ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP
Agroecology for Sustainable Food and Farming

BRIEFING NOTE | What's the future for County Farms in England?

Background

On Monday 29th April the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Agroecology for Sustainable Food and Farming held a panel session on the future of county farms. The panellists included:

- **Guy Shrubsole**, Campaigner and author of Who Owns England?
- **George Dunn**, Chief Executive of the Tenant Farmers Association.
- **Vicki Hird**, Campaign Coordinator Food and Farming Policy at Sustain.
- **Mark Walton**, Director of Shared Assets.
- **Jyoti Fernandes**, Agroecological farmer and Land Workers Alliance.
- **Hugo Mallaby**, Rural Asset Manager for Cambridgeshire County Council.
- **Philip Bradshaw**, Cambridgeshire County Council Tenant Farmer.
- **Sue Pritchard**, Director of RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission.

The Decline of County Farms

In June last year an investigation by *Who Owns England?* revealed that the acreage of county farms in England halved over the past 40 years, from 426,695 acres in 1977 to just 215,155 acres in 2017. DEFRA's latest figures, published in February, show the decline continued between 2017 and 2018 with a further 3 per cent decrease in land. Regrettably, the sell-off doesn't appear to be slowing down with further sales announced this year as councils look to raise capital.

DEFRA's Package of Support

At the Oxford Real Farming Conference in January 2019 the Secretary of State, Michael Gove, promised a new package of support for county farms. Subsequently in a letter (4th March) to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee he stated the Government "recognise the importance of council farms, in particular the role they play in providing new entrants with a route into farming". The Secretary of State went on to say the Department "would like to create a financial incentive for local authorities who want to invest in their council farms".

Key Points from Panellists and Discussion

Governance

- There has been a significant decline in county farms, and as a result tenants, since the late 1970s. The remaining acreage should be viewed as a national asset, on trust in local hands, with better protection and accountability from all levels of government. In the first instance, this requires improved data and reporting to DEFRA about the county farm estate.

- New Clause 9 to the Agriculture Bill seeks to stop the decline, but further measures will be needed to reverse it. This could include a hands-on role for DEFRA and MHCLG in the strategic oversight of the estate, for example to help replace or prevent the sale of the best and most versatile agricultural land. Another option could be to mandate a 'community right to buy' if the council has taken the decision to sell.

- Developing a package of support for county farms is an area of policy we can get on and do regardless of Brexit, it's fundamentally about political choices and priorities. With vision, ambition and pace it's possible to stem the decline and invest for the future.

- Alongside the new package of support there needs to be a wider discussion about land, what it is for and how it is managed. The origins of county farms lie in the land reform following the late-Victorian agricultural depression and we should defend it in our wisdom.

Role and Value of County Farms

- County farms are an affordable way into farming for new entrants and an opportunity to renew the sector. The estate must also provide progression opportunities for existing tenants to move onwards and upwards. In that regard, the structure of the estate is important – there should be twice as many progression units as starter units. Progression doesn't always have to be within the estate and local authorities should advocate their tenants to landlords such as the National Trust, Duchy of Cornwall and Duchy of Lancaster.

- The ecosystem value of county farms needs to be captured as soon as possible, allowing local authorities to understand the potential - and demonstrate best value - beyond rent from flood risk management, carbon sequestration, education, green energy, etcetera.

- Going forward, councils should require, or continue to look favourably on, enhanced management and environmental obligations being included as part of the tender process and agreement – especially as many of these activities, for example restoring soil via minimum tillage, add value back to the estate.

- Cambridgeshire is the flagship county farm authority, with over 32,000 acres generating a sustainable income for the council in excess of £4m each year. Since 2009, they've had 109 new tenants join the estate at an average age of 30 – half the current UK farmer age. It could've been a very different story though, back in 1992 the council decided by only one vote not to sell.

- County farms could be used as incubators for agroecological farming, and for transitioning people from plot to farm scale. Agrivillages and One Planet Developments provide an interesting model to consider, integrating ecology, affordable housing and the opportunity to grow.

A New Model

- There needs to be a new purpose and model for the estate, with a focus on local economic resilience underpinned by social and environmental responsibility. The government should require or incentivise local community benefit, facilitation and shorter supply chains as part of its package.

- It's vital to make sure we have farmland that embodies sustainable resource, particularly in and around towns. As part of that, we need to reconnect the local community (council tax payers) with the estate - too many people simply don't know that council's own farms.

- County farms are well placed to demonstrate the positive outcome of the new post-EU system and should be 'publicly held beacons of a regenerative system'. To flourish, there needs to be support in the form of training, mentoring, capital grants and retirement planning for prospective and existing tenants.

- We need to think more creatively about the county farm estate, particularly the connection between people and food - far too often food is left out of the legislative picture.

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