

ARMAGH CITY, BANBRIDGE & CRAIGAVON BOROUGH COUNCIL

DRAFT AGRICULTURE STRATEGY



Why Agriculture Matters in the Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council Area

The Agriculture Industry has flourished in our borough due to the dedication of generational farmers and growers who have shaped our landscape and who are custodians of our countryside.

Agriculture is part of the largest Broad Industry Group Classification 'Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing', with 3431 registered farm business in 2020, employing 7495 people bringing over £376 million into the ABC Council area. Much of this is spent locally, enabling thriving rural economies and strong agricultural support businesses which supply goods and services to farms. Additionally, agriculture supports the presence of a large number of food processors in the region, ranging from artisan micro-businesses to large scale food processors. These businesses add further value to the income generated from agriculture.

As described elsewhere in this report, agriculture and agri-food are also efficient distributors of wealth, producing goods primarily for sale in populated urban

centres, creating jobs and transferring finance to less populated areas.

Since 2015, Council through the Food Heartland Initiative has developed a strong offering and connection with the Agri Food sector, but to a lesser degree with mainstream farming. Food Heartland has created a celebration of food in the borough, however now it is time for the Borough to recognise and appreciate the farm level and the effort that goes into creating the ingredients for our producers enabling them to develop award winning products.

Relevant to this study at a local level there are a range of strategies and plans which highlight the priorities for ABC which include:

The **ABC Recovery and Growth Framework 2021** identifies Agri Food as an area of focus; '*recognising margins are low and need to move up the value chain and operational investments for the future with a key priority to attract investment*'. It refers to action to develop an agri

food strategy and continue investment for Agri Food and Agri Tech and seeks to reposition Agri Food in the economy.

The **Mid South West Regional Economic Strategy (MSWRES)** through growth deal funding has an ambition to '*deliver sustainable food and farming solutions by 1. Developing a centre for Agri Tech Innovation and 2. Development of Agri-Food Incubation space.*'

One of the nine **Community Plan 2017-2030** priorities is '*A Enterprising Economy: Our borough is the centre of excellence for entrepreneurship, innovation and investment. It references that Agriculture is one of the top three business sectors in the borough contributing to 29%.*'

The Council's **Corporate Plan 2018-2023** under Enterprising Economy sets out a commitment to '*Ensure efficient connections to support enterprise and growth in urban and rural areas*' recognising the importance of the Agri Food as a growth sector.

Engagement undertaken as part of this strategy

Ongoing		Engagement with DAERA, AFBI, Rural Support, UFU, SRC, CAFRE, Invest NI, Agri-Food Quest at Queens University, Food Futures and Council Sections (See Below)
Ongoing		Conversations with Agri Businesses & Organisations including SlurryKat, Armagh Cider Company, NFU Mutual, Loughgall Beekeeping Association and AgriSearch
January 2021		Internal across departmental workshop using mentimeter
February 2021		Individual consultation sessions with key council sections including SOAR, Food Heartland, Mid-South West, Tannaghmore Gardens & Farm, Biodiversity Team and Sustainable Farming Projects, Community Planning, Community Development & Equality Officer, Policing Community & Safety Partnership (PCSP), Planning Officers and Environmental Health
16 February 2021		Elected Members Presentation and Workshop (Evening)
16 February 2021		Presentation and discussion with ICBAN
24 February 2021		Elected Members Presentation & Workshop (Morning)
11 May 2021		Presentation at EDR Committee Workshop
11 June to 4 July 2021		Farmers Survey - open to the public with 73 responses
5 July to 11 August 2021		Agri Business Food Survey - open to the public with 57 responses
1 September		External Stakeholder engagement and feedback session
7 September		Agri Business engagement and stakeholder session
14 September		Presentation to Economic Development and Regeneration Committee
17 September to 15 October 2021		Policy Screening and Rural Impact Screening exercise on Consultation Hub

ARMAGH CITY, BANBRIDGE & CRAIGAVON BOROUGH COUNCIL

HELPING AGRI-BUSINESS WORK

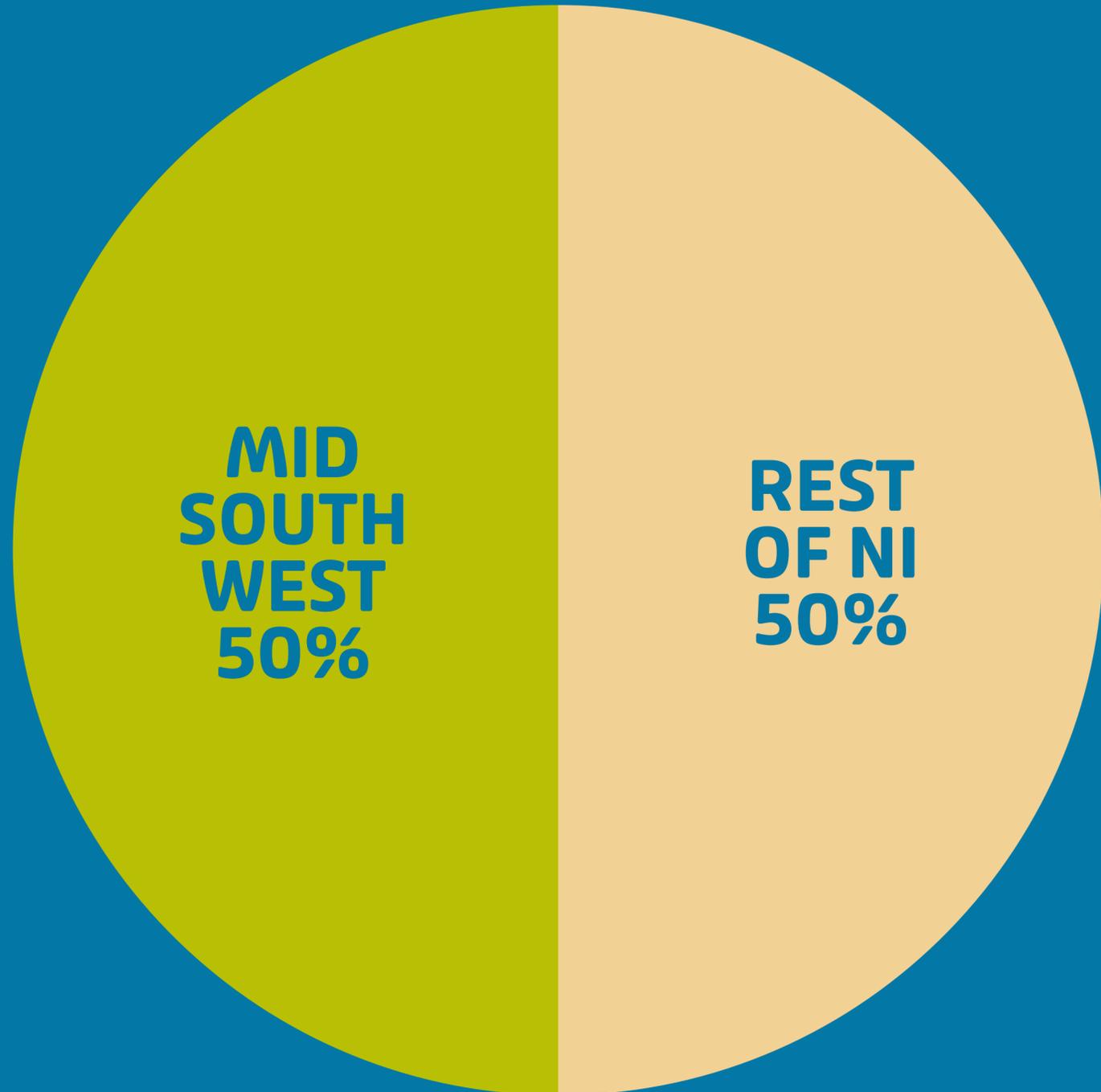


COUNCIL COMPARISON

COUNCIL	% OF NI SECTOR	CEREAL	GENERAL CROPS	HORTI -CULTURE	PIGS	POULTRY	DAIRY	CATTLE/ SHEEP (LFA)	CATTLE/ SHEEP (LOWLAND)	MIXED	OTHERS
Fermanagh & Omagh	21%	*	14%	3%	9%	15%	19%	29%	1%	3%	*
Mid Ulster	17%	12%	14%	0%	26%	31%	16%	16%	19%	18%	*
Newry, Mourne & Down	16%	15%	15%	8%	14%	7%	10%	18%	13%	13%	20%
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	13%	21%	16%	58%	17%	16%	14%	7%	26%	22%	22%
Causeway Coast & Glens	10%	13%	10%	3%	6%	10%	13%	9%	11%	13%	12%
Mid & East Antrim	7%	*	6%	4%	8%	13%	8%	8%	5%	5%	*
Derry City & Strabane	7%	6%	6%	*	8%	2%	7%	8%	4%	6%	*
Antrim & Newtownabbey	4%	2%	*	3%	4%	4%	*	3%	6%	3%	0%
Lisburn & Castlereagh	3%	11%	7%	6%	5%	2%	4%	2%	7%	7%	4%
Ards & North Down	3%	17%	6%	6%	*	1%	*	0%	7%	7%	*
Belfast	0%	0%	*	*	*	0%	*	0%	0%	0%	*

MID SOUTH WEST STATISTICS

THE MID SOUTH WEST REGION REPRESENTS ARMAGH, BANBRIDGE & CRAIGAVON BOROUGH COUNCIL, FERMANAGH & OMAGH DISTRICT COUNCIL AND MID ULSTER COUNCIL



ENTERPRISE	% OF NI SECTOR	EST. VALUE
Horticulture	62%	£59,148,000
Dairy	49%	£326,830,000
Pigs	53%	£115,010,000
Poultry	49%	£112,210,000
General Cropping	45%	£27,900,000
Cattle & Sheep	51%	£133,110,000
Direct Farm Payments	52%	£326,963,688

EST. TOTAL VALUE
£1,101,171,688

KEY BOROUGH STATISTICS

Estimated value of Farming Calculated Pro-Rata

Horticulture (58% of NI) £55,332,000

Beef & Sheep (12% of NI) £62,640,000

Pigs (17% of NI) 36,890,000

General Cropping (16% of NI) £9,920,000

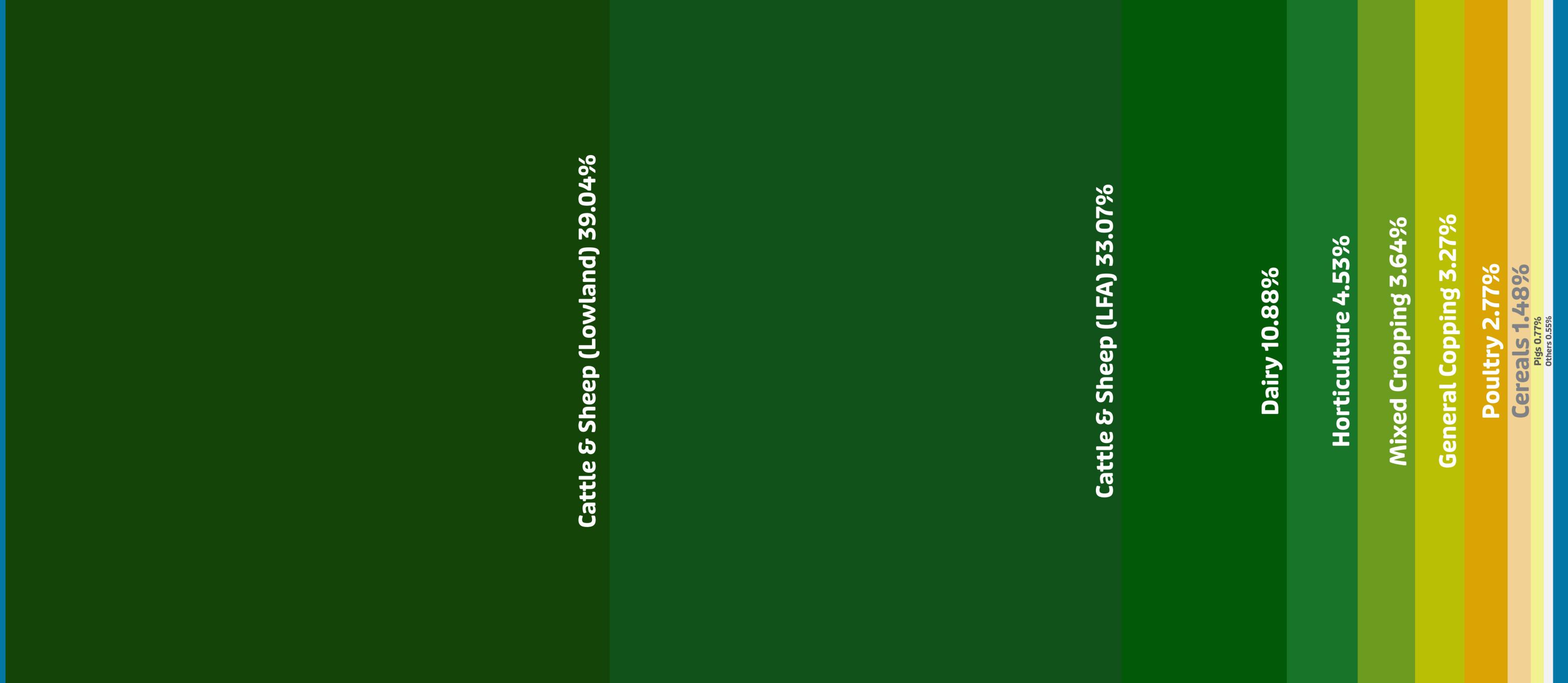
Dairy (14% of NI) £93,380,000

Poultry (16% of NI) £36,640,000

Est. Subsidy Value (13% of NI) £81,224,863

£376,026,863

AGRICULTURAL ENTERPRISES





ARMAGH CITY, BANBRIDGE & CRAIGAVON BOROUGH COUNCIL

**PREPARING
FOR THE FUTURE
OF FARMING**

KEY THEMES IN AGRICULTURE

1

The impact of changing farm support structures

The move away from direct payments will have a major impact for the sector including; farmers, farm structures, farm numbers and the associated impact on rural communities. As indicated in our survey, 67% of respondents indicated that their farms are unviable without direct payments and the withdrawal of these will result in farms going out of business.

With the change of support structures to align with the principle ‘public money for public goods’, farmers will need to prepare for de-carbonisation and environmental enhancement in farming. It is likely that eventually farmers will be able to trade ‘carbon credits’ which will open a new market, but it is imperative our farmers are prepared with the right training and advice. It is also likely that demonstrating good environmental practice will be the price for entry into premium markets in Great Britain.

As part of the ‘Value Chain’, which describes all activities and services required to bring a product or service from conception to sale, the Council should encourage inclusive growth, ensuring that smallholder farmers are included as main actors along the value chain and facilitate mutually-beneficial linkages with other stakeholders, training leaders and good governance.

2

The need for sustainable farming

Farmers understand the role they play as guardians of the countryside, underpinning this by undertaking many essential activities such as increasing hedge heights, planting trees, planting cover crops, creating habitats and soil sampling which goes unnoticed. 73% of those surveyed (Appendix 1) already undertaking environmental activities to date – however more needs to be done across the board.

As NI Assembly consider the Climate Change Bill, it is clear that sustainability will be a key component of the agriculture industry in the future. Although a great challenge, this is a great opportunity for the sector to innovate and find new, better ways of doing things to increase the levels of Economic, Social and Environmental Sustainability. .

Caring for the environment

There are a range of simple and more complex actions which can deliver improvements in the environment. Increasing Hedge Height, installing riparian strips to protect water courses and reducing imported phosphorous use on fields are just a few methods which can be used on farm to increase carbon storage while caring for the environment around us. Farmers and Agri

businesses will benefit from education and training in the use of sustainable methods and devices to better deliver on environmental goals, increase uptake and preparedness for more sustainable farming.

Dealing with waste/by-products/slurries

Developments that will help agri-food mitigate some of its environmental impacts and help with de-carbonisation can be hard to keep up with. Re purposing slurry as a phosphorous source by using separators to extract nutrients while returning clean water or using it to produce hydrogen are just a few of the most recent innovations.

Creating biodiversity

Silvopasture (the practice of integrating trees, forage and the grazing of domesticated animals in a mutually beneficial way) and Wild flower strips around the edges of fields are just two ways in which farming can create biodiversity. These are ideas which can be trialled and demonstrated at the Tannaghmore Farm, who already demonstrate grazing cattle in meadows and should be given the opportunity to collaborate with Agri Stakeholders to provide knowledge and learning to farm businesses in the borough and share best practice.

KEY THEMES IN AGRICULTURE

3

The need for culture change in farming

In many ways, Agriculture can be both forward thinking in evolving practices and new ways of doing things, and backwards in areas such as mental health and data collection.

Cultural change is required to

- 1) Increase and normalise the level of data collection and use for management
- 2) Change farmer's perception of themselves from being solely 'production focused' to 'production and environmentally' focused
- 3) Increase collaboration between farmers
- 4) Recognise the importance of personal development and skills training
- 5) Recognise the importance of maintaining good mental health

According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), Agricultural workers are 46% more likely than those in other industries to endure illness overall, meaning their risk of physical illness is higher than it is for other workers, which can also contribute to stress and anxiety. Mixed with the solitary nature of the sector, many workers can struggle with depression. A 2019 survey report by Empathy Research and AgriLand reported that 46% and 57% were impacted by anxiety and depression to some degree respectively.

According to our Farmers Survey, just over half of farmers benchmark/use data for things like amount of slurry spread, animal weight, fertiliser use and livestock, with 61% of them seeing this data supplied with processors and others as part of an integrated supply chain.

4

Enablers & Tools

Effectively farming requires knowledge and tools, particularly in light of the significant environmental and economic challenges which will emerge over the next 10 years. According to our survey, 47% would like training in Business Planning & Management, 42% in Advice & Skills Training around Best Environmental Practice, 39% on Setting Up a Diversified Business, 31.5% on Managing Planning & Building and 31.5% on Technical Skills Training on Agricultural Practice.

Other tools, however, can be harder to come by such as reliable rural broadband and demonstrations of the latest environmental practices which also enable more productive agriculture. In the Agri Food Sector, incubation spaces can be hard to find and can stimulate rapid growth of fledgling food businesses.

5

Labour & Automation

Obtaining labour to assist on farms is becoming increasingly difficult. According to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs there were 1,404 seasonal and non seasonal workers from outside the UK and Ireland employed in Agriculture in Northern Ireland, which accounts for around 11% of the agricultural labour force according to that year's Agricultural Census .

Shortages in key positions such as Vets and Lorry Drivers also have a knock-on effect to distribution to the supply chain. Lack of people in these professions have been highlighted in the press lately due to problems getting enough vets to carry out official meat inspections mandated by the Northern Ireland Protocol and a Lorry driver shortage caused by Brexit.

KEY THEMES IN AGRICULTURE

6

Development & Diversification

Development & Diversification of farms will be key in the coming years, with farms needing to become more efficient, grow in size or diversify their operations in order to survive.

Historically, it is obvious that farm numbers drop over time. As individual farmers gain knowledge, as new technology and equipment are introduced, labour productivity rises, meaning that one person is able to deliver work which would have required multiple people in previous decades. This means that one person can look after more land, and, as a consequence, farm numbers drop. This trend is likely to continue.

There is a very strong attachment to owning a small piece of land, and many people remain in farming, some as a hobby, some because it is what their family has always done. It is unreasonable to expect that the smallest farms will be able to support even one full time person if the farm remains as it is.

The response to the need for small farms to support more than one person has usually been to establish another

income. Many farmers in this situation obtain work off-farm, some outside the industry, others in roles linked to it. The only other solution is for the farm to diversify into another enterprise, one which is not dependent on holding a large amount of land. This has traditionally meant establishing a poultry unit (meat or eggs), finishing pigs for a large pig breeder or developing a food product. However, the increasing environmental pressure on land is going to mean that this will be severely curtailed unless solutions can be found for dealing with the large amounts of slurry which result from these enterprises.

It became clear during the research for the report that planning restrictions can restrict or prevent development on farms. Planning regulations are set at a national level and are implemented at a local level. It is clear that sometimes developments do not proceed because of a lack of engagement or understanding from a farmer. It is also clear that environmental considerations around planning regulations are going to increase.

One aspect of development which is becoming increasingly

likely is around solutions to the large challenge which slurry and manures presents. Slurries cause one of the greatest environmental challenges around farming, with run-off to rivers and ammonia contamination of air being the most significant. Precision application techniques will help in this area, but in reality, the volume of slurry produced is the greatest problem. There is potential for slurry to replace the use of artificial fertilisers in many cases, but sometimes the associated transportation distances mean that this is not viable.

Planning departments at the local Council will need to be aware of the potential for slurry management units, their significant benefits and the likely risk areas. The plants could also be associated with a large amount of underground pipework to transport slurry and this will also be subject to planning oversight. There is real importance that Council's Planning Dept. fully understand slurry management in order to assess and provide guidance. This knowledge will in turn maximise the protection of the farm units and minimise the impact on local communities.

KEY THEMES IN AGRICULTURE

7

Partnership with the Council

In the farmers' survey, 72% of respondents said they do not have any interaction with the Council. Traditionally Council have not reached out to the farming community and work with mainstream agriculture has been limited and once regarded as a national responsibility under DAERA. This study demonstrates there is a gap between Council and engagement with agriculture sector.

In the agri business survey, the opposite is true, with 73.5% stated they do engage with Council and have a good relationship with Council, mostly through Food Heartland and Business Support Programmes

There is an opportunity for Council to build relationships across the Agriculture industry, particularly at farm business level and to raise recognition that farmers are operating in a business environment. Council have an opportunity to provide advice and information workshops e.g. in terms of planning process and business needs to support the agriculture industry to adapt and grow as legislation changes, and demands of the industry evolve.

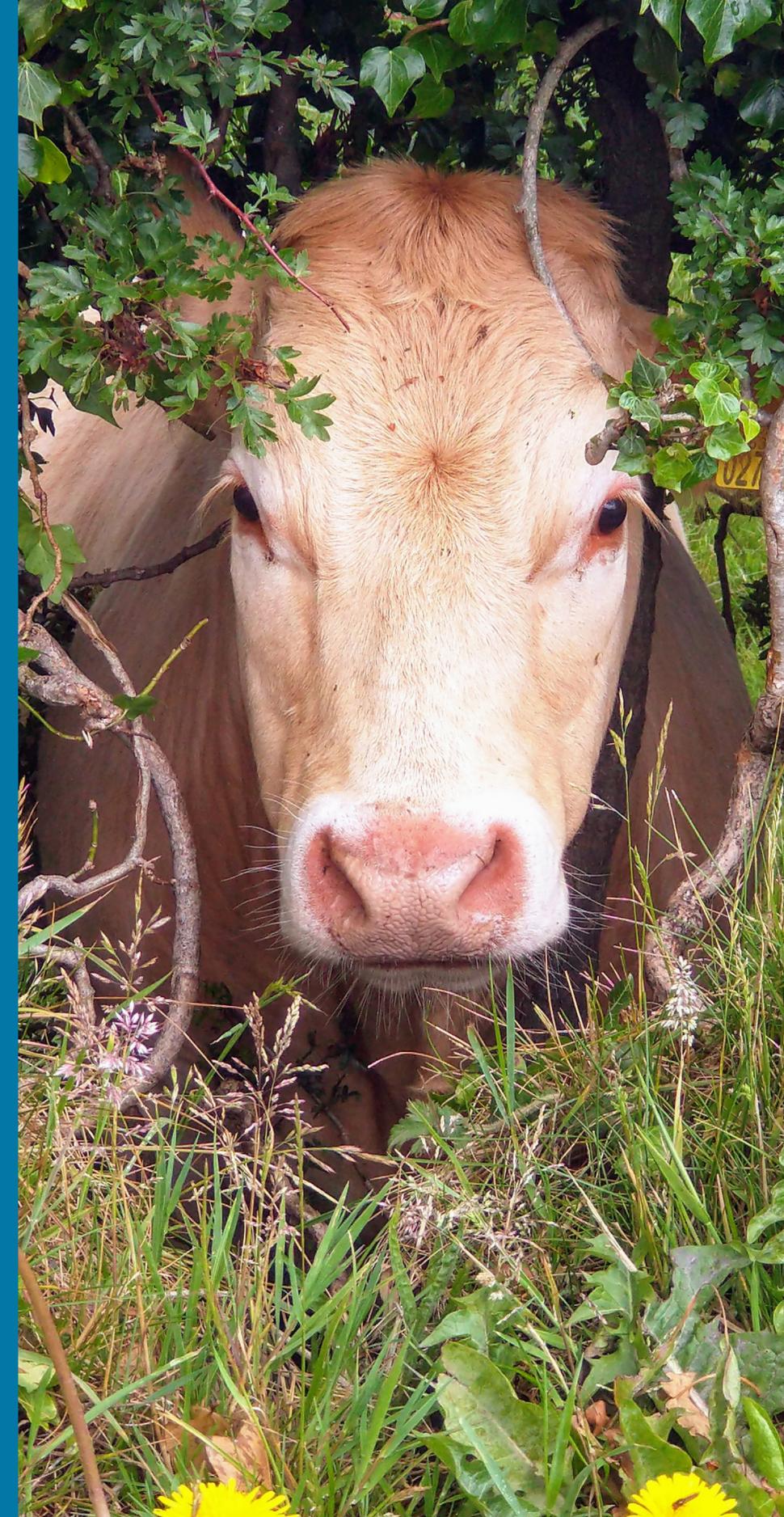
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Easy Access to Information/ Leveraging Resource

An over-riding theme throughout discussions and interviews was the large volume of information which a typical farm business has to process to operate effectively. With most farms under pressure to carry out the day to day tasks, there is little time for self-improvement and farm/enterprise planning.

A key action which the Council could undertake would be to make it easy for farmers to access the information they need - to create a one-stop-shop for farmers in the borough. This emphatically does not mean that the Council should duplicate the work of the many organisations working in agriculture, but it does entail leveraging these organisations and enabling them to work together in the region to deliver advice and support more easily.

In order to raise the profile of the agriculture industry within the borough, there is a requirement for a communications and marketing plan, and a role for champions to assist raising the awareness and leading the strategic direction of agriculture in the borough.



Agriculture SWOT Analysis

Strengths

- > 3,431 Active farms contributing over £376 million to the local economy
- > Land types are better than NI average
- > Centrally located, with easy access to raw materials across NI
- > Good road infrastructure and linkages across most of the region to markets for farms, manufacturers and artisan producers
- > Strong food heritage and range of food production
- > Central location enabling farmers to easily reach knowledge transfer events
- > Council already has structures which could be useful to the agricultural community – particularly Food Heartland, and Tannaghmore farm
- > A range of farmers in the area in influential positions, enabling the challenges around agriculture to be recognised
- > Farmers are very adaptable and entrepreneurial when they visualise an opportunity and have the skills to deliver it
- > 76% from the Farmers Survey are already conducting soil testing
- > 63% from the Farmers Survey are already taking steps to improve the environment with the highest being increasing hedge height

Weaknesses

- > Farming tends to be considered as one entity, whereas it has multiple enterprises.
- > Uptake of technology and new practice is low across many farm enterprises.
- > A lack of understanding of the benefits of farm business data systems and about how to use them effectively.
- > A lack of understanding of the potential effect of very advanced technology in the medium to long-term.
- > Low levels of joint working, machinery sharing etc. among farmers.
- > Very low level of data collection amongst beef and sheep farmers, and also some dairy farmers. Effective use of data is not widespread.
- > Farming is not treated as a business by some farmers leading to an unviable business unit.
- > Farms have not been eligible for business support programmes, which reinforce the idea that farming is not a business and meaning that farmers miss out on business skills.
- > Low level of knowledge about practices which can protect and enhance the environment.
- > Carbon Net Zero has not been effectively explained to the farming community, therefore it is seen as a threat.
- > Many farmers see themselves as production-only focused, meaning that producing public goods is seen as a distraction and not as important as food production.
- > Broadband connectivity is poor across parts of the borough.
- > The farm accident rate is much too high, making it one of the most dangerous sectors in the UK and Ireland.
- > Although it is improving, many farmers do not really look after their own physical or mental health.
- > Farm Business ID's not being recognised by Council and other stakeholders that requires business support

Threats

- > CAP reform is the biggest threat to the beef and sheep sectors, with the majority of those units being unviable without subsidy
- > The environmental impacts of slurry (on air, soil and water) are the biggest threats to the intensive (pig, poultry and dairy) sectors and could require reduced enterprise sizes
- > Reducing producer margins in many enterprises mean that it is likely that some units will exit the industry once CAP reform is complete
- > Rise of alternative diets and allergen awareness
- > Emerging environmental legislation will restrict farm enterprises unless environmental improvements can be made
- > Evolving planning regulations leaving an already difficult system the system hard to understand could further complicate the process and restrict development
- > Lack of engagement between Farmers and Council in recent times
- > There is the potential that, if Carbon Trading launches commercially, many farms could sell their credits outside the industry, meaning that the industry is not credited with the progress it makes

Opportunities

- > Grow the Food Heartland offering to Farmers
- > The collection and proper use of data would benefit farm and environmental performance.
- > All sectors could benefit from being introduced to the latest technology and practice, and an opportunity exists for Council to do this through development of visits to demonstration farms, webinars and an agri network.
- > New familiarity with Video conferencing provides opportunity for knowledge exchange and training.
- > Implementation of Automation and Robotization on many farms to carry out repetitive tasks would improve labour productivity and free up time for business planning and development.
- > The uptake of precision farming techniques which use GPS geolocation can unlock high environmental performance
- > A co-ordinated structure involving CAFRE, AFBI and Agri-Search providing knowledge transfer as ongoing support to farmers.
- > The development of much closer communication links with the farming community allowing the Council to come better connected
- > Increased linking of the planning services to agriculture will help to prepare for the new wave of innovation and enterprises which will emerge over the next decade including using new technology and practices to make them zero additional impact.
- > Considerable potential benefit around the creation of food stories to promote the sector as a whole and food tourism in particular.
- > A growing demand for farmers to provide independent assurance of their environmental credentials

Agri-Food & Agribusiness SWOT Analysis

Strengths

- > Businesses are centrally positioned, giving access to raw material from across Northern Ireland
- > A large number of agri-food businesses within the Borough
- > Growth in turnover over the last 5 years
- > Difficulty supplying products from Great Britain in Northern Ireland and Ireland meaning that businesses in Northern Ireland have the opportunity to gain more business locally from key retailers.
- > Good relationship with the Council
- > Willingness within the Council to create conditions which encourage development
- > The importance and potential of food and agri-food does seem to be recognised in the borough.
- > Food Heartland in place since 2015, which provides a base for supporting the agri-food sector

Weaknesses

- > Low awareness of the technical support which is available.
- > Lack of proper data management, and low awareness of how to use data and how it could drive productivity.
- > Loss of labour due to European immigrants returning home, leading to real labour shortages and failure to supply key customers.
- > Little focus on the use of technology/advanced technology in businesses in the borough.
- > There are some suggestions that innovation in food businesses is not as strong as it could be. However, we believe this is a more mixed picture as some businesses are highly innovative.
- > Limited understanding of new updates and changes to food safety and legislation.
- > Further need for industry promotion through initiatives such as Food Heartland and SOAR
- > No availability for food incubation/development units or spaces in the Borough or MSW region
- > Loughry is at full capacity, and its units are generally too large for small businesses.
- > Local colleges have nowhere to refer food business to for development

Threats

- > Fluctuating economic environment causing reduction in availability of manual workers and creating real issues for businesses.
- > A rising minimum, reducing competitiveness as businesses in NI are less automated and more dependent on a plentiful supply of inexpensive labour.
- > Difficulties around food export and delays at borders can prevent or reduce exports, creating challenges in continuing to supply GB markets.
- > Rise of alternative diets and allergen awareness
- > A reduction in farm income is likely to reduce farm spend at supporting businesses, reducing profitability in these sectors.
- > External pressures may force a reduction in farm numbers as a result of external pressures, which could affect availability of raw material to support food processing premises
- > Not all businesses are prepared for the environmental pressures which will be applied over the next decade.

Opportunities

- > Implementation of automation and robotization within food processing factories is critical to address the labour challenge and improve labour productivity.
- > Collection and use of data for management
- > Education and advice in food safety and legislation e.g. food allergens, labelling, hygiene and HACCAP.
- > Opportunities beyond traditional food production to non-animal sourced protein in particular.
- > Provision of advanced robotics, data gathering technology, drone technology.
- > Delivery or facilitation, identifying potential ideas and support for businesses and making them easier to access including marketing, social media e-commerce and digital training.
- > Training updates on new consumer trends and new emerging products
- > Education for the consumer to understand where food comes from, cooking skills etc.
- > Improved engagement between Council and Agri-Businesses across a range of business topics.
- > Development of Agri-Food Tourism. The creation of stories, trails, an effective food network will all increase visitor traffic and spend.
- > Support for diversification planning.
- > Capital investment intervention opportunities to support Agri Tech/Food as part of the Mid South West Growth Deal

SECURING FARMING FOR THE NEXT GENERATION



RECOMMENDATION #1

Expand and Evolve Food Heartland

The Food Heartland has focussed solely on support for the many wonderful food producers within the Borough.

We propose the Food Heartland team should grow and include the provision of additional full-time officers who have agriculture appropriate skill-sets and drive to understand the challenges in the area and provide solutions, along with a cohesive team who will work together to meet the objectives.

The Food Heartland Evolution will also require the establishment of a broad stakeholder forum with the key bodies to have an understanding of the Agri environment and should include representatives from PCSP, Tourism, DAERA, AFBI, UFU, Rural Support etc. This should be paired with a wider Agri-engagement forum which can be used for engagement and regular communication with its members.

The evolution of the Food Heartland may include:

- Relaunch of the Food Heartland brand to include agriculture, including redesign of imagery and materials.
- Redeveloped Food Heartland framework to reflect the added priorities and responsibilities to support the wider agriculture industry
- Develop and deliver support programmes that are inclusive of Farm Business ID holders and agri-related businesses to include training delivery identified in Recommendation 3.
- Development of a marketing strategy/action plan to promote and raise awareness of Food Heartland to the rest of the region and beyond. Increasing the Food Heartland online and social media audience.
- Networking opportunities between farmers, growers and producers across all enterprises enabling opportunities for local produce to be showcased to local producers.
- Introduce beekeepers to the farming community in the borough and identify opportunities to introduce more pollinators into the countryside.
- Renewal of the “Food Heartland Awards” to include farming categories such as
 - o Best use of data
 - o Best environmental enhancement
 - o Best business change
 - o Best case study
 - o Biggest increase in productivity
- Seek external funding opportunities to deliver programmes
- Develop working relationships with key partners to multiply effectiveness.
- Collaboration with other food networks, environmental networks, agri tech and food innovation centres/hubs across UK and Ireland to share best practise learning.
- Raise awareness of PGI products in the borough.

RECOMMENDATION #2

Develop a method of communicating regularly and clearly with all agriculture & agri businesses in the borough

In order for Council to develop and support the Agriculture Industry in the borough, a communication plan should be developed to improve engagement with the farming community and agriculture sector, inclusive of a series of planned events, workshops and focus groups. The communication plan should be structured to take into account key campaigns delivered by other stakeholders and should be formed in conjunction with other specialist organisations and departments.

The success of communication and engagement is dependent on attendance from farmers and Agriculture/Agri-Food businesses. In the absence of a comprehensive data base to reach farmers in the borough this will be a challenge to overcome.

We recommend that the Council;

- Collects contact details for all Farm Businesses in the borough and updates their Agri-Food Business database subject to GDPR
- Develops a communication plan to publicise events, structures which can support agriculture and raise awareness of Council initiatives and Stakeholder initiatives.
- Develops regular channels of communications, including texts, WhatsApp, email social media etc.
- A role of a digital and social media officer would support consistent messaging and communication.

RECOMMENDATION #3

Develop a Plan to Facilitate Skills Development in Agriculture and Agri-Business

Changing practices in the farming industry will require new technology and practice. The line between farmer and analyst will become increasingly blurred. A traditional skill set will no longer be enough. The Council have the opportunity to enable and encourage the uptake of skills through the running of courses, and partnership with other organisations such as the South Regional College, Rural Support, CAFRE and ABC Economic Development Team to develop training in areas such as Business Management, Technology & Data, Environmental Management, Marketing Skills, Robotics Operation & Management and Health, Well Being & Safety.

Ideally advice provision should be made as simple as possible to access, and should be of very high quality. It would be much better to ensure the delivery of structured courses and soft skills. We believe that the Council should look at regular

facilitation of events, bringing highly specialist individuals and organisations to deliver focused information to farmers in the borough.

Delivery of Knowledge Exchange, Demonstration or Training events should almost always be carried out in conjunction with specialist organisations. They should happen in conjunction with the gathering of information on what is practically achievable on-farm at present and be linked to what the clear needs are.

We recommend that the Council, through Food Heartland, recognises the needs of the industry and develops a plan which addresses the training and information needs. We believe that this should include key training or information which only the Council can provide. That means focusing on Council-controlled services which impact agriculture, including planning and

regulatory services.

The advice delivered at these events should be holistic, covering the impact on all

- Planning advice
- Training to both farmers and members of the Council staff (planners especially, the future of farming)
- Register of experts and delivery of clinics in their areas of expertise
- Identify clear future career paths in farming and agriculture.
- Mental health and well-being support
- Environmental awareness

It should also include involvement from other relevant, qualified organisations.

RECOMMENDATION #4

Appoint Agriculture Champions for the Borough

Council should appoint Champions from within the industry who will influence farmers and Agri business owners in the Borough, promoting positive perceptions of farming, good practices, engaging in activities and programmes and raising awareness of Agriculture in the Borough. The Champion must be passionate about the Agriculture Industry and the countryside.

Similarly, Council may consider to promote women in farming and raise awareness of their contribution to the industry by setting up a panel of women farmers who have a passion for agriculture and would like to make a difference in our Borough collaborating with stakeholders. The Champions should focus on specific identified areas, potentially with each champion focusing on one thing only such as Mental Health, Horticulture, Environment etc.

This could then be expanded to create linkages/twinning between farming regions in the UK, Republic of Ireland or Europe promoting strong knowledge transfer and enabling farmers from the borough to learn from what others are doing well.

RECOMMENDATION #5

Develop an Agriculture Centre for advice, training, demonstration and research

During the course of this study, it was clearly identified that there was a need for the provision of training opportunities and advice for the local Agriculture and Agri-Food sector. Ideally, this would be provided through a training hub/centre both physical and online platform.

We would recommend a facility is developed at a suitable location in the borough perhaps Oxford Island or Tannaghmore Farm to complement the existing team skill-set and knowledge at these centres. This new facility may of two components

- a) Front of house - Customer facing training facility, business unit with mental health provision
- b) Back of house - Research and product development supported by industry experts and key stakeholders such as DAERA, AFBI, CAFRE, Queens, University of Ulster, utilising external funding.

The centre has the potential to;

- Provide agriculture training needs, develop farm

business skills, assist knowledge transfer and practical implementation support for environmental practices to enable farms and business to reduce carbon.

- Address all training and business needs set out and discussed in this strategy within the Borough (refer to recommendation 2 and skills referenced under solutions/enablers chapter).
- Be a place for farmers and Agri businesses to network, engage, and share their experiences and best practise.
- Be a place to demonstrate new technologies and new products of benefit to the industry for example drone training and data systems.
- Explore new and alternative forms of agriculture such as vertical farming, where the Borough can become a leader in the region.
- Be a place for seminars, talks, clinics on relevant topics/trends by leading experts and hold workshops with planners

- Transfer knowledge about farm diversification opportunities and discuss potential projects with case officers under the new SOAR/Rural Development Framework
- Facilitate and signpost existing support and advice to other key stakeholder groups, offering referrals.
- Provide discreet mental health and well-being support and advice for the agriculture sector and advice on farm safety.
- Be home to the Food Heartland team.
- Collaboration with other food networks, environmental networks, agri tech and food innovation centres/hubs across UK and Ireland to share best practise learning and focus on complementary research.
- Contribute to the ecosystem of agri research networks in UK and Ireland.
- Deliver accelerate programmes and instil innovation in the agri industry.

RECOMMENDATION #6

Facilitate Structural Upgrading

There is a real importance to the Council either implementing or lobbying for improved structural upgrades. We have already emphasised the importance of good rural broadband, the upgrading of the electricity network to utilise all renewable energy we produce as well as to permit the electrification of heavy machinery. The provision of slurry tank management units will also be a priority in the future, especially as it lines up with output 2 in DAERA's Future Agriculture Framework.

RECOMMENDATION #7

ABC Rural Strategy

There is an opportunity for Council to look at wider rural development in the borough. This will build on the agricultural strategy to reach out to all rural dwellers including open countryside and consider how best Council can address rural issues (social, economic and environmental) taking an inclusive and all-encompassing approach whilst considering the themes of the ABC Community Plan. This could be easily delivered by SOAR as preparatory work for the borough ahead of the findings from the Rural Policy Framework Consultation on future programmes.

RECOMMENDATION #8

Further Studies in Agriculture Sectors

The Agriculture Industry is very broad, and this strategy will not provide all the answers. There are two important sectors the Equine Sector and Agri Food Tourism that have not been explored fully in this study. Their contribution to the industry is very much interlinked and Council may wish to further research their economic contributions, challenges and opportunities for development and growth in the Borough.

The Council should also investigate the positive impact Social Farms in the area are having, and how farms can be used to educate young people on how food is grown and to raise awareness of potential careers in the agri food industry.

RECOMMENDATION #9

Agri-Food Development

As mentioned earlier, advancements in technology will play a key role in the Agriculture Industry and an important role in new product development in terms of introducing new product lines but also increasing productivity and profits. The Borough is rich in artisan and large-scale food production. However the survey identified a need for growth and spaces such as incubation units for businesses to expand their business, to nest. Council should engage with local enterprise agencies, SRC and CAFRE to provide innovation and growth support solutions and programmes in order to retain and grow the Agri Food businesses offering in the Borough. Agri-food sector will also be supported through initiatives referenced across the other recommendations.

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Council should study the findings of this strategy to fully understand the implications on the Agriculture industry, recognising that highly productive farming and environmentally enhanced farming is possible, but challenging for the farms. It is imperative that Council then recognise that engagement, support and training around environmental practices, targets and measuring is necessary for farming and agri businesses to operate productively in a challenging landscape and realise the need for enhanced mental health provision specifically geared towards those in the agriculture sector both farms and agri businesses.

Immediate (6-12 Months)

- Collaborate and begin to raise the awareness of stakeholder Agri and Rural Support programmes which are available to the Borough, to support the industry immediately.
- Define Food Heartland new priorities and responsibilities, commence its expansion and evolution as per Rec 1, securing funds for its growth from Council and/or external funds for programme delivery.
- Increase Food Heartland online and social media presence
- Develop a communication plan to engage with Farmers and Agri Businesses, develop online agriculture resource hub and signposting as per Rec 2.
- Appoint Champions for Agriculture as per Rec 4
- Collaborate and research potential support and skills based programmes for the borough as per Rec 3
- Prioritise and scope the delivery of other strategies as per Rec 7 and 8

Short-Term (1-2 Years)

- Continued expansion and evolution of Food Heartland as per Rec 1
- Develop a programme of activities to deliver for 2022 & 2023, seeking out experts in Agriculture, Technology and Environmental Practices as per Rec 3
- Provide targeted & specific business & technological (not technical) training & support as per Rec 3
- Conduct workshops between Council departments e.g. SOAR, Planners, DAERA and Agri Stakeholders to better understand farm diversification, planning barriers and new farming practices/requirements that lie ahead.
- Research, collaborate and lobby for structural upgrading to support the industry as per Rec 6
- Continue to develop a ABC Rural Strategy as outlined in Rec 7
- Conduct further research into the development of facilities and growth spaces for businesses as outlined in Rec 5 and 9

Medium-Term (3-5 Years)

- Council should develop a physical space as outlined in Rec 5 and Rec 9 for the provision of support, innovation, growth and development of the agriculture industry.

For further information please contact
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