



Why council farms have dwindled and what needs to be done

Lauren Harris 05 April 2022



© Steheap/AdobeStock

The government must increase its investment and limit land sales in order to restore and protect county holdings for the long-term benefit of next-generation farmers and local communities.

The call comes from the [Reimagining council farms: a vision for 2040](#) (PDF) report from CPRE, the countryside charity, which highlights the importance of these units.

They are essential to help form a new generation that is skilled and equipped to secure a sustainable food supply, alongside tackling climate change and many other challenges, the report states.

See also: [Scrutiny demanded as councils continue to sell farms estate](#)

The county farms estate across Great Britain also delivers many other benefits for local communities – providing access to open space and social enterprises such as care farms, as well as connecting the public to agriculture and food production.

However, the area of England's estate has more than halved over the past 40 years, and the number of holdings let has been massively reduced.

To generate a diverse and thriving farming sector, this issue clearly needs to be addressed, says CPRE.

Depleted opportunities

The latest Defra data show council farms in England and Wales cover about 1% of all agricultural land, 2.5% of tenanted land and 3-4% of farm holdings.

According to CPRE, a further 4,500ha of farms and farmland is held and let by councils.

The total area of council farm estates in England has fallen from 170,000ha in 1977 to 80,000ha in 2020, with a loss of 10,000 holdings since the mid-1960s.

In the past decade, about two-thirds of English councils with estates have sold land and one-third bought, with a net loss of 2,000ha a year.

The number of tenancies available in 2020 was down 27% on 2010, from 2,393 to 1,752.

In Wales, the area of land let on council farms has fallen 25% from 17,700ha in 2010 to 13,100ha in 2020.

Explore more / Know How

Visit our [Know How](#) centre for practical farming advice

Business management >

Why councils aren't prioritising their estates:

- Continued austerity and budget pressures driving farm sales

- Political short-termism
- Lack of a coherent up-to-date purpose nationally
- Conflict between managing for finance and other purposes
- The complexity of integrating land use with other policies

Meanwhile, for those wanting to go into farming, getting hold of a unit or land to do so has only become more difficult.

The price of farmland in Great Britain has tripled since 2001, with many non-farming buyers entering the market.

The tenanted sector – which covers about one-third of farmed land – has stagnated, with fewer opportunities, shorter terms, and nine out of 10 new farm business tenancies consisting of bare land only.

The area of council farms provides far more new chances than other let land, according to the report.

In 2019, council farms offered:

- More than one in 10 of all new farm business tenancies
- More than 12% of the total farmland area let
- Tenancies two years longer on average than by any other landowner
- One in six of all the lettings to new entrants
- Two-fifths of all equipped farms

Cohesive action

To protect and maintain council farms and realise CPRE's 2040 vision, the charity has called for 10 key 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 that 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 that 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 that 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 the 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 that protects and enhances the extent and quality of their farm estates.

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 introduce 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 through dynamic local procurement into council facilities.

Hope for the future

In these times of economic, ecological and health crises, the true value of land to society is becoming clear, the report concludes.

Policy is now reflecting the role land plays in food production and other vital services, from carbon storage to abundant and accessible space for nature and clean water.

It is also a major opportunity for those who own land and work it. The government can and must lead by example in terms of its own estate, says CPRE.

The government at all levels must harness the potential of its farmland to support this transition, to build a thriving and sustainable farming sector and to unlock the wider benefits to society that farmland can deliver.

If central and local government can work together to put in place the new shared purpose, framework and sustained investment needed, then there is hope that this irreplaceable asset will go on to be protected, enhanced and revitalised for the wider benefit of many generations to come, says the report.