

HANDOUT

REIMAGINING COUNCIL FARMLAND

INNOVATION
IN ACTION
SERIES

Pictures credit: Shared Assets

Shared Assets



CONTEXT

Shared Assets works to create a socially just future through practical projects that build new relationships between people and the land. We see council farmland as a valuable but at risk public asset. Previous research we were involved in found that over 84,000 hectares of 'county farm' land held by local councils in the UK has been sold off over the past 40 years, and the approximately 80,000 hectares of this land that remains is threatened by the effects of privatisation and public budget cuts. If preserved, this asset and other council farmland could help meet the groundswell of interest in small-scale agroecological growing farming in England, as well as helping to address a range of other socio-economic and environmental issues.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

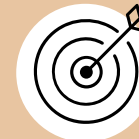
Debates about the future trajectory of agriculture in England are ongoing in the context of Brexit, COVID recovery, and the climate and biodiversity emergencies. Council budgets are under great pressure, and many are looking to sell off parts of their estates to pay for other critical services. There is a risk the current trend of council farmland sales could accelerate, meaning a resource which has provided a cheap entry point into farming for new entrants since the 19th century could be mostly lost. This could also lead to further land ownership concentration and the increased predominance of larger farms with fewer farmers, despite the environmental and social benefits of having more, diverse, smaller farms. This action research sought to change the narrative that council farmland is a thing of the past and instead highlight its potential to meet a variety of 21st-century challenges.

"Innovation in Action". In 2020-21, six RURALIZATION partners conducted eight-month-long participatory action research projects to explore new solutions to leverage farmland in favour of agroecological transition, generational renewal, and rural regeneration. The results of their actions are presented in this series.



INNOVATIVE

- ✓ Exploring routes to valuing land differently - as a common good, not a commodity
- ✓ Proposing ways council land could be better used to prevent asset sell offs
- ✓ Generating a conversation about a national approach to an issue generally dealt with locally and in a disparate manner by councils



IMPACTFUL

- ✓ Placing council farmland at the centre of solving interconnected issues in rural areas
- ✓ Aiming to increase access to land for small-scale farming for new entrants
- ✓ Working to enhance local communities' connection to farming, such as through the production and consumption of more local food

OBJECTIVE

To support the development of a holistic vision for the future of council farmland in England

ACTION PLAN

Task 1: Build relationships with influential stakeholders, and connect people around council farmland

- Map key stakeholders to better understand who holds power in the council farmland ecosystem in England. Work out who to form alliances with or influence to have the greatest impact

Task 2: Find out what needs to be in place for council farmland access to change in England

- Understand the opportunities and barriers for an alternative vision for council farmland in England through workshops and discussions with a wide range of stakeholders, supplemented by desk research and conversations with an advisory group

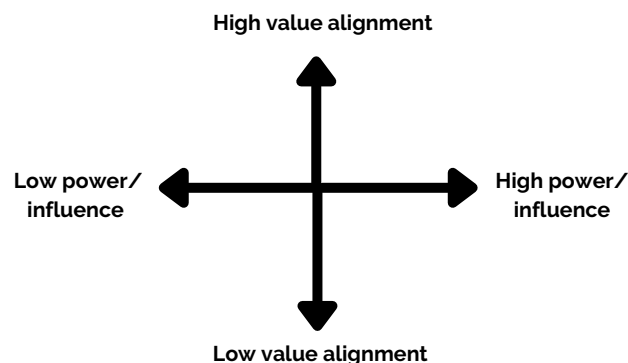
Task 3: Co-create a clear vision for the future of council farmland with stakeholders

- Collectively create and refine this vision with stakeholders to produce resources which can be used by councils, campaigners and practitioners to promote the value and future potential of council farmland, and prevent their further sell-off



RESULTS

We worked closely with our partners CPRE - The countryside charity and the New Economics Foundation throughout this action research. We began by identifying as many stakeholders (groups of individuals and organisations) who might be interested in, or have some degree of power over, council farmland in England. During this discussion, we used an online whiteboard tool to help us visualise the actors, and tried to consider which organisations we would have high value alignment with versus those who had most power or influence, using the grid opposite to categorise each organisation. This exercise helped lay the groundwork for who we would most productively engage with in the workshops and discussions that followed.



Our main action results were:

- **Raising awareness of the existence and potential of council farmland**, and ensuring that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and other stakeholders have them on their agenda when considering the future of farming policy
- **Building strong relationships with the team within Defra which is developing policy for new entrant farmers**, which is important for generational renewal in rural areas
- **Enhancing collective understanding and collaborative work** between Shared Assets, NEF and CPRE and key influential stakeholders

The key components of the vision were: a brief introduction and context overview, key data around council farms and their special role, the vision statements, and policy proposals to support making this vision a reality. The vision statements outline a better future for council farms for the benefit of three types of stakeholders:

1. **Local authorities**, by achieving stability in their estates through investment and the building of a strong national narrative on best-value approach to these assets.
2. **Farmers, growers and the land-based sector**, who will benefit from opportunities to enter farming on council land, where new, diverse, innovative growers with sustainable projects should be prioritised.
3. **Local people**, by ensuring communities are engaged in the management of the farms and can enjoy their benefits (e.g fresh food, access to green space, increased biodiversity).

In future we hope continue to **increase parliamentary awareness and policy support** for the value and potential role of council farmland, to **see a renewed national purpose for council farmland** supported by a broad coalition of stakeholders, and to **form ongoing relationships with specific councils** to work though common challenges, highlight good practice and realise the holistic value of their farmland

TIPS FOR PRACTICE!

DRAWING ON COLLECTIVE KNOWLEDGE

- Understand the existing history of work on the issue in question, and have in-depth discussions with the people involved in it for many years - **there is often no need to start from scratch**, but building a shared narrative to bring together work from past and present can be helpful.
- **Rely on the strengths of each partner organisation** (e.g. there is no point in one partner, without experience in parliamentary lobbying, taking on this role when another partner has a specific team to help with this).
- **Allow ideas to develop and change over time with as broad a range of stakeholders as possible**, to allow outputs to emerge at the time when they can have maximum resonance and impact.

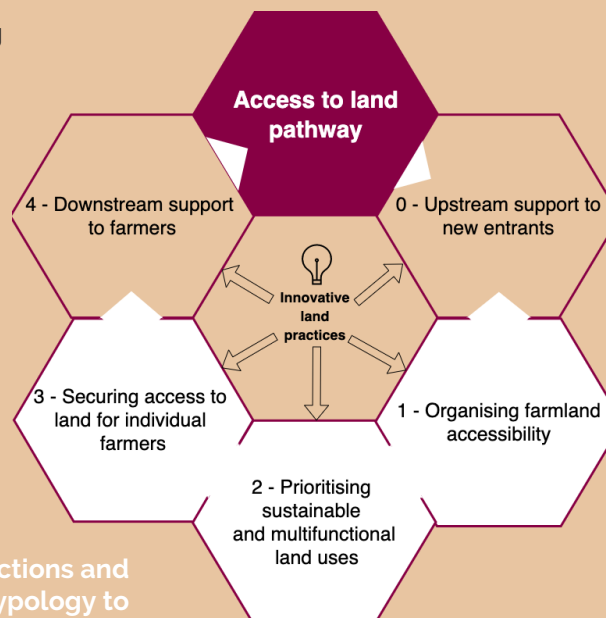
LEVERS & OBSTACLES FOR ACTION

- Presenting **solutions to common problems** faced by councils can go a lot further than framing your demands as something else already busy staff need to do.
- Working **across council departments** and other organisations with wide-ranging priorities can be challenging, but is worth it to achieve the most effective outcomes.



AN ADAPTED RESPONSE TO COUNCIL FARMLAND SELL-OFF

This action aimed, ultimately, to prevent farmland from being sold-off for purposes other than agriculture, or to existing large landowners, and to preserve much of council farmland's original purpose of supporting new entrants into farming (blocks 1 and 3 of the access to land pathway). This is now combined with the additional ambition for this asset to provide a broader range of services for local communities (block 2). In future, if council farmland became better embedded in relocalised food systems as part of the holistic vision under development through this action, the wider council farmland ecosystem could also contribute to blocks 0 and 4 of the pathway, for example through agricultural training and education, farm diversification, and marketing support.



What is the "Access to land pathway"? Innovations use a wide range of actions and strategies to provide effective access to land. The pathway provides a typology to categorise innovative practices' different modes of action.

WHO WE ARE

SHARED ASSETS

Shared Assets are a think and do tank supporting people managing land for the common good. We support the development of new models of managing land, that creates livelihoods, enhances the environment, and involves local people in making decisions about the places they care about. We are environmental governance and stewardship experts.

Learn more at: www.sharedassets.org.uk

ACCESS TO LAND NETWORK

The Access to land network brings together grassroots organisations from across Europe to share experiences and promote the significance of access to land for agroecological transition and generational renewal. Established in 2012, it functions as an informal network of about 15 organisations. Shared Assets is a supporter member of the network.

Learn more at: www.accesstoland.eu



CONTACT

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Learn more at : ruralization.eu

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