

Reviving county farms

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The
countryside
charity



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We would like to express our appreciation to all of those who contributed to the report and, in particular, staff from different councils in England who responded to our survey and agreed to further interviews.

Summary

Farming in Britain is at a crossroads. Brexit offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reform our system of farm payments, dominated for decades by the EU Common Agricultural Policy. Yet the prospects of no-deal Brexit and a future free trade deal with the US represent existential threats to the economic viability of much of British farming. Meanwhile, as the scale of the climate and ecological emergencies facing the planet becomes clear, farmers and landowners have a vital role to play in caring for the countryside and in so doing helping get the UK to net zero emissions and making more space for nature. In this context, it makes considerable sense to re-examine the role the public sector – and the land it owns – has to play in supporting British farming and, in particular, to reassess the value, future purpose and potential of county farms.

County farms are farms owned by local authorities. They were set up originally at the end of the 19th century to provide a way into farming for cash-strapped young farmers during a long agricultural depression, and were sometimes rented out at below market rates. Today, they remain one of the most powerful levers that a local authority has for directly helping new people into farming. They are a national public asset and in England alone cover a huge 200,000 acres. As such they have real potential to support the economic viability of local farming, to promote innovative farming methods, and to deliver environmentally sustainable farming.

Yet, as one of the most powerful tools for helping to deliver diverse, thriving and ecologically abundant farming for current and future generations, they are slowly leaching away. This valuable resource is being lost from public ownership. After years of austerity local authorities are under ever greater pressure to sell off public land. The extent of county farms in England continues to plummet with the loss of over 210,000 acres – down by half in 40 years – but the full extent of the sell-off, and the drivers behind it, have remained largely unknown to policy makers and the public alike.

This report explores in detail the state of county farms in England since 2010, through:

- an analysis of official data on the area of county farms, and how this changed 2010-2018
- a survey of council officers involved in administering county farm estates
- in-depth interviews with key council officers

Our research and analysis finds that:

- The size of England's county farms estate has fallen by over 15,000 acres between 2010 and 2018 (a decline of 7%), with three-quarters of Smallholdings Authorities selling parts of their estate since 2010.² A majority (58%) of this land was sold in the two years from 2016 to 2018.
- Austerity – coupled with a sense that county farms are 'a thing of the past', and an unwillingness by some councils to innovate to develop new income streams or business models – is driving decline in the overall extent of county farms.



- Yet other councils have taken very different approaches, leading them to protect and even expand their county farm estates - viewing them as vital public assets providing social and environmental benefits, as well as an income source for the council.
- Seven of nine councils who responded to our survey gave details of environmental and social benefits provided by their county farms, ranging from tree planting, to local education initiatives, to supporting new entrants into the sector. However, other benefits, including procurement from county farms and community engagement in planning their future, were seen more as potential future avenues than current practices.

Main recommendations

We recommend that:

1. **The government should protect the future of the county farm estate by legislating for a ministerial lock on their disposal, and a rejuvenated purpose statement.** A forthcoming Agriculture Act should safeguard county farms from extensive disposal by making it incumbent on councils to submit a report to the Secretary of State for the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). This should detail how they plan to best manage their county farms to deliver on a range of stipulated social and environmental purposes, and - if they wish to sell off county farms - how doing so accords with these purposes.³
2. **The government should bring forward a package of measures and new funding to enable councils to enhance their county farm estates.**⁴ The end of austerity and the lifting of some borrowing constraints would give councils greater leeway to invest in their estates and create new farms by purchase or sub-dividing farms to create starter units for new entrants including horticulture near towns and cities. Future government Comprehensive Spending Reviews should also make grant money available to local authorities for the specific purpose of investing in and acquiring new county farms and enabling councils to support new entrants through reduced rents and business support.
3. **All councils should promote the value of their county farms, their potential to help address the climate and ecological emergencies and enable them to deliver wider public benefits to meet the needs of their community.** This could include working with tenants to increase take up of post-Brexit farm payments to aid nature recovery, store carbon in soils, trees and hedgerows and boost public access; publicising their county farms on maps on council websites; supporting farm open days, and working in partnership to procure fresh food from county farms for local schools, care homes and hospitals.

Introduction

This report aims to outline the current state of county farms, to understand the various factors that lead to an authority selling or retaining their farms, and to suggest recommendations for reviving this national asset.

We explore in detail the state of county farms since 2010, through an analysis of official data on the area of county farms, and how this changed 2010-2018. We then outline the findings of an online survey of council officers involved in administering county farm estates. Finally, we discuss a number of case studies informed by in-depth interviews with key council officers and desk research. The report then discusses the key findings of these three sections in the round, before making policy recommendations and suggestions for further research.

This report has made initial recommendations for how these more hopeful approaches to county farms could be better supported by policy. But researching this report has highlighted how much work needs to be done to gather more comprehensive data and understand the benefits of county farms, and the obstacles to them thriving. We hope this can be a conversation starter for developing our national approach to reviving one of the most powerful methods for helping to deliver a diverse, thriving and ecologically abundant farming system for the next generation.

Definitions of some key terms used in the report

- County farms are sometimes referred to as ‘county smallholdings’. A ‘smallholding’ was originally defined in the Small Holdings Act of 1892 as being a farm greater than one acre but smaller than 50 acres.⁵ Over time, county smallholdings have been merged and enlarged, so that not all county farms would fall within this strict area definition.
- The term ‘Smallholdings Authorities’ was defined in the Agriculture Act 1970 as being every county council in England.⁶ Subsequent re-organisation of local government, such as the introduction of unitary authorities in the 1990s, has complicated this picture; some former county councils that are now unitary authorities have retained their county farms, and appear to be still considered Smallholdings Authorities. Since 1950, the government has submitted an annual report to Parliament on Local Authority Smallholdings in England, which over the past decade has detailed figures for county farms owned by up to 53 county and unitary authorities.⁷
- Confusingly, some councils own and lease farmland but are not deemed to be ‘Smallholdings Authorities’, nor are their farms ‘county farms’. For example, the borough of Enfield in Greater London owns a considerable acreage of farmland in the London Green Belt which it lets out to tenant farmers, but these are not considered to be county farms. We have not attempted to interrogate this here, but it would be worthy of future study.



1. The state of England's county farms

County farms are smallholdings owned by local authorities and originally intended to be let out to young and first-time farmers, sometimes at below-market rents.⁸ They are a vital 'first rung on the farming ladder' for newcomers to a sector that has high up-front capital costs; by providing the land and buildings, the public sector is helping get fresh blood into an industry where the average age of farmers is 60.⁹ 'Without council farms there is basically no route into agriculture for people who want to farm on their own account, rather than working with contractors and large corporations,' argues George Dunn, head of the Tenant Farmers Association.¹⁰

Yet the extent of county farms in England has halved in the past 40 years, as a result of privatisation, austerity and short-term thinking by governments and councils.

1.1 The rise – and decline – of county farms

The origins of county farms lie in the late-Victorian agricultural depression, during which widespread cries for land reform led radical Liberal MP Joseph Chamberlain to stand for election on the promise of 'three acres and a cow' for landless tenant farmers. He went on to propose a solution whereby councils would buy up land and lease it out to small tenant farmers on cheap rents. A succession of legislative acts in 1892, 1908 and 1926 created county farms, sometimes called county smallholdings.¹¹

The amount of land acquired by councils for county farms skyrocketed, reaching 438,000 acres by 1926, a level more or less maintained from then until the late 1970s. 'The smallholding movement is unique in modern agricultural history,' argues the historian Susanna Wade Martins. 'It is the only occasion on which we see the promotion of small, rather than ever-larger farming units.'¹²

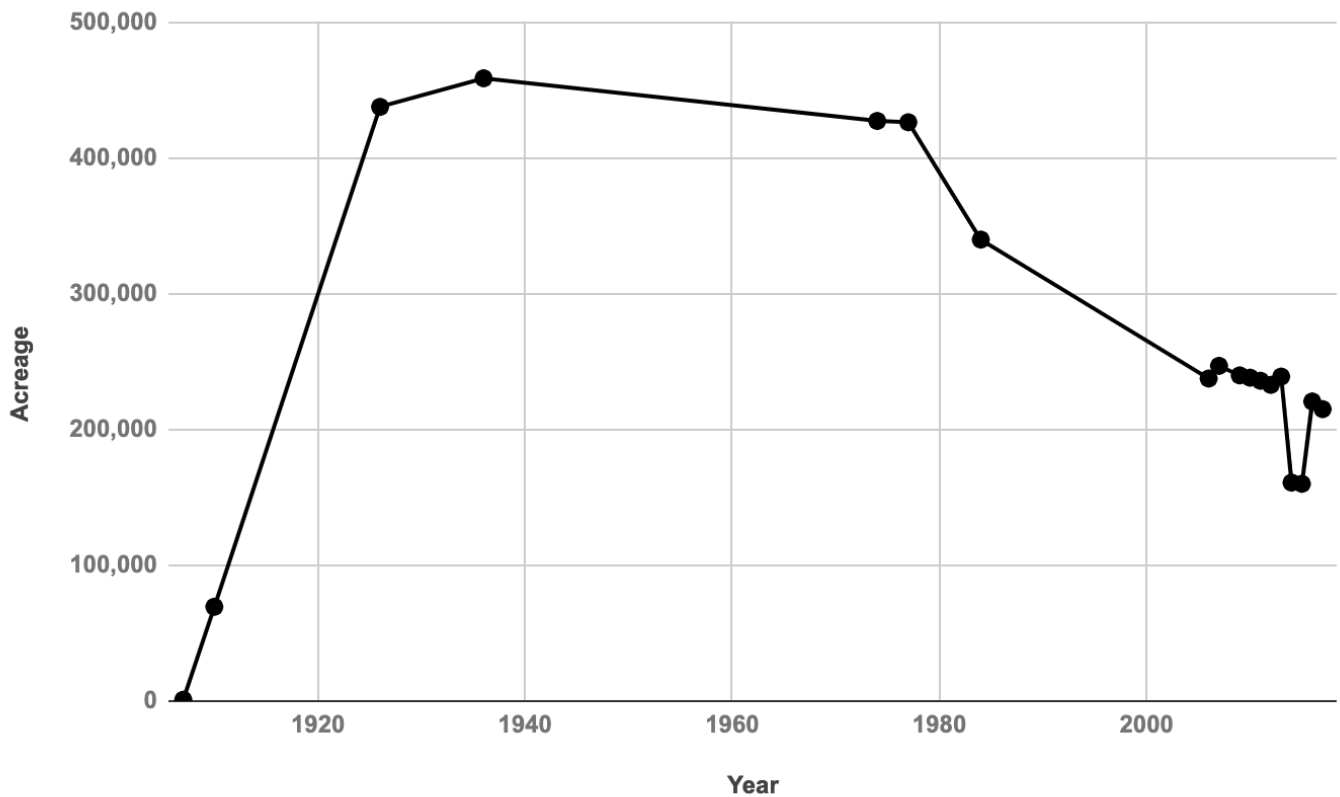
But since the end of the 1970s, thousands of acres of county farms have been lost. The extent of England's county farms estate halved in four decades, from 426,695 acres in 1977 to 208,994 acres in 2018.

Examination of the historical data¹³ suggests that the majority of this decline took place under the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, as part of their wider privatisation drive, and as a result of cuts to council budgets and powers. Though the rosier economic circumstances of the late-1990s and early 2000s may have lessened the financial imperatives for councils to sell off their assets, New Labour did little to dissuade councils from selling up – although a government-commissioned review of County Farms by Sir Don Curry in 2008 did belatedly recommend their retention.¹⁴

However, with the return of the Conservatives to power in 2010 in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, and the onset of austerity, the sell-off of County Farms appears to have accelerated once again. Investigating the scale of this most recent disposal, and what has happened to the farms, is the focus of the remainder of this section.



Figure 1: The rise and decline of England's county farms, 1892-2017¹⁵



1.2 The state of England's county farms estate today

Austerity has taken a dramatic toll on England's county farms. Official data on county farms is not as straightforward as it first seems (see Box 1). But with careful analysis, it's proven possible to construct a record of what has happened to county farms estates between 2010 and 2018, across all 53 reporting councils. The national-level figures are stark. **The size of England's county farms estate (the area let as smallholdings) has fallen by 15,687 acres between 2010 and 2018, a decline of 7%, with three quarters of Smallholdings Authorities selling parts of their estate since 2010.**

Breaking the data down by council, we can see that 39 councils saw their county farms estates decline in size over that time period with nine of them disappearing entirely, one staying static, and 13 increasing in area (most by very small amounts, with the exception of Hillingdon and Cambridgeshire).

A spreadsheet showing data on the size of all councils' county farm estates for 2010 and 2018 can be found online [here](#). A summary table can also be found in Appendix 3.

For those county farm estates that disappeared entirely during this period, it would appear most were the last remnants of what had once been much larger estates, but that have been steadily eroded over the past four decades. Lancashire County Council's smallholdings estate, for example, was mostly disposed of in the 1980s; austerity was the coup de grâce for the remaining fragments.

More significant, in terms of sheer acreage sold off, were these five councils which undertook major sales of their county farms between 2010 and 2018:

- Herefordshire 4,177 acres sold (89% decline)
- Somerset 2,897 acres sold (46% decline)
- North Yorkshire 1,312 acres sold (26% decline)
- Cheshire West & Chester 1,228 acres sold (30% decline)
- Lincolnshire 1,176 acres sold (6% decline)

At the other end of the spectrum, Cambridgeshire increased the area it let out as county farms by 3,433 acres.

Further analysis of the fall in acreage from 2010 to 2018 shows that the rate of disposal accelerated dramatically from 2016-2018 with sales in Herefordshire, Somerset, Cheshire West and Chester and Cumbria contributing most to this. Compared to 2010 – 2016 disposals rose from around 1,100 acres pa to over 4,500 acres pa for these last two years; over half of the total fall since 2010 occurred from 2016-2018.¹⁶ Analysis of data on the number of smallholdings suggests a fall of at least 240 holdings from 2010 to 2018.¹⁷ A significant rate of loss looks set to continue – Staffordshire County Council announced the sale of 1,700 acres, or a fifth of its estate, in February 2019.¹⁸

We look in more detail at what has happened to these councils' county farms in Section 3.

Box 1: Data issues and county farms

Investigating the state of county farms is made harder by various inadequacies in the official data collected on them. Defra publishes an annual report to parliament on local authority smallholdings – a practice dating back to 1950 and now in its 68th year. However, these statistics have proven to contain a number of errors, and comparing them across time is not straightforward.

- **Errors in reporting:** we had to double-check some of Defra's figures with the councils themselves – for example, Hampshire's 2018 figure was incorrectly recorded in hectares rather than acres, which made it look like it had seen a big increase in area. A number of councils for which no return was recorded in 2018 supplied us with figures



they claimed had been reported; one council estate manager told us the council had simply never been asked for the figures.

- **Lack of continuous time series:** whilst the annual reports stretch back to 1950, only those from 2007 to present are available from Defra online (and 2008 is missing). The rest are stored only as paper copies in the House of Commons Library, and it's not been possible to view them for this report. For older statistics, such as those shown in Figure 1, it's been necessary to rely on figures cited in a number of official inquiries and commissions, and occasional ministerial answers to parliamentary questions recorded in Hansard.¹⁹
- **Defra has changed its data collection methodologies over time:** this means that in 2013-14 and 2014-2015, only data on a smaller subset of councils were reported. However, for the two years examined for this report – 2010 and 2018 – the scope of data collection was reportedly the same.
- **Total area of land vs area of land let as smallholdings:** Defra's annual reports record both the total area of land owned by Smallholdings Authorities, and the subset of this let out as smallholdings (county farms). Defra breaks down both national measures by council in its 2010 report, but it does not do so in its 2018 report; so this analysis has relied on use of let area only to compare 2010 to the most recent year reported, 2018.
- **Other councils besides Smallholdings Authorities own farmland:** confusingly, some councils own and lease farmland, but are not deemed to be 'Smallholdings Authorities' by Defra, and nor are their farms 'county farms'. We have not attempted to investigate this here, but this would be worthy of future study.



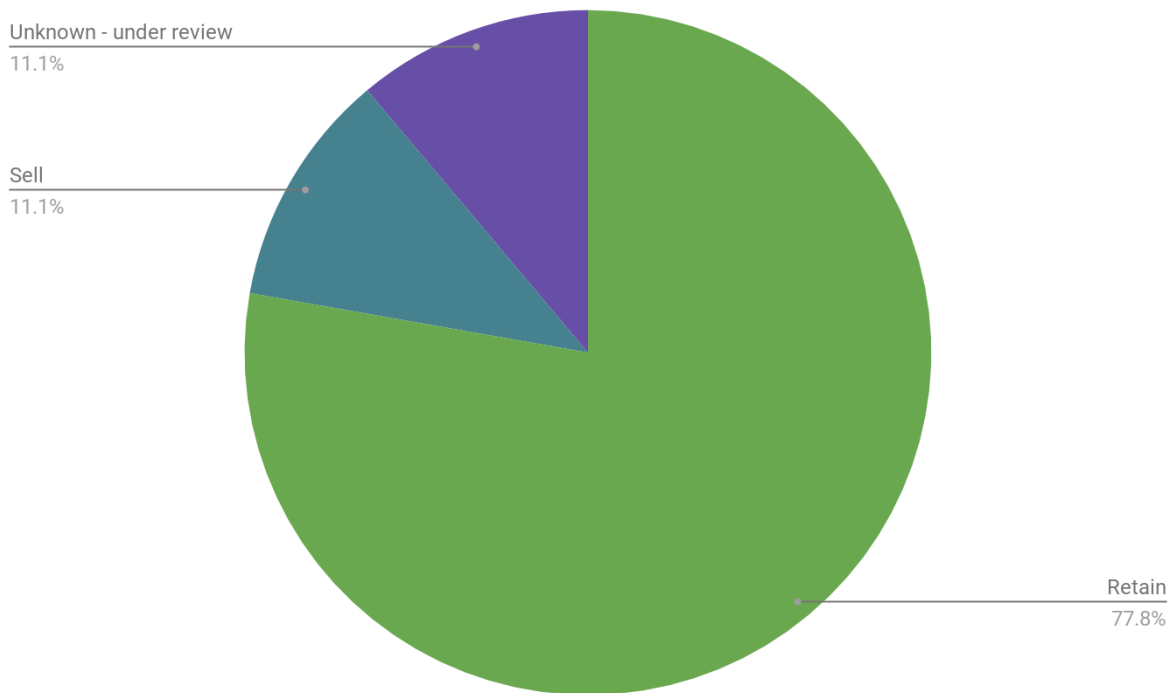
2. Survey of local authorities with county farm estates today

We sent a short online survey to as many Smallholdings Authorities as possible to learn more about their current and future plans for their county farm estates (the questions are reproduced in Appendix 1). Finding the relevant local authority officer – or private sector agent – to send the survey to was challenging, as contact details were not always easily accessible, and since the people responsible for managing the estates are called different things in different authorities, for example: Assets Manager, Estates Surveyor, or Director of Estates and Valuation. When the survey closed, we had received responses from representatives of nine local authorities – equivalent to just under 17% of the 53 Smallholdings Authorities that Defra reported on in 2010 (though subsequently this number has reduced as councils have sold off their estates). The survey results, discussed below, reveal some interesting insights from their answers.

2.1 The status of county farm estates

Most of the survey respondents spoke on behalf of authorities who have decided to retain their county farms estates. This is perhaps unsurprising; councils that have sold off their farms probably have less interest (or capacity) in discussing an asset they no longer possess.

Figure 2: The status of county farm estates for the councils that responded to our survey (retain, sell or review)



Just one of the respondents represented an authority which plans to withdraw from providing farming opportunities and sell its county farm estate, although several of the authorities which said they would retain the bulk of their estate also mentioned some elements of rationalisation. For example:

‘Assets may be sold if they have development value or no longer meet the estate's strategic needs.’

‘Retention of all agricultural land, small strategic sales of garden extension and surplus residential property where appropriate and on a case by case basis.’

‘Retention with some rationalisation including ability to buy well located land.’

In addition to the overall objective of retaining their county farms, the majority of local authorities (seven out of nine) gave further detail on their future plans for the estates, featuring economic as well as social and environmental goals. For instance:

‘Increased starter holdings, further service provision for education and environment and retention of agricultural land. Investment in the outdated infrastructure by the council, including a programme of replacing grain stores - two having been completed over the last two years.’

‘To maximise the estate's return through sound, proactive estate management practices.’

‘Provide opportunities for individuals to establish and develop businesses in rural areas contributing to inclusive economic growth.’

Over three-quarters of the local authorities which intended to retain their estates had formal policies or strategies in place to drive forward these future plans, most of which were available publicly online.

Where no formal policy or strategy existed, management was coordinated through a management strategy and annual action plans for one council, and income generation and potential development (eg for housing) were the drivers for two other authorities. However, one respondent noted the lack of a clear published plan to deliver their stated aims as a potential barrier to achieving them.

Most local authorities knew if their county farms received farm payments through the Common Agricultural Policy. For those which did, these were most often from the Basic Payment Scheme, with two authorities also

mentioning their tenants have received or are currently receiving Countryside or other Higher Level Stewardship payments as well.

2.2 The purpose of county farms

To delve deeper into the practical delivery of local authorities' declared objectives for county farm estates, we also explored issues of procurement, and social and environmental value.

Generally, respondents said their local authorities do not currently procure from county farms in any meaningful or formal way (eg buying local produce from farms for use in school or hospital canteens). However, three local authorities did mention that suitably qualified tenants may be employed to undertake small projects (eg fencing, forestry, or hedge cutting), in addition to any contractual liabilities they have for maintenance of the land they are renting.

There was a spectrum of answers in response to the question focused on the social or environmental management of county farms, indicating a range of more or less proactive approaches to utilising the farms for these purposes. Three local authorities described how non-financial objectives (eg environmental management) are usually considered as part of prospective tenants' proposals, in line with overall county farm estate management policies. Although, as one local authority mentioned, this may not be a deciding factor in agreeing a tenancy arrangement. On the other hand, four local authorities described more intentional initiatives they had encouraged or supported, as these aligned with the councils' wider social or environmental commitments, such as:

- re-introducing ospreys with the support of a local Wildlife Trust
- planting over 250,000 trees on the estate since 2000, managing wildlife habitat sites, and working with local 'friends' groups to open up local woodland and wildlife sites for the benefit of the local communities
- running or supporting Care Farms²⁰
- supporting occupiers to engage with local schools and groups to promote how they farm

These schemes provide a glimpse of the potential multi-functionality of county farms, beyond agricultural production and rural employment, as a resource for local authorities to draw on to reconnect the wider public with food, farming and the natural environment, and perhaps act as a means to achieve other statutory targets (eg around health and wellbeing).

2.3 Community involvement in county farm management

Regular wider community or public involvement in the ongoing management or future planning for county farms is generally limited, according to survey respondents. Three local authorities said community involvement only occurred via a consultative process during a periodic formal review of policy. According to one of these local authorities, while issues to do with county farms may come up in other panels or forums for rural matters, most decisions about them are made by executive council bodies. One local authority considered wider community involvement as being allowed access to parts of the estate as allotments, woodlands or open spaces. Another



authority said the wider community fed into its action plan/vision of county farms before its publication, while one more said the wider community was involved, but provided no further detail as to what this entailed. With such little ongoing public involvement in county farm management, even in areas where these assets are to be retained, it is perhaps not surprising that the general public is largely unaware of their presence or sell-off.

2.4 Further key issues for county farms

A number of respondents took the opportunity to express additional opinions about county farms, and their (future) management in the final, more open question of the survey:

- **Financial management** - three respondents mentioned financial issues as being central to the retention of county farms, both from the perspective of the local authority budget and the profitability of individual farm businesses.
- **Policy and legislation** - two respondents also mentioned the importance of legislation and policy in determining the fate of county farms - structural changes to the taxation system or housing policy could have a significant effect, and the Agriculture Bill (and various proposed amendments to it) will likely have consequences for county farm portfolios when finalised. One respondent also warned that 'it is possible that clumsy legislation or policy from HM Government could accelerate disposals rather than protect the estates as part of a suitably managed asset portfolio', so the issue needs careful consideration.
- **Climate emergency** - a third issue, raised by two representatives, was the impact of declarations of a climate emergency by certain local authorities. One respondent, from an environmental department, thought this could help to clarify a future vision of county farms' purpose, so that it includes more social and environmental considerations. Another participant said their local authority was reviewing their overall work in terms of how to reach carbon neutrality, and an assessment of land assets and how they can contribute to this goal would likely be part of this process.
- **Opportunities for new entrants to farming** - finally, one participant noted the 'vital role' of county farms in 'encouraging new entrants into farming who would otherwise not have the opportunity to farm in their own right', but another respondent mentioned the significant gap between the scale of opportunities able to be afforded to new entrants by councils, versus those available within the private sector. A third respondent said that it would be worth exploring the mechanisms that could be put in place to help new entrants access sufficient finance and starting capital in the early years of their business, as this remains one of the biggest obstacles for new entrants, even where local authorities can provide them with opportunities to farm.

While further research is needed to gauge the opinions and priorities of all Smallholdings Authorities, especially those which have decided to sell their county farms, the survey findings reveal the ongoing precarious nature of these local authority assets, but also their potential as a resource for delivering a wider range of social, economic and environmental benefits.

3. Case studies

Sections 1 and 2 have explored the history and current status of the county farm estate. Taken together, the findings paint a picture of a declining resource that, for local authorities who have retained farms at least, represents an under-utilised opportunity to create space for a more varied and multifaceted kind of farming. But how are county farms viewed by local authorities that have sold them? And what are the drivers behind these decisions?

The selling of county farms does not seem to be driven by political persuasion. For example, Conservative-controlled Cambridgeshire and Norfolk councils have retained and even expanded their county farm estates. Yet Conservative-controlled Herefordshire and Somerset councils, conversely, have sold them off. Nor is it fully explained by location; for example, the agricultural landholdings of Cheshire West & Chester and Cheshire East are both administered by one body, Cheshire Farms Service. But after both reviewing their county farms in 2010-11, one decided to retain and the other decided to sell. While Cheshire East decided to retain its estate largely intact, Cheshire West & Chester opted to 'withdraw from providing opportunities to farm over time as an operational service objective.'²¹ Local media reported that this essentially meant the council would be selling off its entire 4,575-acre estate, comprising 47 farms, over the coming three decades.²²

In order to understand the pressures faced by councils in more detail, the following section explores the different perspectives of local authorities who have either sold or retained their county farms, and considers their options.

3.1 Perspectives from selling authorities

Herefordshire Council has presided over the most dramatic recent sell-off of county farms, disposing of 4,177 acres – almost 90% of its entire estate – in just one year. The story of how it came to do so is instructive, and highlights some of the pressures facing councils to sell off assets – but also the short-term thinking that has led to alternative solutions being dismissed out of hand.

In 2009, the Conservative-run council reviewed its county farms estate policy and decided to retain it. But then David Cameron's Coalition government took power and began enacting stringent cuts to council budgets. In 2015, Herefordshire reviewed the future of its county farms again. The council officer's report once again recommended retention, with a gradual process of disposal – but this time, the councillors disagreed. They voted to sell off the vast majority of their estate. A firm of chartered surveyors were appointed to carry out the sale, and by spring 2017, Herefordshire's estate was auctioned off.²³

Austerity has been a clear driver. Herefordshire has seen its revenue grant support from central government slashed from £60m in 2011/12 to just £5.3m in 2018/19.²⁴ The working group set up by the council to review its county farms in 2015 concluded that income from the estate was too low relative to liabilities. 'For the financial year 2014/15, the gross return on capital was less than 1%', they stated, arguing that other landed estates, such as the Duchy of Cornwall, managed a healthier return of 1-2% annually. Moreover, they argued, 'this takes no account of maintenance and support costs... [and] there exists a significant backlog maintenance liability.'²⁵

An officer from another council we spoke to, who wished to remain anonymous, reported similar reasons for their council's decision to sell its County Farm estate. In 'Council A', the estate was viewed as a burden, costing a



significant amount to maintain. Farmhouses and buildings, often old ones, require a great deal of maintenance and upkeep. In this particular county, all repairs and maintenance of council owned property stopped in 2018 due to insufficient funds, well after they had sold more than two thirds of their farming land. The officer told us that human resources for county farms were diminishing too; over the past twenty years in Council A, a team of eleven surveyors - a role crucial in looking after the county estate - has shrunk to two and a half.

Both Herefordshire and Council A weighed up the maintenance and support costs with the potential benefits of selling. Herefordshire argued that selling off the estate instead could quickly free up considerable capital: 'The capital growth in the value of agricultural land on the county estate, taken as a whole, has risen, on average, 20 per cent per annum over the last 10 years.'²⁶ The officer from Council A told us the estate represented a £50 million asset that, from the council's perspective, was being used to benefit 60 individual tenants.

Budget cuts have forced a re-prioritisation of council activities across England, narrowing the services they deliver down to core statutory obligations such as education and social care for children and adults; Council A felt it could put the money to better use by selling the land and using the cash receipts for services such as education and housing, benefiting a far greater proportion of the local population. Looking after property, including county farms, was viewed as an expensive 'luxury' for a council. Herefordshire argued that 'as resources reduce... it is not a requirement for the council to manage a farm estate... [and] there are many other agricultural landlords who may be better placed to do so.'²⁷ Indeed, Council A also reflected on the role of the public sector in food and farming; now that the role of the state in farming has changed - 'we're not about feeding the nation any more' – there is no need for the farming industry to be supported by the public sector.

For both Herefordshire and Council A, another key factor in the decision-making process was that county farms were not perceived to be serving their intended purpose. Firstly, that of supporting new entrants into farming; county farms were originally meant to be 'starter farms', where young and first-time farmers lacking up-front capital can climb the 'first rung on the farming ladder', while saving up to graduate to their own farms in the future. The issue is that due to the costs of buying their own farms, many county farm tenants have remained on their farms for years, even decades, and not moved on.

In Council A, one of the tenants whose farm was sold was in his seventies and had been a tenant farmer on this county farm since 1959. Herefordshire explained that the slow turnover of tenant farmers was preventing fresh blood from entering the sector. Herefordshire surveyed the age of its county farm tenants and found just four farmers aged 20-40, 62 aged 40-60 and 33 aged 60-80 – with two tenants aged over 80.²⁸ Council A also argued that its county farms were failing on their second intended purpose: to create jobs in the local economy. The officer explained that most county farms only employ one or two people, apart from one employing seven people, which was seen as an anomaly.

The bottom line for both these councils seems to have been the increasing pressures of austerity. The councils stopped investing in their farms. The farms were not perceived to be good value for money, either in terms of financial returns or broader social and environmental benefits. With decreasing central government funding, discretionary services were reduced, and selling county farms freed up capital to provide essential services.

3.2 Perspectives from retaining authorities

Yet, despite the clear challenges outlined in the examples above, other local authorities have retained and in some cases expanded their estates within the same context of austerity. As shown in Section 2, the majority of councils set on retaining their county farm estates hold the social, economic and environmental benefits of the county farm project in high esteem.

We spoke to an officer from a council intent on retaining its estate, who also preferred to remain anonymous. 'Council B' has also faced significant grant reductions as a result of the government's deficit reduction programme. But the officer we spoke to explained that Council B has settled on a policy of retention because the public benefits outweigh the financial gains in selling up. Pre-2010, Council B made a decision to become known for sustainability and environmental leadership. Endeavouring to embed this in its practices and policies, it discussed the role of county farms, not only in supporting new entrants into farming but also in starting conversations about local food production and waste. With cross-party support, it created a policy that would direct the council to consider a number of factors when deciding who to let their county farms to, including environmental factors. Three other local authorities which responded to the survey we conducted mentioned they too consider such non-financial objectives when reviewing tenant proposals.

These councils stressed the specific role that county farms can play in delivering social and environmental value. For example, the Council B officer also discussed the cultural significance of farming and agriculture to their local authority; with a long and cherished agricultural history, county farms are an integral part of its character. Our research found that when sold, some county farms have remained working farms, but others have been lost to other uses, including an acupuncture clinic and a pony paddock.²⁹

There have been numerous attempts to reconsider Council B's position on county farms, including a recent meeting in which some councillors argued in favour of selling the estate. But there is a clear majority in this council that is convinced of the social and environmental value of county farms, which has enabled them to retain their estate so far. Indeed, the council cabinet stated in the summer of 2019 that they vowed to protect the county farm estate from sale for the next decade.

Questioned about the pressures on councils, and other counties' decisions to sell their farms, the interviewee explained that austerity is a political choice, whereas climate change is not. The county declared a state of climate emergency in 2019, and it is expected that they will think about county farm policies within this framework.

Council B, and others that we spoke to, have prioritised investment in their county farms in a more consistent way than Herefordshire and Council A. An ex-officer from Gloucestershire County Council told us it had invested £10 million into its estate over the years. Cheshire East say it is actively investing in its existing estate.³⁰ And there is some evidence of greater investment leading to higher returns. Cambridgeshire is often held up as an example of a well-managed estate, involving investment and long term planning. Cambridgeshire earned £121 per acre from its county farms estate in 2015-16, compared to Herefordshire's £107/acre for the same year, and was due £3.9m in rent from its 32,593 acre estate for the year up to 31 March 2016.³¹

Clearly, this is only a handful of case studies but they offer important insights into some of the thinking behind decisions to sell or retain. Selling authorities have tended to view their county farm estates as a burdensome asset that, if liquidated, could deliver greater benefits to a greater number of people. Retaining authorities have invested in their estates, seeing the financial, social and environmental benefits as outweighing the one-off or short-term cash injection of a sale.



4. Key findings

Drawing on the research in the previous three sections, our main findings are as follows:

- County farms are a discretionary service, not mandatory, so like libraries and leisure centres they are often the first to go when austerity bites. Some councils therefore see county farms as a burden.
- Some councils see county farms as old-fashioned, a hangover from World War Two or earlier, rather than something that can respond to present-day problems.
- Austerity creates fresh pressures on councils to sell off their assets.
- The past 40 years has seen a shift in notions of the proper functions of the state and local government – and whether such functions are better performed by the private sector/market.
- However, there is a wide divergence between how different councils have managed their county farms, which does not appear connected to party politics. For example, Conservative-controlled Cambridgeshire and Norfolk councils have retained and even expanded their county farm estates. Conservative-controlled Herefordshire and Somerset councils, conversely, have sold them off.
- County farms could in fact provide many solutions to other problems councils face – from providing healthy food for schools, to helping address adult social care through providing more Care Farms, to bolstering council income streams through better use of farm subsidies like Environmental Stewardship grants.
- Yet some councils are not innovating or fully exploring even the current opportunities to make county farms work well. There appears to be a willingness in local government to innovate in service delivery, but this has not been extended to managing land assets like county farms.
- Councils display a range of mindsets towards county farms; some believe they are or could be multifunctional sites with multiple benefits, whereas others see them as mono-functional.



5. Recommendations

County farms are an important part of a diverse and thriving farming sector; a sector that ranges from large to small holdings, from private ownership to forms of public and community ownership and management such as Community Supported Agriculture, co-operatives and Community Land Trusts. Forming as they do a key part of this diverse '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. Beyond developing this shared societal vision, we recommend to both national and local government a series of key legislative and policy changes to help county farms thrive:

- **The government should protect the future of the county farm estate by legislating for a ministerial lock on their disposal, and a rejuvenated purpose statement.**

A forthcoming Agriculture Act should safeguard county farms from wholesale disposal by making it incumbent on councils to submit a report to the Defra secretary of state detailing how they plan to best manage their county farms to deliver on a range of stipulated social and environmental purposes, and – if they wish to sell off county farms - how doing so accords with these purposes.³² An example of what such legislation could look like is in New Clause 9, one of the proposed amendments to the Agriculture Bill put before Parliament in 2018-19. The full text of the amendment is reproduced in Appendix 2.

- **Councils themselves should put in place an 'acre for acre' policy to protect their county farms estates.**

To guard against the wholesale disposal of county farm estates in future – such as has occurred recently in Herefordshire – councils should pass policies to retain the current overall acreage of their estate. No one denies that councils should have a certain amount of leeway to rationalise their assets and ensure they are providing strong public benefits. This could mean judicious use of some county farm land to provide community assets such as recreation space. So, this 'acre for acre' policy would allow for estate rationalisation through the sale of fields or even entire farms, as long as they were replaced with an equivalent acreage acquired elsewhere in the authority's area. Gloucestershire County Council has practised this policy for many years. Norfolk County Council has a policy enshrined in its constitution committing it to maintaining a county farms estate of 16,000 acres minimum.³³

- **The government should bring forward a package of measures and new funding to enable councils to enhance their county farm estates. A new Agriculture Act should update the purposes of county farms giving them an explicit role in addressing climate change and aiding the vitality of the farming sector by supporting new entrants. It should explicitly require the Defra secretary of state to give financial assistance to local authorities to invest in their estates.**

Defra Minister George Eustice, and former Defra secretary Michael Gove, have talked about providing a specific funding stream for county farms.³⁴ This is welcome, though details remain scant at the time of writing. The end of austerity and the lifting of some borrowing constraints would give councils greater leeway to invest in their estates and create new farms by purchase and/or subdividing farms. Future Comprehensive Spending Reviews



should make available government money for grants to local authorities to acquire and invest in their county farm estates. This could include enabling all councils to offer tenancies to new entrants at below market rates to encourage capital-poor people into farming for the first time. Some councils already offer this kind of help. Requiring the secretary of state to grant assist local authorities for these purposes would ensure consistency of delivery and certainty for councils over different parliaments.

- **Councils should be rewarded for delivering social and environmental public goods through the forthcoming system of post-Brexit farm payments.**

Some councils and farm tenants already make use of agri-environment funding to create wildlife habitats on county farms, but more should do so. As we move over to the Environmental Land Management Scheme or ELMS – the new system of farm payments post-Brexit – the incentives to farmers will increase for providing public goods such as restoring nature, clean water, access and cutting pollution. County farms should take full advantage of the new scheme by becoming pioneers of agro-ecological farming – producing food in highly sustainable ecological ways. Councils should support their tenant farmers in doing so, as public goods payments will be an important income stream, which will ultimately bolster council incomes too.

- **Councils should consider subdividing or sub-letting county farms into smaller units, particularly near towns and cities, for leasing to market gardeners and horticulturalists.³⁵**

This would increase the number of starter holdings for new entrants to offer an accessible entry point for new highly motivated individuals to develop their skills and business. Current county farm holdings are often too large for such purposes, being geared instead towards, say, medium-sized dairy units or arable farms. Smallholdings can be challenging but can be run in ways that make them productive, prosperous and of great public benefit. They could deliver a wide range of social and environmental benefits especially nearer to urban communities.³⁶

- **Central government should negotiate with other institutional landowners, such as the Crown Estate and Church Commissioners, to provide a ‘graduate tier’ of farm tenancies that county farm tenants move on to after 10 years.**

Security of tenure for tenant farmers is vital, but it is also important that county farms bring fresh blood into the farming sector by enabling established tenants to move on and progress. One way of doing so could be to create a ‘graduate tier’ of farm tenancies, with a range of larger farm units, where farm tenants could move to after spending their first tenancy years on county farms. These tenancies could be offered by other large institutional landowners, such as the Crown Estate (264,233 acres in England), Church Commissioners (105,000 acres) or Duchy of Cornwall (130,639 acres). As semi-public ‘establishment’ institutions, these bodies arguably have a social responsibility (as well as a financial duty) towards nurturing the sustainability of farming.

- **All councils should do more to actively promote their county farms and advance the value and the benefits they bring to the local community.**

This could include publishing clear maps of all their county farms on their websites, to supporting county farm open days, connecting local schools with county farms and working to support some county farms becoming

Care Farms to offer health, social and education services to adults and children.³⁷ Defra should support this by publishing comprehensive data on the current state of county farms, as well as historic time-series data on their past extent.

- **Councils should consult widely in their community and with local bodies on the role county farms should play in addressing the climate and ecological emergencies and delivering benefits to the local community.**

These could feed into the preparation of new local strategies to make best use of county farm holdings, as well as into other relevant local development strategies including local plans.

- **More councils should pursue the ‘Preston Model’ of local procurement and buy fresh local food from their county farms for school dinners and hospital meals.**

The ‘Preston Model’, as pioneered by Preston City Council in Lancashire, has seen the council support local businesses through a procurement policy that prioritises local suppliers.³⁸ Sadly, one of the things that Preston Council cannot procure is food grown on county farms – because Lancashire Council sold off its county farms estate in the 1980s. But other councils that have retained their county farms have the option of buying fresh produce from them for school dinners, council-run care homes and council office catering, thereby keeping money circulating in the local community. They should work with NHS partners to extend this to local hospitals and day care centres.



6. Ideas for future research and discussion

County farms have not been studied properly for years, if not decades. Researching this report has highlighted how much work needs to be done to gather comprehensive data, to understand the benefits of county farms and the opportunities for and obstacles to their success. The organisations involved in this report are keen to explore these and other issues with county farm tenants and representative bodies, national and local government and with wider networks. We suggest the following as ideas for future research and further discussion:

- There is currently little public information about county farms. There is a need for research to improve the understanding of the current public benefits they provide and the potential to increase their social, economic and environmental value to the local area.
- There is a lack of public information about local authority landholdings not covered under Smallholdings Authorities or let out as county farms. This category of land is not reported on in Defra's annual Smallholdings Reports but could in principle be compiled via examination of council asset registers or Land Registry data. This would help establish the extent of such land and its status – whether it is at similar risk to county farms of being sold – and also to enable further research into opportunities for it to deliver greater public benefit.
- County farms represent as a whole a significant body of land which through public ownership gives the potential to shape contracts with tenants which could form the basis for testing at scale different models and approaches to farming and land management. For example, this could include working with tenants across the estate to test the impact of Integrated Pest Management on yields and biodiversity compared to use of conventional pesticides.³⁹
- We need to know more about ways public land could be owned and retained for public good and to deliver wider public services. These include supporting new entrants, innovative approaches to farming and growing, and ways to meet food needs and address the climate and ecological crises. This might include ownership models such as Community Land Trusts or the potential for conservation and other covenants to secure a greater return to local authorities for reinvestment if land is sold and subsequently developed.⁴⁰ There could be potential to develop a national Community Wealth Fund to give local groups the resources to acquire farmland for community ownership and to have first refusal on future sale of publicly owned farmland.⁴¹

7. Conclusion

County farms could play a significant role in the future of UK farming. As we stand at a crossroads of Brexit and the burgeoning climate and ecological emergencies, we must re-examine the role that the public sector has to play in supporting British farming. Today, county farms are one of the most powerful levers that a local authority has for helping new entrants into farming, for ensuring the viability of local farming, and – in principle – for supporting approaches that deliver environmentally sustainable and innovative farming.

This report has shown that the extent of county farms continues to decline – down by half in 40 years. This national asset is under greater threat as austerity continues to put local authorities under pressure to sell off public land to fund essential services. Yet councils have responded to the current context in different ways, and as we have shown in this report, with varied results. We have seen some councils sell extensive tracts of county farm land at scale to secure a cash injection while others, though fewer, continue to invest heavily in their estates, some viewing them as a crucial lever in responding to the climate emergency. Some have protected and expanded their county farm estates - viewing them as vital public assets providing social and environmental benefits, as well as a steady income source for the council.

This report has made initial recommendations for how policy could better support these more hopeful approaches to county farms. We hope this report can be a conversation starter for developing a new national purpose for them as valuable public assets. We now have the opportunity to take a fresh approach, to revive county farms and to help deliver diverse, thriving and ecologically abundant farming for the next generation.



Appendix 1

County farms online survey questions

1. What is your name?
2. What is your job title?
3. What local or unitary authority do you work for?
4. What is [your local authority]'s current position on the retention or sale of its county farms estate?
5. What are [your local authority]'s future plans for its county farms estate?
6. Does [your local authority]'s have formal policies or strategies which drive its future county farms estate plans?
7. [If answered Yes to Q6, then >] Are these documents available publicly online?
[If answered No to Q6, then >] In the absence of a formal policy or strategy, what drives future county farm planning?
8. [If answered Yes to Q7a, then >] Please insert a link below to these documents, or email them to Shared Assets
[If answered No to Q7a, then >] If possible, please drag and drop the documents here, or email them to Shared Assets
9. Does your local authority procure from county farms? If yes, please provide details of the types/amount of produce or services procured.
10. Does your local authority know if its county farms are recipients of any farm subsidies? If yes, please provide details.
11. Are your local authority's county farms managed for a particular social, environmental, or economic purpose (eg Care Farms; social prescribing, providing habitats for wildlife)? If yes, please provide details.
12. Is there any wider community involvement in the management of or future plans for your local authority's county farms? If yes, please provide details.
13. If there is anything else you would like to add about county farms or think might be relevant for this research to explore, please write it here:



Appendix 2

Text of county farms amendment to Agriculture Bill

This is the wording of an amendment to the Agriculture Bill 2018-19, first tabled during Committee Stage as New Clause 27, and subsequently ahead of Report Stage as New Clause 9.⁴² Report Stage did not take place before parliament was prorogued in October 2019. The Government reintroduced an Agriculture Bill in the Queen's Speech on 14 October 2019 for the new parliamentary sitting.

'Smallholdings estates: land management

(1) Every smallholdings authority which immediately before the commencement of Part 1 of this Act holds any land for the purposes of smallholdings shall review the authority's smallholdings estate and shall, before the end of the period of eighteen months beginning with the commencement of Part 1 of this Act, submit to the Secretary of State proposals with respect to the future management of that estate for the purposes of providing—

(a) opportunities for persons to be farmers on their own account;

(b) education or experience in environmental land management practices;

(c) opportunities for increasing public access to the natural environment and understanding of sustainable farming; and

(d) opportunities for innovation in sustainable land management practices.

(2) No land held by a smallholdings authority as a smallholding immediately before commencement of Part 1 of this Act is to be conveyed, transferred, leased or otherwise disposed of otherwise than—

(a) in connection with the purposes listed in subsection (1); and

(b) in accordance with proposals submitted under subsection (1).

(3) For the purposes of this section, "smallholdings authority" has the same meaning as in section 38 of the Agriculture Act 1970.'



Appendix 3

Summary table of change in area of county farms by authority, 2010-2018

This is a summary version of our dataset compiled from Defra's annual Smallholdings Reports and correspondence with councils; the full dataset can be viewed online here:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1G2ALmMWxX9TnvBTPH9V1vK-Zmdilq37qr6uA63Z5L3w/edit#gid=0>

Smallholdings Authority	2010 let area (hectares)	2010 let area (acres)	2018 let area (hectares)	2018 let area (acres)	Change 2010-2018 (acres)
Herefordshire	1,901	4,695	210	519	-4,177
Somerset	2,563	6,331	1,390	3,433	-2,897
North Yorkshire	2,055	5,076	1,523	3,764	-1,312
Cheshire West and Chester	1,667	4,117	1,170	2,890	-1,228
Lincolnshire	8,076	19,948	7,600	18,772	-1,176
Gloucestershire	3,435	8,484	3,040	7,509	-976
Devon	4,047	9,996	3,660	9,040	-956
East Riding of Yorkshire	2,838	7,010	2,460	6,076	-934
Suffolk	5,312	13,121	4,960	12,251	-869
North Lincolnshire	422	1,042	70	173	-869
Worcestershire	1,494	3,690	1,160	2,865	-825
Northamptonshire	300	741	0	0	-741
Dorset	2,743	6,775	2,470	6,101	-674
Northumberland	230	568	0	0	-568



Nottinghamshire	744	1,838	541	1,337	-500
Thurrock	202	499	0	0	-499
Leicestershire	2,908	7,183	2,730	6,743	-440
Staffordshire	3,480	8,596	3,340	8,250	-346
North Somerset	329	813	190	469	-343
Wiltshire	2,192	5,414	2,060	5,088	-326
Cumbria	289	714	170	420	-294
South Gloucestershire	490	1,210	380	939	-272
Shropshire	628	1,551	520	1,284	-267
Milton Keynes	313	773	220	543	-230
Bournemouth	86	212	0	0	-212
Durham	573	1,415	493	1,217	-198
Cornwall	4,328	10,690	4,250	10,498	-193
Surrey	867	2,141	800	1,976	-165
Cheshire East	1,976	4,881	1,920	4,742	-138
East Sussex	43	106	0	0	-106
Lancashire	36	89	0	0	-89
Torbay	25	62	0	0	-62
Oxfordshire	361	892	351	867	-25
Swindon	680	1,680	670	1,655	-25
Hartlepool	88	217	80	198	-20



Medway	56	138	50	124	-15
Slough	3	7	0	0	-7
Peterborough	1,219	3,011	1,217	3,006	-5
Warrington	2	5	0	0	-5
Warwickshire	2,000	4,940	2,000	4,940	0
York, City of	58	143	60	148	5
West Berkshire	117	289	120	296	7
Hertfordshire	1,934	4,777	1,940	4,792	15
Essex	73	180	80	198	17
Bedfordshire Central	2,210	5,459	2,240	5,533	74
Brighton & Hove	4,043	9,986	4,080	10,078	91
Bedford	187	462	230	568	106
West Sussex	213	526	350	865	338
Hampshire	1,707	4,216	1,886	4,660	444
Norfolk	6,379	15,756	6,590	16,277	521
Buckinghamshire	1,242	3,068	1,460	3,606	538
Hillingdon	<i>None listed</i>	0	690	1,704	1,704
Cambridgeshire	11,800	29,146	13,190	32,579	3,433
TOTALS	90,964	224,681	84,611	208,994	-15,687



Appendix 4

Table showing selected dates for rise and decline of county farms, 1892-2017

Figures for 2014 and 2015 lower because Defra changed data collection methodology and scope, before changing back again in 2016. The full dataset with all sources can be found in Google Sheets at:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1tKhep2lFBSWIYQtVxy5ssE7yAmZ5ilp4UZP4pwjvYk0/edit#gid=0>

Year	Acreage of county farms
2017	215,155
2016	220,813
2015	160,109*
2014	160,977*
2013	239,159
2012	233,050
2011	236,079
2010	238,345
2009	240,048
2007	247,076
2006	237,725
1984	340,167
1977	426,695
1974	427,650
1936	459,103
1926	438,031
1910	69,429
1907	881.5
1892	0

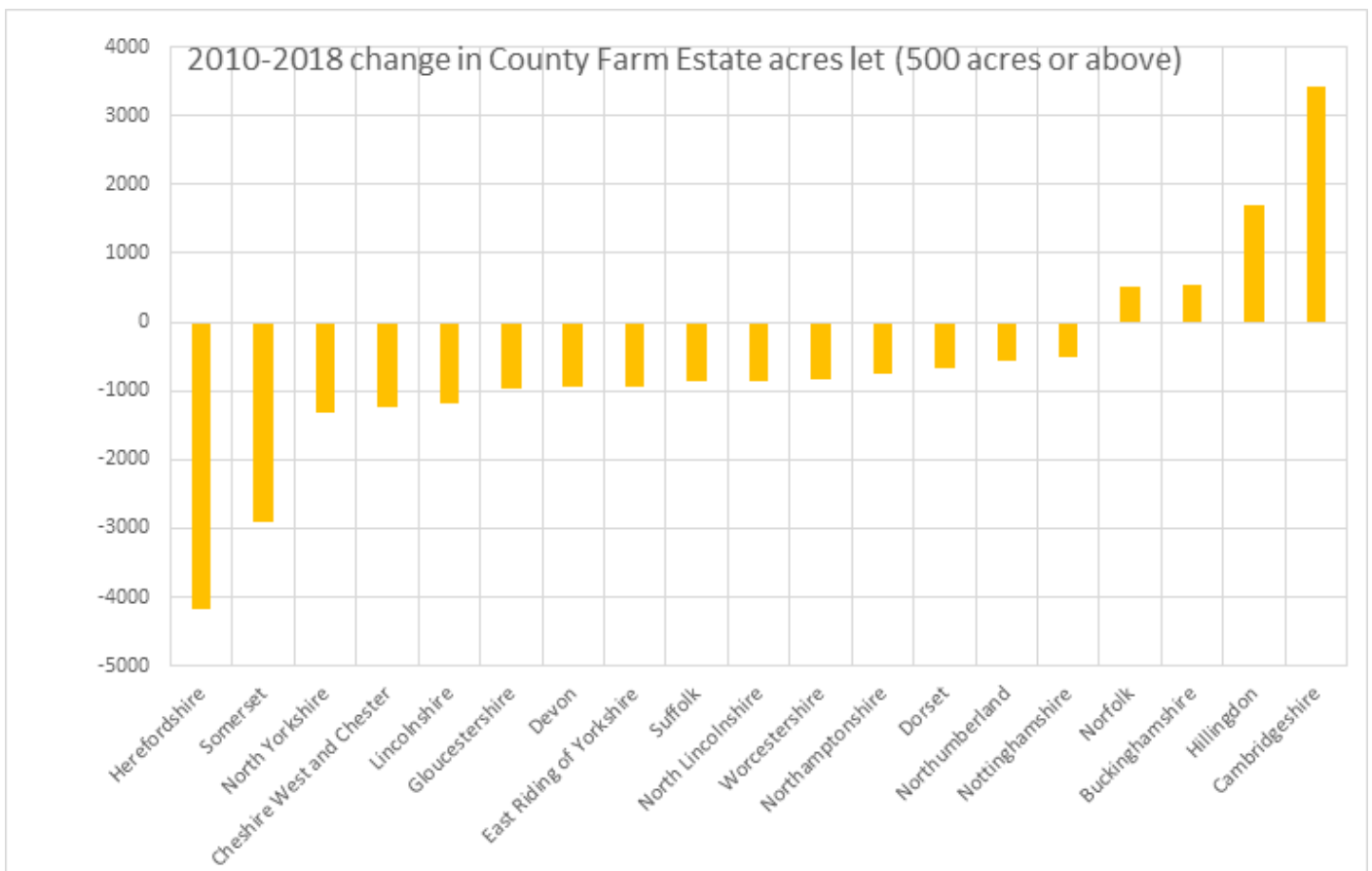
* Figures for 2014 and 2015 are lower because Defra changed its data collection methodology and scope, before changing back again in 2016.



Appendix 5

Chart of change in county farms area by authority, 2010-2018 (land area of 500 acres and above)

Based on dataset in Appendix 3



8. Endnotes

¹ The report authors were in alphabetical order: Kim Graham (Shared Assets), Guy Shrubsole (Who Owns England?), Kate Swade (Shared Assets) and Hanna Wheatley (New Economics Foundation). Graeme Willis (CPRE) provided editorial input.

² On analysis of let area from 2010 to 2018 for this report 9 of 53 local authorities (county councils and unitary authorities as Smallholdings Authorities under the Agriculture Act 1970) had ceased to let land as smallholdings by 2018.

³ An amendment to the Agriculture Bill to this effect received cross-party support in 2018.

⁴ Defra Minister George Eustice, and former Defra Secretary Michael Gove, have spoken about providing a specific funding stream for county farms. Letter from then Environment Secretary Michael Gove to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee, March 2019, <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/environment-food-rural-affairs/correspondence/190304-Secretary-of-State-to-the-Chair-re-Council-Farms.pdf>

See also the response by Farming Minister George Eustice on 8 October 2019 to a parliamentary question from Kerry McCarthy MP:

‘I value the role of county farm smallholdings, and particularly the opportunities they offer for new entrant farmers. We are considering whether we can use funds to refresh the county farm model by supporting local authorities to reinvest in their farms, helping with facilitation funding so that the farms are more of a hub for new entrants, and working with them to make it easier to move tenants out so that we have a constant pipe stream of new opportunities for new entrants. Alongside that, we are considering whether that can be broadened beyond the traditional county farm, which has existed for many decades since the war, to include some of the peri-urban farms, which often have links to the agro-ecology movement and are often smaller community-based groups. Where local authorities have land that they can make available, we might be able to support the fostering of those schemes, which can be popular.’

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2019-09-26/291303/>

⁵ Small Holdings Act 1892, Part 1, Section 1, Paragraph 2. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/55-56/31/section/1>

⁶ Agriculture Act 1970, Section 38. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1970/40/section/38>

⁷ The most recent such report is the *68th annual report to Parliament on smallholdings in England*, published by Defra, 27th February 2019. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/68th-annual-report-to-parliament-on-smallholdings-in-england>

⁸ We can't quantify how often rents are offered at below market rates, but we have found examples; for instance, a 2017 review of county farms in Monmouthshire in Wales states that ‘based on comparable



lettings we consider that the rents for the holdings are, in some cases, below the current market.'

<https://www.monmouthshire.gov.uk/app/uploads/2013/06/Farms-Asset-Management-Plan-Nov-2017.pdf>

⁹ Defra. *Agriculture in the United Kingdom 2017*.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/741062/AUK-2017-18sep18.pdf

¹⁰ Thame, D. 'Shrinking opportunities for council farms', *Farmers Weekly*. 25th June 2009.

<https://www.fwi.co.uk/business/shrinking-opportunities-for-council-farms>. Of course, those from farming families have different routes into farming, via inheritance, but this is not a route usually available to newcomers to the sector.

¹¹ Small Holdings Act 1892. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/55-56/31/contents>. Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Edw7/8/36> Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1926. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo5/16-17/52/part/1>

¹² Wade Martins, S. 'Smallholdings in Norfolk, 1890-1950: a social and farming experiment', *Agricultural History Review*. 54, II. pp304-30. 2006. <https://www.bahs.org.uk/AGHR/ARTICLES/54n2a7.pdf>

¹³ A full list of all sources of historical data on county farms is given in Shrubsole, G. 'How the extent of County farms has halved in 40 years', *Who Owns England*. 8th June 2018.

<https://whoownsengland.org/2018/06/08/how-the-extent-of-county-farms-has-halved-in-40-years/>

¹⁴ Sir Don Curry for Defra, 'The Importance of the County Farms Service to the Rural Economy', 2008. All copies appear to have disappeared from the internet; the authors hold a PDF copy.

¹⁵ Figures for 2014 and 2015 displayed in the graph are lower because Defra changed its data collection methodology before changing back again in 2016. See supporting table for this graph in Appendix 4.

¹⁶ Based on further CPRE analysis of total land let as smallholdings from Defra annual reports to parliament from 2009-2010, 2015-2016 and 2017-2018 (for each from table 1 *Area of smallholdings land held by Smallholdings Authorities*. Total acreage figures for 2015-2016 were adjusted for missing data for South Gloucestershire and Peterborough using best data available ie nearest year from other Defra annual reports. Figures for 2017-2018 were adjusted for the omission of Durham, North Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire and Peterborough and other errors as noted in Box 1 and corrected for in Appendix 3. Our analysis shows some 15,706 acres were sold from 2010-18, but of this 42% (6,598 acres) was sold by 2016 and a further 58% (9,108 acres) sold by 2018. Differences in the total here from Appendix 3 are likely to be due to rounding.

¹⁷ This figure is based on CPRE analysis of the total number of holdings from the Defra annual reports for 2009-10 and 2017-2018 adjusted for missing data in both years using the best available data from other annual reports. Main data extracted from Table 3: Analysis of smallholdings by size at 31 March 2010 and Table 2: Number of smallholding lets held by Smallholdings Authorities as at 31 March 2018. However, there is a difference between the tables as the 2018 data covers 'equipped farms', 'bare land farm lets' but also 'agricultural lets' i.e. grazing licences and lettings under a year in the number of smallholdings lets – it is not clear whether the last of these are included in the 2010 figures. On our analysis the fall is from 2,811 holdings in 2010 to 2,570 in 2018 so 241 or 8.6% of holdings sold.

¹⁸ Harris, L. 'Seven Staffordshire County Council holdings up for sale', *Farmers Weekly*. 18th October 2019.



¹⁹ A full list of all sources of historical data on county farms is given in Shrubsole, G. 'How the extent of County farms has halved in 40 years', *Who Owns England*. 8th June 2018.

<https://whoownsengland.org/2018/06/08/how-the-extent-of-county-farms-has-halved-in-40-years/>

²⁰ Care Farms are farms which provide or promote healing, mental health, social, or educational care services. <https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/our-work>

²¹ See Cheshire West & Chester webpage on county farms:

<https://www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/business/sites-and-premises/cheshire-farms.aspx>

²² *Cheshire Live*. 'Controversial sale of £31m worth of council-owned Cheshire farms would be ploughed back into rural economy. 15th December 2011. <https://www.cheshire-live.co.uk/news/chester-cheshire-news/controversial-sale-31m-worth-council-owned-5184626>

²³ Herefordshire council meeting minutes, reports and documents relating to the sale of their county farms estate are linked to from here:

https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/news/article/254/herefordshire_council_smallholdings.

The 'Task and finish Group' report from 2015 and supporting documents are here:

<http://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/ielssueDetails.aspx?IId=50011562&Opt=3> (including appendices A-D – appendix D shows a rough map of Herefordshire's county farms estate prior to disposal)

²⁴ Herefordshire Council, Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2019/20-2021/22.

https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/1/medium_term_financial_strategy_201920_-_202122.pdf

²⁵ Herefordshire Council. 'Task and finish group' report, 2015

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Herefordshire council webpages on county farms:

https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/news/article/254/herefordshire_council_smallholdings

²⁸ Herefordshire County Council, report on county farms estate 2015, Appendix C – estate data

²⁹ The Somerset County Farm land and farm outbuildings referred to were sold in 2007 for £2.4m to 'IMT Trust Services Establishment', an asset management firm based in Liechtenstein (<https://imt.li/en/>) – as revealed by Land Registry data on Overseas Companies, first mapped by Private Eye at <https://www.private-eye.co.uk/registry>. Until quite recently, Liechtenstein was considered by many to be a tax haven, though it has reformed its tax and transparency rules in more recent years – see <https://www.ico.li/liechtenstein-grey-list/>. The firm appears to have registered the land and property on behalf of its ultimate owner, who has converted the former farm outbuildings into an acupuncture clinic (see <http://www.acupuncture-horsington.co.uk/>) and the fields into a horse paddock (see planning permission granted here: <http://horsingtonvillagehall.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/minutesaug16.pdf>).

³⁰ Dann, L. 'County council farms – how many are left?' *Farmers Weekly*. 18th May 2017.

<https://www.fwi.co.uk/business/markets-and-trends/land-markets/county-council-farms-how-many-are-left>

³¹ Ibid.

³² An amendment to the Agriculture Bill to this effect received cross-party support in 2018.

³³ Norfolk County Council. *Norfolk County Farms: A Guide for Prospective Tenants*. 2018.



<http://angliaruralconsultants.com/wp-content/uploads/norfolk-county-farms-guide-for-prospective-tenants-2018-rr.pdf>.

³⁴ Letter from The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) to Neil Parish MP, Chairman of the EFRA Select Committee, 4 March 2019.

<file:///D:/Farming/county%20farms/County%20farms%20report/Template%20versions/190304-Secretary-of-State-to-the-Chair-re-Council-Farms.pdf>

See also <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2019-09-26/291303/> and endnote 4 above.

³⁵ This was a recommendation of the People's Food Policy, proposed by the Land Workers' Alliance and many other groups, whose members struggle to acquire access to land for horticulture; Land Workers' Alliance et al. *A People's Food Policy*. June 2017. <https://www.peoplesfoodpolicy.org/download>

see also CPRE. *New model farming*. 2016. p5 and p20. <https://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/farming-and-food/farming/item/4347-new-model-farming>

³⁶ See The Ecological Land Cooperative. *Small is Successful Creating sustainable livelihoods on ten acres or less*, 2011 https://ecologicaland.coop/sites/ecologicaland.coop/files/Small_is_Successful_0.pdf and Laughton, R. *A Matter of Scale – a study of the productivity, financial viability and multifunctional benefits of small farms (20 ha and less)*. 2017. Landworkers' Alliance and Centre for Agroecology, Coventry University. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B5dw4mKBC3yEdzRIOHhNbkFwUFg1MWNycHNpZW5JaDBnWVNr/view>

³⁷ <https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/GCF>

³⁸ Chakraborty, A. 'In 2011 Preston hit rock bottom. Then it took back control'. *The Guardian*. 31st January 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/31/preston-hit-rock-bottom-took-back-control>

³⁹ Thanks to Adam Dyster and Matt Shardlow for suggesting this idea.

⁴⁰ Councils could consider putting in place covenants on County Farm land to ensure some public or community benefit is derived if the land is eventually sold off. For example, if a County Farm is sold and the private owner later applies for permission to develop it for housing, a covenant on the land could ensure that a decent percentage of the resulting uplift in land values is returned to the council or local community. North Yorkshire Council has written such covenants into some of the County Farm land it previously owned, though subsequent owners have sought to unpick it.

⁴¹ The Centre for London has proposed a national Community Wealth Fund to enable local groups to buy sites and buildings for development but logically this could be extended to other land including farms to be bought for community ownership. Centre for London/ Willis, J. (ed), *Act Local: Empowering London's Neighbourhoods*. 2019. <https://www.centreforlondon.org/publication/act-local/>

⁴² House of Commons notice of amendments to the Agriculture Bill, 8th November 2018, New Clause 27, p42. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/2017-2019/0266/amend/agriculture_rm_pbc_1108.pdf House of Commons notice of amendments to the Agriculture Bill, 3rd December 2018, New Clause 9, p6. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/2017-2019/0292/amend/agriculture_rm_rep_1203.pdf



The
countryside
charity

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CPRE is the countryside charity that campaigns to promote, enhance and protect the countryside for everyone's benefit, wherever they live. With a local CPRE in every county, we work with communities, businesses and government to find positive and lasting ways to help the countryside thrive - today and for generations to come.

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