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Recommendations to support the production of sustainable, local and healthy food

A set of recommendations to better support rural microbusinesses to produce sustainable, local and healthy food including access to the Government's environmental land management schemes and more permitted development for farm and horticultural buildings have emerged from research commissioned by the National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise (NICRE).

Researchers at the Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI) worked with the Landworkers' Alliance (LWA) to gain an understanding of the economic, environmental and social impact of food and farming businesses, their challenges and innovation potential.

The research found that while LWA members – farmers, growers, foresters and land-based workers across the UK, rarely employing more than 10 people – do not necessarily identify as conventional 'farmers', they are focused on delivering many of the 'public goods' to which government policy is committed, and as advocated by the National Food Strategy.

The 10 recommendations for state, private and civil society are therefore designed to provide support to these microbusinesses to develop rural food systems, sustainability and innovation.

See the 10 recommendations for action: [Developing rural food systems, sustainability and innovation](#).

Dr Charlotte Chivers, lead author of the report, said: "Given the unique make-up of these microbusinesses which aren't traditional farmers or food or catering businesses, this

group fall between many policy stools. At a time of intense debate on how to feed our nation in the wake of the rising cost of living and climate change, their contribution to sustainable, local and healthy food production must be harnessed.

"Our recommendations cover a breadth of measures including eligibility for agri-environment schemes for smaller farms and holdings, provision of affordable rented homes for workers and availability of machinery for small-scale agriculture and food processing and we hope they are a step towards providing the support they need to flourish."

The CCRI team surveyed members of the LWA in England, Scotland and Wales operating within localised supply chains for this research: [Exploring the socio-economic dynamics and innovation capacities of rural food and farming microbusinesses](#). They found that they are more likely to be new entrants, tend to be younger than their conventional farming peers and run smaller enterprises.

Most operate a portfolio of enterprises diversified mainly into the food system, processing and retailing food rather than selling along the food chain or servicing the agricultural sector.

Although many are owner-operators, a sizeable minority employ others. These businesses' social and environmental engagements are the primary motivation for the business operators, with profit as means to these ends. Volunteering opportunities are a crucial offer from these businesses while improving and regenerating the farmed environment is an equal priority.

To explore the challenges and opportunities for microbusinesses in more depth, the CCRI team also conducted three focus groups with LWA members. The challenges reported are accessing appropriate finance, under-developed markets, insufficient targeted business support, inflexible planning arrangements, and agri-environmental schemes that do not embrace this group.

Dr Chivers added: "In the ways that these microbusinesses operate, these diverse, complex and sophisticated clusters of enterprises are making a distinctive contribution to the rural economy.

"The resilience and innovation they bring to rural areas are essential to the diversity of businesses that help rural areas thrive."

Tony Little, Resilient Local Food Systems Project Co-ordinator at the LWA, said: "This research shows that small, diverse, agroecological farms – selling direct to customers or through short supply chain food systems – deliver a huge range of social, economic and environmental benefits. Yet they receive little or no government support.

"This work highlights the contribution they can make to addressing some of the biggest challenges we face – including the climate change and biodiversity crises, food security and inequality in our food systems – and strengthens the case for increasing support to this group."

The research is one of seven projects funded by NICRE to further explore rural enterprise and expand its portfolio.

LWA members Ashley Wheeler and Kate Norman have been running Trill Farm Garden in East Devon since 2010, and won Young Organic Growers of the Year in 2021. Their garden is five acres, supplying mainly to cafes and restaurants, until the pandemic when they started a veg box scheme.

Ashley said: "We integrate green manures and pollen rich plants into the cropping, grow a diverse range of crops and produce seed, which is more than many larger farms currently achieve. However, due to our scale, we have not been able to access any agri-environmental support. Machinery and tools can be prohibitively expensive, so help to set up machinery sharing cooperatives would be an excellent way to support smaller scale agroecology.

"Our box scheme has been very popular during the pandemic, and we want to provide lower income families with fresh, healthy, locally-grown vegetables, but the systems are not in place to do this effectively. Support to set up schemes that would benefit a wider section of society would be extremely helpful and have a wider impact than just supporting the local economy.

"We employ a number of local people to help us on the farm, and offer training opportunities, but have been running this independently as there are no appropriate college courses to link in with currently."

Ends.

Caption

Trill Farm Garden co-founders Ashley Wheeler and Kate Norman. Credit: Karen Robinson.

For further photos, see <https://bit.ly/3dfEo1V>

Notes to editors

- Lead author Dr Charlotte Chivers is available for interview – please contact NICRE (see below).
- Trill Farm Garden co-founder Ashley Wheeler is available for interview – please contact the LWA (see below).

The 10 recommendations are:

1. Eligibility for agri-environmental support for smaller farms and holdings.
2. Support businesses that benefit wellbeing and the 'green mind' (prioritising nature).
3. Expand permitted development for farm and horticultural buildings.
4. Provision of affordable rented properties for agricultural workers.
5. Business support packages focused on environmental and social outcomes.
6. Machine rings (of shared assets) focused on small-scale agriculture and food processing.
7. Support initiatives to provide regional Dynamic Procurement Systems (DPS) schemes.
8. Increased renting out of small parcels of land for smaller enterprises.
9. Framework for developing novel skills to future-proof businesses.
10. Supporting opportunities for local producers to supply good quality staples into the food justice and solidarity networks.

A microbusiness has fewer than 10 employees and annual turnover of £1.7m (European Commission definition)

<https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/sites/default/files/docs/2008/04/ofgem---defining-micro-businesses-180308.pdf>

The National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise (NICRE) puts knowledge to work for an enterprising countryside... combining research with practical innovation to find new ways of unlocking potential and supporting thriving rural businesses and communities.

It brings together the strengths of its founding university partners: Centre for Rural Economy and Business School at Newcastle University, Enterprise Research Centre at Warwick University and Countryside and Community Research Institute at the University of Gloucestershire and Royal Agricultural University.

NICRE was set up in September 2020 with funding from Research England.

The **Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI)** is a collaboration between the University of Gloucestershire, the Royal Agricultural University and Hartpury College for the purposes of research, education and knowledge exchange. The CCRI is one of the largest specialist rural research centre in the UK, working at the interface of agriculture, society and the environment on issues relevant to rural and urban development, in the UK, Europe and further afield.

The **Landworkers' Alliance (LWA)** is a grassroots union of farmers, foresters and land-based workers in the UK. It is part of a global movement representing 200 million small-scale farmers under the umbrella group La Via Campesina.

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