

Reimagining council farms: a vision for 2040

Executive summary and recommendations

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.



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.

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.



View the full report

cpre.org.uk/reimagining-council-farms

Contact us

15-21 Provost Street, London, N1 7NH

Telephone: 020 7981 2800

Email: info@cpre.org.uk

 @cprecountrysidecharity

 @CPRE

 @CPRE

Funders



Supporting organisations



Join in:
cpre.org.uk

The Campaign to Protect Rural England is a company limited by guarantee
Registered in England number: 4302973 Registered charity number 1089685



The
countryside
charity