



Food and farming: too many steps removed?

Making a step change in reconnecting the public with British farming

A report of the Business Forum meeting on 26th November 2013

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About the Business Forum

Ethical questions around climate change, obesity and new technologies are becoming core concerns for food businesses. The Business Forum is a seminar series intended to help senior executives learn about these issues. Membership is by invitation only and numbers are strictly limited.

The Business Forum meets six times a year for in-depth discussion over an early dinner at a London restaurant.

To read reports of previous meetings, visit foodethicscouncil.org/businessforum.

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Introduction

Many millions of people don't understand or appreciate where their food comes from or how it is produced. If more than a third of 16 to 23-year-olds (36%) do not know that bacon comes from pigs (LEAF, 2012), then how can we encourage people to eat ethically and value food more? In our desire for a fairer food system, what transformative steps might genuinely help reconnect the food on our plate and farming? But is this 'disconnect' issue really getting worse? And is the idea of 'reconnecting' simply a middle-class luxury in a world where there is great food poverty and where food prices are increasingly volatile (and on an upward trend), or is it essential in tackling those very issues?

The November 2013 meeting of the Food Ethics Council Business Forum considered whether and why this 'disconnect' issue is getting worse. It also looked at how much of a need there is to bring people closer to their food and at how food and farming businesses might create a step change in '(re)connecting'. It also explored what lessons can be learned from attempts to reconnect the public with farming. This includes MyFarm, a former National Trust initiative where the running of a real farm was handed over to the public through the web.

We are grateful to our speakers, Lord Donald Curry, Chair of the Better Regulations Executive based in BIS and Chair of the Leckford Estate Management Committee – the Waitrose Farm; Jon Alexander, founder of the New Citizenship Project; and Richard Morris, Farm Manager for the National Trust's Home Farm, Wimpole Estate. The meeting was chaired by Helen Browning, Chair of the Food Ethics Council.

The report was prepared by Dan Crossley and outlines points raised during the meeting. The report does not necessarily represent the views of the Food Ethics Council, the Business Forum, or its members.

Key points

- Farming's perceived detachment from the economy and the environment has been blamed for the UK's 'dysfunctional' food system. There has been progress on some aspects of the 'reconnection challenge' in recent years, and there were a range of views as to how significant the 'disconnect' problem is. A key question is whether people can value food if they don't understand or appreciate where their food comes from or how it is produced.
- If there is a 'disconnect', at what level is it? Arguably, it stems from the lack of a deeper connection with nature more broadly, rather than food and farming alone.
- Attempts have been made to reconnect people with farming in the UK, for example MyFarm, and it is important to learn lessons from both the successes and failures of such initiatives.
- Imagining what a society truly connected to food and farming might look like would help people consider how desirable that might be, and work out what might be needed to move towards that vision.
- Labelling people as consumers may help create this disconnect. 'Consumer' is a construct which tends to draw the boundaries round the self quite narrowly. If food businesses engage with people in their broader role as 'citizens', people would be empowered to participate more actively in creating better food and farming systems.
- It was felt that particular focus should be given to connecting children with their food and where it comes from. There are several opportunities to create a step change in reconnecting the public with the food they eat and enjoy. Wider and deeper engagement, greater transparency along the whole food chain and collaboration are all key ingredients.

The (re)connection challenge

In 2002, the Report of the Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food stated: “We believe the real reason why the present situation is so dysfunctional is that farming has become detached from the rest of the economy and the environment. The key objective of public policy should be to reconnect our food and farming industry; to reconnect farming with its market and the rest of the food chain; to reconnect the food chain and the countryside; and to reconnect consumers with what they eat and how it is produced.”¹

The Commission was set up following the foot and mouth outbreak of 2001, which in turn came after a very difficult decade for agriculture and food in the 1990s (with multiple disease outbreaks and falling consumer confidence in food production and in the scientific community). At the time it was argued that the challenge is often one of ‘connection’ rather than ‘reconnection’, as there are large swathes of British society who arguably have never been connected with the land at all. What is clear is that many millions of British citizens still appear to have much less of a connection and affinity with the land, the countryside and farming today than fellow citizens in other countries, for example France and Germany.

It was suggested that the ‘disconnect’ may have started at the time of the Industrial Revolution – which happened first in Great Britain, which is why the scale of the problem may be larger than in many other countries. The proportion of people working in farming in the UK has reduced significantly and is in long-term decline. In England, there has been an 8% reduction in the total agricultural labour force between 2000 and 2012 alone². There are far fewer people actively working in UK farming today than there were for most of the twentieth century.

¹The Report of the Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food (2002)

²https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/245828/agindicator-b9-01oct13.pdf

A problem getting worse or better?

In the last decade or so, there has been much work carried out to build up confidence and trust in the food and farming system. This has included promotion of farm assurance schemes and the establishment of the Food Standards Agency (albeit its role has changed in recent years). There has also been growing public interest in food, including a rapid growth in the number of box schemes, farmers’ markets and TV programmes about food, cooking and farming.

Some of the challenges faced by the impact of global population growth, resource scarcity and climate change are better understood than they were a decade ago. There appears to be a growing realisation of the pressures on food security. There is also arguably a more positive view of agriculture amongst the general public in Great Britain than there was at the turn of the century. So perhaps it can be argued that ‘reconnection’ is already under way.

However, some surveys suggest many children in the UK are now more disconnected from where their food comes from than ever. The extent to which this reconnection is being translated into tangible behavioural change can be questioned. There was broad consensus that while there has been progress on some fronts, it could be accelerated if the fragmented efforts of different players in the food system were better coordinated. There were a range of views as to how significant the ‘disconnect’ problem currently is.

At what level is the problem?

Accepting that many people *are* disconnected from their food, the problem may lie deeper than with food alone. Should the challenge instead be how to (re)connect people with nature more broadly?

Food is often a used to help people understand nature better – for example through learning about growing vegetables. As such, reconnecting people

with food can bring increased understanding and connection with nature.

In considering the level of the problem, it is also important to consider timescales. One suggestion was that reconnection is pressing in the short to medium term, but that in the longer-term, other issues might be regarded as more important. So, for example if farming became more profitable in the future, this might create hostility amongst the public, with farmers being portrayed as making money whilst others are suffering financial hardship.

Parallels with other sectors

Whilst it is recognised that the food and farming sector is complex and ‘different’, it may help to consider levels of connection in other sectors (for example energy), and if parallels might be drawn.

Before exploring how to reconnect people in practice, the purpose of connecting people was challenged. The question was asked as to whether trying to ‘connect’ people is the best way to get to the desired outcome or outcomes? With energy, there is often a line of argument put forward that if only people understood where their energy comes from, they would make different (‘better’) decisions in relation to it. It was challenged whether this is always necessarily the case. Do people really care about their connection with where their energy comes from in the same way they do (or should do) about food?

It is not possible to draw a generic conclusion on whether and why connection matters, because people have different value judgements on this. People – as citizens and consumers – will have very different views as to where they want to be (and where they want society to be) in the long-term. There is potentially a wide range of desirable outcomes for consumers (and other stakeholders) that deal with issues like food poverty, animal welfare and the environmental sustainability of food. Ensuring the British food and farming industry

delivers these multiple different outcomes is currently a very real challenge.

MyFarm: reconnection in practice

MyFarm was a National Trust experiment at Wimpole Home Farm, whereby the running of a working farm was handed over to the public through the web, with decision-making taking place via online voting. It started in May 2011 and whilst the MyFarm experiment has officially ended, there remain lots of valuable lessons to be learned from the experience and its legacy continues.

The recruitment tag line was ‘10,000 farmers wanted. No experience necessary’, which clearly articulates who MyFarm was trying to reach and implicitly suggests the aim of the initiative – to connect the public with farming. Every month or as often as necessary, the MyFarm team would open up a decision to its members. There would then be an opportunity for members to learn about the issue. They were given information on the website and signposts to find out material elsewhere. Members were then invited back to vote online on what they wanted. Once a decision was made, it had to be implemented. The initiative relied on the ‘wisdom of the crowds’ to make the ‘right’ decision, which (reflecting back) seems to have worked well.

MyFarm attracted 3,000 paying members and actively engaged with around 10,000 people. Whilst ‘virtual engagement’ is different to direct hands-on experience of working on a real farm, many members did learn a great deal about farming in the period it ran for. One of the biggest surprises for some MyFarm members was the often significant difference between farm gate and retail prices. Getting greater awareness and understanding of such issues is really important in driving change.

Citizens and consumers

There have been a series of studies in social psychology that have looked at talking to people as

citizens rather than as consumers³. Priming studies give prompts to behaviour that can only be processed unconsciously rather than consciously - yet people react differently. A simple example of this was a 1,000-person survey of environmental and social attitudes and behaviours. Five hundred people answered a 'citizen response study' and 500 a 'consumer response study'. Levels of environmental and social motivation were significantly lower in the one entitled *consumer* response study.

The language of the individual as 'consumer' has become more and more dominant in recent decades, often at the expense of the language of 'citizens'. It is argued that the notion of the 'consumer' disempowers the individual. The sense of agency about 'consumers' is restricted largely to what they buy and don't buy – a limited way of participating in society. The purpose of being a consumer is arguably getting the best deal for oneself. The question was asked whether disconnection is somehow inherent to the notion of people's role as 'consumers', because it is a construct that is about drawing the boundaries round the self quite narrowly.

However, it was also proposed that getting people conscious of themselves as consumers might be a *route into* becoming citizens, rather than 'consumers' being something diametrically *opposed* to being 'citizens'.

The importance of early connection

There are several longitudinal studies that show if you have developed a personal visceral connection with the natural world when young, then you are significantly more likely to have pro-environmental, pro-social behaviours later in life. Studies show that children who have developed a connection with nature by the age of 12 tend to be much healthier physically (with lower rates of obesity) and mentally

(with positive self-esteem). That explains initiatives to get young people outdoors – such as the National Trust's '50 things to do before you're 11 ¾'.

In 2007, a UNICEF report highlighted the issue of child well-being. When compared with 20 other OECD countries, including substantially poorer ones, the UK was at the bottom of the league table of child well-being. A follow-up ethnographic study defined childhood materialism as being one of the key measures.⁴ It was argued that shifting away from childhood materialism improves child well-being.

Many schools have been participating in farm visits for some time. Open Farm Sunday – run by LEAF – has been very successful at getting people to engage with farmers and to learn about farming. Over one million have participated since it was launched in 2006, many of whom are families with children. The Royal Highland Educational Trust was also cited as an example of a programme that successfully helps get young people onto farms in Scotland. The Food for Life Partnership also tries to connect people better with where food comes from – hence schools have to organise an annual farm visit as part of achieving its bronze award. Some barriers remain to getting more children onto farms however. These include teachers being nervous about financial barriers, particularly transport costs, and health risks (although it was noted E. coli outbreaks on school farm visits are extremely rare, because teachers are typically vigilant on hygiene).

There are other models for raising children's awareness of food and farming that extend beyond farm visits, including Fairtrade schools (as part of citizenship education), plus greater cooking and food growing in schools. TV programmes also offer opportunities to engage children on food and farming issues.

It was noted that in Cuba, the national curriculum mandates children at the age of 15 to work on farms

³<http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/news/releases/consumerism-and-its-antisocial-effects-can-be-turned-on-or-off.html>

⁴http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publications/IPSOS_UNICEF_ChildWellBeingreport.pdf

for two years. This helps them understand first-hand how food is produced – and it was reported that it results in many choosing agricultural courses at university because of their experiences gained.

Success: a truly connected society?

If the goal is a society truly connected with food and farming, what might that look like? Several suggestions were put forward. Perhaps people would be prepared to spend a higher proportion of disposable income on food in the UK than they do now? Maybe families would sit down and eat together regularly? And the culture might be such that people do not feel their values are compromised by the decisions they must make in relation to food.

Ways of creating a step change?

Several ideas were suggested:

1. Nationwide schools-farm partnership

Every school in the country could be partnered with a farm. This could be supported (and possibly funded) by key players from across the food system.

2. Open up ‘hidden’ aspects of food chain

Rather than sanitizing aspects of food production, and having (often) opaque supply chains, why not go beyond farm visits and open up food chains more widely? The largest abattoir in Denmark has a visitors’ gallery receiving over 20,000 visitors a year, including groups of schoolchildren. It may be possible to set up similar models in the UK to encourage people to connect better with their food, including at key points along the chain that may have previously been ‘off-limits’, such as abattoirs.

3. National Food Service?

Could the concept of a ‘National Food Service’ be adapted and deployed in the UK in some way – perhaps following the US model of FoodCorps⁵?

4. Encourage families to eat together

Could programmes be developed to encourage families/ households to eat dinner together, and in doing so enable conversations about where their food comes from? This reflects the view that connecting people to farms is not the only approach if the goal is getting people to value their food more.

5. Reframe food consumers as food citizens

Food businesses could experiment with encouraging customers to participate as citizens, rather than solely as people who buy from them. As one example, supermarkets could run customer competitions in all of their stores for ideas to help reduce food waste (in store and at home).

It was felt each of these ideas has the potential to better connect people with food and farming. It is important to note the above does not represent an exhaustive list of ideas or a roadmap to reconnecting the public with food and farming. These are intended as initial ideas for stimulus.

Reflection

If people are more connected with where their food comes from, it is likely they will value their food more. Critically, this extends beyond connection to the farm and into a broader connection with the land and countryside. Overcoming any such reconnection challenge is likely to take concerted effort and joined-up activity right along the food chain – sustained over a considerable period of time. However, solutions to our food and farming problems do not *necessarily* all rely on everyone being better connected to farming. Hence attempting to ‘reconnect’ is a positive aspiration, with other routes to fairer, greener, healthier and more humane food and farming systems worth pursuing too.

⁵ FoodCorps (www.foodcorps.org) is a nationwide team of leaders that connects kids to real food and helps them grow up

healthy by placing motivated leaders in limited-resource communities for a year of public service.

Speaker biographies



Lord (Donald) Curry of Kirkharle is Chair of the Better Regulations Executive (BRE) based in BIS and Chair of the Leckford Estate Management Committee – the Waitrose Farm. In August 2012 he was appointed Chair of the Royal Veterinary College. He was Chairman of the NFU Mutual Insurance Company from 2003 to 2011 and now sits on their board. He chaired the Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food reporting to Government in January 2002 and was responsible for overseeing the Government's Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food until March 2009. He is a trustee of Clinton Devon Estates and also Anglican International Developments (AID). He was awarded a CBE for his services to Agriculture in the 1997 New Year's Honours list, a Knighthood in the Birthday Honours in 2001 and was appointed as a cross bench peer in The House of Lords in October 2011.



Jon Alexander is founder of the New Citizenship Project, a nascent think tank and consultancy specialising in promoting the role of the individual in society beyond that of the Consumer. Jon's background is in the advertising industry, which he left after a Jerry Maguire moment, having co-authored a seminal report on ethics in advertising called 'Think of me as evil!' He is now back in the industry, but with a very different role, working with agencies and marketing directors to find ways to open a new kind of conversation about the society we want.



Richard Morris is Farm Manager for the National Trust's in hand Home Farm, Wimpole Estate in Cambridgeshire, which comprises 680 hectares (1,633 acres) of park land and arable land. He joined the National Trust in 2007. Since then he has been instrumental in Wimpole's organic conversion, is one of Natural England's six UK Carbon Champion Farmers and acts as a consultant to a dairy farm cooperative in Uganda. He tries to keep abreast of current thinking on sustainable farming and is passionate about reconnecting people with food and farming.



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