

Executive summary



Our future depends on the land. The land nourishes and supports us. It provides for our nutrition, our health and our wellbeing. Food and farming depend critically on the fate of the countryside. Those who live and work here are the stewards of this relationship but the responsibility for it rests with us all. Our own health and the health of the land are inextricably intertwined.

In the last 70 years, this relationship has been broken. Driven by poor policy and perverse incentives, the food and farming system has become one of the main drivers of human and ecosystem crisis. From deforestation, loss of wildlife and soil degradation, to widespread pollution and spiralling diet-related ill-health, people and planet have suffered alike. Far from being the sector that nourishes us, and the land on which we all depend, the system has damaged and depleted our precious and finite resources.

We have relied for too long on the hope that future technologies can repair the damage caused by this. Time is now running out. The actions that we take in the next ten years are critical: to recover and regenerate nature; and to restore health and wellbeing to both people and planet.

The good news is that people are now grasping the extent of this challenge; the call for collective and concerted action is rising. And everywhere, people are responding – shareholders and schoolchildren,

farms and food businesses, and in communities all around the UK. Whilst the challenges are complex and interconnected, we already have many of the tools we need to act.

The RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission is an independent inquiry established in November 2017, with support from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. Chaired by Sir Ian Cheshire, 15 Commissioners were drawn from farming and food businesses, from public health and citizens groups, from thinktanks and universities. The work came at a particularly challenging time in the wake of the EU referendum. But from very early on, the Commissioners agreed that the focus of the work should not be defined by current circumstances. They wanted to tackle the bigger challenges facing the food, farming and countryside sector: from climate and ecosystem breakdown to rising rates of diet-related ill-health.

Commissioners also wanted to hear more from people who are not usually involved in these debates.

“I'm a farmer and I can't afford to buy the food I produce. How ridiculous is that?”

James, Peak District sheep farmer

Decades of policy to produce ever cheaper food has created perverse and detrimental consequences. Farm gate prices are low; and whilst food in the supermarkets is getting cheaper, the true cost of that policy is simply passed off elsewhere in society – in a degraded environment, spiraling ill-health and impoverished high streets. The UK has the third cheapest food amongst developed countries, but the highest food insecurity in Europe.

The cost of just one diet-related illness – Type 2 diabetes – to the NHS, and in lost work and benefits, is nearly £27bn a year.

"Tell you what lads, you'd want a thick skin to be a farmer right now. Only a matter of time until someone blames us for the disappearance of Shergar & Jimmy Hoffa..."

@willpenrievans on Twitter

Many farmers are at a loss to know what to do for the best. Agroecology or high-tech solutions? More intensification, extensification or diversification? And how to disinvest from investments made in good faith? We found farmers open to change but anxious, and locked into their current business models by debt, skills or circumstance.

In the UK, agriculture contributes 11 percent of GHG emissions, and is the biggest driver of wildlife loss, with 67 percent decline in the abundance of priority species since 1970 and 13 percent of them now close to extinction.

"People come here for the lifestyle. That's great, don't get me wrong. But will they stand for the council? Will they coach the kids' football team? Because at the same time the local bloke driving a tractor for £14,000 a year hasn't got a hope of living in this village."

Mark, Nottinghamshire

Nowhere do conflicts in food, farming and the countryside show up more than in discussions about how we use our land and who decides. Debates have become polarised and it is the ground on which the battles for the future of farming and the countryside are being fought.

Only 8 percent of rural homes are affordable, compared to 20 percent in urban areas; weekly transport costs average £132 in rural areas compared to £71 in urban areas.

During our inquiry we heard many examples of people already taking action. Inspired by them, and as we conclude this phase of our work, the Commission's recommendations for actions are underpinned by three interdependent principles:

1. Healthy food is every body's business
2. Farming is a force for change
3. The countryside has to work for everyone

We also propose a framework for change to speed up the transition to a more sustainable food and farming system, where radical ambitions can be implemented at scale and at pace, through practical actions by governments, businesses and citizens.

Healthy food is every body's business

Healthier and life-enhancing diets mean more and better fresh fruit, vegetables, nuts and pulses, less and better meat and dairy, with livestock products coming from climate and nature-friendly production, with zero food waste, and rebuilding our connections with food producers and with each other.

Much attention is directed towards the challenge of feeding nine billion people by 2030. But we already produce more than enough for everyone in the world to eat well. Today, it is inefficiently and unsustainably produced, profligately wasted and unfairly distributed.

To understand how UK farming could contribute to a more sustainable and healthy diet, we explored reactions to this year's high-profile call from the EAT-Lancet Commission which included a recommendation to move to more plant-based diets. We brought farmers and others together with EAT-Lancet scientists, to model scenarios sensitive to the UK's specific conditions. The results highlighted significant areas of convergence, supporting sustainably-produced pasture-fed livestock to make the best of the UK landscape and climate.

This is the time for an historic drive to put health at the heart of our food system. Government holds many of the key levers and must take the lead, in partnerships with businesses and civil society. All effort, policy, legislation, money and resources must be directed towards implementing and accelerating a transition plan for climate, nature, and public health and wellbeing.

We recommend:

1. Levelling the playing field for a fair food system – good food must become good business
2. Committing to grow the UK supply of fruit, vegetables, nuts and pulses, and products from UK sustainable agriculture, and to using them more in everyday foods
3. Implementing world-leading public procurement, using this powerful tool to transform the market
4. Establishing collaborative community food plans help inform and implement national food strategies and meet the different needs of communities around the UK
5. Reconnecting people and nature to boost health and wellbeing

Farming is a force for change, unleashing a fourth agricultural revolution driven by public values

The case for change is now urgent and unassailable - farming systems must change radically to become more sustainable. This is a challenge as fundamental as decarbonising our energy system. Many farmers around the world are picking up the challenge and the opportunities with courage and commitment. But some were sceptical about the practicality, fairness or impact of future environmental payments.

In a series of polls and focus groups, we asked farmers what it would take to help them, and the industry as a whole, to transition sustainably. Their priorities were:

- A predictable policy environment – a clear and reliable framework to unlock investment and allow strategic planning
- Relevant innovation – public research investment that matches what farmers need
- Peer-to-peer support – technical, business and social support go hand-in-hand in a sector under pressure
- Fair prices and stable markets – a decent income from their produce so farmers can save, plan and reinvest
- Access to innovative finance – farmers are being asked to adapt to an uncertain future, and need investors and lenders ready to share the risk

Changing farming systems is a serious and long-term task. We propose a transition plan for agriculture that applies ecological principles to food and farming systems, optimising interactions between plants, animals, humans and the environment, as well as with the social components of a fair and sustainable food system – a fourth agricultural revolution.

Far from being a revolution that leaves victims in its wake, we want to place farmers in the driving seat to design and lead the change. Working together with industry, stakeholders and government, a transition plan to 2030 must be backed by fair investment, and function from farm scale through landscape scale to national scale.

We recommend:

1. Designing and implementing a ten-year transition plan for sustainable, agroecological farming by 2030
2. Backing innovation by farmers to unleash a fourth agricultural revolution
3. Making sure every farmer can get trusted, independent advice by training a cadre of peer mentors and farmer support networks
4. Boosting cooperation and collaboration by extending support for Producer Organisations to all sectors
5. Establishing a National Agroecology Development Bank to accelerate a fair and sustainable transition

A countryside that works for all, and rural communities are a powerhouse for a fair and green economy

How do we best manage all our land for farming, for nature, for climate adaptation, for habitat restoration, for housing, infrastructure, energy and industry? This isn't about a new spatial plan; it is about taking a farsighted, whole systems and systematic view.

Whilst around one percent of people are employed in agriculture, around 72 percent of UK land is farmed. People are part of the landscape; they shape it and are shaped by it. The beauty of the countryside contributes to the local and national identities of rural and urban people alike. Access to the countryside and to the natural world is crucial to wellbeing. This requires flourishing rural economies to sustain vibrant, living, working communities.

It is also in and on the land that new work is needed to respond to the well-rehearsed global challenges. The world of work is changing fast. Amidst the talk of disruptive technologies and their impact on careers, we also need to ask, what is the work needed right now to recover fragile natural and human systems and who will do it? The fierce sense of urgency to tackle the climate emergency is well expressed amongst young people, who will be hurt most directly by degraded ecosystems.

We recommend:

1. Establishing a national land use framework in England that inspires cooperation based on the public value of land, mediating and encouraging multipurpose uses
2. Investing in the skills and rural infrastructure to underpin the rural economy
3. Creating more good work in the regenerative economy
4. Developing sustainable solutions to meet rural housing need
5. Establishing a National Nature Service that employs the energy of young people to kickstart the regenerative economy

A framework for change

Radically shifting the whole system is likely to combine incremental, transformational and disruptive change. We need leaders who can hold together broad coalitions of interests, unified around a connecting mission, to imagine a better version of our shared future, and to translate shared intention into collective action.

A radical mission must be underpinned by practical actions. And as we have found throughout our inquiry, people are already doing things to bring a more regenerative future to life. Around the UK, farmers and growers, businesses and communities are bringing their ingenuity to work, to craft creative solutions to the problems they are dealing with day in and day out. Our companion document to the report, Field Guide for the Future, shares their stories, experiences and learning.

Our relationship with the EU and our subsequent trade arrangements are still to be determined. It is vital that the government reflects UK standards in trade deals and champions the multilateral approaches best placed to achieve a consistent approach worldwide. Meanwhile, government already has some useful tools at its disposal to act now. One is the Public Value Framework and we set out how we think this can be imaginatively and practically extended to provide for stronger cross-departmental actions across government, local and regional bodies.

The Natural Capital Committee and others have moved the dial in debates about how public money should be spent for public benefits. The three underpinning principles are compelling. And we think we can go further.



Public money for public goods



all the resources aligned for public value



Polluter pays principle



not just the environment but also health and wellbeing



Net environmental gain



AND fair net social gain

We also need new economic measures. Perverse incentives in one part of the system can drive actions which create unforeseen consequences elsewhere, with huge costs to the public purse, people and planet. Businesses require the right enabling environment to change, with meaningful incentives to enrich public value. To back these up, we call for a strong and escalating regulatory baseline, so that business activities which deplete public value are curtailed. We must make it easy for people to do the right thing and increasingly difficult (or expensive) to do the wrong things.

But we also know that the change required is momentous. Some of our recommendations are straightforward, aligning with others; some require much more deliberation, so that citizens, businesses and communities can work through the complex choices and implications. Our report sets out actions for everyone. In taking this whole systems approach, our responses are both radical and practical, engaging all those who need to act, to do so together.

Next steps

The Commission will continue to work with partners until the end of October 2019 to help progress and implement our recommendations.