



# Revitalising Rural

Realising the Vision

## The Rural Services Network

We are a membership organisation and we work on your behalf for rural communities.

The RSN is the national champion for rural services, ensuring that people in rural areas have a strong voice. We are fighting for a fair deal for rural communities to maintain their social and economic viability for the benefit of the nation.

Our membership comprises 121 rural local authorities plus over 215 other rural service providers and interest groups including Rural Housing Associations, Healthcare Trusts and Charities.

You can find out more about the RSN at our website [www.rsnonline.org.uk](http://www.rsnonline.org.uk).

We always welcome new members and if you are interested in joining the RSN, click here for more information. [Join the RSN!](#)

## Revitalising Rural, Realising the Vision

Revitalising Rural, Realising the Vision is a campaign run by the RSN, which sets out a number of policy asks in 14 key subject areas to help support rural areas to achieve their full potential, and to 'level-up' areas of historical underinvestment.



# Revitalising Rural

Realising the Vision

## SUSTAINABLE FARMING AND LAND MANAGEMENT



### Why it matters

Food on the plate is something we (in England) have tended to take for granted. However, one thing learnt from the Covid-19 lockdown is that some foodstuffs depend highly on imports, delivered on a just-in-time basis. Whilst trade in food can bring many benefits, there is growing interest in the ability of the nation to feed itself.

Farming remains an important source of employment in many rural areas, even after decades of change bringing efficiency gains. It supports many other rural jobs in the supply chain, too, such as those upstream producing farm inputs and those downstream in food processing. Indirectly, it also helps support other rural employment, as farmers and farm employees use local shops and services.

Many farms have diversified their businesses, particularly into retail and tourism. As a result, they contribute to the wider economy through enterprises like farm shops and visitor accommodation.

Farmers, foresters, and other land managers are stewards of the land and fundamentally shape our countryside. It is a countryside variously enjoyed by both nearby residents and by visitors for its openness, beauty, peacefulness, wildlife, and leisure opportunities.

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## The national policy context

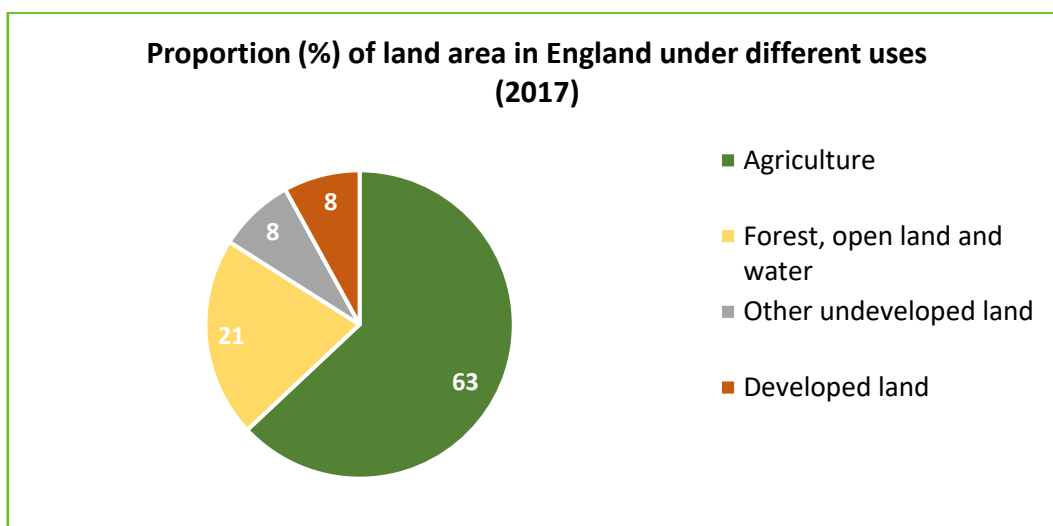
Key elements of national policy include:

- Post-EU reforms – preparing for departure from the EU and its Common Agricultural Policy, the UK Government published proposals in 2018 which would shift agricultural subsidies so that they fund public goods in future. This shift is expected to happen over a seven-year period, whilst the EU farm subsidy scheme is phased out. It will align subsidies with goals set out in the 25 Year Environment Plan, such as those for clean air, clean water, flood mitigation and thriving wildlife. Development of the proposals is being progressed under the policy banner, The Future for Food, Farming and the Environment. Government has said that the overall funding level for farm subsidies will not reduce, though there will inevitably be some redistribution that creates winners and losers.
- Agriculture Bill – this legislation will make provision for payments under the replacement subsidy scheme. In England, those subsidies will be paid through an Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme, which is due to start major trials in 2021 and to be fully operational by 2024. Some tests are already being run. It is proposed that ELM should operate at three levels, with grants to support individual farm practice, local area priorities and landscape scale projects. Additional Productivity Grants will be available to help farmers invest in equipment, technology, infrastructure, value added products and new business models.
- National Food Strategy – an independent review has been taking place to inform the Government’s plan for a National Food Strategy. This is looking at the whole supply chain, from food production through to food purchasing. It is also exploring issues such as food security, health impacts, environmental impacts, and economic value. A part one report from the independent review has been published, focused on short-term Covid-19 and EU exit issues.
- Workforce – UK farming has been highly dependent on seasonal labour from EU member states, especially the edible horticulture sector. Future access to that labour force will alter, given the agreement reached between the UK and EU. A UK migration system which seeks to attract higher earning migrants is unlikely to favour farm workers. Meanwhile, Government has run a pilot Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS), to test giving vegetable and fruit growers access to a temporary workforce, subject to certain conditions.
- Flood defences – the Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution announced a six-year programme of investment to improve flood and coastal defences, recognising the damage caused by recent flood events and the growing risk due to climate change. It notes that land management practice and nature-based solutions have important roles to play.



## The rural dimension

Agriculture is easily the predominant land use in England. Just over 63% of its land area is used for agriculture.<sup>1</sup>



The agriculture, forestry, and fishing sector accounts for:

- 4% of all registered businesses in England as a whole; and
- 15% of all registered businesses in the rural areas of England.<sup>2</sup>

In England around 350,000 people are employed in registered businesses which fall within the agriculture, forestry, and fishing sector. Although they comprise only 1.3% of employment nationally, the sector is an important part of rural economies and especially so in areas which have a sparse population.

### *Employment in agriculture, forestry, and fishing sector in England registered businesses (2018/19)*

<sup>1</sup> *Land Use in England 2017*, Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2019).

<sup>2</sup> *Statistical Digest of Rural England*, Defra (2020), based on Inter Departmental Business Register 2018/19 data.

	Number employed in sector	As per cent of all employment
Across England	354,545	1.3%
In all rural areas	308,235	7.5%
Just in sparse rural areas	30,805	14.0%

The UK is 75% self-sufficient in the food and drink products which can be grown in the country (due to climate, etc) and 61% self-sufficient in all food and drink products that are consumed in the country. Across the whole of the food and farming sector, the UK:

- Exported £20 billion worth of food and drink products; and
- Imported £43 billion worth of food and drink products.<sup>3</sup>

Over the period from 2014 to 2020 farmers across the UK were allocated around £22.3 billion in direct subsidy payments, offering income support under pillar one of the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Typically, these CAP payments made up around 50% to 60% of a farm's income in England, though this proportion is likely to be higher in places with difficult farming conditions, such as upland areas.

The agriculture sector (and, indeed, the food sector) have been heavily reliant on migrant labour. This is especially so for short-term summer tasks, such as fruit and vegetable picking.<sup>4</sup> The great majority of this labour force has come from countries which joined the EU from 2004 onwards.

***Migrant labour working in the UK food and agriculture sectors (2016)***

Migrant labour groups (from other EU states)	Numbers estimated in 2016
Working long-term in the agriculture sector	27,000
Working in the food manufacturing sector	116,000
Working temporarily for summer in agriculture	75,000

## Policy solutions

The coming years will inevitably be a period of considerable change and, for many, uncertainty in the agricultural sector. It is important that policy changes are clear and fair, so those in the sector can plan ahead with a reasonable degree of confidence.

<sup>3</sup> *Brexit: Future UK Agriculture Policy*, House of Commons library briefing paper (2018) – figures are for 2016.

<sup>4</sup> *Migrant Workers in Agriculture*, House of Commons library briefing paper (2017) - based on Quarterly Labour Force Survey data for 2016.



## Sustainable Farming and Land Management

### Specific policy asks

**Future farm support:** Government should ensure that ELM payments are set at a level which rewards good practice. That scheme should be based on proportionate rules and administration. There is considerable scope for the agricultural sector to contribute to the UK's 2050 net zero target and to help realise natural capital benefits. However, it is equally important that home grown food production is valued and that all future Trade Deals do not allow lowering import standards which undercut home grown produce.

**Diversification:** the UK Shared Prosperity Fund should make grant funding available to farmers where they have well thought through diversification projects that enhance the wider rural economy. This could benefit from a dedicated rural funding stream (as recommended in the chapter *UK Shared Prosperity Fund* of this document).

**Local foods:** greater effort should go into promoting UK products and encouraging local foods, the latter typically enabling food producers to capture more of their value. This could include small grant support for product development and the launch of promotional campaigns.

**Seasonal labour:** Government should be more sympathetic to the seasonal labour needs of the agricultural sector. It should quickly develop policies which ensure an adequate supply from 2021 onwards, which could involve a greatly expanded SAWS scheme. The support for Agri-tech robotics and AI should also be increased.

**Flood management:** the Government's six-year programme to improve flood defences is welcome. Urgent action is needed in rural areas which have experienced serious flood events during the last few years. A timescale for the works should be provided to those rural communities.