

Environment Committee at Forty Hall Farm, Enfield, 12 July 2018

Round table attendees

Environment Committee members: Caroline Russell (Chair), Tony Arbour, Jennette Arnold, David Kurten, Onkar Sahota

GLA staff: Joe Driscoll, Raphi Driver, Jo Laban, George Raszka, Holly Smith, Ian Williamson

External guests:

Forty Hall Farm—Kate McGeever, Manager, and Beth Stuart, Grower

Community Food Growers Network and **Land Workers Alliance**—Deirdre Woods

Lea Valley Growers Association (and **National Farmers Union**)—Lee Stiles, Secretary

Surrey County Agricultural Society (and **Agricultural Association**)—Jonathan Thompson, Vice-Chairman

Sustain—Sarah Williams, Programme Director

Sutton Community Farm—Alice Brown, Manager, and Joris Gunawardena, Head of Production

Apologies were received on the day from Brian Kelly of **OrganicLea**, who sent his input via Sarah Williams of Sustain. Apologies were also received from Environment Committee members Léonie Cooper (Deputy Chair) and Shaun Bailey, and from the Enfield and Haringey constituency member Joanne McCartney.

Introductions

The external guests introduced the organisations they were representing and their work.

Forty Hall Farm is a mixed organic farm, renting around 170 acres of land from Enfield Council. It is an educational centre as well as a commercial grower. It also puts on a monthly farmers' market, an annual food festival and an annual music festival, and other community events.

The Community Food Growers Network (CFGN) represents small to large community gardens and farms, lobbying on their behalf and providing support. It seeks to help with access to land, security of tenure and sharing learning. The Land Workers Alliance is a union of small ecologically-friendly producers.

The Surrey County Agricultural Society is a charitable trust promoting agriculture, and educating farmers and the public. The Agricultural Association is a representative body for lawyers working in areas related to agriculture.

Sutton Community Farm (SCF) was set up a few years ago to promote health and environmentally sustainable food. It is a community operation, with 300 community customers and 70 volunteer workers, and being owned by its 400 members.

The Lea Valley Growers Association (LVGA) represents 100 glasshouse growers in London, Essex and Hertfordshire. Between them they grow most of the UK's sweet peppers and cucumbers, mainly in hydroponic systems. The high yields mean they can achieve a large turnover (collectively, £0.5 billion) in a modest area of land. The Association also represents urban farmers.

Sustain is a national alliance of around 100 member organisations, campaigning on food and farming issues.

Challenges for farmers

Guests at the meeting outlined a number of issues that present challenges for farmers. The notes below summarise points made by guests.

Access to land

Challenging aspects include getting sufficient land area, of the right kind, and the length and security of tenure. OrganicLea reported that they cannot keep up with the demand for their produce, or find land for all the growers they train.

Short tenures pose several challenges. They increase the cost in time and money of negotiating tenure. They deter investment. Farmers need to invest in site-specific capital improvements such as buildings, which have long payback periods. Environmentally-friendly farmers in particular invest in trees, hedges, and the condition of the soil, which can take years to start to show a return. If tenure on the land is not long and secure enough, farmers cannot rely on seeing the benefits of the investment. Ten years can be regarded as a minimum, and longer leases are beneficial.

The difficulty of engaging in the private land market for (small) agricultural businesses means that publicly owned land may offer the best opportunities. Local authorities are major landowners.

There are also many cases where land ownership is unclear. It would be useful for there to be a public database of land that may be available for potential users.

A Green Belt designation limits the uses that land can be put to and may encourage agricultural use. However, concerns were expressed over large land owners 'banking' land for possible future development. In the Green Belt, where development is not allowed under current designation, this can be a long-term situation, perhaps encouraged by debate over the status of Green Belt land. The land can be under-used in the meantime. Landowners felt to be doing this included public sector bodies as well as private. It was argued that local authorities should exercise better stewardship, and not allow good agricultural land to be built over. County farms are being lost at an alarming rate.

Financial viability

It was noted that the financial viability of agriculture depends on a wider range of factors, including food prices and input costs. In a couple of years, commercial food growers will be charged for the amount of water they use, which they are not currently.

Farm size and support for small agricultural businesses

Under the current subsidy regime, farms that are large in area receive the most subsidy, whereas small farms (of which there are many in London's Green Belt) receive less; those under 100 acres may not find it worth the time it takes to apply. The subsidy regime no longer appears to encourage employment creation.

Forty Hall received a small start-up grant from the Outer London Fund and has shown a sustained benefit from this. It also receives a grant through Natural England to maintain pasture and meadow in an environmentally-friendly way. The grant makes it viable, because although the land management is sometimes termed 'low-input' it can be more expensive, for example because of the labour cost of hand-weeding rather than spraying. Smaller farms therefore might not be able to maintain organic status.

It was suggested that the GLA could support investment to help farms get established, expand or diversify. There would be benefits to a range of GLA strategies, including skills, to justify Mayoral support. The Good Growth Fund is applicable.

Forty Hall and Sutton Community Farm had benefited from grants in their early years that were made to, or under the auspices of, a larger body that set up the farms. Stand-alone start-ups may be unable to benefit from many grants, either because they do not have the credibility to win the grants, or they do not have the cash reserves to rely on grants made in arrears. Without a parent organisation, there may be scope for start-ups to work with a larger partner, or to group together to bid for grants.

There are alternative models of farm business including share farming, in which farmers share their overheads, and contract farming, in which parties provide different inputs and share the profits. In a number of other countries, including France and Japan, there are more agricultural co-ops. Within the UK, the organic sector has more co-ops. There are co-operatives in certain types of farm input, like machinery rings. Farms could benefit by pooling procurement. They could also benefit by coming together to meet larger supply contracts, such as to schools or hospitals. There are examples of this kind of arrangement in Manchester, Copenhagen. In London there is a Procurement Across London project, led by Havering.

Worker accommodation

One factor making land usable for farming is the availability of on-site accommodation. Farm workers need to do long hours and potentially respond to urgent work out of hours. Larger farms benefit from tied accommodation on site, and for small operators it was suggested that the Land Settlement Association model could work—5 acres and a home, enabling agricultural entrepreneurs to start small. However, others at the meeting felt that allowing homes on agricultural sites could create opening for abuse, or risk undermining Green Belt status.

Low Emission Zone

It was asked whether the Low Emission Zone could cause problems for cross-border farms, but those at the meeting were not aware of issues.

Environmental impacts

Again, the notes below summarise points made by guests about the environmental impacts of farms in London's Green Belt.

Farms deliver a whole range of benefits, such as biodiversity, especially when they produce in line with nature rather than against it. Several of the farms at the table were organic and avoid pesticides. In the LVGA's glasshouses it is normal to use biological control of pests, placing predator organisms in the glasshouses before planting.

The commercial glasshouse operators of the LVGA mainly use hydroponics, which uses one-sixth the water of conventional growing and recycles nutrients. They claim near-neutral carbon emissions thanks to computer control of the growing climate. Heat and power are typically supplied by CHP, and in some cases fuelled by renewable energy such as biomass. One grower has an AD plant that takes about half of the food waste from Spitalfields market and some local authority food waste, but AD requires a controlled feedstock and this limits the usability of some waste streams. In the Netherlands, some glasshouses use geothermal heat, but this is viable there because of the density of demand created by the larger concentration of glasshouses. It has not been found viable in this country. LVGA suggested that it be made compulsory for generators of waste heat to make it available for other users.

There are emissions from transport of products to market. Lea Valley growers used to use river transport, but this no longer meets their needs and they use road transport.

Food security

This was felt to be a national priority, with UK farming making a valuable contribution. It was argued that the perception that food production and environmental benefit are in conflict is false, and fails to take into account the environmental impacts of overseas food production.

Site tour

The group toured the Forty Hall Farm site. This note briefly summarises some features seen and discussed.

The farm includes market garden, pasture, vineyard and woodland. They have 3 paid growers, doing about 12 days' work per week between them, plus community volunteers and students.

They run a veg bag scheme, filling the bags on average over half with their own produce, and supplementing with produce from elsewhere in the UK when their own production is low. As well as producing in different seasons, the aims of their crop choice include reducing labour requirement and to diversify out the risks of poor growing conditions. Growing flowers alongside the food crops attracts pollinating insects and volunteers. Rotating crops in a 9-year cycle, with changes of plant family, discourages pests. The rotation includes green manure for soil condition. They concurred that they should plant more produce that caters to the London's diversity of cultures.

They would like to find seeds bred for organic agriculture. Those from nearly all producers are optimised for chemical use.

London is short of people with tractor skills, and of local training opportunities. The small plots in London make it difficult to use tractors. Another skill challenge is in picking. Picking the right fruit or veg at the right time, without damaging, and then grading it for sale, it is a skilled job.

There are some markets they don't have the time to sell in—those further away and/or operating very early in the morning. Sutton Community Farm use Food Chain distributors.

Forty Hall is used for events, such as the music festival, as well as food production.