighton and Hove City or Swindon Borough Councils.

Lastly, not all rural land held by councils will be farmed. For example, Sheffield Council owns the Eastern Moors in the Peak District, but this area is currently being rewilded for nature and recreation rather than farmed for food production. Similarly, Enfield Council owns farmland in the Green Belt which it lets to tenant farmers but that land is not regarded as county farms nor Enfield as a smallholding authority. Some of this land has been identified for new woodland planting.

In terms of the vision, we would argue that all farmland which is let to tenants by local authorities – whether county, unitary, district or borough – has greater potential to support new people into land-based work and their own businesses as well as to benefit local people and enable councils to fulfil a broad set of policy objectives. For that reason we cast the net wider than ‘county farms’ alone.

End notes

- 1 CPRE, [Reviving county farms](#), 2019
- 2 These could include hybrid community enterprise models such as Community Benefit Societies (CBS) with assets such as livestock and equipment held in community ownership but the council retaining the land and acting as landlord.
- 3 The term ‘sustainable’, though at risk of overuse and losing meaning, has been retained here to reflect the need for a triple bottom line approach to farming – social, economic and environmental – which, although it addresses the nature and climate crises, also needs to respect other environmental limits including resource use.
- 4 HM Treasury, [The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review – headline messages](#), February 2021
- 5 Sir Donald Curry, THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COUNTY FARMS SERVICE TO THE RURAL ECONOMY, November 2008, p3
- 6 Defra, [Future Of Farming Review Report](#), July 2013; the review group included representatives of the Country Land and Business Association, National Farmers Union and with Tenant Farmers Association, the Bank of England and Central Association of Agricultural Valuers.
- 7 ACES (Association of Chief Estates Surveyors and Property Managers in the Public Sector) / TRIG (The Tenancy Reform Industry Group), [Local Authority Rural Estate Asset Management Planning – Good Practice Guidance](#), November 2015
- 8 Royal Society of Arts Food, Farming and Countryside Commission, [Our Future in the Land](#), 2019, p57 recommends action on county farms as part of ‘Creating more good work in the regenerative economy’ and supporting new people into agriculture.
- 9 CPRE, [Reviving county farms](#), 2019
- 10 This total figure is based on CPRE analysis of annual smallholdings reports to Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. Council farms make up less than 1% of the agricultural area and 2.35% of the tenanted land area in England and for Wales they make up less than 1% of the land area on farms and 4.2% of the tenanted land area.
- 11 See Moody, J./ Central Association of Agricultural Valuers (CAAV), [The Annual Agricultural Land Occupation Surveys for Great Britain, 2019](#), 2020. For England 51.5% of council holdings and 78% of their land area are let as equipped with land and buildings and, in some cases, a home.
- 12 Savills, [UK Rural – January 2021 The Farmland Market](#), Spotlight Savills research.
- 13 The government is investing £2.4 billion annually in public goods delivery via ELMs for England or per hectare of farmland around £260-70 / ha per annum. Using this total as a very crude proxy, for council estates nationally this puts their public goods delivery value at some £22.4 million. This compares for example to an operational surplus on smallholdings estates of £10.8 million in 2020 – see [Seventieth Annual Report to Parliament on Local Authority Smallholdings in England 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020](#), February 2021 p8; in reality the societal value of public goods delivery is likely to be much higher since it is hard to quantify and give a market value to.
- 14 CPRE, [Reviving county farms](#), December 2019 appendices 3 & 4 ; acres converted to hectares; figures apply to England only.
- 15 The Tenancy Reform Industry Group (TRIG), [Local Authority Rural Estate Asset Management Planning GOOD PRACTICE GUIDANCE](#), 2015, p4 – figures from 1966 to 2013
- 16 CPRE, [Reviving county farms](#), December 2019; see p3 and subsequent analysis by CPRE of Defra Annual Reports to Parliament on Local Authority Smallholdings in England from 2010 to 2020; the rate of sales has increased from 0.5% to 2.5% pa.
- 17 Based on CPRE analysis of a range of reports to Parliament and the Welsh Assembly for the period 2010 to 2020. Figures for England are based on the best comparable basis so use let area.
- 18 This is a fall of 641 tenants over the decade. ‘There were 2,393 tenants of local authority smallholdings in England at 31 March 2010,’ See Defra, [Sixtieth Annual Report to Parliament on Smallholdings in England 1 April 2009 – 31 March 2010, 2011](#), p8; ‘For the 39 authorities that provided data, there were 1,752 tenants as at 31 March 2020.(...) 104 tenancies were granted and 146 tenancies were terminated.’ [Seventieth Annual Report to Parliament on Local Authority Smallholdings in England \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) February 2021 p7
- 19 Prices of farmland in Great Britain of all types have risen more than threefold since 2001. In 2020, less than half of the buyers were farmers. Savills, [UK Rural – January 2021 The Farmland Market](#), Spotlight Savills research, 2021 pp3-4
- 20 Moody, J./ Central Association of Agricultural Valuers (CAAV), [The Annual Agricultural Land Occupation Surveys for Great Britain, 2019](#), 2020, p20 table 6.6; the range of averages given is those by year for all new FBTs granted that year over the period 2010-2019 for England and Wales.

21 In 2019, 44 of 607 or just 7% of new FBTs were for farms with buildings. This data is from Moody, J./CAAV, 2020. The CAAV Land Occupation surveys have covered tenancies in England and Wales since 1977.

22 Data from the CAAV below derives from a survey of England and Wales so we include both in the areas mentioned here. Council farms make up less than 1% of the agricultural area and 2.35 of the tenanted land area in England and for Wales they make up less than 1% of the land area on farms and 4.2% of the tenanted land area.

23 Specific figures for the bullets above are: for 2019 12% of all new FBTs (75 of 607) and a five-year average of 9.7% of all new FBTs; council let FBTs averaged 5.8 years compared to only 3.2 to 3.8 years (based on CPRE analysis of Table 6.12 in Moody, J. / CAAV 2020, p24 above which gives averages of FBTs by owner from 2010-2019 so compares FBT length by owner averaged over the whole period); made up 10 of just 57 new entrant lettings in 2019 and 18 of 44 equipped farms – with buildings and homes – let in England and Wales; For England 51.5% of council holdings and 78% of their land area are let as equipped with land and buildings and, in some cases, a home.

24 These include for example the Crown Estate or Church Commissioners' estate.

25 This home is either for the new tenant or the existing tenant and enables both to work together to achieve a smooth succession and the transfer of knowledge and skills as well as sharing of workload, returns and capital.

26 The term regenerative applies to 'farming (...) practices that, among other benefits, reverse climate change by rebuilding soil organic matter and restoring degraded soil biodiversity. They include no or minimum tillage; use of cover crops, crop rotations, compost, and animal manures; and well-managed grazing on the land. See [What is Regenerative Agriculture? - Regeneration International](#)

27 The FAO describes agroecology as follows: 'Agroecology is based on applying ecological concepts and principles to optimize interactions between plants, animals, humans and the environment while taking into consideration the social aspects that need to be addressed for a sustainable and fair food system.' See [Overview | Agroecology Knowledge Hub | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations \(fao.org\)](#). Regenerative practices can support an agroecological approach but the latter includes aspects such as co-creation of knowledge and knowledge sharing, supporting rural livelihoods and healthy, diverse and appropriate diets. See [10 elements | Agroecology Knowledge Hub | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations \(fao.org\)](#)

28 Prince caveats his analysis as follows: "In order to generate the freehold land sales value, the amount of land sold per annum is valued at the average UK land price for that year as recorded by Savills (2009). It should be noted that land values vary regionally, by land type and by land quality. These calculations also omit residential property and building sales and are, therefore, on the conservative side of the actual income generated from property sales. The same average UK land value has also been used to calculate an estimated value of the remaining CFE portfolio per annum. Again, these calculations consider only land value and the actual estate value is considerably higher."

See Prince, N., [Agricultural property rights and the county farms estate in England and Wales - A thesis submitted to The University of Gloucestershire in accordance with the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Applied Sciences](#), March 2012, p131 and table 5.4 The estimated value of the CFE including land sales and freehold estate value, 1998 to 2010.

CPRE extended this analysis onwards from 2009/10 using data from annual smallholdings reports for England and Wales to 2019/20 and using average land value data from Savills research, UK Rural January 2021 The Farmland Market, pp2-3. Note our analysis similarly cannot factor in potential higher disposal values but nor can it reflect potential higher values linked to farmhouses and buildings – it only reflects average farmland values. Note also that neither Prince nor we reflect general inflation over this period.

29 Savills research, UK Rural January 2021 The Farmland Market, p5.

30 Asgarian, P, 'Viewpoint: British farming, diversity and racism' in Soil Association, Organic farming, Summer/Autumn 2020, p58.

31 This could include building a democratic consensus around a target for halting their decline and setting a level for their growth.

32 See Cornwall Council, [Cornwall Council's Farms Estate Strategy 2019-2039 Incorporating the Asset Management and Business Plan 2019-2029](#) and The Duchy of Cornwall [website](#) in particular its approach to integrated thinking [Integrated Thinking | The Duchy of Cornwall](#)

33 Currently annual smallholdings authority reports to Parliament in England are required under section 59 of the Agriculture Act 1970; more extensive reporting may need legal force under an amendment to the Agriculture Act 2020.

34 These could include schemes under the Future Farming and Countryside Programme (ELM, New Entrants, Future Productivity and Farm Resilience Programme) but also other Government initiatives such as the Nature For Climate Fund and rural spending under the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

[35 Defra, The Path to Sustainable Farming: An Agricultural Transition Plan 2021 to 2024 November 2020](#), p25 and p54

[36](#) The accelerator model would enable councils to develop a pipeline of potential applicants to fill future tenancies on the estate but could also allow councils to collaborate to develop new opportunities and options for use of holdings that match their needs, interests, abilities and business plans.

[37](#) ‘The National Adaptation Programme (NAP) sets the actions that government and others will take to adapt to the challenges of climate change in the UK. It sets out key actions for the next 5 years.’ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/climate-change-second-national-adaptation-programme-2018-to-2023>

[38](#) This case study was developed from articles published by the Local Government Association in Cornwall Council: Cornwall Biomethane Pilot 3 August 2021 at Cornwall Council; it was updated by Bennamann Ltd and Cornwall Council Farms team: [Cornwall Biomethane Pilot | Local Government Association](#) and Oliver, M. ‘Innovative kit converts slurry emissions to fuel,’ in Farmers Weekly, 16 July 2021, pp74-75. See [Farmers-Weekly-Bennamann.pdf](#)

[39](#) Cornwall Council, [Cornwall Council’s Farms Estate Strategy 2019-2039 Incorporating the Asset Management and Business Plan 2019-2029](#); Foreword p2

[40](#) The Strategy also is designed to fit with Council’s own Climate Change Action Plan (July 2019) and to align with the NFU’s stated goal for the farming sector to achieve net zero by 2040. In so doing it aims to enable and support successful farm businesses which themselves take a ‘holistic approach to economic and environmental growth’ while contributing to protecting the historic and beautiful natural environment of the county and promote the well-being of local people.

[41](#) As above p18

[42](#) As above p19

[43](#) Defra, [Sixty First Annual Report to Parliament on Smallholdings in England 1 April 2010 – 31 March 2011](#), 2012, p5; the report also notes that from 1966 to 2011 smallholdings numbers fell by 10,163 and the average size of those remaining increased from 11 to 35 hectares.

[44](#) The average market rent for all FBTs in 2019 was £222 per hectare (Defra/National Statistics, [Farm Rents, England, 2019/20](#) report, 25 March 2021, p1) compared to an average £229/ha for bare land farms or £300/ha for all land let as smallholdings for all types of tenancies (Defra, [69th Annual Report to Parliament on Local Authority Smallholdings in England 1 April 2018 – 31 March 2019](#), 2020, p14, table 4. Data on rents offered on starter farms to new entrants are not published in these reports.

To find our more detailed research findings and analysis please see, the resources section of the CPRE website, cpre.org.uk

Acknowledgements

This report was written by the project team: Graeme Willis (CPRE, the countryside charity), Chris Williams (New Economics Foundation), Kim Graham and Kate Swade (Shared Assets).

This document was developed with the support of an expert panel drawn from academia, farmer representatives, council estate managers, and food and land activists. Workshops were held with estate managers, tenant farmers, agroecological farmers and prospective and new entrant farmers, as well as Defra’s team developing the New Entrants scheme. These groups helped to co-create the vision by drawing out issues, especially challenges and barriers, which it would address. The vision was shared with sector stakeholders including from supporting organisations who helped shape its evolution.

The project partners and report authors are extremely grateful for the invaluable guidance of the expert panel Charles Coats, George Dunn, Jyoti Fernandes, Nick Millard, Guy Shrubsole and Matthew Thomson. Our sincere thanks also go to Denise Sear, Sarah Kettleley, Stephen Briggs, Dr Tim Fox, Caroline Carroll and Stephen Morgan for their help with case studies. We are indebted to all participants of workshops and other informants who have helped steer and shape this work including Richard Benwell, Patrick Ford, Keith Halstead, Vicki Hird, Henry Leveson-Gower, Clare Horrell, Gareth Morgan, Clare Oxborrow, Sarah Palmer, Suzy Russell, James Woodward and Lord Curry of Kirkharle. Any errors that may occur remain the responsibility of the project team.



Contact us

15-21 Provost Street, London, N1 7NH
Telephone: 020 7981 2800
Email: info@cpre.org.uk

-  @cprecountrysidecharity
-  @CPRE
-  @CPRE

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