



The countryside charity Gloucestershire

Change is inevitable: it should be for the better

POSITION STATEMENT FARMING AND LAND MANAGEMENT

Summary

We recognise that good management of the landscape depends on the viability of farming. Our policies support farm businesses and diversification but in a way which should also help deliver environmental objectives. Accordingly, we:

- *Will encourage farmers to bid for funding for conservation work through ELMS as it is progressively introduced from 2024.*
- *Support adding value to products through direct sales and local sales.*
- *Support the protection from development and from flooding of Best and Most Versatile agricultural land.*
- *Support woodland expansion where this is consistent with food production and landscape and biodiversity considerations.*
- *Support the conversion for appropriate alternative employment uses of redundant traditional farm buildings and the replacement of more modern redundant buildings by well-designed new buildings for employment or community purposes.*
- *Support the conversion of listed or fine traditional agricultural buildings for residential purposes where this is demonstrably the only way to achieve long term preservation.*
- *Are not opposed in principle to new developments such as polytunnels or new farm buildings but view each case on its merits.*
- *Seek to limit local over-concentration of equestrian establishments.*

Background

Farmers and landowners are the owners and custodians of most of our countryside and of many of the buildings sited in the open countryside. Some of these buildings are of historic and architectural merit; the majority are larger more modern system-built functional structures. The vast majority of farmers care for their environment and put in measures wherever possible to mitigate adverse changes which are driven by the economic realities of farming.

Since this policy statement was last reviewed in 2016 the context for farming has changed considerably and is posing substantial challenges for the industry.

Firstly, now that the UK is no longer a member of the European Union a new farming support system will have to be introduced. The bare bones are known with the commitment to phase out direct payments to farmers based on land area which were an entitlement under the EU Common Agriculture Policy, together with the Countryside Stewardship agreements which funded environmental work, replacing this support with the Environmental Land Management System (ELMS). ELMS, to be phased in from 2024, will provide public money for public benefits from farming, but the details are far from clear. CPRE has welcomed this major policy shift and the national team will be doing their bit to get the details right.

Of equal concern is the need to strike new trade deals but at the same time ensure that UK food standards and animal welfare standards are maintained, and our farmers are not put at a competitive disadvantage. We need to be mindful of the importance of UK food production as our population continues to grow.

The second challenge is addressing climate change with the farming industry having to play its full part in delivering the government's commitment to achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. (CPRE is arguing for a more ambitious target of 2045). This will require significant changes in the way agricultural land is managed and farmed to reduce carbon emissions, encourage carbon storage and sequestration and promote better management of soils.

A third challenge is to reduce and then reverse the decline in species diversity and abundance of wildlife in the farmed countryside, noting the ambition in the government's 25-year Environment Plan to develop the concept of a Nature Recovery Network.

A characteristic of traditional farming in much of Gloucestershire is that it is dominated by small farms and small fields. The pattern of field boundaries (whether dry stone walls, hedges, fences or shelter tree belts) is an essential component of the character of the landscape. Grazing livestock farming is on the decline and may decline more rapidly as less meat is eaten as a public response to climate change and to health concerns, yet a living grazed landscape is characteristic of much of the landscape and is important for biodiversity, particularly on the Cotswold escarpment and in the Forest of Dean.

Farming is already under economic pressure due to competition from overseas (huge fields and much less regulation) and supermarket buying power. A logical response to these pressures is to go for the economies of scale of larger fields and larger farms to allow large machinery to operate and to raise the financing required for modern technology. This route to continuing economic viability could be damaging to the Gloucestershire countryside but we need to be pragmatic and constructive in our approach to this dilemma - mindful that economic viability is essential to the good management of our landscape, and that ELMS could offer new economic opportunities.

The communities which tend to care most about their environment are living and working communities. It is essential that there is a dispersal of economic activity into rural areas to prevent villages becoming mostly the preserve of retirees and commuters.

The conservation of most rural parts of Gloucestershire depends on the related themes of ensuring farmers make a reasonable living within the existing landscape structure and ensuring our villages remain vibrant communities. Farming itself no longer provides the core of a community and vitality therefore depends upon generating other sources of economic activity.

There are a number of fundamental issues which CPRE Gloucestershire cannot influence directly – technical innovation, changes in the scale and nature of public support for agriculture following the UK's withdrawal from the EU, and any unfavourable changes to the international playing field as a result of trade negotiations.

Land tenure can have an influence on land management. What matters is how the land is managed and conserved and that detailed knowledge of the farm is not lost. That is a potential risk to good land management - though not an automatic consequence - where large-scale contract operations take over from direct management by individual farm owners or tenants.

For farmers to maintain the character of the countryside and wildlife they will need to be encouraged to take full advantage of the support which will be available through ELMS. But farmers will need more than public payments through ELMS, and will not be able to rely on a resurgence in prices for their produce. Farmers, therefore, have to get more out of their assets and continue to diversify income away from traditional agricultural income. The issue for CPRE is how can this be done without damaging the countryside.

The Government has made it easier for farmers to find new uses for traditional, but redundant, agricultural buildings by allowing change of use without planning permission for other business uses and for conversion to up to three residential units, although the latter change does not apply in National Parks and AONBs.

Our policies

Our policies are to:

- Contribute to the development of ELMS by inputting to the “trials” of scheme approaches being run in Gloucestershire.
- Encourage farmers to bid for funding for conservation work through ELMS as the new scheme is progressively introduced from 2024.
- Input to the work being led by the Gloucestershire Local Nature Partnership to develop a local Nature Recovery Network.
- Support adding value to products through direct sales and local sales. We will support farm shops which have this objective. We will encourage CPRE national to continue to lobby supermarkets chains to increase local purchasing, and encourage more public procurement of local produce. We will put effort into understanding local food supply chains.
- Support the protection from development and from flooding of the Best and Most Versatile agricultural land by reminding planning authorities and the Environment Agency of current national planning policy and by promoting the long term need to preserve this valuable and increasingly scarce natural (soil) resource. In a local

context the availability of such high-quality soils is essential to the production of many vegetable and fruit crops, which can help to supply genuine local foods.

- Sponsor and support projects to protect and restore hedgerows and walls where they are important visual elements of the local landscape.
- Support woodland expansion as a response to climate change where this is consistent with food production and landscape and biodiversity considerations.
- Support the conversion of traditional farm buildings for alternative uses where these are no longer needed for agriculture. Our preference is for uses which deliver additional income to the farmer rather than short term gains from selling the assets.
- Support the conversion or replacement of more modern redundant farm buildings for use for employment or community purposes. Our support will be conditional on an acceptable plan for maintaining or developing farm activity and we will oppose schemes where we feel “redundancy” is a first step towards releasing existing buildings for development to be replaced later by substitute agricultural buildings. In such cases we will lobby for the existing buildings simply to be replaced with fit for purpose agricultural buildings. It should be an aim that any replacement buildings are visually an improvement on those they replace and we note that such buildings may be suitable for exploiting farm produced renewable energy.
- Support the conversion of listed or fine traditional agricultural buildings for residential purposes where this is demonstrably the only way to achieve long term preservation. Elsewhere we will continue to argue for a presumption against new housing in the open countryside. However, there may, occasionally, be circumstances where there is a demonstrable case for new accommodation on the farm for essential management purposes. We would expect the proposed location, size and type of dwelling to reflect its stated purpose.
- Insist that all conversions must be to a design standard which ensures that the outward appearance maintains the essence of an agricultural building.
- Not to be opposed in principle to new developments such as polytunnels or new farm buildings but view each case on its merits. In forming a view on the impact of proposed new developments and whether they are acceptable within the landscape, we will start from what is distinctive in the landscape using landscape character assessment and whether the scale of development would have a material effect. Our first approach will be to seek to advise how such development might be acceptably located or scaled given the need, in many cases, for the development to be located on suitable soil.
- Seek to limit the local over-concentration of equestrian establishments where this would be contrary to the local landscape character, create pressure to construct new housing to accommodate owners/employees or would have safety implications in the use of the local roads network.

The above imply active discussion with the farming community to find positive solutions, which we can then support, rather than an adversarial approach. We also recognise the need for good on-farm advice and the case for the reintroduction of a government-based advisory service which would help facilitate the best environmental outcomes from the new ELMS funding arrangements and for farmers.

Lastly, we recognise that, currently, the main farming sectors which are critical to management of the countryside would not survive without income support. The use of public funding to encourage and support the delivery of environmental benefits is appropriate but the scale of payments must reflect management costs and payments must be made on time.

Updated April 2020

CPRE Gloucestershire Position Statements are regularly reviewed and updated as necessary. They should be read as a set