

Feeding the nation inquiry response (March 2017)

We welcome the opportunity to submit a written response to this inquiry. This response encourages the inquiry not to view this as an issue rooted in Brexit, but rather as a crisis long in the making. There is a huge deficit in landworkers able to deliver the land use we need. This response focuses on the potential role of small-scale land-based social enterprises to tackle this crisis. These organisations are often expert trainers, and are especially well placed to attract new entrants to the food and farming sector. After explaining how we understand this problem, we will focus on the following question, which lies at the heart of the issue:

What should the Government and the food and farming sectors be doing to attract and retain UK workers for all parts of the food supply chain?

1. Our analysis of the situation

1.1 A lack of UK workers with the skills needed to make land work for everyone

Brexit has brought attention to what has been a long brewing crisis in the UK land-based workforce. The [average age of farmers is now 59¹](#) and the land-based sector as a whole [has an ageing workforce²](#). Farming is simply not considered aspirational for the vast majority of young British people.

Moreover even if we could encourage more UK workers to go into farming, this would not address our deficit in the skills needed to manage land well. Mainstream land management is simply not working - either financially or for the environment. Most farms are [heavily reliant on subsidies³](#). We are facing a rapid decline in the quality of our environment - or our [‘natural capital’⁴](#). In particular intensive farming has led to a soil crisis [costing us up to £1.4bn a year⁵](#). Our existing land-based workforce simply does not have the skills to manage land in a way that is sustainable in the long term. Urgent intervention is needed from the Government to ensure our long-term food security.

¹ Defra (2013), Agriculture in the United Kingdom, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/315103/aug-2013-29may14.pdf#page=18

² Lantra (2010), UK Skills Assessment, available at: [https://www.lantra.co.uk/sites/default/files/UK-Skills-Assessment-\(2010-11\).pdf#page=13](https://www.lantra.co.uk/sites/default/files/UK-Skills-Assessment-(2010-11).pdf#page=13)

³ Full Fact (2016), Do farmers make more from subsidies than agriculture?, Available at: <https://fullfact.org/economy/farming-subsidies-uk/>

⁴ Natural Capital Committee (2013), The State of Natural Capital: towards a framework for measurement and valuation, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/516707/ncc-state-natural-capital-first-report.pdf

⁵ The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (2015), Securing UK Soil Health, available at: <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PN-0502/POST-PN-0502.pdf>.

1.2 We need many new workers capable of delivering new models of land use

There is a pressing need to attract and train the UK landworkers of tomorrow, but current attempts by industry and the government are clearly not working. We need a new approach, based on attracting new entrants to farming, and promoting a new aspirational message that farming is a skilled profession premised on supplying people with healthy food whilst enriching the environment.

1.3 Land-based social enterprises can deliver these new entrants

Shared Assets supports land-based social enterprises. These are land-based businesses who focus on creating environmental and social value whilst generating income from a wide range of activities. They are characterised by innovative approaches to land use that create social and environmental value, and achieve sustainability by creating a diverse range of income streams. They often operate in the heart of communities, and attract customers, volunteers, and employees that might otherwise have little engagement with food production.

Land-based social enterprises are already attracting new entrants from a range of backgrounds. They are training them not just in food production, but in the skills needed to run a successful business whilst managing land sustainably. They make farming aspirational by focusing on the wider social and environmental benefits it can encourage. They reject the increasing industrialisation of agriculture and promote people-centred, community-oriented approaches. This is despite facing an incredibly tough business climate and receiving virtually no support. With funding and support from government they could play a major role in inspiring and training the landworkers of tomorrow.

2. What should the Government and the food and farming sectors be doing to attract and retain UK workers for all parts of the food supply chain?

The Government must acknowledge the scale of the problem. This is not just a temporary shortage resulting from Brexit. Rather it is a general crisis in land-based skills, requiring a major push to promote young British people to enter the food and farming sector.

The Government should respond to this crisis with a major programme of support for land-based training that delivers the landworkers we need.

2.1 Incentives for land managers to offer land-based training:

Brexit has precipitated a debate about the future of farm subsidy. There is a strong argument that public money should be actively targeted at public goods and training should be included in this. The farming sector clearly requires more trained workers, however there are insufficient apprenticeships and other training at the moment. Defra should explore a new set of incentives for delivering training.

This money could go to anyone who can share the skills we need. This might mean large landowners like the National Trust. We think it should definitely include land-based social enterprises as they have a huge amount to offer. Land managers should be paid for contributing to the skill base, beyond the paltry amounts available for apprenticeship schemes. We can look to the US for an example of how this might work, with [significant USDA support for incubating new farmers and training](#)⁶.

Incentives to deliver training could also be supported by income raised from natural capital legislation if it is passed. Workforce issues should not be viewed in isolation. Skilled land-managers will be needed to improve our natural capital.

2.2 Funding for projects aimed at attracting new entrants to commercial farming

The Government should offer particular support to projects aimed at supporting new entrants into farming. At the moment young farmers and career changers can struggle to break into farming because they lack key skills and/or start-up capital to launch careers in commercial growing. This means that even when people are inspired to get into growing, they are often forced to pursue other careers.

Land-based social enterprises are particularly well suited to bringing in new entrants. One good example is the FarmStart programme funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, and carried out by businesses like [OrganicLea](#)⁷ and [Kindling Trust](#)⁸. This involves giving new farmers small parcels of land along with the support they need to grow for the market. This both gives them land to develop their growing and business skills, and gives them a clearer idea of whether they want to pursue this as a career.

2.3 Making land available for new entrants

Government should seek to make more land available for new entrants to farming. County farms used to play this role, but are increasingly under threat. Central and local government departments should allocate as much land as possible to new entrants. At the moment it is very difficult for new entrants to find land, even if they have the requisite skills.

Land could also be found by offering landowners incentives to rent portions of their land to new entrant farmers at sympathetic rates.

⁶ Sena Christian, 'America's new farmers: the age-old profession gets a young, idealistic upgrade,' The Guardian, available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/mar/11/america-new-farmers-young-college-educated-idealistic-happy-acres-connecticut>

⁷ OrganicLea website section on FarmStart: <https://www.organiclea.org.uk/we-work-for-change/farm-start/>

⁸ Kindling Trust website section on FarmStart: <http://kindling.org.uk/farmstart>

2.4 Making farming aspirational

This will mean working with both young people and adults to present farming as an attractive career. And this will require models that are actually attractive. Many of the groups we work with offer tours for schools. Indeed promoting sustainable farming to young people is often a key part of their social mission. And they show that farming can be aspirational. Work can include community engagement, environmentalism, diversification, innovation, training, care work and much more. The careers on offer may be easier to sell than traditional farm labouring.

3. Conclusion

Addressing long-term workforce shortages in food and farming may ultimately require major reforms beyond the scope of this inquiry, entailing structural reforms of land market and even a cultural shift around the way farming is perceived. This response has focused on what we see as short term fixes that can begin addressing the shortage, and encouraging land use that works for everyone.

If the committee have any questions or would like to talk, we would be delighted to help. We could also arrange a visit to one of the businesses we are talking about if that would be helpful.

Please direct any further questions to our Policy and Research Lead, Tom Kenny, tom@sharedassets.org.uk, 07542063083. You can find out more about Shared Assets on our website, www.sharedassets.org.uk.