Food, Farming & Countryside Commission

Lay of the Land

Report of the Northern Ireland Inquiry

RSA
21st century enlightenment

Lay of the Land

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Preface

This report, a volume in the collection of publications from the RSA Food Farming and Countryside Commission makes an important and much needed contribution to the Commission's inquiries.

When the Commission set out on its task in November 2017, we were determined to involve all the devolved areas of the UK to reflect their different situations, concerns and aspirations. For Northern Ireland, the inquiry could have been especially poignant, intersecting, as it does, with the deep concerns about relationships between north and south, in a post-Brexit world.

Yet the inquiry focussed most on the critical issues that transcend even Brexit; how to mitigate and adapt to climate change and restore biodiversity; how to improve the public's health and wellbeing in all communities; and how to build on and develop Northern Ireland's distinctive pattern of farming to play its full part in responding to these challenges, also supporting and revitalising rural communities. Most importantly and impressively, the leadership group were determined to hear citizen's voices – especially those often unheard.

We live in fastmoving, uncertain, complex and unpredictable times. The Northern Ireland Inquiry brought their diverse knowledge, considerable expertise and authority to help design and develop their inquiry. I'm most grateful for their work, and to all those who participated in meetings and workshops. Special thanks go to Karin Eyben for her facilitation, and to the Chair, Patrick Casement and Secretariat, John Woods, who brought their unfailing wisdom and unwavering commitment to do the work needed to produce this valuable report.

Sue Pritchard
Director, RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission

September 2019

Foreword

The RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission was set up to think afresh about where our food comes from, how we support farming and rural communities, and how we invest in the many benefits the countryside provides. The immediate stimulus for action was the imminent departure of the UK from the European Union, and the combination of opportunity and threat that this presents: opportunity to find a better way to support agriculture while benefiting the environment outside of the Common Agricultural Policy, and threat in concerns about the loss of EU environmental governance, principles and standards. However this was very much against the wider backdrop of a sense of global ecological crisis which has intensified during the 18 months that our inquiry has been meeting. Recent scientific reports from the United Nations on climate disruption and biodiversity loss have brought home the urgency of the situation and the inevitability of deeply challenging times ahead. Public consciousness and demands for action have also intensified – school strikes across the globe and disruptive climate protests in London and elsewhere have raised these issues higher on political agendas.

Northern Ireland may be a small place on the edge of Europe but our obligations to contribute to tackling these existential threats are essentially the same as in any jurisdiction in the developed world. Unfortunately, we have a very poor record in meeting these obligations, partly because of past preoccupations with healing the damage of years of conflict, and partly because of inadequate policies and structures to deliver them. Over the past two and a half years this situation has been exacerbated by the absence of a devolved government which has severely hampered the development of the new policies and strategies required in a post-Brexit world. This political vacuum means that as a society we have to find other ways of addressing the key issues, which in turn provides a unique opportunity for much greater direct public engagement in developing ways forward. With this in mind the Commission's Northern Ireland Inquiry decided at the outset that our approach should be citizen led, seeking the views of as wide a range of people as possible. We were also clear, however, that finding out what citizens think would be the means to an end rather than the end itself. The onus would be on the members of the inquiry, with their collective experience and expertise from a wide range of relevant backgrounds, to use the findings as raw material for our own deliberations and draw some conclusions from what we had heard. This report sets out the context of our inquiry, its findings, some signposts to the future, and some recommendations for the way ahead.

Patrick Casement
Chair, Northern Ireland Inquiry

RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission

September 2019

1. A challenging context

Meeting our global obligations

Last year, the UN warned that we have just 12 years to limit the rise in global temperatures to 1.5C, the point beyond which the risk of drought, floods and extreme heat significantly worsens.[1] In May this year, another UN science body published its global assessment on the state of nature, warning that one million species, a quarter of the total, are at risk of extinction driven by intensive agriculture, overfishing, climate change and pollution.[2] And in August a UN report highlighted the climate impact of agriculture, forestry and other land use, the threat posed by climate change to global food security and the need for change to land management and diet.[3]

Northern Ireland meets its global obligations through the United Kingdom as a signatory to a number of international agreements and through our contribution to a range of UK-wide targets and commitments. Our performance in meeting them, however, is very poor as the examples below demonstrate.

- **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change:** The UK is currently committed to a 57 percent greenhouse gas emissions reduction on 1990 levels by 2030 as part of an EU 40 percent reduction commitment. The UK has recently committed to achieving net zero emissions by 2050 which implies a reduction of rather more than 57 percent by 2030.[4] Northern Ireland, however, is in a very different place as it struggles to reach the modest 35 percent reduction required of it (as its contribution to the 57 percent commitment above).[5]
- **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD):** The targets agreed for Northern Ireland under this UN convention are not ambitious.[6] Nevertheless, we have failed to meet many of them. The most recent national implementation of CBD in NI, 'The 2015-2020 Biodiversity Strategy for Northern Ireland', outlines 20 targets which are supposed to contribute to reducing or halting biodiversity decline. However, the targets are poorly scoped and it is unlikely Northern Ireland will meet any of them eg Target 7, 'By 2020, areas under agriculture, aquaculture and forestry are managed sustainably ensuring conservation of biodiversity'.
- **Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats:** We meet our obligations via the EU Birds and Habitats Directives. The proportion of terrestrial areas under favourable management has shown a decreasing trend since 2009-10. As of 2017-18, 1489km2 had been designated with only 0.18 percent under favourable management.[7]
- **EU Water Framework Directive:** Northern Ireland will miss the 2020 target of achieving Good Ecological Status (GES) for 70 percent of water bodies and is likely to miss the 2026 target of 100 percent in GES.[8]

How we produce food in Northern Ireland is central to our ability to meet these obligations. The UK Government's Committee on Climate Change states, 'Nearly 30 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions in Northern Ireland are from agriculture, compared to 10 percent in the rest of the UK…Agriculture will be more

challenging to decarbonise in the next decade than most other sectors.'. It continues, 'Emissions from agriculture have risen year on year since 2009 in Northern Ireland despite efficiency improvements in dairy farms'.[9] Much of the challenge, therefore, lies in our predominantly animal based farming system and the solutions are far from clear. Further, ammonia from animal based agriculture is severely compromising our ability to meet biodiversity targets while simultaneously compromising the ability of our peatlands to absorb carbon from the atmosphere and therefore our ability to meet emissions targets.

The scale and depth of change to current systems is likely to be considerable. The recent report from the *EAT-Lancet Commission on Healthy Diets from Sustainable Food Systems* makes a powerful scientific case for a global shift to predominantly plant-based diets.[10] This has obvious implications for Northern Ireland where only 5 percent of our agricultural land currently produces plant-based food, most of which is used as animal feed.

In highlighting these stark realities, we do not think it is helpful to point the finger of blame at farmers. A combination of a climate that favours grass-based agricultural systems and policy that has often been myopic on environmental issues has left many farmers with few choices. Global forces of change are at work whether we like it or not; it is part of the function of this report to help navigate a way through these changes to more resilient and sustainable food and farming systems that lie at the heart of thriving rural communities.

Farming and rural life

Any discussion of food, farming and the countryside in Northern Ireland needs to take account of a number of ways in which we are substantially different from elsewhere in the UK. The first is the way we farm: three-quarters of our farms are classified as very small compared to around a third in England; nearly half of farmers are part-time; 95 percent of farmland provides grass and rough grazing for beef, sheep and dairy leaving only 5 percent for crops compared with 46 percent in England; and 69 percent of the land qualifies as Less Favoured Area. Our land tenure is also very different, with all farms owner-occupied, while about 30 percent of farmed land is let under a system of annual letting known as conacre.

Our farms are heavily dependent on subsidies: for every pound earned by Northern Ireland farmers, 83 pence comes from direct CAP support.[11] This compares with approximately 57 pence for the UK as a whole.[12]

Agriculture makes up 1.7 percent of Northern Ireland's Gross Value Added (GVA) compared to 0.5 percent across the UK as a whole, and the industry accounts for 2.7 percent of total employment in Northern Ireland, more than double the UK-wide level of 1.1 percent.[13] The food and drink processing sector is responsible for a further 1.7 percent of GVA, a further 2.2 percent of total employment and a quarter of Northern Ireland's manufacturing industry sales.[14]

Approximately three quarters of Northern Ireland's agricultural produce is exported to Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland, the rest of the EU and beyond.[15] This includes 85 percent of our beef and lamb and 75 percent of milk and milk products. It is not known how much food is imported. In terms of day-to-day operations

Local produce - Beef, Comber Potatoes and Wheaten Bread

Photos: Northern Ireland Tourist Board

in farming and food production, cross border movements of animals and goods are stitched into the fabric of our economy and many people's lives and livelihoods.

Rural life in Northern Ireland is also very different to most of the rest of the UK with 36 percent of the population living in rural areas in highly dispersed settlement patterns. Over 86 percent of the employed rural population is not directly engaged in farming although many are involved in ancillary industries, often involving minimum wage employment, particularly in the food industry. Levels of self- employment are high in rural areas meaning people are less likely to be registered on unemployment databases and most have intermittent employment. At the same time the farming community is often regarded as the bedrock of rural society.

Our land border with the Republic of Ireland means that we share significant water catchments and our flora and fauna: the island of Ireland forms a single biogeographic unit distinct from Great Britain and continental Europe. Finally, the Irish Sea presents a significant physical barrier between Northern Ireland and Great Britain with implications for security of food supply and the need for plant and animal biosecurity.

Countryside and biodiversity

For its size (5,460 square miles), Northern Ireland is highly geographically diverse, and around 23,500 species can be found in its wealth of habitats. Some of these species, such as the cryptic wood white butterfly, are not found anywhere else in the UK, Others including red squirrels, pine martens and a number of freshwater invertebrates are threatened elsewhere in the UK, but occur in significant numbers here[16]. NI's birdlife is rich in seabirds and migratory species that include waders, ducks, swans and geese, but woodland bird species are poorly represented in comparison. Human involvement, whether intentional or accidental, has played a large part in the make-up of NI's biodiversity. The eradication of Ireland's forests from 80 percent land cover to less than 1 percent land cover (lowest in Europe) hugely impacted wildlife, seeing the extinction of wild boars and wolves in the 1700s. Although vertebrates are perhaps the best-known species group, they are only a tiny proportion of our wild diversity. Plants are considerably more numerous, and the greatest number of species can be found amongst the invertebrates.

The landscape is dominated by agricultural land, which makes up around 75 percent of the total area. This farmed environment is criss-crossed with areas of upland and waterbodies, such as Lough Neagh, the largest fresh water lake in the UK and upper and lower Lough Erne.

St Patrick's Trail at Slemish

Photo: Northern Ireland Tourist Board

With 650kms of coastline and intertidal loughs and estuaries, there is a rich and varied marine environment with a high degree of biodiversity. Half of NI's biodiversity is in its seas, which support fishing, tourism and renewable energy; they are also a vital part of our cultural heritage.

Pressures on Northern Ireland's diverse landscapes have resulted in both losses and gains for biodiversity in recent decades. Challenges for wildlife come from many sources including agriculture, habitat fragmentation and loss, changes in grazing levels, pollution and invasive non-native species. Climate change places additional burdens on wildlife and can exacerbate the impacts from other stresses.

Environmental regulation

Environmental regulation is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency; it has been consistently criticised for lack of independence, lack of resources and lack of trust on the part of many stakeholders, leading to poor environmental and business outcomes. A number of issues have been the subject of complaints to the European Commission or have been judicially reviewed in recent years. The UK departure from the EU removes a powerful regulatory tier that, in England and for non-devolved matters, is due to be replaced by the proposed Office for Environmental Protection (OEP). The Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) has proposed that the OEP's remit should extend to Northern Ireland on the basis that in the absence of the Assembly, this would be in the public interest. DAERA is of the opinion, however, that while Northern Ireland can be included in the legislation it would take the endorsement of a Minister for the OEP to become operational here. In addition, the proposed OEP has been severely criticised by the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee and by Environmental NGOs on the basis that it lacks independence and has limited powers.[17] Experience has shown that Northern Ireland needs a highly robust upper tier of regulation.

Food

Recent research by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) shows that people in Northern Ireland are more likely to eat meat, less likely to eat fish and less likely to eat raw vegetables and salads than people in England. They are half as likely to be vegetarian or vegan. In common with the rest of the UK there is a very high dependence on supermarkets for shopping although people in Northern Ireland are more likely to also shop in local and corner shops, garage forecourts and independent butchers. They also showed rather higher levels of trust in the provenance and safety standards of food from the UK and Ireland.[18]

Levels of food security and insecurity are similar in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. 'Food security' is defined by the FSA as 'having access at all times to enough food that is both sufficiently varied and culturally appropriate to sustain an active and healthy life.' In Northern Ireland about one in six respondents to the FSA research reported that their household had worried in the last 12 months about running out of food before there was money to buy more.[19]

In common with many parts of the UK, Northern Ireland has seen a proliferation of food banks in recent years, driven largely by austerity policy. The issue of food poverty is a deep-rooted one, however. A 2007 report concluded that people living in poverty are particularly at risk of poor dietary intake and health.[20] The Joseph Rowntree Foundation reports that one fifth of the population of Northern Ireland is living in poverty and the organisation recommends that 'the creation of more and better jobs must be central to Northern Ireland's efforts to reduce poverty.' Jobs in the agri-food sector, however, generally fail to qualify as better jobs[21]. Wages in the sector are well below the average for Northern Ireland.

Devolution

All powers relevant to food, farming, environment and the countryside are devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly. With the suspension of the Assembly, however, political leadership has been absent for over two and a half years and civil servants are constrained from taking new policy initiatives in the absence of Ministers. This has inevitably led to a brake on progress in numerous aspects of life in Northern Ireland. It has also led to the suspension of activity by the North

South Ministerial Council (established under the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement for the purpose of co-ordinating all-island co-operation in a number of policy areas including agriculture, environment and health) as it is unable to sit without Ministers from Northern Ireland.[22]

Post conflict society

All discussion of public policy in Northern Ireland occurs against the backdrop of decades of destructive conflict followed by further decades of uneasy peace. Many rural areas suffered deep impacts from political violence and the security response to it. Divisions in society continue to affect many aspects of rural life. 'There is no question that in a rural context [in Northern Ireland], issues of attachment to area, locality and in some cases the very land itself, are emotive.' [23] Such emotions are played out in daily life through behaviours such as avoidance and segregation. People with a shared attachment to the places in which they live lead largely separate lives, attending different schools, churches, societies, entertainment, community facilities and often using different shops. The land itself is often seen as 'belonging' to one community rather than another and there is a marked reluctance to sell land to someone not of the seller's community.[24]

The Troubles also left their mark in terms of access to public land with large areas of forest and other land closed off to the public particularly in the western counties. Ironically our natural environment often provides a neutral space where people can interact with each other unburdened by issues related to community division.

Leaving the EU

At the time of writing there is continuing uncertainty about the UK's exit from the EU with a 'no deal' departure looking like a real possibility. The severe impact of such a situation for Northern Ireland in terms of cross-border movement of food and live animals, as well as trade in general, has been well documented elsewhere.[25] Even with an agreed withdrawal there may be threats to food and farming, chief among which is the prospect of cheaper meat imports produced to lower standards and undercutting local produce. All-island collaboration on agricultural, environment and health policy via the North South Ministerial Council also faces significant challenges in the context of Brexit.

This inquiry was conceived in the aftermath of the EU Referendum and whatever else one thought about Brexit, there was a good deal of consensus that withdrawal from the Common Agricultural Policy presented new opportunities: to develop policies and farm support mechanisms more closely aligned with our own food, farming and countryside system as well as rural development and more balanced regional development. These opportunities remain, albeit that they are currently overshadowed by immediate fears and uncertainties.

Policy context

Although never formally adopted by the NI Executive before its collapse in early 2017, the Draft Programme for Government 2016-21 (PfG) is the main document guiding public policy. The Draft PfG is accompanied by an Outcomes Delivery Plan 2018-19 which sets out how progress is to be made towards the 12 headline outcomes of the PfG. Although at least seven of these outcomes depend on actions related to food, farming and the countryside there is surprisingly little relevant content in the documents – confined largely to actions on

environmental management, food waste and, interestingly, 'engaging with businesses in the reformulation of locally manufactured food' to 'improve nutritional content and improve local diets.' DAERA has also signalled its intention that monitoring arrangements for the Programme for Government will show how Northern Ireland is progressing towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals.[26]

In 2014 the Government-appointed Agri-Food Strategy Board produced its 'Going for Growth' report which elaborated a vision of 'Growing a sustainable, profitable and integrated Agri-Food supply chain, focused on delivering the needs of the market.' Targets for 2020 included a 60 percent growth in sales, 15 percent growth in employment, 75 percent increase in sales outside NI and 60 percent in value added by local companies.[27] Government adopted many of the recommendations of the report and strong progress has been made towards many of the targets. The strategy has been controversial for being industry dominated and unconnected to wider environmental and social policy.

Cows grazing at Stranocum

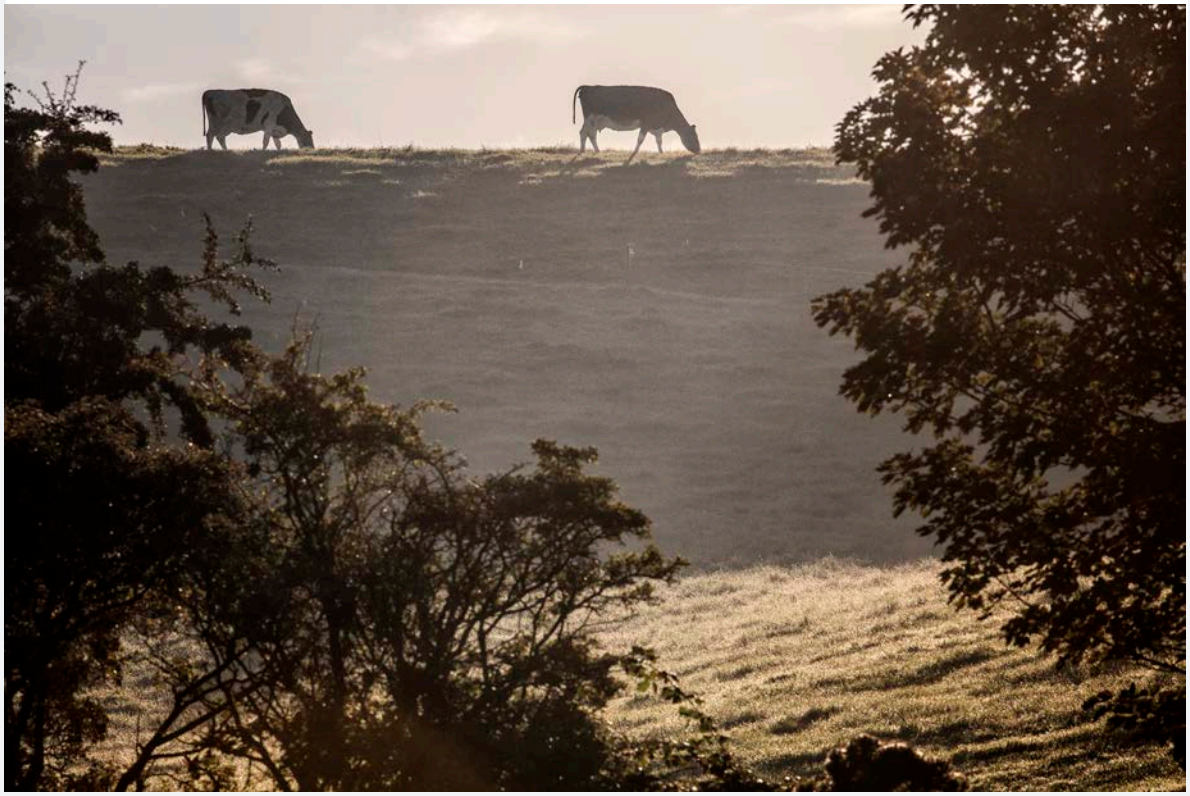

Photo: Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Following a recommendation in 'Going for Growth' an independent working group was set up to develop a Sustainable Agricultural Land Management Strategy for Northern Ireland which was published in 2016.[28] The strategy aims to improve both agricultural productivity and environmental performance through improving soil health and adopting more sustainable farming practices. The findings have been largely accepted by government, but implementation has been slow and patchy, hampered by lack of funds and departmental preoccupations with the implications of leaving the EU. The working group was subsequently tasked with producing a report on the issue of ammonia emissions from the agricultural sector, published in 2018 under the title 'Making Ammonia Visible'. This contained a series of recommendations for action which are currently being developed into an Ammonia Strategy by DAERA.

In August 2018 the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs published the Northern Ireland Future Agriculture Framework Stakeholder Engagement in preparation for the UK's departure from the EU and the Common Agricultural Policy. The stakeholder engagement ended in October 2018. At the time of writing the Department is consulting on an environment strategy and a rural development strategy to sit alongside other NI Executive strategies.

Making Life Better is the strategic framework for public health. It includes a range of initiatives on food and nutrition designed to improve health and wellbeing and to reduce health inequalities.[29] There is no over-arching policy on food for Northern Ireland such as Scotland's Good Food Nation policy, for example. A food strategy is currently being developed by DAERA, however.

The Rural Needs Act (2016) introduced a new duty on Northern Ireland departments, district councils and the other public bodies to have due regard to rural needs in their policies, strategies, plans and service delivery. The purpose of the Act is to ensure that public authorities have due regard to the social and economic needs of people in rural areas. This legislation is widely regarded in a positive light and is unique to Northern Ireland.

2. What we have heard from citizens

The Northern Ireland inquiry decided at the outset that it would be citizen led. Evidence of citizens' views was gathered through a series of workshops held across Northern Ireland with people from a wide variety of backgrounds: farmers, shoppers, urban and rural community groups, environmentalists, growers, chefs, traders, young and old.

What these diverse groups of people described to us emerged as a series of 'disconnects' in the complex system of our food, farming and countryside. While these disconnects paint a graphic picture of what is wrong with the system, our reading of the information we received is that contained within each 'negative' is a 'positive' impulse to repair, reconnect and create a better future.

- **The disconnect between the efforts required by farmers and their ability to earn a living.** Farmers feel they are under constant pressure to be ever more productive as the cost of inputs (feedstuffs, fertiliser, fuel and veterinary products) rises faster than the value of their outputs. But when they invest in improved productivity they see little or no economic benefit as the value is captured elsewhere in the supply chain. Supermarkets were identified as the main beneficiaries but consumers may also benefit through lower prices.

> I used to be able to make a decent living from 50 cows. Now it takes at least 100 to make the same living.
>
> Co Tyrone dairy farmer

- **The disconnect between the provision of public subsidy and benefits to the public.** On average 83 pence in every pound earned by farmers in Northern Ireland comes from CAP payments.[30] While there is broad support for the principle of supporting farming in this way, there is a widespread belief that the subsidies don't really work. Some believe they are captured by corporate interests higher up the supply chain, others that they penalise farmers who work hardest and others say that they should be more directed towards environmental protection. There is concern that a reduction or a removal of subsidies in the future would damage rural economies and communities irreparably and lead to land abandonment and the demise of the small family farm.

> If subsidies disappear, farming will become more intensive. I am happy to pay farmers to look after the countryside.
>
> Co Down resident

- The disconnect between how land is used and a healthy environment. Attitudes to the environment were characterised by regret, anger, fear, frustration and distrust. Many farmers regret that commercial pressures drive them to destroy habitats – 'farming to the fence', as one put it. Many people are angered at farming's role in the loss of biodiversity, climate change and pollution while some farmers are angry about current regulation and fearful about future environmental rules. Much farming appears

to have become disconnected from the soil on which it and all of human life depends. The overall impression is one of frustration that farming and nature are in conflict while nearly everyone believes they can be mutually supportive, a situation that is not helped by distrust between those who have the power to put things right: farmers, environmental organisations and government.

> For greater efficiency I took out a hedgerow the other day and a family of shrews ran away. I thought - I have just destroyed your home. Modern farming leaves no space for nature.
>
> Co Armagh farmer

- The disconnect between the price of food and the value of food. People were enthusiastic about local produce such as potatoes, the ingredients that make up an Ulster fry, vegetables, baking, seafood, dairy products, beef and lamb. They perceived Northern Ireland produce as being very high quality and liked the idea of organic and free range. They contrasted these preferences with the tendency to buy food on the basis of price. Good food is seen as expensive and we are all caught up in the expectation that food should be cheap driven by competition between supermarkets. Thus there is a deep disconnect between what people would prefer to do and what they actually do, between what they want and what they are offered.

> It's not true that people want everything cheap. We pay plenty for phones and cars, don't we? Food has been devalued by the business model and makes us view food differently.
>
> Co Fermanagh resident

- **The disconnect between the quality of the food we export and the market in which it finds itself.** Our products are mainly simply sold as commodities (beef, lamb or milk) without any acknowledgement that they are produced to high health and welfare standards, largely from grass-fed animals. We need to find ways of unlocking the inherent value of our production systems through better marketing and by adding value at home prior to export. The example of the Republic of Ireland's Bord Bia Origin Green export campaign is a pointer, but we need to have substance behind claims for a 'green' image for our food.
- **The disconnect between producers of food and consumers of food.** Farm shops, market stalls and the Belfast Farmers' Market rate highly for many people. They enjoy dealing directly with food producers and the conviviality of the experience. They regret a system that has evolved where they have little knowledge of where food comes from or who produced it.

> At a farmers' market stall you can see the smiles on people's faces. It's that direct link between producer and consumer
>
> Environmental worker

Artisan Market, Ballycastle

Photo: Naturally North Coast & Glens, Northern Ireland Tourist Board

- **The disconnect between the food we eat and food that sustains health.** There was a widespread view from participants that our health depends on a good diet of healthy food but for many people it can be unavailable, too expensive, too difficult to prepare or simply an unattractive prospect. People want to see a stronger focus on the nutritional value of food and, for some, a shift from meat and dairy towards more plant-based diets. The epidemics of obesity and diabetes are seen as being driven by advertising aimed at school children and funded by corporate interests.

- **The disconnect between the food we produce in Northern Ireland and the food we eat.** Farming has the potential to increase the availability of healthy food but the food system here is skewed towards meat and dairy and most of what we produce is exported. We also import a huge amount of food, even things which could do well locally. There is a very weak connection between the need/demand for healthy food amongst people in Northern Ireland and local supply. The public sector could provide a market for healthy local food but public procurement practices work against this.

- **The disconnect between our relationship with food and our mental health.** Food was described as 'social glue' contributing to both our sense of community and our mental health but people feel this role is greatly undervalued. The production, preparation and eating of food can make an important contribution to mental health. This can be in structured settings such as care farms, community gardening or cooking skills education. Or it can be in the everyday business of growing vegetables or having the time and focus to prepare wholesome meals and eat them with others.

> Allotments create enjoyment, social connections and mental health. That's a big contrast with realities of commercial food production. We need more community allotments.
>
> Co Down allotment holder

- **The disconnect between our education system and the food system.** Food education is being mainly provided by supermarkets and multinational corporations. At the same time our education system has failed to engage with food, farming and the countryside. The profile of agriculture has largely disappeared from rural schools and many schools fail to properly support the practical cooking elements of Home Economics. People also feel that children are not adequately taught about diet and health. These failures disproportionately affect those from poorer backgrounds.

> We are collectively suffering from 'nature deficit disorder'. There is plenty of evidence on the benefits of green space for mental and physical health.
>
> Co Tyrone social worker

- **The disconnect between people and nature.** The countryside is seen as having an important role in contributing to mental and physical health through public access to green spaces. Lack of access is identified as an issue: no public footpath network with

Citizen Workshops






very restricted access for both urban and rural dwellers. The isolation experienced by many farmers is seen as contributing to poor mental health and associated with more intensive forms of farming.

- **The physical disconnect between the remaining fragments of our natural/semi-natural habitats.** One of the primary causes of our significant loss of biodiversity has been the fragmentation of habitat caused by agricultural 'improvement' with the loss of connectivity making it difficult or impossible for species to spread and disperse. This was highlighted in the 'Lawton' report Making Space for Nature (2010). A shift in the form of agricultural subsidies towards a 'public money for public goods' approach could do much to remedy this issue.

> I remember the call of the Curlew by Lough Neagh as a boy making hay. Now they are gone.
>
> Supermarket worker

What citizens didn't say

There were a small number of topics that we expected to come up in our citizen workshops but received very little airing. The most obvious was the issue of the border. In common with issues of community identity, which also received little mention, this is a subject that people in Northern Ireland tend to avoid unless they are in known and trusted company. These are nevertheless likely to be important issues for many people. Using the language of disconnection, the kinds of disconnects that citizens are likely to have identified would be those between communities and the fear of the deepening divides that a possible post-Brexit hard border might bring about.

Another area that citizens did not discuss is the tension between those engaged in rural development activity and those in farming. A shift from direct farm payments (CAP Pillar 1) to rural development funding (CAP Pillar 2) was perceived by farmers to be a reduction in support for agriculture. In fact this is not the case but the misunderstanding and resulting tension remain.

Curlew

3. A complex system

Views expressed by citizens came with passion and conviction. Despite some disagreement, discussion was always respectful and constructive. What the vast majority of participants had in common was that they felt the system isn't working and current policy and practice is failing to address the issues. Meanwhile the dysfunction is being exacerbated by influences ranging from corporate greed to climate change. There is clearly an appetite for a different future for food, farming and the countryside and many proposals and solutions were offered but there is no consensus on what that future should look like.

We consider that the picture painted by citizens is a fair reflection of reality and that the challenge now is to develop an agenda of 'reconnection' towards a vision that is widely shared. At this stage we would suggest that our collective aspiration should be to achieve 'a safe, secure, inclusive food and farming system, a flourishing rural economy and a sustainable and accessible countryside' and the task of this inquiry is to suggest a route map of how to get there.

The relationships between how we farm, how we produce food, how we eat food, how we care for our health, how we care for the environment and how we sustain rural communities form a complex system. Systems scientist, Peter Senge of MIT, has said that the essential characteristic of such complex systems is that no one is in control – if someone was in control the system would not be malfunctioning. Systems are in control of themselves so we struggle to implement even the best laid plans. Senge goes on to say how we can deal with this complexity by building a vision that is widely shared across society, enabling many types of leadership in many different forms and from many different places, recognising our interdependence, and tackling the 'disconnects' by focusing on relationships across the system.[31]

A major part of the challenge is to identify where are the most effective places to intervene in the system: to discover what actions can exert the most leverage to have a benign impact across the system. This could include some changes to the 'rules' such as how subsidies are paid or changes to how rules are applied such as the way regulation is carried out. It could include changes in how information is provided through education, for example, or more strategic changes such as how we plan land use. Having reviewed what citizens have had to say and having brought our own experience and expertise to bear, we consider that interventions need to be made at a fundamental level by redefining the goals of the system.[32]

There is little consensus on what our farming system is for – is it to maximise exports, to care for the environment or to provide food for the nation? Is our food system there to provide nutritious food or to maximise returns on investment? Is the environment a resource to be exploited for maximum return, a provider of eco-system services or something with more intrinsic value that should be protected regardless of its utility to humankind? Are rural communities best seen as a kind of green suburbia for commuters with bucolic tastes or should they be nurtured to provide a sense of 'place' for the people who live there?

4. Signposts

To many people the answers to the questions above are obvious and to many others they are equally obvious – but not the same. We suggest that a number of guiding concepts, or signposts, may help us navigate our way through this complexity.

Transition

The disconnects described above, together with the global drivers of climate change and biodiversity loss, combine to make a major transition in food, farming and our relationship with the countryside inevitable. This transition will occur whether we like it or not – arguably it is already occurring and not in a benign way. Our collective challenge is to make it a good transition, doing better by the public in the long run and getting there as smoothly as possible.

Resilience

Resilience is the ability of a system, such as an individual farm, a local economy, a community or an entire country, to withstand shock and then adapt to that shock. These shocks could be the impact of climate change or global economic shifts, for example. The ability to react to external threats isn't just a defensive mechanism, however, it is an opportunity to engage in positive and creative ways to improve the overall performance of the system and thus the wellbeing of those who are part of it.[33] Resilience is an essential component of a successful transition.

Prosperity

Prosperity is generally seen as being about creating wealth but it is also rather more than that. As Professor Tim Jackson puts it 'Prosperity is about things going well for us – in accordance with (pro- in the Latin) our hopes and expectations (speres).' We think that prosperity is an essential characteristic of a healthy system – ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to do well in accordance with their hopes and expectations.

Inequality

Perhaps the greatest enemy of prosperity is inequality and inequalities are rife in our complex system of food, farming and countryside. Food poverty is growing while profound health inequalities are exacerbated by the cheapest food often being the unhealthiest. We think that the eradication of such inequalities must be front of mind as we envision the transition before us. It is especially important that we ensure that ours is a just transition where benefits are shared and costs are borne by those best placed to do so.

Fairness

There is a widespread view in the farming community that the operation of the food supply chain is inherently unfair, with the processors, wholesalers and retailers taking the lion's share of the profit, leaving little or nothing for the producer, without whom there would be no product. The agri-food industry is unique in that the purchaser of the product (supermarkets seeking low prices for their customers) sets the price rather than the producer, reflecting the power of a few large organisations to dictate to large numbers of individuals.

Wellbeing

'Improving wellbeing for all' is the over-arching purpose of the draft Programme for Government.[34] As the Roundtable on Measuring Wellbeing in Northern Ireland put it, 'Wellbeing is a holistic concept, bringing together social, environmental, economic and democratic outcomes. A wellbeing approach asks us to consider how society is progressing in the round, rather than using economic indicators as a proxy for wellbeing or focusing on specific areas at the expense of others. It also asks us to look at the outcomes, focusing on how people's lives are improving (or not) rather than allowing the conversation to centre on the inputs or processes we use to improve society.' [35]

Carnegie UK Trust - Measuring Wellbeing

Stewardship

The Land Matters Task Force has pointed out that for a number of historical and cultural reasons the primary focus of landowners in Northern Ireland tends to be on rights that go with land ownership rather than the responsibilities of stewardship that accompany the possession of land. The Task Force report states, 'There is a resistance to change, particularly to anything that might be seen as eroding any of those rights. For example there is no system of public rights of way across land in Northern Ireland, and very strong opposition to any form of wider public access. Similarly there has been deep suspicion about any form of landscape protection, with widespread antipathy to the introduction of National Parks and statutory management of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.'[36]

We feel that the concept of stewardship with its connotations of management of natural capital on behalf of the public has much to offer. It recognises the rights, responsibilities and social contribution of landowners and dovetails with the emerging policy of public money for public goods.

Democracy and participation

In producing this report we have been led by the views of citizens. We think it is imperative that plans for managing the transition we speak of above fully involve a wide cross section of society and go far beyond the usual interest groups. At stake is not only the economic success of the food and farming industries, but also the wellbeing of whole communities, the health of our people, the state of the local environment and the future of the planet. A transition that is democratic and participative has a much better chance of success than one that is determined by a small number of people in influential positions. Innovative

deliberative forums such as citizens' juries or a citizens' assembly can play an important role, especially in the absence of locally accountable democratic institutions.

Governance

The Draft Programme for Government 2016-21 commits Government to work across Departments in order to achieve shared outcomes. Such an approach, if implemented, can potentially have a critical enabling role in the kind of systemic change that a benign transition will require. The proposed NI Environment Strategy aims to be cross-cutting, requiring buy-in and action from all Departments. At a more local level the kind of cooperation that is being developed under the auspices of Community Planning can be another opportunity to reconnect across the system.

Destructive conflict and peace building

Conflict is an inevitable part of life and can function as a motor for change and development in society if handled constructively. Conflict becomes destructive when it leads to a breakdown of communication among groups, damaging social relations and exacerbating tensions that can lead to violence. Peacebuilding, on the other hand, is both the development of human and institutional capacity for resolving conflicts without violence, and the transformation of the conditions that generate destructive conflict.

Systems leadership

A successful transition will depend on leadership from multiple sources and in multiple ways. Peter Senge says that 'system leaders' need to develop three core capabilities.[37] The first is to be prepared to be wrong and to recognise that if things aren't working then we are all likely to be part of the problem in some way; we need to approach things with genuinely open minds.

Secondly, we need to cultivate the ability to see the larger system: get different views in the room together, learning to stand in each other's shoes and collectively start to see something that individually none of us can see. And finally we need to shift the focus from problem-solving to co-creating the future: problem-solving restricts our focus to the negatives rather than exploring the potential of the positives. Such leaders are potentially everywhere in society and we need to unlock their capacity to provide leadership.

5. The way ahead

The challenge for Northern Ireland is to enable a transition to a safe, secure, inclusive food and farming system, a flourishing rural economy and a sustainable and accessible countryside. The 140 citizens who attended our workshops came up with a wide range of potential solutions to the many 'disconnects' they identified. The RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission, in its final report published in July, identified innovative and radical proposals which are summarised as:

1. Healthy food is every body's business: healthy, nourishing, delicious and sustainably produced food is plentiful and affordable for everyone
2. Farming is a force for change, unleashing a fourth agricultural revolution driven by public values.
3. A countryside that works for all and rural communities are a powerhouse for a fair and green economy

The Commission further recommended 'a framework for change': 'We need change, and a framework that can guide and accelerate the incremental, the transformational and the disruptive changes, helping distributed leadership and local action to thrive.'[39]

In Northern Ireland we need our own framework for change, one that speaks to our particular situation and challenges. It is clear to us that we can only achieve a benign and just transition through fundamentally reconsidering the purpose of the complex system that governs so much of our health, our environment, our economy and our whole way of life.

To address such fundamental issues will require a significant and sustained intervention to agree a way forward based on a collective vision that commands public confidence. The task of such an intervention is to go beyond the many perceptions and misperceptions that exist, build the trust needed for effective working relationships to be developed and build consensus on practical ways forward.

Since the collapse of Stormont in January 2017, political direction has been absent from government and there are limits to what civil servants can and should do. We believe it is up to civil society organisations to offer the leadership needed to tackle this great challenge. Northern Ireland is a small place and it is possible to bring the key stakeholders from government and wider society together in one room.

We therefore offer the following outcomes and recommendations as a framework for what we consider to be the main elements of the needed transition to a sustainable future. These are not intended to be prescriptive but rather are designed to stimulate debate and provide some guidance towards an agreed future. Some of the outcomes may be readily achievable while others will be deeply challenging. On some it will be easy to achieve agreement while others will be deeply controversial.

The systems thinking approach described in section 3 above and the signposts set out in section 4, provide essential guidance on how we can work through these challenges.

A Framework for Change - Towards a safe, secure, inclusive food and farming system, a flourishing rural economy and a sustainable and accessible countryside

Suggested Outcomes

- The efforts and investments made by farmers are rewarded through appropriate farm incomes and all those working in the agriculture and food industries earn a decent living.
- We farm in a way that conserves our soils, eliminates pollution, restores biodiversity and reduces carbon emissions.
- When public money is spent it is done in a way that contributes to the common good.
- Food of high quality is produced and its value is recognised through the price it achieves.
- The food available to people is nutritious and diverse and forms a healthy diet affordable by all.
- Resilience is built through a shift towards satisfying local food demand from local produce.
- Relationships are built between producers and consumers of our food.
- A culture of good food and its social value is nurtured and celebrated.
- Young people understand and appreciate the relationships between farming, food, environment and health.
- The countryside is accessible to all and the people are able to reconnect with nature.

Recommendations for action

It is now a matter of urgency that progress is made towards the outcomes above. Building on what we have heard from citizens and the analysis set out in this report, we make the following recommendation:

Stakeholders from farming, community, environmental, business, academia and other civil society interests to work with Government Departments, statutory agencies, local government and political parties to undertake an extensive period of deliberative engagement to include:

- A focus on building trust and working relationships between those involved.
- Working towards the outcomes and connections set out in the draft Programme for Government.
- Working with Community Planning structures and processes
- Learning from, and cooperating with, neighbouring and other jurisdictions.
- Building on the findings of the UK wide RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission.
- Developing an evidence base in partnership with academic institutions.
- Creating the required 'systems leadership' across society.
- A programme of continuing and extensive public engagement including a focus on those whose views often go unheard.

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Lynn Finnegan, Founding Editor, Freckle Magazine

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