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FARMERS WEEKLY

TRANSITION

Securing a sustainable future for your farm business

NEW VISION

How family farm businesses are driving positive change

How to build a stronger family farm

Welcome to *Transition*, the quarterly supplement from *Farmers Weekly* to help you secure a sustainable future for your farm business. In this issue, we examine a key option for family farms trying to generate additional revenue to make up the shortfall in income following the phase-out of the Basic Payment Scheme in England.

We begin with a detailed look at stacking – the principle of building multiple income streams on a single land parcel. This approach can also build resilience through a more diverse business set-up. A fresh approach to farm management is also central to our special report on family charters, with some of the most successful farming families sharing decision-making responsibilities rather than relying on a single individual.

Sticking with the family theme, there are some changes to our Transition Farmer line-up. First, we welcome our first report from Beth Speakman, who is working alongside her father, Kit, to create a more integrated beef and arable business. The second change is a decision by Karen and Tom Halton to pursue a career path away from farming. We wish them well and are hugely grateful to them for opening the doors on their exemplary Cheshire dairy unit over the past four years.

This means we have a vacancy for a new Transition Farmer or couple. If you would like more details about joining us and securing a sustainable future for your farm business, please email jonathan.riley@markallengroup.com.

As always, we are grateful to our Transition Partners for sharing their expertise and supporting our Transition Farmers with help and advice. For more about our Transition initiative, visit our knowledge hub at **fwi.co.uk/transition**.

Johann Tasker, *Transition* editor

OUR PARTNERS

The *Farmers Weekly* Transition Partner Network is a UK-wide community of farmers, industry stakeholders and influencers working together to secure a sustainable future for UK agriculture. If you would like to join and want more information, contact Anna Eccleston at anna.eccleston@markallengroup.com

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Meet our Transition Farmers

These 16 farmers are sharing their journeys with us as they adapt their businesses

Karen Halton
Cheshire

P28

Farm size 240ha

Enterprises
530-cow dairy herd

Transition goals
- Recruit/retain staff
- Maintain animal health and welfare
- Increase direct sales

James MacCartney
Rutland

Farm size 162ha

Enterprises
Beef and sheep

Transition goals
- Reduce disease in sheep
- Be better than net zero
- Establish herbal leys

Vaughan Hodgson
Cumbria

Farm size 244ha

Enterprises
Cereals, grassland, broilers

Transition goals
- Support the next generation
- Replace lost Basic Payment Scheme income
- Adapt to uncertain weather

Alan Steven
Fife

Farm size 138ha

Enterprises
Potatoes, brussels sprouts, parsnips, malting barley

Transition goals
- Reduce cultivations
- Improve soil health
- More resilient rotations

Andrew McFadzean
Ayrshire

Farm size 285ha

Enterprises
350 beef cattle, wheat, beans, barley, fodder beet

Transition goals
- Slash finishing time
- Reduce dependence on inputs using solar energy
- Improve grassland

Rachel & Richard Risdon
Devon

Farm size 161ha

Enterprises
300-cow dairy herd

Transition goals
- Secure adequate labour
- Better understanding of Environmental Land Management
- Reduce carbon footprint

Beth Speakman
Essex

P27

Farm size 275ha

Enterprises
Mixed arable, beef and sheep

Transition goals
- Bridge income gap
- Fully diversified business
- Widen the rotation

Eddie Andrew
Sheffield

P17

Farm size 73ha

Enterprises
Dairy, milk delivery service, ice cream parlour and farm shop

Transition goals
- Co-operating to reduce costs
- Establish a new dairy
- Reduce carbon footprint

Irwel Jones
Carmarthenshire

Farm size 375ha

Enterprises
1,500 ewes on owned and rented land, suckler cows and followers, root crops

Transition goals
- Manage natural woodland
- Plant hedgerows
- Rely less on volatile inputs

Andy Bason
Hampshire

Farm size 800ha

Enterprises
Cereals, spring beans, oats, linseed and oilseed rape

Transition goals
- Cut carbon emissions by 30%
- Establish 10ha of agroforestry
- Establish 10ha of woodland

Duncan Blyth
Norfolk

Farm size 2,650ha

Enterprises
Cereals, oilseed rape, sugar beet, pulses, grassland, woodland, wetlands

Transition goals
- Improve soil health
- Develop natural capital revenues
- Achieve net zero by 2030

Fergal Watson
County Down

Farm size 285ha across three units

Enterprises
170-cow suckler herd, beans, wheat, spring barley, oats

Transition goals
- Recruit/retain farm staff
- Restructure suckler herd
- Improve business resilience

Philip Vickers
County Durham

Farm size 1,250ha

Enterprises
Winter wheat, oilseed rape, spring barley, spring beans, lupins, rotational grass; share-farming agreement with tenant sheep farmer

Transition goals
- Maintain margins while changing approach
- Improve soil health and resilience
- Enhance natural environment

Kate and Vicky Morgan
East Yorkshire

Farm size 1,700 breeding sows

Enterprises
Weaning 1,000 pigs a week – finished on-site and through B&B arrangements with local farmers, 140ha rented out

Transition goals
- Facilitate structural change in supply chain
- Establish more influence over own destiny
- Diversify

Ed Shuldham
Wiltshire

P13&17

Farm size 1,800ha

Enterprises
Cereals, oilseed rape, oats, forage and grain maize, peas, solar, biomass, anaerobic digestion, events and property diversifications

Transition goals
- Help shape Sustainable Farming Incentive through participation in pilot
- Make more use of data
- Take natural capital

Matthew Williams
Shropshire

P27

Farm size 1,100ha

Enterprises
Cereals, oilseed rape, winter beans

Transition goals
- Improve profitability and margins
- Continue to improve soil health
- Control and optimise input use

Your soil carbon could be worth more than you think

Northumberland beef and sheep farmer Dr Matt Jordon, who is also Chief Scientific Officer for Regenerate Outcomes, explains how farmers can earn additional revenue from healthy soil.

Improving soil health drives crop and livestock performance, reduces the need for external inputs, cuts costs and grows profits.

In addition, it also creates the opportunity for farmers to generate income by selling soil carbon credits.

What is soil carbon?

Practices such as mob or rotational grazing, increasing sward diversity and reducing cultivation, all help to build soil organic matter. Organic matter is all the living or once-living things which soil contains and is made up of approximately 50 per cent carbon by weight.

Very simply, the more organic matter you have in your soil the more carbon it contains and the healthier it is.

Selling your soil carbon

Soil carbon contained in organic matter all represents carbon dioxide which has been removed from the atmosphere through photosynthesis.

As businesses look to achieve 'net zero' this creates a market for selling removals in the form of carbon credits.

Carbon removals are measured in tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent. One tonne of carbon dioxide equivalent is equal to one carbon credit.

Baselining and measuring soil carbon

In order to generate and sell carbon credits, farmers must demonstrate a growth in carbon stocks over time.

The first step is to obtain an accurate soil carbon baseline, from which increases can be measured and quantified to generate carbon credits.

Even if you are uncertain about selling carbon credits from your farm, getting a baseline will give you the option of doing so in the future. Without a baseline in place any value you create will go unrewarded.

The deadline for arranging a spring soil carbon baseline falls in November.

Choosing the right baseline

To maximise the value of the carbon credits you generate, it is important to get a high integrity baseline.

It makes most sense to get a baseline which follows an international verification standard, such as the Verified Carbon Standard.

This will enable you to earn more from your carbon, as verified credits trade for a premium price and are more likely to retain value over time.

Many farmers find it beneficial to work with a trusted partner like Regenerate Outcomes, who can facilitate baselining to a very high standard that is compatible with verification schemes. Regenerate Outcomes is the only UK programme that measures soil carbon stocks every five years, at no upfront cost.

The financial benefits of healthy soil

A recent study in the US has shown significant reductions in the cost of inputs on farms which adopted regenerative practices.

Results for livestock farms after five years included on average a 38% reduction in veterinary bills and 40% fewer days using processed feed, while arable farms saw a 22% reduction in fuel use per acre and a 37% reduction in synthetic fertiliser applications.

Prioritising production

Amid all the changes which the sector faces, the priority for most farmers remains the same: Running a profitable business while producing food.

The beauty of improving soil health is that it supports these core aims alongside wider impacts such as carbon sequestration and increasing biodiversity.

Generating carbon credits should not be about replacing food production. It is about gaining an added benefit while building a resilient farming business based on healthy soil.

How stacking could boost your farm revenue

Could stacking income streams on land parcels make up for the financial loss of government support. **Jonathan Riley** asks the experts

Volatile prices and weather extremes have added risk and uncertainty to farm businesses while dwindling government support has caused a shortfall between pre- and post-Brexit incomes. To make up that shortfall and spread risks, analysts and advisers are advocating a rethink of the traditional whole-farm management approach. Instead, they suggest a hectare-by-hectare strategy focused on producing multiple income streams from land parcels – a process known as stacking.

Stacking incomes can squeeze the most financial benefit out of a piece of land while the diversified streams help to spread the business risk, adding a layer of protection against market changes and the impact of extreme weather. Here, four *Transition* partners – Agrovista consultant Lewis Butlin, AHDB senior economist Dr Amandeep Kaur Purewal, Agreena regen farming lead Thomas Gent and Environment Bank principal land manager Rory Hodgson – explain how stacking can bolster incomes.

How to start the stacking process

Stacking activities fit into three broad areas:
- Production
- Publicly funded schemes
- Privately funded ventures.

1. Production

"Headline figures for funding schemes can be attractive, but efficient production could still yield the highest income per hectare," says Lewis. He cites an example of a farm that adopted herbal leys across its entire pasture to maximise Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) payments.

Under the herbal ley, grass growth was reduced, silage yields fell and the farm had to buy in forage to achieve the herd's milking potential. It would have been more profitable to prioritise the grass growth on the most productive land and look to alternative options that could be stacked on other areas of the farm, he says. "The example highlights that you must establish a detailed picture of the farm's production potential before jumping into alternative incomes," says Lewis.

AHDB analysis shows that the top 25% of farm businesses have a better grip on their costs and assets, says Amandeep. There was no single thing they were doing but attention to detail was key.

So the first step in the stacking process is to review business data in as much detail as possible, she suggests. The review should include financial and production performance figures and data on all assets. This will help identify the most- and least-productive areas, which is crucial when looking at where stacking will yield the most benefit. Once the output on each land parcel has been established, consider changes that could potentially improve soil health and yields, such as:
- New technology that improves efficiency
- Cover crops for soil health
- Rotation improvements to limit disease and boost soil health
- Intercropping or bicropping to help improve soil fertility, cut disease and add incomes
- Low-tillage options to improve organic matter and reduce input costs
- Better stock or plant genetics that improve production and meet added value markets.

Once the potential production system changes are identified, consider what funding measures could be stacked to help facilitate these.

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STACKING – RULES AND JARGON

There are rules that govern what, and how many, public- and private-funded options can be stacked on a single piece of land. From the outset it's important to understand the key principles and jargon linked to the stacking process.
- **What is stacking?** Stacking refers to using a block of land to generate income from multiple streams such as production, environment schemes, grants, supply chain incentives, natural capital agreements and diversifications.
- **Additionality** To receive funding, farmers must demonstrate work undertaken for an environment or welfare scheme will result in a measurable, extra benefit. This is referred to as "additionality".
- **Double funding** Double funding legislation is one of the biggest challenges in stacking payments for Transition work. The rules are in place to prevent farmers from getting paid by two schemes for the same environmental outcome or improvement.


Agroforestry can yield fruit and nut crops on top of scheme payments

2. Publicly funded schemes

England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland offer government-backed incentives to improve the environment and farm business resilience. For example, Scotland's Preparing for Sustainable Farming (PSF) grant provides funding for soil sampling. These not only provide some additional income but they improve efficiency and productivity, says Lewis. Payments like this can be stacked on top of the agricultural output, he adds.

In England, the SFI scheme is the main government support. Although it is currently suspended for applications, it is expected to reopen in 2026. The following examples and analysis are based on the 2024 round and are a guide only to the principles of stacking payments.

"The SFI alone is not going to be enough to make up for the loss of EU support, but a carefully planned set of stacked options will help make up a significant amount of the shortfall," says Lewis. "It must be noted these payments come with additional management and groundwork costs to implement, particularly in the first year, which must be borne in mind," adds Amandeep.

Using farm models of grass-based and arable production, Amandeep's analysis has found that an increase in profit was likely for both farm types, where SFI actions were implemented without sacrificing the most productive areas.

Livestock

Stacked example SFI options for grassland production systems:

- CSAM1 Assess soil, produce a soil management plan and test soil organic matter
- CNUM1 Assess nutrient management and produce a review report
- CIPM1 Assess integrated pest management and produce a plan
- Boundary – CHRW1 Assess and record hedgerow condition (if entered, both sides will get double the payment rate – if have control/ownership)
- Boundary – CHRW2 Manage hedgerows condition (if entered, both sides will get double the payment rate – if have control/ownership)
- Boundary – CHRW3 Maintain or establish hedgerow trees (covers both sides of hedgerow, so just the payment rate as shown, £10/100m)
- PRF1 – Variable-rate application of nutrients
- PRF2 – Camera or remote sensor guided herbicide spraying
- CSAM3 – Herbal ley

Source: Amandeep Kaur Purewal/AHDB.

When applied to the model 150ha AHDB beef and sheep farm, similar options benefited incomes by up to £10,500/year over the three-year SFI agreement.

Arable

Stacked example options for arable production systems:

- CSAM1 Assess soil, produce a soil management plan and test soil organic matter
- CNUM1 Assess nutrient management and produce a review report
- CIPM1 Assess integrated pest management and produce a plan
- Boundary – CHRW1 Assess and record hedgerow condition (if entered, both sides will get double the payment rate – if have control/ownership)
- Boundary – CHRW2 Manage hedgerows condition (if entered, both sides will get double the payment rate – if have control/ownership)
- Boundary – CHRW3 Maintain or establish hedgerow trees (covers both sides of hedgerow, so just the payment rate as shown, £10/100m)
- SOH1 – No-till farming
- PRF1 – Variable-rate application of nutrients
- PRF2 – Camera or remote sensor guided herbicide spraying
- PRF4 – Mechanical robotic weeding
- SOH2 - Multispecies spring cover crop
- CIPM4 – No use of insecticide on arable or permanent crops
- CAHL2 – Winter bird food on arable and horticultural land
- AHW2 – Supplementary winter bird food (if there was a crop within this land parcel, for example, rapeseed, could also do CIPM3 – companion cropping)

Source: Amandeep Kaur Purewal/AHDB.

When the AHDB applied this level of stacking to a virtual 450ha arable farm, the model showed it received £18,400-£40,700 in additional income, depending on the level of options applied for.

With both livestock and arable models the more ambitious actions must be carefully balanced against production. "The additional land taken up could affect grass or cash-crop yields and net profit levels are more likely to suffer if these actions are carried out on productive land," points out Amandeep.

Low till boosts soil health and cuts input costs

Grant schemes
Alongside the SFI, or regional equivalent, there are grants that could provide further stacked income as long as additionality rules are met.

Woodland Creation grants
Under the Nature for Climate Fund, the England Woodland Creation Offer (Ewco) pays out up to £10,200/ha, plus bonuses for projects that deliver wider benefits. The goal is to provide public benefits, contribute to 2050 net-zero targets and create habitat for native flora and fauna.

There are four types of payment:

- Funding for 100% of standard capital costs to establish new woodland
- Annual maintenance costs for 15 years to protect the young trees
- A contribution towards installing infrastructure to enable management or recreational access
- Funding where the location allows additional public benefits including nature restoration, flood risk reduction, water quality improvements, riverside habitat improvements and recreational access.

Planting woodland not only attracts grants but also opens opportunities for stacking carbon credits or biodiversity net gain (BNG) units. Despite the headline payments, the costs associated with the work required mean margins are quite tight. "Again, consider the net return and ensure the options chosen fit with production aims," advises Lewis.

Capital grants
Capital grants are available for projects such as hedgerow planting, water quality improvements and natural flood management, and are offered across the four UK regions. They include:

- Improving Farm Productivity
- Farming Equipment and Technology Fund
- Countryside Stewardship Capital Grants
- Future Farm Investment Scheme (Scotland)
- Small Grants – water or woodland (Wales)
- Farm Business Improvement Scheme (NI)
- Farmers Start-Up Grant (NI)
- Rural Business Development Grant (NI).

Innovate UK grants
The Farming Innovation Programme is a joint approach by Defra and Innovate UK to foster business-led research initiatives that help reduce farming's environmental impact and find new ways of increasing productivity. It does this through the Accelerating Development of Practices and Technologies (Adopt) scheme – farmer-led R&D projects that demonstrate the on-farm viability of technology and innovation.

Two grants are available – a facilitator grant, that funds expert support to make an application, and the project grant itself, worth up to £100,000.

3. Privately funded ventures
"Private funding for UK farming's environmental efforts and natural assets is an income stream with huge potential," says Rory. "While private funding markets are still not a widely accessed source of finance on farms, they are gaining momentum as pressures on finances mount."

There are now concrete examples of corporate investors willing to invest in agricultural works such as climate action and nature recovery, that help meet their company goals for sustainability, adds Thomas. Among the best-known options are carbon credits, issued for sequestration and reduction in emissions and BNG units for wildlife habitat creation and restoration.

Carbon credits
A carbon credit is a tradable financial unit that represents the removal of 1t of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere or the equivalent reduction in emissions. Carbon credits are an additional payment that reward sustainable farming efforts. "It is possible to stack carbon credits with certain environmental scheme options and BNG unit trading," says Thomas. For example, you could be paid for BNG units by a developer and for carbon credits by a corporation with a net-zero strategy for separate contracts on the same land. "Carbon credits work alongside regenerative farming practices," adds Thomas.

"The first step is to review the farm's management data for the previous five years. From that information, we can carry out a carbon audit and establish a baseline to gauge the improvements in carbon from the new practices adapted in subsequent years," he says.

Practices include regenerative farming practices such as low-till, wider rotations and cover crop use. Agreena will carry out the data verification process for the new approach and annual auditing of sustainable farming methods.

The farmer has a requirement to submit new data post-harvest for the previous 12 months each year. Agreena then calculates the number of carbon credits and issues those credits to the market. Values can vary, but the normal range that a farmer can earn per hectare is between £20 and £50. Once issued, the credits belong to the farm business, says Thomas.

There has been some reticence on entering the carbon market. "However, there is no commitment to trade credits on the carbon market straight away. Instead, they can be stored up over years if desired," Thomas explains. Delaying the process of issuing credits just means the farm is missing out on years of potential rewards for sustainable work, he adds. When ready to sell, Agreena will take the credits to market and find buyers.

BNG
The BNG scheme is underpinned by UK environmental policy that requires construction developments to have a measurably positive impact on biodiversity. The units quantify the value of habitats, such as hedgerows, and watercourses.

Environment Bank creates and sells BNG units to developers, allowing them to meet the mandatory government requirements. "The first step is for farmers to register the details of their land with Environment Bank," says Rory. A team of ecologists will then identify suitable habitat areas and management options that will integrate with the existing farming use. Environment Bank enters an agreement to lease land and its staff work with farmers to create or improve existing habitats.

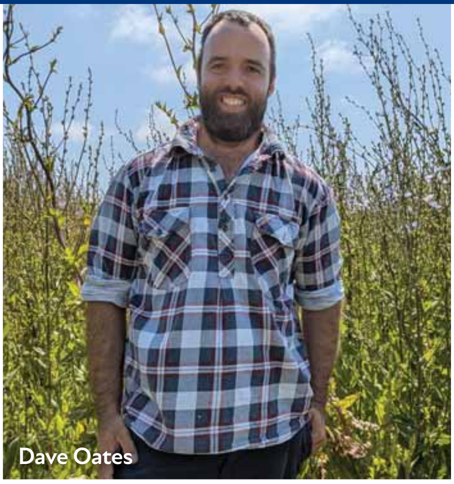
This generates thriving plant and wildlife populations that can be measured and converted into BNG units, which developers can purchase >


Woodland grants are available and can dovetail with BNG and carbon schemes

CASE STUDY: DAVE OATES

Cornish farmer Dave Oates believes farms need to stack enterprises and offer more than food alone to remain financially and environmentally sustainable.

Dave is a Nature Friendly Farming Network ambassador, and he and his brother Stuart are the seventh generation of the Oates family to manage Rosuick Farm on the Lizard peninsula. Key to preserving Rosuick for future generations is the philosophy that farming should use the land to provide goods and services that benefit both society and the natural environment.


Dave Oates

Multi-level system

Also a Nuffield scholar studying the potential of stacking, Dave has refined farming practice at Rosuick into a system that works on multiple levels. Broadly, at the base level, the system is an extension of traditional farming with organic production of beef and sheep and mixed arable rotations including diverse cropping, he explains. The next level is building soil fertility and increasing carbon stocks, which could have a financial gain. Permanent pasture used to be the least profitable areas under the Basic Payment Scheme, says Dave.

But now, some grassland is under the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) herbal ley option, while others are in species-rich grassland options. Hay crops are taken from these areas and wildflower seed is harvested using a machine developed by Dave and Stuart. The seed is then sown under contract on local farms with biodiversity net gain sites adding another income stream.

For the arable enterprise, there is a focus on carbon, with some of the farm baselined after soil sampling. The carbon data is held for insetting to trade within the farm's supply chain rather than sold as credits.

Wild bird seed plots

Mixes of wild bird seed plots, grown under Countryside Stewardship, have been tweaked to include varieties that add positively to the soil microbiome, boosting plant health and growth. The palatable mix provides a further opportunity, with cattle brought in to graze once the seeds have been taken off. The forage source can provide weeks of additional feed for the beef herd. Finally, the aftermath acts as a green manure ahead of the incoming crop.

Agroforestry is then stacked on top of this. The agroforestry venture is set to expand, with 40ha planted in the past few years, says Dave. Natural blocks of willow have added silvoculture opportunities, providing shade and shelter for grazing animals and, in turn, improving growth rates and yields. Other fields have different tree species either for fruit or timber.

Woodland

The woodland enterprise is funded by Forest for Cornwall, which paid for all of the establishment. An aim is to secure SFI payments for maintenance as the trees mature. Hedgerows can provide further income through SFI management options and planting trees that can yield further, timber, fruit and nut crops.

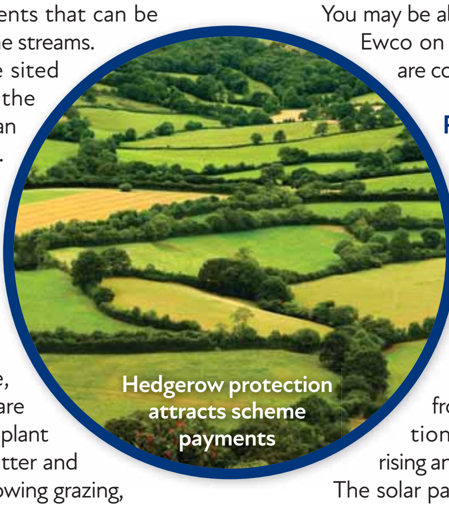
Improving hedgerows is an important venture because they yield an additional income from previously unproductive areas. They also provide soil fertility and wildlife habitat, says Dave. Improving the wildlife habitats makes the farm more attractive to visitors and research bodies and that has created further income streams.

One such example is a Farm Innovation Project. The projects allow the farm to cover costs for some crops but, importantly, give detailed data to inform decision-making, says Dave. Almost 60 school visits also take place at the farm each year along with farm walks for farmers, research organisations and environmental groups.

All of the school visits are funded via Countryside Stewardship agreements, while the farm walks are paid for at an hourly rate. Events like weddings are hosted on the wild bird seed plots adding another income stream.

< to offset habitat loss from their projects. Lease agreements are for a minimum 30-year period, providing landowners with guaranteed rent and management payments that can be stacked with other income streams.

Habitat banks can be sited on poorer land so that the more productive areas can continue to be farmed. Certain agricultural use is allowable on the area designated for BNG unit production and habitat banks fit well with sustainable livestock farming, Rory points out. For example, grazing and hay cutting are encouraged to stimulate plant growth, build organic matter and enhance biodiversity following grazing, he says.


Hedgerow protection attracts scheme payments

It means as well as the BNG unit income it's possible to stack revenue from lamb, beef or hay. BNG can also incorporate woodland areas as part of the habitat creation and enhancement. The landowner receives rent and management payments for the woodland but can also benefit from the timber, fruit or nut crops, adding further income potential, says Rory.

You may be able to utilise BNG and the Ewco on the same land, but there are constraints.

Renewable energy

Land may also be leased to renewable energy companies such as Lightsource BP, which works with farmers and landowners on solar packages. Leases of more than 30 years are offered.

Rental incomes are paid from the outset of construction work and index-linked, rising annually in line with inflation.

The solar panels and equipment typically occupy only 40% of the leased land, and the design of the arrays offers stacking possibilities with livestock production.

Landscape Enterprise Networks (Lens)

Other areas where funding can be secured are through Landscape Enterprise Networks (Lens). Private companies invest directly in projects that enhance their operations or supply chains, building resilience to climate change.

Like the Adopt scheme, Lens brings together private organisations and farmers to collaborate on environmental change and supply chain resilience. It first identifies the organisations, such as food suppliers and utility companies, with a need and an ability to fund environmental good practice. It then engages farmers that can provide the natural assets to meet those needs. Finally, Lens negotiates transactions between the farmer and the company to fund the work.

Supply chain schemes

Supply chain incentives offered by processors or buyers are also emerging as valuable stackable income streams. One such scheme is Arla's FarmAhead programme, a point-based system that rewards specified environmentally sustainable activities. Up to 3 eurocents/litre can be earned per farm. Points are distributed across 19 option areas, allowing farmers to find ones that suit their particular regimes and environmental targets. Further points are added for attending knowledge exchange events throughout the year. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY: GNP, TIM SCRIVENER, ADOBE STOCK, CLAYDON, PAUL MAGUIRE/ISTOCKPHOTO, DAVE OATES

Planning for 2040: Essential skills for your farm to thrive

With technology playing an increasing part in driving efficiencies on farms, it's never been more important to ensure your business has the skills to make the most of the opportunities innovations can bring.

Farming is evolving rapidly and the skills gap is growing. Three-quarters of agricultural employers haven't undertaken formal management training in the past three years, and more than half say their teams lack key competencies in areas such as health and safety, digital technology and environmental management.

This shortfall is already hitting the bottom line. UK farm productivity lags behind that of many of our European neighbours, where structured training is standard. The top 25% of UK farms are almost twice as productive as the bottom 25% and continuous skills development is a major reason why.

By 2040, profitable farms will look completely different. After years of workforce decline, growth is expected, but this will require a different set of skills.

Automation, robotics, drones and precision data tools are transforming how we farm. Yet only around a quarter of smaller farms currently use precision technology, compared with nearly two-thirds of larger operations.

Farming's skills shortage

55% of farmers report that their staff lack adequate health and safety skills.

51% lack knowledge in environmental management.

41% of the agricultural workforce are missing basic IT skills.

37% of respondents are not confident they can find and retain skilled staff.

Visit tiah.org/planning-for-2040 for more on this including the key skills for the future.

Skills driving success

That gap is widening – and those who don't adapt risk being left behind.

Research shows 95% of agricultural workers would benefit from upskilling as technology reshapes farming and growing.

The most in-demand skills? Digital literacy, data analysis, biosecurity, environmental management and effective communication.

The farms investing in their people are building stronger, more efficient, and more resilient businesses.

Training improves productivity, boosts staff satisfaction, increasing retention, and it also helps attract the next generation of talent. In today's competitive market, upskilling isn't a 'nice-to-have' any more, it's an essential business strategy.

Benefits to upskilling

Technology and regulation are moving fast. The farms that invest in skills today are already seeing the benefits – higher productivity, better staff engagement, and improved profitability.

Future-proof your farm: Join TIAH today

THE Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture (TIAH) is the professional body created to support UK farmers and growers with accessible, relevant, and affordable training.

Flexible and affordable, TIAH membership starts from just £12 a month. Become a member and you can:

- **Access tailored learning:** Quickly access farm-focused courses on topics of real relevance to farmers and growers, which are designed to fit around your busy schedule.
- **Download practical tools and resources:** Access contract templates, guides, webinars and much more.
- **Evidence your professionalism:** Get the recognition your skills deserve by tracking your achievements in one place, speeding up farm audit CPD checks.

To find out more:
Call: 0300 131 1257
Email: Jemma@tiah.org
Visit: www.tiah.org

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Why improving water is a waiting game

Farming has a key role in improving rivers and watercourses – and financial rewards are gradually materialising. **Louise Impey** reports

Putting resilience measures into a farming business is one of the best ways to protect water, prevent pollution and retain more water in the landscape. With many of the major water quality initiatives paused due to funding constraints, current advice focuses on encouraging farmers to understand how land management practices and input applications impact water.

"Water is a good metric for what's happening to the farm," says Richard Reynolds, senior agronomy adviser of Anglian Water. "If you are losing valuable inputs off the farm due to water movement, from either run-off or leaching, you are probably losing money.

"Knowing what these losses are is a good place to start; once there's a better understanding of the challenge at an individual farm level, there's usually a plan that can be implemented to solve it. It's a win-win; good for the farm and good for water," Richard says.

Nitrates

His advice to farmers in the East is to concentrate on nitrates. "This will become a bigger issue in dry years, when there is less water in the rivers and crops are unable to take up fertiliser applications. It's particularly relevant for arable farmers. Metaldehyde used to be our biggest challenge, now its nitrates, so farmers should expect greater scrutiny of nitrogen applications and be prepared to work collaboratively to reduce losses."

In wet years, pesticides are the main issue, he adds. "Again, it's the loss of investment that we focus on with farmers. Finding ways to keep them on the land makes sense for everyone."

Sustainable water management practices are varied, he adds, meaning that there are plenty of solutions to consider. "In a water company's case, where the system has been designed around pesticide and nutrient challenges, soil health is an obvious place to start – if your soil is working like a sponge, it will be holding more of the water and minimising those losses."

For most, that means improving soil organic matter levels to improve its water holding capacity and increase infiltration rates, as well as looking for ways to keep the soil covered and reducing tillage where appropriate.

Grant funding

Anglian Water recognises that farmers often have the local solutions that work, so its Farming Innovation Grant programme is run to support those risk-sharing ideas and fund approaches that can be scaled up. "It provides up to £7,500 per farm," says Richard. "Although we have defined application windows, we are always prepared to look at projects that will help with the water quality challenges we all face." Training and events grants

WHERE IS THE MONEY COMING FROM?

Agri-environment schemes, water company catchment management partnerships and local environmental initiatives are all ways to get financial help with making changes for water, but farmer ambition is currently ahead of funding availability.

Payments for ecosystem services such as flood mitigation haven't progressed as hoped for, although some private money for long-term projects is being discussed and the first Landscape Recovery projects are now moving forward.

For those in Higher Tier Countryside Stewardship, there are higher paying, long-term options for water protection, such as managing species-rich floodplain meadows. Otherwise, the new version of the Sustainable Farming Incentive, when it is opened next year, is expected to have bundles of actions that help with water quality aims.

Housing developers

Nutrient Neutrality, a planning policy where housing developers in specific water catchments are required to mitigate the nutrient impact of any developments on the river, has been made mandatory in 74 catchments. However, the government is currently reshaping the policy under the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. For farmers, both nitrate and phosphate credits are likely to be of interest but will often require taking areas out of production.

Watercourses should be monitored to identify risks and aid plans for nutrient applications

TRANSITION FARMER ED SHULDHAM, JM STRATTON & CO

Water monitoring work on the River Wylye continues at Transition Farmer JM Stratton & Co in Wiltshire as part of a wider cluster group initiative, so that a better understanding of the impact of farming operations on water quality is achieved.

Both nitrate and phosphate levels are checked monthly for members of the cluster group, confirms farm ecologist and cluster group facilitator Robin Leech, while sediment fingerprinting is done to get a gauge on the largest sources of sediment.

To date, the work has been conducted on the main stretch of the river, he confirms, but the focus will move this autumn to the head waters. "Arable land isn't having much of a sediment impact on the main river. It's more about the channel bank and the grasslands close to the water."

However, the river headwaters are more confined and the valleys are steeper, he says. "So the potential is for the arable land to have more influence." Nitrate and phosphate levels in the water are low, he reports. "They are related to rainfall, as you would expect, and they have clear trend lines. Farmer members have been really interested in the results and are keen to take any action where it's needed."

A larger Landscape Recovery project to re-naturalise the river and its floodplain encompasses up to 600ha in the catchment and should eventually bring financial rewards to those in long-term agreements. "There's a great deal that can be achieved by farmers working together on a landscape scale and that's the best route for monetising improved water quality, through both private and public funding."

● See p5 for more on our Transition Farmers

are on offer too, with 50% of the cost of attending courses up to £600 available.

Anglian Water is also involved in Landscape Enterprise Networks, which brings organisations together to co-fund measures that improve landscapes and protect water quality. "Where we can collaborate, it makes sense to do so. The same is true of farmer action, which is why we have provided two years of funding to 10 cluster groups."

Farmer experience

For Lincolnshire farmer Colin Chappell, who has land adjoining the River Ancholme, working in partnership with his water company makes sense, especially as there is an Anglian Water abstraction plant on the farm. "Everything I do on the farm could have implications for water," he says. "The partnership approach that I have with them means we find ways around any potential issues. It's a carrot rather than stick approach, and the help I receive is really useful."

Colin Chappell

In the past, he has received financial support for growing cover crops and benefited from a training grant, so he is keen to maintain his engagement and keep working with Anglian Water advisers, for both the farm business and the wider societal benefits it offers.

Colin reveals that the discovery of herbicide bentazone in a nearby borehole – not on his farm – meant that the water couldn't be used for 10 years. "That just shows why we all have a responsibility to act, especially as the climate continues to change."

Another concern is that his farm is prone to flooding, with 120ha of cropping being lost in recent wet years. Despite getting his soil in better shape so that it is working like a sponge, there are years when the amount of water is overwhelming. "The focus has been to ensure that the local town of Brigg doesn't flood so it has become a case of not if, but when, the farm floods."

Payments for storing floodwater on farmland haven't materialised as expected through government funding and the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) and with further delays predicted, Colin is looking at what private money could offer. "I'm part of the Environmental Farmers Group now and am also working with GIGL [Green Investment in Greater Lincolnshire] to explore these options." As a result, he is investigating a project that would involve him putting 15ha down to grass and leaving it. The land concerned is by the river and has a "leaky" bank. >

KEY ON-FARM ACTIONS FOR WATER

- Improve soil health to absorb more water, prevent run-off and minimise leaching
- Plant cover crops to retain nutrients, reduce soil erosion and build soil structure
- Reduce tillage if soil type and conditions allow to limit soil loss, compaction and capping
- Put in buffer strips to break the pathway of nutrient/sediment/pesticide loss
- Manage livestock access to watercourses by fencing them off and providing alternative drinking water sources
- Monitor water quality to understand where risks are and plan nutrient use according to regulations and weather conditions
- Avoid pollution from the farmyard by using drip trays, proper storage of slurry and by separating clean and dirty water
- Join local/catchment initiatives and consider landscape changes

CURRENT FUNDING – BIG CHALK

Chalk streams are included in a new capital funding programme designed to help restore and reconnect the chalk and limestone landscapes from Dorset to Norfolk, an area spanning 20% of England.

Applications to the Big Chalk Nature Recovery Fund opened in August 2025, with the aim of supporting bold, practical projects – either by fully funding them, offering match funding or providing top-up grants to help scale existing ideas. Individual grants of up to £75,000 are available, for the purchase of equipment, creation of new infrastructure and the restoration/establishment of habitat. They cannot be used to support on-going running costs or revenue.

Funded through the Protected Landscapes Partnership and supported by Defra, funding must be spent by 31 March 2026.

< Nature-based solutions

Building semi-natural features into the landscape – such as swales and bunds – can help to manage water flow, while practices such as leaky dams, ponds and riparian buffer strips also help to hold water and remove sediment. As Catchment Sensitive Farming adviser Tom Hall points out, these features need to suit the site and the water pathways through it, so will nearly always produce better results if they are planned across a landscape rather than used in isolation.

"A bund that can hold 200-400cu m of water won't make a difference in a serious flooding event, but where you have hundreds of them across the countryside you will see results. Multi-farm projects have lots of potential." This type of feature helps to deal with water upstream, to prevent problems happening further downstream, so their use is cost-effective and they are often easy to install, he adds.

In terms of government funding, Tom explains that Countryside Stewardship High Tier schemes are used for specific habitats and more ambitious projects, while everything else connected with water should come through either the SFI or from capital grants for infrastructure. ■

Capital funding of up to £75,000 is available to protect at-risk chalk streams

CASE STUDY: DEBBIE WILKINS, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Producing good compost and clean water from slurry are the twin aims of a water management project planned for a Gloucestershire dairy farm, as it works towards a circular system. The first phase has been completed, explains Nature Friendly Farming Network member Debbie Wilkins of Norton Court Farm, which showed that microbial composting and on-farm filtration systems could be used to remove solids and nutrients from dirty water.

Compost making

At the outset, biology was used to make Bokashi compost from slurry solids, with the resulting 80t of compost used successfully on the farm's maize crop. For this to happen, straw and woodchip were added to the slurry, along with the right microbes, so that a nutrient-dense composted material was produced, replacing the need for some artificial fertiliser. "We tried various recipes and learned quite a few lessons along the way," she says. "We now need to think about the infrastructure we would need to be able to do this composting process at scale."

This initial stage of the project was made possible by receiving an Innovate UK starter grant and working collaboratively with the Royal Agricultural University, says Debbie, who is now keen to establish a wetland ecological treatment (WET) system to provide clean water. "Another part of phase one was to look at how we might be able to extract nutrients from the liquid fraction" she continues. "So we filtered it by running it through some woodchip, which reduces the solids fraction from 6% to 3%, and then through some biochar to dissolve nutrients."

There are other ways that this filtration process could be achieved, notes Debbie, although she is keen to return the woodchip and biochar that have captured the nutrients to the compost, so that they end up back on the land rather than being wasted. "We still need to know more about what happens when we put the compost on the land, so we hope that will be part of phase two of this ambitious project."

Constructed wetland system

The other plan for phase two, depending on success with the next application for collaborative funding, is to put the resulting cleaner water sample into the constructed wetland system, using the power of the soil microbiome to improve the water quality.

The proposed wetland ecological system will be designed and created by Jay Abrahams of Biologic Design, who has more than three decades of experience in creating soil-based, multispecies constructed wetlands, designed to integrate wastewater purification with both habitat creation and biomass resource production. "We know that constructed wetland systems, which follow the regenerative principles of applied permaculture design, work well," she says. "They use soil, not gravel, as the purification medium and also produce biomass yield or osier willow varieties, as well as enhancing biodiversity and supporting wildlife."

Non-infiltration swales

The proposed WET system at Norton Court Farm would be a series of non-infiltration swales, which comprise densely planted on-contour soil banks and pools, so that water moves slowly by gravity flow through the root zone of the system, being purified as it goes. "The final pond would be of bathing quality. Keeping that water on the farm for use in a dry summer is another bonus from such a system." The willow growing on the pond banks would be coppiced to produce the woodchip for filtering and composting, she adds.

Getting biology and nature to do most of the work makes sense and fits with the regenerative approach used for running the farm, stresses Debbie. "Managing water and nutrients on the farm are really important, and although we do have sufficient storage, doing it in a better way requires a change in the current system. It should only be a year before the wetland area is fully established and functioning well."

Funding her plans is another matter. The grant funding received to date covers the research that's been done, but not the capital works associated with activities such as concreting yards and constructing wetlands. "While the government schemes remain closed and the farm is not considered to be in a priority catchment, it seems there's very little help available."

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVEN BOOTH/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO, KATHY HORNIBLOW, NFFN, FLPA/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

PARTNER PERSPECTIVE

BNG has "de-risked my business" says Suffolk farmer

Our vision for Coney Weston Habitat Bank

Farmer, James Bucher

Photo credit: Duncan Elliott

Second-generation farmer and recipient of the Ian MacNicol Farm Conservation Award, James Bucher, was looking for a way to de-risk his sustainable farming and agroforestry enterprise in Knettishall, Suffolk.

After first reaching out in 2023 to explore his options, James partnered with Environment Bank to take 50-acres of his least productive land and create a BNG Habitat Bank which went live in spring 2025.

James worked together with our team of ecologists and land managers to design something that would really complement his land business – including incorporating James' herd of Red Poll cattle into the habitat management plan using sustainable grazing.

What made you consider a BNG Habitat Bank for your land?

"The farming world is currently facing low crop prices and the withdrawal of other subsidies. I was interested in BNG for its environmental potential and the long-term income security it could provide for my marginal, less-profitable arable land.

I have always been interested in conservation, but this is really exciting because it's large-scale with a 30-year commitment so we should see some really fantastic results, especially with the Habitat Bank being right next to Knettishall Heath Nature Reserve.

This is marginal land that does not produce fantastic yields with arable crops, so both the location and the quality of the soil lends itself to something like BNG."

Why did you choose to partner with Environment Bank?

"In a good year on that field, growing an arable crop would probably return half of what we are getting paid through Environment Bank. We are never going to achieve those sorts of figures with arable crops, so to take some marginal land out of production makes sense to me. You cannot keep flogging a dead horse.

The really exciting thing is these guys at Environment Bank have got the expertise to guide this and we can create something really effective rather than a stewardship agreement, which is great for wildlife in the short-term, but which might not necessarily be targeting the species that the area is lacking or suited to."

What changes are you seeing for your land and farm business?

"It has de-risked the business. We are getting a guaranteed rental payment and management payment for the next thirty years.

Our BNG Habitat Bank has taken about a twentieth of the farm out of production, so it is not a massive area, but it is a guaranteed source of income at a time when government support is waning, and commodity prices are as low as they have ever been.

Environment Bank creates the habitats, and we get a rental payment per hectare for the field, which is good at today's prices – it's a guaranteed return. With unpredictable weather and commodity prices, it's nice to have some surety.

What I am hoping is that in ten to fifteen years' time there could also be some significant agrotourism opportunities to be tagged alongside the Habitat Bank, like glamping and bird watching."

Data opportunity and IHT threat to family farm

Our *Farmers Weekly* Transition farmers continue to work towards making their businesses more sustainable. **Debbie James** catches up with two of them

FARM FACTS
JM Stratton & Co, East Farm, Wiltshire
- Farm size: 1,800ha
- Annual rainfall: 900mm
- Soil type: Light to medium chalk with clay patches

Ed Shuldham

Running five-year field-scale trials on sustainable farming methods will provide data for JM Stratton & Co to achieve the "sweet spot" between high productivity and reducing inputs. The family-run farming business is working with Hutchinsons to trial regen techniques, such as enriching chalkland arable soils with compost tea.

Making more use of data is a Transition goal and the farm is investing in the Omnia digital farming platform. "Running these trials on a field scale, using Hutchinsons' expertise, methodologies and the back-up of their data team, allows proper scientific research in whole fields not trial plots because plots aren't real world," says business development manager Ed Shuldham. "It's multi-year, so if we grow a bi-crop for five years or we direct-drill or don't direct-drill for five years, and use an additive or not for that period, we can track differences over several years."

Some regen techniques add cost and complexity to arable operations, but with the back-up of data, the business will better understand which to embrace, he adds.

The business has made progress with its natural capital objectives too, striking insetting deals with buyers to secure higher prices in return for direct drilling, growing cover crops and other sustainable techniques. It is also engaging with buyers through membership of the Salisbury Cereals supply co-operative.

TRANSITION GOAL PROGRESS

Approximate percentage of progress towards completion:
- Make more use of data 100%
- Take natural capital opportunities 50%

The business is in the early stages of developing a biodiversity net gain project through the farmer-owned natural capital co-op, Environmental Farmers Group, reverting arable land to calcareous flower-rich grassland habitat.

It withdrew from the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFI) pilot to secure an actual agreement, but political ideology could see schemes capped on acreage going forward, Ed predicts. "That would be counterproductive because if the government wants to achieve the aims of the SFI or Countryside Stewardship, larger farms are often better able to achieve these – for example, we have an in-house ecologist to guide us."

Eddie Andrew

Government plans to introduce inheritance tax (IHT) on agricultural assets from April 2026 threaten the future of the three-generation farm run by Eddie Andrew and his family.

As a Transition goal, and encouraged by Sir Keir Starmer's pro-farming speech at the NFU conference in November 2023, the family secured a bank loan to construct a modern building for their 90-cow herd and followers, with milking robots and high-welfare housing. But with Eddie's parents in their seventies, servicing a large loan and paying significant IHT that the prime minister had pledged not to introduce could cripple the business, even if it could be paid over 10 years.

"It feels like the maddest thing ever to finish the build as it's simply a massive asset for incurring the IHT coming down the line," admits Eddie. "We took out an enormous loan, the farm's biggest in the 70 years we have been farming here, we should never have trusted Keir Starmer's promises that he wouldn't bring in an inheritance tax."

In constituencies with a Labour MP, Eddie urges farmers to invite that MP to the farm to explain the true implications of the government's proposals. "It was only when our MP came here that he really understood, he could see that we would have to be unbelievably profitable for the next 10 years to pay just the interest on the loan and the tax."

FARM FACTS
Cliffe House Farm, Yorkshire
- Farm size: 73ha
- Annual rainfall: 850mm
- Soil type: Mixed clay loam

TRANSITION GOALS
- Co-operating to reduce costs
- Establishing new dairy
- Reducing carbon footprint

With the last of the cubicles being installed in September, the shed is almost commissioned, with a different approach to utilise the roof to decarbonise the farm – another Transition goal. Eddie had originally planned to install solar panels on the roof, but with the IHT threat looming, he couldn't commit the funding.

Instead, local social enterprise Sheffield Renewables and SY Ecofit CIC will introduce solar anaerobic digestion through a community-owned green energy initiative. SY Ecofit CIC will install 3MW of renewable energy at the farm, raising a community share offer to pay for the capital costs. "It's going to be amazing for the farm to buy all its electricity from the community, renewable energy and long-term security and price – no more surprises," says Eddie.

● See p5 for more on our Transition Farmers

PHOTOGRAPHY: KATHY HORNIBLOW, OUR COW MOLLY

Look to new recruitment areas to beat labour crisis

Could farmers widen recruitment drives to exploit previously untapped labour pools? **Debbie James** finds out more

Agriculture has traditionally recruited workers from within its own ranks. But labour shortages and new farming techniques mean farmers should look beyond established recruitment sources to find the right person for the job.

The reluctance to recruit from beyond farming circles was recently highlighted in a survey by The Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture (Tiah). It found that 42% of respondents were unwilling to take on staff who had no experience or background in farming.

While recruiting and retaining workers has always been part of the challenge of running a farm, it has never been more so than right now, says Paul Harris, of recruitment specialists Real Success. Farming is entering a new era as labour markets shift, technology reshapes roles, and expectations of work changes, and that means the sector can't rely on old ways of recruiting, Paul warns.

Working outdoors is a selling point

"Traditional sources of labour are no longer sufficient. Farmers need to work harder to attract and hold on to the right workforce, which means thinking differently about how the farm is positioned as a workplace."

Tess Howe, head of partnerships and policy at Tiah, believes a reason why farmers have until now shied away from casting their recruitment net more widely is because they are time-poor.

As such, the prospect of taking on someone who needs training can seem daunting. "I think it is more circumstance that has led to this situation, not farmers actively overlooking potential staff from non-farming backgrounds; many will want someone who they think will hit the ground running," Tess reasons.

She now sees a growing number of farms recruiting more widely though, bringing in employees with a different perspective and that is driving profit for these businesses.

A disconnection between farmers and agricultural colleges is another reason why the numbers of new recruits needed are not coming through.

In the past there was perhaps disengagement between what the colleges were delivering and what farmers wanted, Tess reflects.

"There aren't a huge number of apprenticeships either but the transition to Trailblazer Apprenticeships means that apprenticeships are now better aligned to what providers, in this case the farmer, want."

Another step in the right direction has been capturing more funding for apprenticeships; working with Skills England, Tiah has secured extra government money for apprenticeships at Level 2, doubling it in fact, and that is likely to result in more places becoming available.

But for some farms it is simply geography that is the barrier to taking on an apprentice. Remoteness from an agricultural college means that an apprentice has a long distance to travel between the farm and college.

Services and facilities

Dr Laura Palczynski, postdoctoral research associate at Harper Adams University, says the absence of services and facilities in rural areas can also put people off seeking jobs in the countryside. Schools, childcare provision and public transport links all need to be considered and those services and others can be lacking in the places where farms are located.

Laura is part of a team at Harper Adams University that is hoping to secure funding from Horizon Europe to research what they have called the "3As" approach, which she has developed with colleagues Dr Fiona Williams and Professor David Rose. This considers awareness of agricultural careers, accessibility to people from non-farming backgrounds, and attracting talent by making jobs appealing.

Fiona, who coined the concept, says it's not just UK farmers who are struggling to fill vacancies, generational renewal is an issue across Europe. "Farming needs to be attractive to the next generation, clearly that is very important when people are making decisions around their careers, but they need to be aware of those opportunities to begin with.

"We have a mainstream youth population that >

PHOTOGRAPHY: TIM SCRIVENER, KATHY HORNIBLOW, GNP, SALLY ANDERSON/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO, ISTOCKPHOTO

Creating clear job rules and safe practice will help build respect for the business

perhaps isn't even aware of the careers that are available in some agricultural sectors, so farming possibly doesn't even cross their mind."

If that awareness is created and the career prospect is attractive, access, or rather lack of it, can form a third barrier. "Agriculture can seem to be a closed profession when there are traditional family farms with succession in-house, so if you are a new entrant from a non-farming background and you are thinking 'I quite fancy working in dairying or in a mixed livestock system' it can be quite challenging to get into," says Fiona, senior lecturer in Rural Land Use and Management at Harper Adams Business School.

"There is a route through agricultural education which clearly opens up opportunities, but even on securing agricultural employment, are there the prospects within that role to take it forward to perhaps one day managing or owning your own farm business?"

Careers in farming haven't always been seen as attractive with an industry known for its long working hours. Many also see jobs within the profession as lacking progression and work is needed to change that perception too, Fiona adds. "If a farmworker has been getting up at the crack of dawn for five years to milk cows and they can't see a route to progressing to do anything other than that then it becomes problematic."

Some farms have found solutions to recruitment by engaging with their local community, drawing in local workers by using initiatives that highlight and showcase what they do.

Breaking down barriers

Dan Stevenson, head of sustainable farming at Linking Environment and Farming (Leaf), says the organisation advocates breaking down barriers between farms and their local community for multiple reasons, including staff recruitment.

"If farms are seen as being very closed off, something that is behind closed doors and is outside of the normal community, it promotes a sort of 'them and us' attitude. I can see how that situation might arise at times as some in the community might not necessarily understand the

intricacies and challenges around farming."

However, that "them and us" position is a barrier to drawing from a potentially large and geographically well-placed group of employees, not just advocates and ambassadors for an individual farm business and the farming industry.

Farms in the Leaf network engage with the community, says Dan, which doesn't mean situations will always be positive, but they create opportunities to explain and dispel some myths

CASE STUDY: NICK AND LUCY TYLER, WILTSHIRE

By engaging with schools and the wider community, Wiltshire farmers Nick and Lucy Tyler give people of all ages a glimpse of the employment opportunities on their farm and in agriculture in general. The couple connect with local schools through regular visits to the farm, even building a classroom to host those activities. Those schools align their curriculums with what is happening on the farm at that point in time and nationally, the Farm to Fork initiative for instance.

"We participate in career fairs too, not necessarily to recruit directly for ourselves but for getting the message across for the wider industry," says Nick.

The Tylers employ six full-time workers within Kingsplay Farm and have a high rate of staff retention. With the recent departure of their head herdsman after eight years in

A farming background is less important now, says Nick Tyler

the job, they are currently recruiting into what is now a robot milking system. "Having the robots could make the job appealing to people who might not have considered working on a dairy farm before," says Nick.

That is true of automation on farm in general. "We have replaced the yard scraper with a robot scraper because who wants to be scraping yards at 4am on a Sunday morning – it makes the job more attractive," says Nick.

It is not important whether workers have a background in farming or not – employing good people is, he adds. "We need to run a good business for all sorts of reasons but mostly because of the way we farm."

The roles now open to new recruits are very different to the ones that existed when he was in college. "It doesn't necessarily mean being out there at all hours, day and night, any longer, getting covered in muck, oil and grease. Some roles can now be done in part at home on a computer, the analysis part of the job, for example.

"Farming isn't just about driving a tractor or milking a cow, it's very different now."


Attract workers by offering flexible working, rota systems and additional holidays

and tell good stories about what is being done on the farm. This might come from inviting people onto the farm, from designing farm walks or engaging through community newsletters and community WhatsApp groups.

Those farms are seen as a "community asset", not so much a community farm but very much part of the community, a place to be proud of, says Dan. "We find that people want to be part of that, they will defend the farm and they will potentially be attracted to work there.

"It might not be somebody who wants to work 90 hours a week, but you can suddenly tap into a different audience that might not have been open to you before, people who are maybe outside the traditional labour pool who might have been considering other careers or worked in other industries.

"Farming is an incredibly exciting industry to be involved in, and if you are presenting it as such and making it attractive to people then there is no reason why farmers can't draw in anyone to work for them, but they have to think beyond what they have conventionally done."

Those new recruits will need different levels of skills training, but a gap exists in the availability of off-the-shelf courses. Tess says these courses can be offered by an employer as a starting point to training for a new employee to provide structure and support and they are readily available in many industries but not so in agriculture.

"It would really help if there was more easily available material," she believes. ■

TIPS FOR EMPLOYERS

To overcome labour challenges and to access new employee pools, farms must position themselves as progressive, supportive and professional employers. Paul Harris, of Real Success, says there is a lot to consider and offers tips on what he sees as the key components.

Get everything in order behind the farmgate

A farm's culture, working conditions, and leadership are fundamental to recruitment success. If existing staff are dissatisfied, the hours unsustainable or the safety record poor, no amount of advertising will draw in new talent. The first step is getting things right behind the farmgate, from safe machinery and clear job roles to nurturing a respectful team culture. Farmers also need to consider how they talk about their businesses. The dominant narrative in agriculture often focuses on difficulty: falling prices, rising costs, lack of profit, and uncertainty.

While these challenges are real, negative messaging deters young people and career changers – why would someone join a sector that seems to have no future? A more balanced narrative is needed to emphasise farming's role in producing food, stewarding the environment, and driving innovation. Words matter, and how the industry talks about itself will shape the future workforce.

Broaden the recruitment net

Reach beyond traditional labour sources. Young people are attracted by technology, and sustainability while mid-career changers could be seeking purposeful work outdoors.

Then there are parents returning to work, who value flexible hours, semi-retired workers who bring experience, reliability and mentoring skills, and students and apprentices from local colleges who can be nurtured into long-term employees.

Engagement with schools and colleges is critical – offer visits, talks and placements as these help portray farming as modern and varied, not simply as hard labour. For other groups, highlighting transferable skills such as logistics or engineering can pull in candidates who might never have imagined themselves working on a farm.

Rethink recruitment techniques

Farmers often rely on word of mouth, but more structured approaches will widen the talent pool. Options include professional adverts that are clearly written and avoid jargon, head hunting by approaching individuals with the skills needed, and engaging the services of recruitment agencies, particularly those specialising in agriculture.

Create social media posts with engaging imagery and short videos. At the interview stage, it pays to prepare – consider carefully what qualities you need in that new recruit, reliability, initiative, and communication skills maybe. Use open-ended questions to draw out real-life examples. Use the interview as an opportunity to sell the role by explaining what makes your farm different, the opportunities it offers, and the values it stands for.

Retain the right people

Recruitment is only half the battle; retention is equally important as staff turnover is both costly and disruptive. Building loyalty is therefore essential. Managers who listen, give feedback, support development, and respect work-life balance will keep their staff. Regular appraisals, development plans and open communication help employees feel valued and motivated.

Positioning the farm as an employer of choice

Being an employer of choice doesn't just mean paying fairly, though that is an essential; it means offering a package that modern workers expect. Practical steps include offering a competitive remuneration – research what others locally and nationally are paying.

Have clear contracts of employment as written contracts protect both sides. Create a favourable work-life balance with rota systems, flexible working and additional holidays. Employees want opportunities to grow so provide training and progression. A positive culture with respect, communication and team spirit matter more than ever, and safe working conditions are non-negotiable.

Stay ahead of the competition

In a tight labour market, competition for workers is fierce, therefore farms who offer meaningful incentives will be more attractive. These might include holiday packages beyond the statutory minimum, bonuses for performance or long service, and accommodation benefits that are safe and fair. Wellbeing initiatives such as hot meals or access to support can help farms stay ahead of the competition as can recognition through awards and by celebrating team successes. Build a reputation locally as a good employer. Use technology and showcase modern kit and systems to appeal to tech-minded recruits.

Modern farming is no longer just about physical labour – precision agriculture, data systems, robotics, and advanced machinery mean recruits need technical aptitude as much as strength. This creates an opportunity to appeal to those with digital skills who may never have thought about agriculture.

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How family charters could strengthen your farm

Popular overseas but little known in the UK, could family charters promote farming innovation and help avoid family rifts? **Debbie James** reports

Being in business with parents or siblings can split farming families apart, but a simple document could hold the key to strengthening those relationships and the business itself.

Not a year goes by without the pages of *Farmers Weekly* featuring reports on court judgments involving a farming family dispute. The reasons for fallouts escalating to civil courts vary, but could some of that costly and upsetting litigation, and the breakdown of family relationships, have been avoided had a document called a family charter been in place?

Charters, also known as constitutions or governance documents, are a common feature on family farms in New Zealand, Australia and the US, but exist in only tiny numbers in the UK.

Stifling innovation

A more likely scenario here is that the farm will have one decision-maker, in most cases the oldest male. That autocratic setup can stifle innovation and development as it doesn't allow for ideas from other family members to be heard.

Involving the wider family, and adopting a charter that sets out family values, clearly defines individuals' roles and responsibilities, the management structure and future ownership, can result in more successful and sustainable businesses – and ultimately a happy family.

There is evidence that UK farms are tuning in to this, for example by adopting a board structure, but Peter Craven, head of agriculture at Natural England, estimates that only 1% of farming businesses have a charter.

Why so few? Peter, who has seen first-hand the benefits charters have delivered for farming businesses overseas, believes it's because families are often afraid of the actual process of formulating one.

"They worry that if everyone talks about their hopes and dreams they might not like what they hear, that those hopes and dreams might not be aligned and, if that is the case, how that will be dealt with," he says.

It is often those discussions, not the charter itself, that can be the most valuable, though.

"There has to be an element of unpacking, a niggle or two, but once fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters have had a chance to have their say, a line must be drawn in the sand," says Peter, who researched family charters as a Nuffield Scholarship topic. "Allowing people to feel heard and understood is a great starting point to move forward from."

Charters have both benefits and challenges, but if one had been in place in his own family's farming business, Peter says it could have avoided issues which ultimately led to him pursuing a different career path – before joining Natural England he worked on the farm for 20 years.

"Having different qualities is good when you are in business with family, but it can also be divisive, and when communication breaks down, as it can in so many situations, when you are not able to make decisions well together, that affects the business and, as a consequence, profitability."

Bank pressure

It was the abrupt removal of government subsidies in New Zealand that first resulted in the widespread adoption of family charters among farmers there. To survive and thrive post-subsidies, farms needed to be agile and innovative, and many applied for bank loans to drive forward with their plans. As a pre-requisite to authorising those loans, banks insisted that clients created a family charter. >

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WHAT TO COVER IN A CHARTER

- History and background information about the family and the business
- Family's vision, core values and mission statement
- Charter's purpose and long-term objectives
- Ownership structure, including shares, voting rights and ownership percentages
- Roles and responsibilities of family members, the board of directors, and management
- Composition, selection process and responsibilities of the board of directors
- Clear guidelines for leadership succession
- Policies regarding employment of family members in the business
- Procedures for resolving conflicts
- How profits and dividends are distributed
- Decision-making processes such as mechanisms for dispute resolution
- Financial policies, such as debt management and capital allocation
- Communication channels – for example, regular family meetings
- Potential conflicts of interest and how they will be managed
- Options if family members want to exit the business
- Process for amending and reviewing the charter
- Procedure for resolving disputes related to the interpretation or enforcement of the charter
- Confidentiality considerations regarding sensitive business and family matters
- Compliance with applicable laws and tax regulations

< "The banks needed to be certain they would get their money back and discovered that the weakest link in those farming businesses was the family – if the family couldn't get on, it didn't matter how good the business was," Peter says.

"The banks stipulated that farmers couldn't borrow money without first having a family charter."

What is a family charter?

A charter captures as a formal written agreement the values, principles and rules of a family and their business. Charters are usually one of the tools alongside succession planning solutions, such as wills, trusts and corporate structures, for achieving a family's objectives.

Unlike those other documents, it is not legally binding; it simply gives guidance on governing how the family and the business function. Its purpose is to build trust between all family members and to add clarity and alignment.

Peter visualises it as a roadmap that helps a family tackle the challenges that arise in any business.

While they exist as a formal document on only a very small number of UK farms, Peter suggests every farm has an informal charter – without knowing it. "It will exist in their heads because every family member will have their own thoughts on how the business should operate, what the future should look like, but no one talks about it. If they take the next step and formalise it, they could instead all pull in the same direction rather than pull at right angles. That will create a stronger business and family."

It will override supposition, too. "There can be lots of theories within a family farming dynamic of what others are thinking, but you can allay an awful lot of fears by sharing some of this stuff rather than letting people dream up what they think might be happening."

A charter can also give clarity to succession, a topic that farming families still shy away from despite the well-documented issues that can arise by ignoring it. "Some family members might have an expectation that they will get the business, others an expectation that they won't, but if no one talks about it, no one really knows what will happen next," says Peter.

A charter can involve sons, daughters and other family members who don't work on the farm but have skills that could strengthen the business. "Siblings might work in marketing, for example, and using their skills to add value might be exactly what the business needs to grow, so why not utilise some of those peripheral skills and professionalism, to at least have that conversation," Peter adds.

Writing a charter

Issues relating to the business, family and ownership should be included within a charter. Some family members might be in the business and have ownership, others who are in the business but don't have ownership, and there will be family without either, so this must be reflected.

The farmers Peter met in New Zealand, Australia and the US said that when structuring their own charters, the core principles most wanted the document to reflect was for the family to be happy, to get on with each other, and to do well. "Why not write that down in the charter? Put it at the top of the page as a way of uniting the family," he advises. "The document should narrate where you want to go as a family farming business, address anything that could stop that, consider the challenges and issues that the family could fall out over.

"A charter can be simple or as complicated as you want to make it, but it is best to keep it simple. It is a living document, to be updated as the family and business evolve, not one to be written once and filed away."

What to include

Understanding the family's direction and discussing its vision is an essential base for a family charter.

In Peter's opinion, family values should be a central theme in every charter. These might be different for each family member, but decide on some shared values – those that everyone agrees are important for the business. "Tease those out because values drive behaviour and behaviour drives decision-making and everything else," he says.

Reflecting on the past is a good starting point. "Discussing the history and how the family business started helps preserve the family's heritage, guiding principles, and shared identity," says Peter. Learning from the past also helps inspire unity and offers valuable lessons for present and future endeavours. Two questions should be addressed, he adds: whether the family wants to remain as a family in business, and who is considered to be family.

"When the initial discussions take place it may become apparent that a family might not want to remain in business and the question that then follows is, 'how are we going to do that?'. That might be formulating a plan to grow the business with the intention of splitting it, someone might want to leave the business and be happy to step back."

Who is defined as family in the context of the business must be considered too, he says.

Including younger family members in the decision-making process can introduce new thinking

"If a son or daughter has married, their spouse becomes family, but in terms of the business, should they be included in the decision-making as they will have huge sway on how their partner thinks and acts."

Good communication, having clear roles, responsibilities and accountability are important to many families in business. Setting out in the charter which overall areas apply to each family member prevents conflict but also helps to navigate the business forward. "Documenting which aspects of the business each member is responsible for will prevent everyone from stepping on each other's toes, but it's also important to prepare the next generation if the business is to move forward and succeed," says Peter.

The document should address how the charter will be policed and conflict managed. It should assume there will be conflict, and provide a roadmap out of the situation. "People may fall out but how do they manage it? Do they bring in a third party or a non-executive director, as quite often people behave differently when there is a stranger in the room?" says Peter.

In terms of succession, it can include how to upskill the next generation, he adds. "Is the person or people you intend to hand the baton to in a position to receive it? Could they hold the baton if you gave it to them or, if not, could you nurse them into it?"

Updating a family charter

Within families, change is constant, and that is true in the business environment, too. Therefore a charter should be periodically updated to reflect this. This ensures the charter remains current and relevant. Revisiting it every year is advisable. "Has anything changed? What's working, what's not? You start to normalise this conversation if it is done annually rather than storing up problems," says Peter.

Should charters be included in college and university curriculums? Peter studied agribusiness management at Wye College, where he learned a lot about farming and farming businesses. But, as he points out: "What they don't teach you at college is how to get on with the family you will be working with. Every farming family in the country will struggle with this problem from time to time, some more than others. Yet there is nobody teaching the next generation how to deal with it, and situations can creep up on them."

In the US, this thinking is being integrated into college degrees.

There is a saying that you shouldn't get into bed with someone if you don't know how you are going to get out of it again so what does that look like if you get into bed, into business, with your family?

Is professional help needed to create a family charter? Whether a family can create a charter without the help of a professional will depend on the dynamics within that unit.

If family members are respectful of each other, it is often not necessary to bring in a third party, Peter advises. "Respect is a bit like air in the room: it is not a problem until there isn't any of it."

You need to maintain a level of respect in the conversations you will have, so people feel listened to and understood, that they feel they can be open and honest. "If you can create that situation then you are fine to create your own charter. If you are at daggers, you are going to need some assistance."

He signposts the Succession Alliance, a group of Nuffield scholars and industry professionals who recognise that families need guidance to prevent conflict, or on how to navigate their way out of it if that conflict already exists.

Workshops will be held later this year to help families with these difficult conversations and take those first steps. ■

CASE STUDY: THE TAVERNOR FAMILY, SHROPSHIRE

Formulating a charter isn't meant to be a rapid process – for the Tavernor family, it will have taken a year or more to get the document finalised.

Shropshire dairy farmers Roly and Mary, and their four children, David, James, Emma and George, started the process in December 2024 and should be in a position to complete it after one more family meeting.

James is the only sibling directly involved in the business, but there was never any question of the others being excluded from contributing to the charter, says Roly. "We couldn't have done it without involving everyone," he says.

Family values and allowing each member the opportunity to contribute and be heard has long been important to the Tavernors. "We had Monday meetings when they were kids," Roly recalls.

He hopes the charter will continue and remain a living, evolving document, drawing in others as and when new members join the family.

Roly admits the process has been harder than he anticipated, but says the exercise, and the ultimate outcome, has been very valuable.

"For us it wasn't about the need to create harmony but about avoiding disharmony in the future, by being open and by allowing everyone the chance to have their say."


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Horn beats corn and profit focus on regen policy

Our *Farmers Weekly* Transition farmers are striving to secure a better future for their businesses. **Debbie James** reports from Essex and Shropshire

FARM FACTS
Little Braxted, Hall Farm, Essex
- Farm size: 275ha
- Annual rainfall: 610mm
- Soil type: Loamy clay

Beth Speakman

With wheat yields hit by drought, de-risking the arable enterprise by growing different crops is a priority for the Speakman family. Wheat was previously the cash crop for Beth – who has taken over the role as *Farmers Weekly* Transition Farmer from father Kit – but returns will be down this year because the dry weather has challenged their farm's light, gravel soils. Yields from this harvest have ranged from a high of 10t/ha to 3t/ha.

Decision-making earlier in the cropping year on how to pitch inputs and expenditure was especially difficult, when the wheat looked promising before the pressure of drought. "It was a very clean crop. But with dry weather and such low commodity prices, we can no longer rely on wheat being our cash crop – so we will try other crops to safeguard our income," says Beth.

Yields were down but at 13-14%, protein milling specification was easily achieved. This was also true for many wheat growers, reducing premiums and further hitting income. Beth knows it is a loss-making year for the arable business, yet beef prices are strong and that bodes well for their beef-finishing enterprise. "It is very rare that horn beats corn, but the cattle are doing well due to lower feed prices," she says.

A Transition goal is to adjust the rotation and include a greater acreage of grass seed, which is more profitable. Stewardship remains important, with two Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) and three Countryside Stewardship scheme agreements in place. Beth is considering entering the SFI's low-input cereal option, which has paid £354/ha, to capitalise on the farm's low chemical usage. "We will consider low-input oats or barley – the offer of guaranteed income is hard to ignore when prices are so volatile."

Payments must reflect farmers' environmental work. "We have had a lot of advancement in bringing back native species such as turtle doves, lapwings and kites on the farm, but those habitat areas rely on funding."

TRANSITION GOAL PROGRESS

Approximate percentage of progress towards completion:
- Bridging income gap 40%
- Creating integrated farm business 40%
- Growing more grass and widening the rotation 40%

Matthew Williams

All 567ha of wheat Matthew Williams is establishing this autumn are sown with milling varieties – a big shift in direction for a business that usually grows feed wheat. It comes on the back of two difficult years for profitability and after securing an ADM contract to supply milling wheat.

Improving profitability is a Transition goal, which Matthew is addressing in part by maximising margins through targeting milling specification. Reducing cultivation is another objective. "The first leg of sustainability is profitability. You can't farm at a loss – put simply, say that you have burned 15 litres/ha less diesel by direct drilling, but have no crops to combine, that just doesn't work."

Advice received when Matthew first introduced changes to his farming system was to avoid that "cold turkey" approach and trial reduced cultivation in small areas first. "You quickly realise that if your sheds aren't full, your margins would have to be phenomenal to make up for that gap in yield," he says.

"To tell a landowner that we will break even, but that it's OK because we have direct drilled everything, doesn't wash for me – you need to make a profit. We are still trying to do as much as we can environmentally, but are taking more of a view that we will run a leg through any land that is compacted." Where Matthew has direct drilled, soil improvement is noticeable within 12 months. "We get very little movement in our light land, and that was a big lightbulb moment."

Matthew has bought a 6m Claydon drill and is practising what he describes as a "halfway house" cultivating some land, but not all. Good conditions in September saw early establishment. "Regen-wise, you might say it has been so dry we could wait until October, but I don't have the nerves to sit on my hands. For me, a crop well-sown is half-grown," he says.

Most of the land Matthew farms is contract farmed, therefore investing in a small block to establish a grain store is a big milestone, "to own a bit of England and to have control".

With planning permission secured for a 6,500t facility with a 40t/hour continuous flow dryer and a pre-cleaner, work will start soon to get it completed before the 2026 harvest.

FARM FACTS
Criddon Hall Farm, Shropshire
- Farm size: 1,100ha
- Crops: Wheat, spring oats, spring barley, winter beans, OSR, triticale

TRANSITION GOALS
- Improve profitability and margins
- Continue to improve soil health
- Control and optimise input use

● See p5 for more on our Transition Farmers

PHOTOGRAPHY: PHIL WEEDON, RICHARD STANTON

Transition Farmers leave dairy after tenancy bombshell

It was a week of mixed emotions for Karen and Tom Halton when they sold most of their cows and heifers. But they tell **Debbie James** why scaling back now is the right decision for them and their business

FARM FACTS

Halton Farm, Congleton, Cheshire

- Farm size: 240ha tenanted
- Annual rainfall:1,000mm
- Soil type: Clay loams

On the very day that the Haltons paid the half-yearly rent due on their four tenancies, a letter arrived from the landlord's agent advising them that one of the agreements would not be renewed at the end of this year. "We were really shocked, it completely took us by surprise," says Karen.

For 20 years, she and Tom had built up cow numbers, seizing multiple opportunities they were offered to rent land, infrastructure and staff accommodation on the same estate near Congleton, Cheshire. Their four tenancies cover 500 acres and include two farmhouses and a cottage. The news delivered in March 2025 that one of the farm business tenancies would not be renewed when it expired – an agreement for 80 acres, a worker's cottage and a herdsman's home – was a bolt from the blue.

Two months down the line, as the Haltons entered a scheduled meeting with the agent to discuss this, they were anticipating a scenario where they would renegotiate the tenancy, perhaps pay a higher rent, and it would then be renewed. The outcome was very different – in fact much worse than the news conveyed in the agent's first letter. "We sat there to be told it was absolutely non-negotiable, that there was absolutely no way we could keep the tenancy, and that at Christmas 2025 we would be given notice on the farm where we have our heifer rearing unit and on another 200 acres," Karen recalls. It would only leave them with their main holding, Chance Hall Farm, as the tenancy on that runs until 2037.

Decision-making

What followed was a week of decision-making, weighing up their options – should they pursue other tenancies to maintain herd size, scale back by halving cow numbers, which their remaining land base would allow, or cash in? "Did we want to go forward and farm half the business and half the cows? We decided we didn't. We are the type of people who like to push on, to grow things," says Karen.

In a year when they both turn 56, they settled on the third option – to walk away from the day-to-day business of dairy farming as Halton Farms Ltd. "We don't have any succession [their son, Jack, opted for a different career] and the landlord doesn't want to work with us, which makes it really tricky because there isn't even a chance of having a chat around the table," Karen explains. "At our age did we want to get into another tenancy or by doing that would we just be blocking a young person from being able to get into the industry?"

While some business owners might not want to exit when they are at the top of their game, for the Haltons it made sense. "This is a business and we have to remember that. In business, you put everything into it to make it profitable, grow it to a position that when you want to cash in, you can do so at a high. This is our pension, everything we have got is tied up in this busi-

will produce milk from a small number of cows to maintain that enterprise. This will be run by a manager and some of the staff will remain, freeing the Haltons up to focus on other business activities, including in the property sector.

Karen says the TV programme *Grand Designs*, which documents ambitious self-build projects, is her favourite. She and Tom have experience in this area, when they renovated a house as their potential home to retire to from farming. "We enjoyed that, we had a great team of people around us, and Tom is great at procurement," says Karen. "We will look at doing up another property, another development, and will also have the time to catch up on holidays we haven't had, and take the time to see friends."

Lifetime in farming

Farming is her third career as she worked in other jobs before joining Tom on the farm, but for him it has been his life for 40 years, four decades when he has never experienced "that Sunday night feeling". His father came to the estate in 1968 and Tom has lived there all his life, originally farming in partnership with his father, their landlord and the landlord's son.

In 2012, the partnership was split and Tom and Karen created Halton Farms Ltd. The best farming decision in Tom's career was to switch the herd to cross-breeding 20 years ago. The ProCross cows – a three-way Holstein, Swedish Red and Montbéliard cross – had a daily milk yield average of 38 litres at 4.2% butterfat and 3.5% protein, were achieving an average pregnancy rate of 38%, and had exceptional foot health. "Those cows will perform in any system," Tom maintains.

As the Haltons look forward to their next chapter, recent experience has taught them the importance of taking control of when to exit a business. "It was us who made the decision to leave as the business could still have functioned as a smaller one, the decision hasn't been made for us," Karen points out. And her advice to other farmers on planning their own exits? "Do it when you want to do it, not when you are forced to, and most of all make the decision and follow it through. We were nearly forced to, not through choice or decisions of our own." ■

ness. We have worked hard, we have invested, we have built up a business and now is the right time to step back because it is worth the most it has ever been. Why would we not cash in?"

Selling up

And that is what they have done, selling 454 milkers, 157 maiden heifers, 88 in-calf and recently served heifers and 53 heifer calves over two days in September. The breeding and management they had invested in those ProCross animals was rewarded with exceptional sale prices achieved. "The sale was a difficult day, to sell our amazing girls is the hardest thing we have ever done on our dairy farming journey," Karen admits.

"They achieved one of the highest grossing sales on record, which has left us immensely proud, but it is very bittersweet as we loved them so much. However, we have to remember that we have now given other people the opportunity to work with them and breed from them – they have gone all over the country and will hopefully help to set up other family farming business and careers."

The Haltons have known difficult times – when their milk price was slashed by 8p/litre during the pandemic was among the toughest – and admit it has been "a rocky old ride over the years". But as Karen points out: "We have always worked through it, always come back on top."

They are retaining the Chance Hall Farm tenancy, a farm where they have established their direct milk sales business, The Milk Shack, and

● **See p5 for more on our Transition Farmers**

PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD STANTON

PHOTOGRAPHY: SIMON ANNABLE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

How to start a diversified farm-based business

Setting up a successful farm-based diversification requires planning and expert guidance. **Jonathan Riley** finds out more

A diversification can add revenue and spread business risks but farmers must take a carefully planned approach to ensure the venture flourishes, according to an expert panel.

When looking at the starting point for a business, Jennie Wheildon said it was key to have everyone with an interest involved at the concept stage. Whether it is a farm shop, cafe, butchery, wedding venue, renewable energy, holiday let, education or events, it is important everyone has the chance to air their views. So a conversation with the entire family must be held from the outset. "If there are objections and you can't make it work at this first step, it won't work in the future," said Ms Wheildon.

Kathryn Donkin advised starting with a business plan. Initially, it can be in the form of an overview to set out what you want to achieve, finance options, expansion plans and how it might fit with the existing business.

It can also be a working document that evolves but, whatever direction this takes, it is essential to have everything written down, she said. Situations can change, and family members may want to move in a different direction in the future.

Structuring the business

Fitting a new enterprise within or alongside the existing business was crucial, the experts agreed. For example, it need not be a part of the main farm setup. The new business could lease an area of the farm, for example, so that its finances can be managed separately, said Ms Wheildon.

Dave Oates suggested testing plans. "Start simple but test plans against a long-term outlook – 10, 20 and 30 years ahead," Mr Oates said. Questions to ask include: is the venture going to form part of the farm or will it lease land from the business? Or could it be entirely separate and based on land leased from another landlord?

In terms of the people involved, perhaps the new venture could be a partnership for one or two members of the family and take the risk and receive the income, said Ms Donkin.

Suitability

Look around the area to see what competition exists nearby and thoroughly assess the likely demand, said Mr Oates. There are typical business types that farms will often look to – farm shops and building conversions for holiday lets or workshop rentals. Planned carefully and in the right locations, these can work well.

There are key considerations to take into account. Mr Oates said a farm shop is often a popular venture but it may require increasing input with staffing throughout the week and a trained manager. It is also people-facing so you must enjoy working with the public or this could prove difficult.

Ms Donkin added that requirements for access, car parks, toilets and rubbish disposal should be factored in with the farm's particular setup. The same applies with holiday lets. Traditional buildings may be appealing but they need to be suitable. The location and planning considerations all have to be taken into account, said Ms Donkin.

Often holiday lets are converted buildings such as stone barns, which are no longer compatible with modern farming. But conversion costs can exceed £100,000 and a large building may not have as much demand as smaller units. It is always worth looking at alternatives. For example, rather than converting the large building, consider a cluster of shepherd huts with each one generating the same income as the barn but with half the overall development cost.

Regulations

Many ventures will require planning permission, so conversations with the local authority should take place early on in the process and before any investment is made, said Ms Wheildon.

Ventures involving food will require hygiene certificates, and businesses where people are working must be clean and safe. Any business that is selling bought-in products will need adequate access for deliveries. Noise and pollution from visitors and deliveries must also be considered, especially near residential areas.

Adding value to a building will incur capital gains tax and advice on inheritance tax issues should be sought. While the tax implications are serious, the overall process of diversifying can be an opportunity to review the business structure and make it more tax-efficient, Ms Wheildon concluded. ■

EXPERT PANEL

Transition Project editor and webinar host Johann Tasker was joined by three experts to discuss "How to start a new farm-based business". The panel discussed the planning, legal, staffing, and health and safety issues involved in setting up a business and where to find the necessary support to guide you through the process.

- **Kathryn Donkin**, director and head of Strutt & Parker's rural team in Sussex
- **David Oates**, farmer and Nature Friendly Farming Network ambassador
- **Jennie Wheildon**, specialist agricultural lawyer Shakespeare Martineau

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