



# Northumberland

## County Council

CABINET

TUESDAY, 14 FEBRUARY 2023

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### COUNCIL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT FUTURE OF FARMING IN NORTHUMBERLAND INQUIRY

**Report of:** Councillor Glen Sanderson, Leader

**Lead Officer:** Janice Rose, Interim Executive Director for Regeneration

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#### **Purpose of report**

The purpose of the report is to summarise the key findings and recommendations from the independent Inquiry and to seek approval to the proposed Council response to those recommendations.

#### **Recommendations**

**Cabinet is recommended to:**

- 1. approve the proposed initial Council response to the key findings and recommendations of the independent Inquiry into the Future of Farming in Northumberland as set out in Appendix 2; and**
- 2. communicate those initial responses to Dr Sally Shortall in her capacity as Inquiry Chair with a request that the Panel reconvenes in early 2024 to review progress and suggest any further next steps.**

#### **Link to Corporate Plan**

The farming sector is important to the local economy of the county and as such the Council's response to the independent Inquiry as to its future contributes directly to the Council priority to facilitate economic growth.

#### **Key issues**

Following a question at full Council from Councillor Mather, the Leader invited, in March 2022, Professor Sally Shortall, the Duke of Northumberland Chair of Rural Economy at

Newcastle University, to conduct an independent inquiry into the future of Farming in Northumberland.

The purpose of the Inquiry was to better understand the challenges and opportunities faced by the range of farmers and landowners in Northumberland in moving from the current regime of subsidy funding to the new benefits system for environmental land management. The Inquiry would make recommendations to the County Council about the tangible action it could take to promote the interests of farmers and landowners across the county to successfully make this transition while maintaining profitable businesses.

Five key themes emerged from the Inquiry discussions, as follows:

- Navigating the changing policy landscape
- Supporting farmers through the agricultural transition
- Maximising the benefits from locally produced food
- Promoting farming as a career
- Balancing the respective interests of landowners and tenants

The Inquiry report considers each of these and sets out recommendations for the County Council to help address the prevailing challenging and opportunities they present.

The Council's initial response to each of the recommendations is set out in Appendix 2 and it is suggested that these are communicated to Professor Shortall as Chair with a request for the panel members to reconvene in early 2024 to review progress and suggest any further next steps.

## **BACKGROUND**

1. At the full Council meeting in November 2021, Councillor Mather asked the following question of the Leader:

*The need to address climate change is important but I'm worried about the knock on impacts to farmers and the rural community, in particular tenant farmers and their workers, many of whom have contacted me to say that they at risk of or already have been served notice to vacate land to make way for "re-wilding", tree planting etc. Would the Leader set in motion a review by NCC of the subject by NCC officers and join me in discussions with local farmers so that we can ensure we understand the issues being encountered, and identify positive ways to address them and support our vital industry?*

2. The Council Leader replied as follows:

*Efforts were being made nationally to find more forestry to offset carbon, and also looking for a whole new range of environmental options for farmland.*

*Northumberland is a beautiful county because of its farmers. There needed to be balance in how the County was taken forward, and tenant farmers were vulnerable and needed to be protected. He would set a working group up of officers along with representatives of the National Farmers Union (NFU), Country Land and Business Association (CLA) and the Tenant Farmers Association (TFA).*

3. From this, the Council Leader invited, in March 2022, Professor Sally Shortall, the Duke of Northumberland Chair of Rural Economy at Newcastle University, to conduct an independent inquiry into the future of Farming in Northumberland.
4. The purpose of the Inquiry was to better understand the challenges and opportunities faced by the range of farmers and landowners in Northumberland in moving from the current regime of subsidy funding to the new benefits system for environmental land management. The Inquiry would make recommendations to the County Council about the tangible action it could take to promote the interests of farmers and landowners across the county to successfully make this transition while maintaining profitable businesses.
5. Professor Shortall was supported in conducting the Inquiry by an independent panel of experts who collectively provided a range of local and national perspectives of the farming sector. In addition, each of the Inquiry sessions was informed by contributions from three or four individuals with direct experience of the local farming and land management context. The full list of those who participated in the Inquiry is reproduced at Appendix 1.

## **Context**

6. From the outset, the Inquiry recognised that it is a time of unprecedented change for agriculture in England following the UK's exit from the European Union and the

associated Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Farmers and landowners are having to navigate this complex policy landscape to make challenging short-term decisions to maintain their survival until such time as the fuller implications of the transition to the new system become clearer and they are better placed to plan for their long-term future.

7. Within this national context, the pressure on the future of farming in Northumberland is particularly acute. Three quarters of the farm holdings in the county currently receive and rely on some form of subsidy to supplement their income. This is the highest proportion of any county in the country and largely relates to the fact that upland farming, which predominates in Northumberland, is more marginal economically.
8. Another unique characteristic of the local farming economy is the extent to which land management is undertaken on a tenancy basis. Half of the county's farms are operated by tenants, who obviously have the added complication of being governed by tenancy agreements in making decisions about their holding's operation, particularly where there are medium to long term implications of those decisions.

## **Approach**

9. The Inquiry was split into distinct phases.

### *Phase 1*

10. The initial phase focused on exploring "what successful farming in Northumberland would look like by 2030", with consideration given to the following three questions:
  - In ideal world, what does success look like for farming in Northumberland in 2030?
  - What are the opportunities and barriers to achieving this success, from your understanding of the current operational context?
  - Following on from the above, in your opinion what are the three main support strategies that need to be in place to optimise the value of farming in the county by 2030?

### *Phase 2*

11. The second phase of the Inquiry subsequently considered in more depth the salient issues associated with:
  - Complying with the new demands for environmental land management through the progressive rollout by the Government of the Sustainable Farming Incentive, Local Nature Recovery and Landscape Recovery schemes.
  - Finding the right balance between sustaining food production and production

with the national ambition for widespread nature recovery, tree and woodland planting, and peat restoration as well as continued housing development.

- Fully unlocking the role of the agriculture sector in tackling climate change through the considerable opportunities to maximise carbon capture while progressively reducing greenhouse gas emissions from food production.
- Balancing the distinct interests of estate landowners and tenant farmers to ensure that the benefits of the new environmental land management schemes are equitably shared.

## **Inquiry Themes**

12. From this, five key themes emerged from the Inquiry discussions, as follows:
  - Navigating the changing policy landscape
  - Supporting farmers through the agricultural transition
  - Maximising the benefits from locally produced food
  - Promoting farming as a career
  - Balancing the respective interests of landowners and tenants
13. The Inquiry report (which is available [here](#)) considers each of these and sets out recommendations for the County Council to help address the prevailing challenging and opportunities they present.

## **Conclusion and Review**

14. The Inquiry report concludes with a request from the panel members to provide a written response to the recommendations, detailing whether they endorse them or not – and where they do, how they will be actioned and within what timeframe.
15. Equally, the Inquiry offers to reconvene once a year for the next three years to review progress to date and to offer ongoing advice on how best to progress the industry.
16. The Council's initial response to each of the recommendations is set out in Appendix 2 and it is suggested that these are communicated to Professor Shortall as Chair with a request for the panel members to reconvene in early 2024 to review progress and suggest any further next steps.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

<b>Policy</b>	The farming sector is important to the local economy of the county with the sustainability of its future fundamental to the delivery of the Northumberland Stewardship and Rural Growth Investment Plan.
<b>Finance and value for money</b>	The initial response to the Farming Inquiry can be resourced from a combination of existing Council budgets and external funding secure through the Northumberland Stewardship and Rural Growth Investment Programme.
<b>Legal</b>	The Local Authorities (Functions and Responsibilities) (England) Regulations 2000 confirm that the matters within this report are not functions reserved to Full Council.
<b>Procurement</b>	n/a
<b>Human Resources</b>	n/a
<b>Property</b>	n/a
<b>Equalities</b>	Impact Assessment Attached Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The farming sector will need to demonstrate that it can attract a more diverse workforce its future is going to be sustainable.
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	n/a
<b>Crime &amp; Disorder</b>	n/a
<b>Customer Consideration</b>	n/a
<b>Carbon reduction</b>	The farming sector will need to demonstrate that it can operate on a Net Zero basis if its future is going to be sustainable.
<b>Health and Wellbeing</b>	The farming sector plays a key role in facilitating public access to the countryside which contributes to the physical and mental well-being of residents and visitors.
<b>Wards</b>	ALL

### **Background papers**

[Future of Farming in Northumberland Inquiry Report, November 2022](#)

## **Report sign off**

***Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:***

	Full Name of Officer
Monitoring Officer/Legal	Suki Binjal
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	Jan Willis
Relevant Executive Director	Rick O'Farrell
Chief Executive	Rick O'Farrell
Portfolio Holder(s)	Glen Sanderson

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## **Appendix 1: List of Individuals who participated in the Inquiry**

### **Inquiry Committee:**

Carl Atkin, Chair, Institute of Agricultural Management  
James Barber, Country Land and Business Association (CLA)  
Tom Burston, Farming and Countryside Commission  
Lord Curry of Kirkharle  
Jean Davidson, Northumberland National Park Authority (NNPA)  
Edward Dungait, National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs (NFYFC)  
Fiona Fell, Centre for Innovation Excellence in Livestock (CIEL)  
Peter Hetherington, journalist and author of Land Renewed  
Councillor Mark Mather, ward councillor for Wooler and tenant farmer  
Professor Sally Shortall, Newcastle University and Chair  
Tom Richardson, National Farmers Union (NFU)

### **Individuals who gave evidence to the Inquiry:**

Libby Bateman, CLA  
Mark Bridgeman, farm and business owner  
Mark Child, Great Northumberland Forest  
George Dunn, Tenant Farmer Association (TFA)  
David Feige, Northumberland County Council  
Tony Gates, Northumberland National Park  
Carmen Hubbard, Newcastle University  
Scott Iley, tenant farmer  
Walter Riddle, farm and business owner  
Alistair Scott, Northumbria University  
Christine Venus, Natural England  
Rory Wilson, Northumberland Estates

### **Secretariat to the Inquiry:**

Sarah Kidd, Northumberland County Council  
Chloe Munro, Northumberland County Council  
Janice Rose, Northumberland County Council  
Phil Hunter, Northumberland County Council



## Appendix 2: Initial response of the Council to the recommendations of the Inquiry

INQUIRY RECOMMENDATION	INITIAL COUNCIL RESPONSE
<b>Navigating the changing policy landscape</b>	
<p>1. Invites the Secretary of State for the Environment to a conference in Northumberland, where the local farming sector can present their views on the plans for agricultural transition and showcase the potential for Northumberland to act as a place-based exemplar.</p>	<p>The Secretary of State has already been invited to a roundtable discussion, with members of the Inquiry Panel and those who gave evidence to the Inquiry, to explore the role that Northumberland can play in facilitating the agricultural transition.</p>
<p>2. Considers accelerating the preparation of a Land Use Framework for Northumberland to inform the equivalent approach the Government have committed to undertake for England in 2023</p>	<p>The potential scope to accelerate the preparation of a Land Use Framework for Northumberland will initially be discussed at the proposed roundtable discussion with Defra.</p>
<b>Supporting farmers through the agricultural transition</b>	
<p>3. Working collaboratively with the National Park, maps and promotes the existing network of farmer groups/clusters within the county and progressively seeks to address the gaps in coverage to establish a coherent network for farmer engagement and collaboration.</p>	<p>Mapping of existing farmer clusters/groups is already in hand, and further dialogue is planned with the National Park to define how best to further build and support this network as part of the new Northumberland Small Business Service.</p>
<p>4. Commissions a survey of Northumberland farm businesses to identify the specific information, tools and support required to facilitate the agricultural transition, with the feedback generated being used, in collaboration with the NFU, TFA and CLA to inform the further signposting to existing online resources and examples of best practice to access funding, provide peer support, diversify farms and achieve change.</p>	<p>Further dialogue with the National Park and the National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise is planned to define the scope and timing of a survey of Northumberland farm businesses within the context of the new Northumberland Small Business Service.</p>
<p>5. Commission the provision of short online training modules as appropriate</p>	<p>The commissioning of online training modules will be progressed as required</p>

<p>to further equip farm businesses with the confidence and capability to undertake continued and expanded farm diversification.</p>	<p>following the conducting and analysis of the survey of Northumberland farm businesses outlined at recommendation 4.</p>
<p>6. Reviews the process of assessing planning applications for farm diversification initiatives.</p>	<p>The Council will prepare, over the next three months, a short paper detailing the policies in the Northumberland Local Plan that will help facilitate the timely consideration of planning applications associated with farm diversification.</p>
<p>7. Continues to work with the Shared Rural Network (SRN) to ensure that all farms in the county are connected to 4G technology.</p>	<p>Whilst the Council, currently, has no influence over where SRN masts are sited, work is ongoing to find the most efficient and effective way to deal with enquiries that come in from operators deploying mobile infrastructure as part of the Digital Connectivity Infrastructure Accelerator (DCIA) project. The Council is also working with Building Digital UK (BDUK) and broadband suppliers to ensure that the harder to reach areas, which by their nature will include farms, will receive gigabit capable broadband as part of Project Gigabit.</p>
<p>8. Seeks clarity from the Northern Powergrid about the number of farm businesses not connected to the national grid and the current strategy to address these gaps and uses this information to secure additional investment from the Government as part of rural levelling up to address the problem.</p>	<p>The Council will initially liaise with the North of Tyne Combined Authority as to how best to raise this issue with Northern Powergrid within the context of the new North East devolution deal which recognises (in paragraph 81d) the need to increase the North East's electricity network capacity to meet future electricity demand, including from industry</p>
<p><b>Maximising the benefits from locally produced food</b></p>	
<p>9. Coordinates the development and delivery of a Northumberland Food Strategy; that will build on the existing "Produced in Northumberland" brand, and champion the value of local produce to further economic growth and reducing ill-health and inequality.</p>	<p>The preparation of a Northumberland Food Strategy will be commissioned within the next six months, in dialogue with the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission.</p>

<p>10. Commissions a technical feasibility study on improving the local processing infrastructure to: help define the optimal way to process local meat products; reduce road miles travelled by produce and expand specialist butchery provision within the county.</p>	<p>The feasibility work to explore the processing of local meat products will be incorporated into the preparation of the Northumberland Food Strategy.</p>
<p><b>Promoting farming as a career</b></p>	
<p>11. Collaborates with the National Farmers' Union (NFU), Tenant Farmers' Association (TFA) and Country Land and Business Association (CLA) to develop and champion a suite of case studies of individual farmers and landowners to showcase the contribution they make to the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of Northumberland.</p>	<p>The initial suite of case studies of individuals farmers and landowners will be generated as part of the preparation of the Northumberland Food Strategy.</p>
<p>12. Encourages a larger local landowner, either an estate, the Ministry of Defence or the National Trust, to bid for a pilot from Defra's New Entrant Scheme as a platform from which a wider campaign showcasing the attraction of working in the farming sector could be built.</p>	<p>The potential scope for a New Entrant Scheme pilot in Northumberland will be initially discussed at the proposed roundtable session with Defra.</p>
<p><b>Balancing the respective interests of landowners and tenants</b></p>	
<p>13. Affirms to Defra its commitment to work with local landowners and tenants to pioneer any changes made as a result of the Government's response to the Rock Review.</p>	<p>The Council confirms its commitment to work with tenants and local landowners to pioneer any changes made as a result of the Government response to the Rock Review.</p>
<p>14. Recognising the importance of the tenanted farming sector in Northumberland (and the growing insecurity faced by many tenants), that the County Council affirms its commitment to work with tenants and local landowners to pioneer any changes made as a result of the Government's response of the Rock</p>	<p>As such, the potential scope of this commitment will be initially discussed at the proposed roundtable session with Defra.</p>

Review, which stated that tenants must be given full, independent access to all Government schemes and incentives if the sector is to thrive.	
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