



Food Makers 2030

**Who will grow and make our food
in the future?**

A report of the Business Forum meeting on
Tuesday 28th March 2017

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About the Business Forum

Ethical questions around climate change, obesity, food security, people and animal welfare, 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 an 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

Looking beyond the shorter-term capacity challenges around migrant labour relating to Brexit, what does the future hold for the UK's food and farming? Who will be growing and making our food in 2030? What skills will be needed in the future? Will the perennial threat/opportunity (delete as applicable) of robots replacing humans take hold in food and farming? What can be done to transform the appeal of our food and farming sectors?

The population of UK farmers is growing older, and many food sector jobs are widely perceived as unattractive. The furore around Brexit risks distracting from long-term structural issues within the industry, which include the ability to attract new and young talent. The UK came a worrying 25th out of 25 countries on 'participation of youth in farming' in the recently published Food Sustainability Index.

What opportunities are there to create a vibrant, profitable, sustainable sector that includes better jobs for the farmers, producers, growers and cooks of tomorrow? Surely seizing the opportunities provided by Brexit must include designing a sector where people have skills to produce food and steward the land in the years ahead.

The March 2017 meeting of the Business Forum explored the extent to which an automated sector is desirable/possible; what skills will be needed in the future and how the right talent can be nurtured. It also discussed barriers to good food and farming jobs, how to overcome them and how to improve youth participation in the sector, and considered opportunities to improve the reality and the image of food and farming.

We are grateful to our keynote speakers, **Chris Manley**, former Chair of the National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs (NFYFC) and **Solitaire Townsend**, co-founder of Futerra (sustainable development communications agency). The meeting was chaired by **Helen Browning**, Chief Executive of the Soil Association and Council member of the Food Ethics Council.

The report was compiled by Anna Cura, Liz Barling and 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

- Across the UK, the farming population is ageing, with young people living in rural communities increasingly moving away.
- Farming is often seen as a low status career choice, and the lack of positive rural role models in the media entrenches this belief.
- The industry is trying to tackle the practical issues that are stopping young people from working in food and farming, but this is unlikely to work until they have tackled the social barriers.
- Many young people are interested in entrepreneurship and technology. Farming and food production can offer opportunities in both these areas – but the industry needs to change to embrace these interests.
- An image of food producer as entrepreneurial, rebellious and challenging is surely much more likely to capture the imagination of young people than the bucolic image of a rural idyllic life.
- There is a lack of a clear career path and of professional qualifications in food and farming. Coupled with very few opportunities for young people to 'try before they buy', this is a serious barrier to encouraging younger generations into the industry.
- There is a lack of access to practical support for would-be farmers and food producers, including access to land or to training in marketing and accountancy. Social isolation is also a key challenge.
- The younger generations have different values to older generations. They are interested in social value as well as economic value. Farming can offer unique opportunities to 'give back' to society.
- But not all farming jobs will be high-tech. There will always be a role for manual labour, which is important in ensuring that rural communities are sustainable and thrive. There are also an increasing number of technical career paths in food and farming that young people could be inspired to pursue.
- It was argued that the future of farming depends on building high quality jobs that allow people to do great things, rather than on poor quality jobs that are 'dirty, dull and dangerous' – and at risk of becoming a fourth 'D' – defunct, with the onset of mechanisation.

Current realities

The current UK farming population is ageing – the average age of a UK farmer is 59¹ – with relatively little uptake from younger generations. Working in the food and agriculture sectors is not regarded as an attractive career choice for many potential recruits among millennials.

Meanwhile, many parts of the UK's food and farming sectors are heavily reliant on foreign labour, and Brexit will have a major impact on how our food will be produced, distributed, and sold in the future.

The food and farming sectors are shifting. Beyond the expansion of career opportunities, many in younger generations interact differently with the sector. They are less loyal to brands. They are both more interested in connecting with authenticity and more detached from where their food comes from.

Barriers

With this in mind, it is imperative to understand the reasons why lots of young people are turning away from careers in food and farming. It was suggested that there are two types of barriers: of the 'head' and the 'heart'. Industry discussions often focus on the 'head', tackling intellectual, issues such as income, succession planning and training.

Meanwhile the 'heart' (or emotional) barriers are often overlooked. Why are people leaving rural areas? If younger generations do not even want to live in the countryside, then it does not matter how many plans are in place to break down the structural barriers to entering the sector.

Three important criteria were described when looking at how people decide what career they want to pursue: status, social proofing, and salience.

Farming in general is not considered a high-status career. Apart from being a dangerous occupation (with one recorded death per week), it is often associated with low-skilled workers and manual labour, as opposed to being regarded as a profitable business venture.

There is also a lack of role models who can inspire and nurture new recruits. Farmers are under-represented in society; people living rural lifestyles are only infrequently represented in a positive way on TV, for example. The question was asked as to how one can decide to become a farmer if it is not a profession people are familiar with or respect?

Beyond UK food and farming

The ageing farming population is not an issue unique to the UK. It is a challenge in a great many countries around the world. The UK's farmers may be getting older, but the average age of a farmer in the USA is 58 years old², while it is 55 in Peru. With life expectancy in Peru peaking at 60, the country is in danger of losing a generation of farmers, and with it crucial agricultural knowledge.

There are other structural issues that go beyond those normally associated with the food and agricultural sector. Lack of Wi-Fi is one such issues, and is a major barrier to retaining young people in rural areas. Being online allows younger people to participate in the important global conversations that affect their generation. It also helps people living in physically isolated areas to combat loneliness by feeling connected with their peers. Some food companies have already spotted this as an issue and are installing wireless connection points in rural areas. The adoption of social media in farming communities has been very rapid in recent times (e.g. Twitter chats and Instagram), which can also help combat physical and emotional isolation.

Such issues are not food system issues, they are wider government policy issues, many of which relate to the 'rural-urban divide'.

Raising status

Farming is often perceived as low-status manual work. Some families who want the best for their children may only consider 'white collar' work as a successful career, and may wish to avoid seeing their children doing manual labour. It was argued that some families living in rural areas believe that

¹ NFU Mutual (2017) 'Why Britain should protect and cherish small farms' [\[link\]](#)

² Jöhr (2012) Where are the Future Farmers to Grow Our Food? *International Food and Agribusiness Management Review Volume 15 Special Issue A* [\[link\]](#)

the only way out of poverty is to remove oneself through education or by physically leaving the area. This is particularly true, it was suggested, for women. Studies in Peru have shown that encouraging women to leave farming areas also encourages men to follow them to the city, which further depletes the pool of potential labour.

Outside the UK, particularly in places like Africa, South America and South-east Asia, the farming sector enjoys a very low status. It is considered to be an occupation for the uneducated and poor. Many city dwellers in those regions think of farmers as peasants scratching a living from their farms.

It was argued that the media hardly ever represents rural people on television, and when it does, such roles emphasise the drawbacks of farming, which only keeps the industry's status low.

So how do you raise status?

Income is hugely important when considering a career, but so is status. A key question is how to raise the status of those working in food and farming.

One way may be to harness a growing interest in making things. Over recent years, it was argued, people have lost interest in (and knowledge of) practical skills. However, this is beginning to change, and the food and farming sectors could tap in to the trend.

Another possible way to raise the status of farming might be to link it to technology. Farming is becoming increasingly technology focused, and this could appeal to technically-minded young people who are also interested in taking care of the land.

A third way to raise status could be to focus on entrepreneurship. Linking food production with the entrepreneurial spirit can make it seem like a much higher status career option, particularly for young generations brought up on stories of start-up successes.

The question was asked: what else can the food and farming sector do that is unusual, unlikely and unexpected, to catch the attention of young people and show them that it can be a high-status, desirable profession? Most importantly, what is the target audience's definition of high status? One thing it almost certainly is *not* is the

bucolic image of a rural idyllic life. However, an image of food producer as entrepreneurial, rebellious and challenging is much more likely to capture the imagination.

Training and career opportunities

Another factor affecting status is the lack of a clear career path for those wanting to work in the sector. Business owners, whether of farms or restaurants, can no longer assume that they will find it easy to recruit staff. Food and farming career opportunities need to be promoted better in school (both at primary and secondary levels). Teaching children about careers in food production (and along the whole food supply chain) is critical in attracting more young people into the industry. Alongside this, young people need to be given the tools to run a business – it is not enough to have great animal husbandry skills; they need to have a good working knowledge of business management skills, including maths and ICT, to run or work in a food businesses.

In some sectors, specific professional qualifications are needed, e.g. become a chartered accountant. This provides a clear career path and turns them into accredited professionals with a high status.

This is not so much the case in the food and farming sector. Whilst the poultry sector has rolled out a recognised qualification (the Poultry Passport), the approach across the sector is still very fragmented. There are mixed views about the value of chartered status in farming, as qualifications are often linked to vested interests in the system, which it was argued can be off-putting for some. There is another problem - the UK does not have technical colleges in the same way as other countries do, so the infrastructure to roll out professional food and farming qualifications is limited

The UK's fragmented approach to developing technical qualifications for food and farming may well have contributed to a general under-valuing of technical skills. This is not the case in other countries. Many migrant food and farming workers in the UK (such as butchers) are highly valued for their skills in the countries from which they come.

The UK used to have an Agricultural Wages Board (AWB), whose brief included developing

agricultural skills. But the AWB was abolished in David Cameron's 'bonfire of the quangos' and nothing has officially replaced it in England. Many highly regarded agricultural research institutes have been phased out. Harper Adams University is one of the few places left where training is provided. Here, the training has diversified, with the environment and climate change, among other issues, included in the curriculum. There is also training available within the industry, not just for employees, but down the supply chain as well. However, this 'on the job' training is often only provided by large farms or food businesses, because small farms typically lack the resources to offer progression opportunities.

Creating social proofing

Mentors are essential for good careers guidance. Universities use mentors, and the wider food and farming sector could too. However, a one-to-one approach is difficult in such a diverse sector. That is why, it was argued, trying to convince individuals one at a time to work in the farming sector is unlikely to work – unless the social influences around them project positive images of young people with careers in the sector.

People tend to do what others around them do. If young people working in rural farming communities see others working in those communities, they will be more likely to stay. If they see those around them leave, they are more likely to follow. This phenomenon is known as social proofing. A study found that a fundamental block for people worldwide to want to work on farms is a lack of role models, and a more generally a lack of social proof of others who farm.³

This begs the question: where do millennials get their social proofing from? More often than not, the answer is social media rather than TV or the printed news media. New trends, such as the #felfie ('farmer selfie') and #AgriChatUK, are thriving within the sector, but remain largely niche. There is a huge opportunity in opening these trends up to the wider population and changing the perception around farming.

Younger children still watch a lot of television, and, it was argued, the sector could begin to work

on influencing children's TV to create positive food and farming role models, thus tackling social proofing from a very early age.

Incentives

Saliency

'Can you see a picture in your head of you farming?' Psychological saliency allows people to envision themselves in a situation, in order to decide whether it is the right thing for them or not.

For those already working in food and farming, this relates to what they see and feel around them. Do they want the same lifestyle? And if not, what other models seem more appealing?

However, even people who are keen to become farmers or food producers often bemoan the lack of opportunities to 'try before they buy.' In the US State of Maine, such schemes are in place for novices, with the result that it is the only state in the country that has seen a rise in farmers. Similarly, in Italy, agri-ecoles allow people to work on farms and to learn how, for example, to develop community gardens.

Increased mechanisation has made it even harder for farms to welcome would-be farmers to try their hand. Agroforestry involves more manual labour, so it is easier to train people on a short-term, trial basis. School gardens, scouting, Open Farm Sundays, and any other opportunity that gives people the chance to test the job helps give them positive images of working in the sector. Without such experiences, it is very difficult decision for new entrants to decide if a career in food and farming is for them.

Practical support

Access to land and capital are two other key barriers to young people working in food production. Therefore, the support available needs to be adequately signposted. Owning land, for example, is not the only starting point for a new food producer. In New Zealand (and indeed in the UK) there are share-farming arrangements and land partnerships that link those who have land with those looking for an opportunity. Crowdfunding, Community-Supported Agriculture (CSAs) or offering shares in ownership are other

³ Leavy and Hossain (2014) Who wants to Farm? Youth Aspirations, Opportunities and Rising Food Prices [\[link\]](#)

options. The Field of Wheat project⁴ is a co-owned field of wheat that a farmer manages for the shareholders. All decisions are made collectively which allows shareholders to engage more with their food, while guaranteeing income to the farmer.

What the younger generation wants

It was argued that many in the younger generation want to connect with their desires for purposefulness and experience. They want their work to have salience. They could be considered the de-commoditisation generation, with their push-back on consumption and their different values. This is so important that some industries (e.g. oil and gas) are struggling to recruit, while many staff do not like to admit that they work for them.

This represents a fantastic opportunity for the food and farming sector, if it positions itself as ‘feeding people, making a difference, growing – or making – something’. The key is to harness the new generation’s burning desire for a purposeful and meaningful career, whilst – as a sector – be willing to adapt to this new workforce.

Increasing value and productivity

What is meant by productivity in food and farming? And should this definition be changed? Traditionally, the focus has been on agricultural yield to the exclusion of social productivity. But should it be defined by yield alone or is there another way? If social factors are fed in to the equation, what would farm productivity look like? Would redefining productivity to include social aims make the sector more attractive to younger generations?

Farms are businesses that produce food, but they also add value by contributing to – for example – the rural economy, biodiversity and climate change. These additional values, it was argued, mean that farmers should see themselves playing multiple roles, not least in linking and sustaining communities. There are very few farmers who have trained in marketing or tourism, for instance, but these are roles they could play to be successful.

The trend towards specialisation in agriculture can, it was suggested, make farmers lose sight of the wide variety of services that farms can offer. In order to attract young people to work for them, farmers may need to diversify and make their business more dynamic and interesting. Farming should be about business leadership and innovation.

The future role of technology

The food and farming sector has only recently begun to offer opportunities for people interested in computing or technology. Some argue that this trend will become more significant as the quest for agricultural efficiency becomes ever more dominant.

Millennials are inspired by the ability of technology to break down barriers. There are opportunities to bring in technology partners and major software companies into farming. There has been a rise in interest from tech companies in food (in Silicon Valley in particular). However, so far, such involvement has been disappointing in its lack of engagement with food and farming communities. Rather, tech companies have sought to ‘solve’ problems themselves, e.g. with synthetic meat and protein replacement foods.

Technology’s most promising advancement is in tackling the ‘three Ds’ of farming: Dirty, Dull and Dangerous jobs. For example, the objective of Reading University’s robotics department is to get rid of all such jobs, from shelf stacking to auditing.

It was argued that technology should at its most fundamental be about getting the absolute basics right (e.g. well invested facilities, good ventilation and clean water) and tackling the 3Ds. Its second focus should be on better product development right along the product chain, including at the raw material level, (e.g. nutritional composition).

One vision of the future put forward was of the agri-food sector embracing advancing technology, where work is undertaken in response to real time information and practical experience. This new era, where technology and data are key, will need highly trained people who are not only expert in creating data, but also experts in understanding what information is relevant – and in interpreting that data in a way that benefits society as well as the client.

⁴ For more information, visit <http://fieldofwheat.co.uk/>

Technology is on the march: on farms, it is already seen in drones, GPS technology in tractors, mobile phone apps and cameras in lambing sheds. But there may be bigger systemic changes on the horizon. If society wants more – and more resilient – rural communities growing produce, it was argued that technology will affect the way food is distributed and how people live their lives.

Getting real time information could be compelling to the customer (e.g. codes on eggs that link back to the farm, with ideas on the farm's favourite egg recipes). It was asked whether farmers are ready for that level of transparency.

Technology cannot solve all problems. There will always be jobs that cannot be mechanised, and the economics of automation is still complex. The rearing of animals for example will always need some manual labour, and farmers should not lose their connection with caring and nurturing animals, crops and their land. The big question is whether technology will weaken or strengthen our connection with food production.

Automation may reduce 'dirty, dangerous and dull' jobs, but those jobs feed families. What are the ethical considerations when they disappear? Is it possible, or even desirable, that everyone becomes knowledge workers? Will there always be a place for manual workers in agriculture? It was suggested that having a number of manual labourers living in rural communities can lessen the social isolation that many farmers and farm workers feel.

Brexit and beyond

The UK's Brexit negotiations with the EU offer an opportunity to build a platform for the sector to be more attractive in the future. This could include making investment in people a professional concern; offering leadership training; being more open and outward-looking (including, for example, making more of Open Farm Sunday); and coming together in a more joined-up way as a sector to highlight the diversity of the (many highly skilled) jobs across the sector.

It is important to understand what progression looks like in a fragmented industry. This is particularly hard to achieve when people cannot imagine what their careers might look like. The face of farming needs to change. It was suggested that the key to future success includes high

standards of leadership and professionalism at all levels, collaboration that provides mutual benefits, a willingness to adapt to a business culture in farming, and everyone willing to positively promote the food and farming sectors.

It was argued that some sector processors and retailers (especially in the red meat sector) will need to provide a stronger commitment, to give potential farmers the confidence to invest (some give a 10-year buying commitment, for instance).

Conclusions

Is a new era of food production and manufacture on its way? Will Brexit and the associated changes to our food and farming entice a younger generation back to the land, or will we see an even faster exodus to cities?

It was argued that millennials want to make a difference, to make things with their own hands, and to connect with products. They also have a strongly held belief in the power of technology to create change for the better.

Are these trends enough to encourage more young people to food production, or does the government need to put formal measures in place to make farming more attractive? Professional qualifications, positive role models, and valuing social productivity are just three ways that might help to make farming an attractive career.

It was argued that the future of farming depends on building high quality jobs that allow people to do great things, rather than on poor quality jobs that are dirty, dull and dangerous – and at risk of becoming a fourth 'D' – defunct, with the onset of mechanisation.

Speaker biographies



Chris Manley was brought up on a family farm in Devon and is a Harper Adams University (HAU) graduate and former Students' Union President. Chris is passionate about promoting educational and career opportunities within the food and farming industry, having gained experience in the ruminant sector in a number of supply chain roles and now in his current position as Agriculture Manager for Chicken and Turkey at Sainsbury's. This is complimented by his many years of experience in the Young Farmers movement where he recently finished leading the organisation as Chairman, actively encouraging over 24,000 members in England and Wales. He believes that it is important that the opinions of Young People are well represented and he actively took part in lobbying the European Commission, as part of CEJA European Young Farmers Council, for Young Farmers measures in the most recent CAP Reform. Chris is developing his leadership skills and has completed the Worshipful Company of Farmers Challenge of Rural Leadership Course and become a Lord Plumb Foundation Scholar.



Solitaire Townsend co-founded Futerra, the leading sustainable development communications agency, working with global brands, charities and governments to make sustainable development so desirable it becomes normal. Solitaire advises clients including Danone, L'Oréal, Axa, eBay, MTR and the United Nations on making green messages great. Solitaire is passionate (and occasionally argumentative) about the need to make sustainability desirable rather than doom-laden. As she says "selling sustainability isn't like selling a new brand of soap, it's like persuading people to use soap in the first place." Solitaire was named Ethical Entrepreneur of the Year 2008, is Chair of the UK Green Energy Scheme, sits on Danone and O2 Telefonica's advisory boards, and is a London Leader for Sustainability. She speaks regularly on sustainability communications for international media and for Harvard, the Global Reporting Initiative, CEBDS and TEDx.



Helen Browning farms 1,350 acres in Wiltshire, as a tenant of the Church of England, with dairy, beef, pig, sheep and arable enterprises. Her business 'Helen Browning's Organic' supplies organic meat to multiple and independent retailers... and also runs the village pub. Helen became Chief Executive of the Soil Association in March 2011, and prior to that was Director of External Affairs at the National Trust. Helen was until recently Chair of the Food Ethics Council and remains a Council member. She has been a member of several important commissions concerning British agriculture and food, including the Curry Commission on the Future of Farming and Food; the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission; and the Meat and Livestock Commission. She was awarded an OBE in 1998 for services to organic farming.

(Helen chaired the discussion)
