

Farmstarts: A Pathway for New Farmers to Grow and Thrive

Facilitator: Sabine Virani, Sustainable Food Norwich

Background and Context

The session was facilitated by Sabine Virani - the coordinator of the Norwich Food Partnership ([Sustainable Food Norwich](#)) which joined the [Sustainable Food Places](#) network last year. Sabine highlighted how there are about 110 of these partnerships across the UK but there was nothing in East Anglia, until they joined last year. So to have them on board last year and Suffolk hopefully next year, is beginning to fill out some big gaps in the UK map.

Sabine mentioned how it was interesting seeing that lovely film about the madman dancing.

“And I felt a bit like that at the beginning. And what happened was the Norwich Institute for Sustainable Development watched the dancing and said: yeah, we want to play too.”

Sustainable Food Norwich is based at the University of East Anglia, within the School of International Development and connected across the research park. While initially focused on global food development issues, they recognised the need to pay more attention to their local community in Norwich. And then Goodery came on board (local Riverford organics for Norfolk). They also have links with Nourishing Norfolk, The Feed, and the Arts University as well.

Introductions

Estelle Gray (note taker)	Suffolk County Council, HAF project, providing food and activities for children on Free School Meals during the school holidays.
Nicola Horden	Chef, started the Canteen in Southwold as a way to bring good sustainably produced food to the community
Louise Carpenter	Allotmenteer, representing Natural Boxford and HEAT, recently started Food Group and trying to decide priorities
Tom	Set up community food growing project in Reading that provides access to nature while working with refugee support groups, new to area
Marley Karzimba	Runs Bantu farm in Bentley (3-acre CSA)
Lora Aziz	Bantu farm, wild crafter and forager
Anna Beames	CEO of Suffolk Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG)
Leon Collyer	Rookery Farm - family farm in north Suffolk, would like the farm to be a whole-diet CSA (300 acres)
Sam Morgan	Stour Valley Farming and Conservation, entrant livestock farmer, passionate about farming with nature
Simon Clifton	Citizens Advice Bureau Mid Suffolk
Laura Smith	Babergh District Council, Cabinet Member for Thriving Communities

Andy Mellon	Green Councillor for Mid Suffolk, small farmer
Ryan Boyd	Head grower at Oak Tree Community Farm
Ned Harrison	Suffolk County Council, supports biodiversity on county farm estates
Teresa Davis	District Councillor, Cabinet Member for Thriving Communities
Sam Hanks	Suffolk Wildlife Trust, small organic farmer
Kryisia Woroniecka	Market gardener for Tilia Veg and Kids Kitchen leader (cooking workshops for families_
Jan Candy	Cabinet member for Community Health, East Suffolk DC

FarmStarts: What They Are

FarmStarts are site-based incubator programmes – incubating both farmers and farms - designed to support aspiring new entrant farmers, addressing typical barriers to entry, filling a gap in opportunities for new entrants and giving people a chance to test their farming ideas in a safe environment. This refers to financial safety but also having community support, mentors and advice. Developing their skills, experience, confidence, which enables them to establish and sustain their own farm/ market garden.

Lots of different models around the world

In general – all provide access to land, equipment and some level of infrastructure, provide routes to market, business support and mentoring, social support and solidarity. Some might provide grants and loans, and some provide support in progressing beyond the FarmStart incubator site.

Characteristics of FarmStarts

Usually managed centrally by a particular group/ organisation often a CSA of some sort, must grow to organic/ agroecological principles.

Agroecology – an approach to regenerative growing, taking care of both the environment and people. People might be the farmers/growers themselves, and also the wider community. It has been adopted by the UN FAO.

The Landworkers' Alliance (LWA) run the network of FarmStarts across the UK. They encourage FarmStarts, if not certified organic, to put in place an Ecological Land Management plan to demonstrate how they are achieving best practice in terms of the environment.

Origin of FarmStarts

Started in the US and Canada 30 years ago, but no longer in Canada due to lack of funding. There are different groups around the world: France, Spain, Belgium, Finland. There are 100 in US and 400 in France.

“Where communities have really focused the effort to make this happen, they can really flourish”

Maps (refer to slides) depict FarmStarts existing/ have existed in the UK. There is a gap in East Anglia. Norwich, Peterborough and Lincolnshire, are working together with Nottinghamshire, through the [Urban Agriculture Consortium](#), to develop FarmStarts in the area – still in early stages. Sabine mentioned that while this is something Suffolk could do on its own, it would be wonderful to consider linking up with other initiatives in the region.

Lancashire did a [feasibility study](#) looking at all the different FarmStarts around the country:

- Kindling Trust in Manchester – their project costs participants around £500/ year, pay extra for seeds and compost
- Organiclea London – doesn't cost participants anything
- Another in Scotland – £120

In France, some pay farmers a living wage. This doesn't seem like a very likely model in our current economic climate but the aspiration would be to pay farmers a living wage to train, and then a tapered off income to bridge the gap from training to setting up on their own.

There are a variety of ways to go about it: some are for a whole year, some are for winter and spring, some are a few days a week with training days spotted around the year.

Why we need FarmStarts

Not enough young farmers

As of this year:

- 38% percent of farmers are over 65
- 30% are aged 55 to 64 years old
- Only 5% are under 35 years old

We have a desperate need for young farmers, but to start out as a young new entrant farmer is financially unaffordable for most and the access to land is another major challenge.

“In the current global, geopolitical, and environmental volatility, there is a real need for more flexibility in the system and much more distributed systems, so that we’re not relying on systems that seem to be teetering on collapse.”

An example shared was the flooding in Pakistan two years ago, which devastated half of the country's land in just two weeks. This region is responsible for producing 90% of Pakistan's food, and Pakistan is the fifth most populous country in the world.

Volatile supply chains

In the UK: 40% of food is imported; 85% fruit; 43% vegetables

Not sure whether that data is one or two years old, but what we do know is that farmers are exiting fruit and veg production in the UK. It has become unaffordable to manage and with Brexit, and without access to labour, it is becoming more and more difficult.

Moreover, all the food that we are importing is coming from countries that are struggling with water scarcity, flooding, wildfires, etc .

“We need to build some sort of resilience in our system”

The control of supermarkets

90% of food is controlled by nine supermarkets – this puts huge pressure on farmers because they earn very little from food sold through supermarkets.

Farmer suicide is a significant problem in this country, the US, India, and all over the world.

Food Security

The Met Office is waking up – their [publication last October](#) was about food security and recognising the direct impacts of climate change on food supply chains.

We are throwing away more food but still have people in food poverty. There are 4 million children experiencing food poverty in UK, doubling in one year from 2022 to 2023. And there are 800,000 children living in poverty not eligible for free school meals (FSM). In Suffolk alone, we have around 28,000 children not registered for benefit-related FSM – and that’s the children we know about (shared by audience member).

Nutrition-related illness on the rise; a school in Norwich had children collapsing due to hunger and starvation, and kids with rickets and scurvy and heart murmurs ([Guardian article, 2023](#)).

There is an organisation in the US called Bionutrient Institute doing [research](#) on the nutrient density of foods. They compared organic and conventional produce and found that that richer the soil, richer the nutrients in the food. There can be an 8-fold difference

in the amount of nutrients in a blueberry, 9 times between the worst and the best in beetroots, and 15 times in grapes.

“It’s not really about growing more, it’s about growing better food and getting it into the mouths of people who need it.”

We know that food and farming account for 30% of our global greenhouse gas emissions. We know that industrial farming contributes to soil compaction, droughts and flooding, and that our current feed system is one of the major contributors to the sixth mass extinction event that we're in the middle of.

Theory U

Concept from MIT – Theory U upgrading our operating systems (our thinking, the way our structures work) (slide 26)

Operating system 1.0 is an input and authority centric operating system. In food and farming that looks like a traditional farming centric system. In health, it looks like a traditional doctor-centered system, and in the business world, it looks like compliance.

Operating system 2.0 is looking at output and efficiency centric. In food and farming, that's an industrial agriculture based on monocultures. In health, we're looking at evidence-based medicine, and in business, we're looking at resource efficiency.

Operating system 3.0 - outcome and user centric. In food and farming, we're looking at organic agriculture and reducing the negative footprint. In health, we're looking at patient centric medicine, and in business, and sustainability, we're looking at business innovation and net zero.

And what we really need is operating system 4.0 - a regenerative and ecosystem centric system. In food and farming, that looks like regenerative agriculture, where food is a medium for healing people and the planet. And in health, it's about strengthening the sources of health and well-being. And in business and sustainability, the purpose is about ecosystem transformation, and not net zero, but net positive.

The food and farming system cuts across all of that. Sabine shared that it is a useful way to challenge people who are in the system, but possibly quite stuck at operating systems 2.0 and 3.0.

Farmstarts work on a very local level. How do we start connecting these dots?

Food Zone model from [Growing Communities](#) (slide 28)– based on permaculture idea of zones

- Zone 0 domestic grown urban food, closer to the centre
- Zone 1 is urban traded food

- Zone 2 is peri urban environment
- Zone 3 is rural hinterland (within 100 miles of urban area)

They suggest that we get 60% of our food from zones zero through three, 20% from the rest of the UK, 15% from the rest of Europe, and a mere 5% from the rest of the world.

Part of the idea is having the most perishable food grown locally and potentially grazing animals further out.

In the Southwest – [Good Food Loop](#), using the Open Food Network (online platform) is connecting CSAs, FarmStarts, bakeries and sharing a van to collect and drop off produce. People order online so producers pack exactly what is being ordered, minimising food waste. The markup taken up by the coordinators is miniscule compared to supermarkets.

Growing Communities pay their farmers 80p/kilo compared to 15p/kg which is the farmgate price. They have an annual turnover of 1m, been running for 25 years, and work only with small producers. A cost-benefit analysis with [New Economic Foundation](#) found that for every pound spent buying organic fruit and veg through Growing Communities, they were generating £3.73 in health benefits for customers, better financial returns and job security for their farmers, and in environmental stewardship.

[Eves Hill Veg Co.](#), a small veg producer in Norfolk had to move site onto unimproved land. In the first year, using principles from OrganicLea, they sold £35,000 of produce from their single acre, and earned £70,000 from training. They are training up lots of new growers but finding that there isn't anywhere for them to move on to.

Q&A

Do you need to have a certain amount of land to assign to FarmStarts?

Can be integrated

Could it be a regular trainee getting training?

Yes, but it depends on what stage they are at – if they are complete beginners, you will have a more integrated approach (assistant growers) but as you go through further training, more training on planning, business support, etc.

Generally three years, but doesn't have to be.

Oak Tree already has trainees run through the farm, how would it be different through farm start?

There would be funding so that you would be paid to offer training. Some qualifications might be required to provide Level 2/3 training.

There is growing interest in soil health among typical East Anglian farms. But compared to what smaller scale producers are able to do, it is not the same for larger farms. FarmStarts could be a source of income while improving soil health, but if the entrant is starting from scratch, there might not be an experienced farmer there – **are there examples of partnerships of “traditional farms” offering land and an experienced grower pairing up with an entrant?**

FarmStarts is more than land - offering a wraparound support including training, mentoring, and community. And with that is a community of growers - you are not learning in isolation, there is a group.

Is there a focus only on veg or can there be animal husbandry?

Not heard of it but no reason why this could not be possible, it is mainly veg but they have been other things grown including hemp, lavender, etc.

There are new models coming up. Richard Perkins is all about how small scale farming can max out the produce. We need animals to help farming, it is only a problem when animals are static (shared by Anna Beames).

So are hosts what you are looking for?

Hosting needed and people to take up the offer

Anna can think of 5 farmers and through Groundschool, we can bring in the practitioners.

Without any national food strategy, this land that you are wanting – new labour is wanting to build on (housing), are you talking to people about this?

No answer at the moment. We responded to the new planning permission consultation in partnership with other food partnerships in the country, trying to change the planning rules.

Comments from audience:

- When planning is set to housing it is almost impossible to change
- We don't have a land use framework yet, which was promised. A land use framework then opens up that dialogue.
- There are competing land uses, and energy and development is winning. One farmer was offered 6mil to put solar panels on Grade 1 land.

- We need to analyse trade-offs; without nature we have nothing.
- The film, [Common Ground](#), covers this conversation.

FarmStart is managed by LWA - where is the funding coming from, when is the funding coming to an end?

Started in 2017; funding is still in place at the moment

Sabine is inviting the Suffolk Food Partnership to start generating some of its own work and to be in dialogue with her in Norwich and colleagues in this area.

“We can all start up together, maybe put in a larger funding bid somewhere, so we're not competing and we're actually thinking across the region.”

How far practically was the distance between FarmStarts?

No idea, cannot say. Support can be far or near.

With the onset of a whole new energy infrastructure, seems like Suffolk is being sacrificed – is there a map?

(Anna) That would be a land use framework. Coal mines were in centre of GB; so to transport that, you went outwards – that's almost redundant. Renewable energy ring around the UK is built offshore, which is re-routing the infrastructure for energy – we are not here as a county to provide energy for the rest of the country – two nuclear power stations, windfarm, solar farms – at what trade off?

A land use framework allows us to prioritise and make decisions locally as to how to best use land because our land now has to be multifunctional, and it can be.

There is no support for actual food production. We're just having to be clever and use this environmental money. Otherwise, a lot of farms can earn more by packing up production and just growing for nature.

If you grow for human health, nature uplifts naturally – should be a win win and that's not reflected in our economic system, nor culturally. It is not all or nothing, should be diverse.

It's diversity, the diversity is the key. Because it gives you choice. And choice gives you freedom.

It's the same as farming: a lot of it is so prescriptive, which lacks passion. Current farmers are not interested in food, but new farmers are different. They are back casting into farming. They're not seeing what they want to eat, so they're growing it themselves and are trying to change things.