

## ***Growing the Future: Pathways for young people into agriculture and food production***

**Facilitator:** Gaina Dunsire, Barleybird CIC

### **Panel:**

- Andy Jolliffe, Communications Officer, East Suffolk Council (Field to Fork)
- Lynsey Wilson, Director of Land Based Industries and Culinary Arts, Suffolk Rural College
- Shan Buss, Education Manager, Suffolk Agricultural Association
- Toby Greenhalgh, Farm Supervisor, Suffolk Rural College

Gaina began the session by asking the panelists to introduce their work, providing an overview of **what's currently going on in Suffolk.**

### Suffolk Agricultural Association (SAA)

Shan spoke about Suffolk Agricultural Association (SAA), which is best known for the Suffolk Show, but it also runs events all year round. Their core purpose is to be a force for good and central to all matters food, farming and countryside. They use members to share information and as volunteers at most events. Education is a core purpose - facilitating learning in schools, organising farmers to connect with secondary schools and other young people. They also work on farmer education.

*“Our aim is to not just teach them where their food comes from, but to hopefully inspire the younger generation to consider a career in food and farming as well”*

They run a range of events and a lot is focused around primary schools. [School Farm and Country Fair](#), hosted in April at Trinity Park, brings in around 4000 primary school children. A mini Suffolk Show.

Secondary schools have the [Food and Farming Student Day](#) - 400 secondary school students have the opportunity to be on a working farm. The Farm4Future Day at the Suffolk Show is another chance to go around different zones (production, machinery, marketing, environment).

### East Suffolk Field to Fork

Andy introduced Field to Fork which has been running for 2.5 years in East Suffolk. It emerged as part of the Ease the Squeeze Campaign during the start the cost of living crisis and aims to:

- 1) Increase the number of food produce produced locally, and
- 2) Increase the number of people that are growing locally, regardless of scale.

They do this through:

- 1) **Grants** up to £2,000 provided to community gardens , allotments, village halls, schools. £32000 has been distributed over three rounds.

- 2) **Starter kits**

The kits contain everything that you need to grow your own, from a recycled plastic planter, seeds, etc. and can be grown on a windowsill. They are typically distributed through primary schools in the most income deprived parts of the district.

Last year, 1,700 kits were distributed. Over the last two rounds, about 10,000 people across the district have now got access to one of their kits.

Andy mentioned how the programme is not just providing these kits to young families, but trying to get them involved in the production and the design of the kits as well. For example, Kesgrave High School is running a design competition for the art work on the kit. This year, they also started working with the Royal Horticultural Society and their education team to make some additional resources.

### Suffolk Rural College

Toby shared that his focus is on teaching students about the basics of agriculture, highlighting production, but also showcasing sustainability. He is not from a farming background and therefore, understands how to enter the farming sector. He mentioned a farmers meeting a few weeks ago where they discussed where the next generation of farmers are going to come from. There are not many people applying for jobs on farms at the moment.

Lynsey provided some more context on Suffolk Rural College. It was previously Otley college and when it became Suffolk Rural, they wanted to put agriculture back on the map and attract people from non-farming backgrounds. She added that they are also trying to focus on females coming through into the sector as it can be quite a male orientated/dominant industry.

A lot of their courses are one or two year courses and range from levels one to three, which allows them to move into employment or higher education. But when they ask local employers what young people need to work for them, the answer is often experience and tickets. Suffolk Rural provides experience in a safe environment on the college farm and farm shop. Learners need a minimum of 150 hours experience which can be achieved through volunteering. Some students have completed over 700 hours volunteering which has also really helped farmers, who might not be able to take an extra person on. At the same time, it helps young people gain a big experience, something for their CV, and a reference point for them to move into the sector.

She added that they receive support from local agricultural trusts, which have been funding industry tickets for the past few years. As a result, learners graduate with qualifications for operating machinery like telehandlers and tractors, equipping them with practical skills that enhance their employability.

She also mentioned that their learner chefs come out to the farm, work with a farm supervisor and understand everything about the animals: how they are treated, how they are looked after, how they are fed, what that means, who the vet is, about the local abattoir, among other things. They opened a [farm shop](#) last November which is open to the public three afternoons a week.

Lynsey highlighted the [Rising Star Scholarship Award](#) for those age 19-30 which recognises someone who is supporting the industry and sharing their passion, despite being early in their career. Shan contributed that SAA supports [Agriculture Apprenticeship of the Year and Allied Agriculture Apprenticeship of the Year](#). Both recognise people that are working in the industry and at the start of their career, really trying to support those that are making those first steps.

Gaina enquired about **choice of primary schools over secondary schools.**

Andy shared that he chose them initially for the ease of distribution. It guaranteed a pick up and drop off point with a captive audience, which allows them to target hyper local areas (most areas have a primary school). For example, Kyson Primary School in Woodbridge, a town which otherwise does not have much income deprivation.

*“Primary is the heart of the community so you can reach the wider community as well”*

- Gaina

Gaina said that primaries are perhaps easier to work with, with a bigger take-up. Teenagers are a bit more reluctant so more support is needed to engage with secondary schools.

Shan added that it can be difficult to get secondary schools to come to farms around their lessons and exams. So they have to start these conversations really early.

### **LEAF Study on Young People’s Perceptions on the Agri-Food Industry**

Gaina shared that in a previous role, they did a widespread study of why is it that young people are not going into agriculture and farming as a profession. The study had three phases (read it [here](#)).

The recommendations on the basis of research was that students really wanted to get more involved (refer to slides). They wanted more opportunities to get out on the farm, have a go at growing, maybe in the school ground or outside of the school. And those sort of practical opportunities just aren't really there. They're expensive, they take a lot of staffing, organisations, teachers. Its asking a lot of teachers to organise that. Perhaps, external organisations need to be paid to help the teachers do that. But the students really wanted more experiences so they can decide for themselves whether it's something they want to go into.

Gaina highlighted that school teachers don’t know how much about agriculture, yet it is those high school teachers who reach and get the best audience. The Food Tech GCSE, now has a section called food provenance, but more training is needed because the teachers don't necessarily know the difference between organic and non-organic food. She mentioned an online site, [Countryside Classroom](#), which has primary and secondary free downloadable resources.

Gaina said that more work is needed on making farming more inclusive. Yet it is hard for farming-related professionals or course tutors to get in with careers advisers at high schools. Students are therefore unaware of the farming career opportunities open to them - we need more accessible careers booklets for students regarding farming opportunities and salaries to help them with their career choices.

Gaina also highlighted a lack of understanding about sustainability. When asked to rank sausages in terms of sustainability, all students looked at was the packaging. There was an incredible trust as well that the government and the supermarkets are doing the right thing.

### **Which challenge does your work address?**

Andy felt that Field to Fork was addressing the need for practical experiences. The starter kits provided in the first year, which would cost around £40 if purchased from a garden centre, offer an accessible way for people to start growing at home. The goal is to provide an initial experience that encourages participants to explore allotments and community gardens, fostering a deeper interest in gardening and food production.

*“The feedback is that people want more. There’s no obligation, see what you can do. We make it as simple as possible. Even the seeds and plants that we choose are the ones that germinate very quickly.”*

Shan said that SAA works on the first one as well, especially with their Food and Farming Student Day.

Lynsey mentioned that their focus is on inclusivity. *“We're just trying to include everybody, so anyone can come into farming, anyone can pursue this.”*

She said that hopefully they pick up the interest at the younger age groups. When they come to college, learners will be on a programme with mixed experiences - some can already drive a tractor, some can't. So rather than trying to separate them out, they pair them up, and encourage them to teach and support each other.

They also run a lot of events on at the college - a [Spring Day](#) where the public come on to the farm to look at lambing, and an Open Day too.

Lynsey mentioned a fantastic example: *“We have a young lad who spent two years with us. He's now got his own contracting business in Suffolk, and he was in Farms Weekly. And it's just amazing, you know, they are the stories that we want to show. That you can stay local, keep the skills local, and then that will come back into the system.”*

### **What is your greatest challenge?**

Andy mentioned that engaging with schools can be challenging, as schools often require everything to be organised for them. To overcome this, his project removes as many barriers as possible by coordinating all logistics. They work with the school to schedule the visit and handle everything from registration to loading, packing, and delivery.

Shan brought up funding – organisations involved rely on a lot on funding and hence, spend a lot of time looking for and applying for funding.

Lynsey struggles with the information, advice and guidance that's given out at schools. You wouldn't hear someone generally say, “have you thought about agriculture”?

Gaina highlighted the misconception that farming is a low-skilled job, with some believing that young people facing challenges can easily get a job or work experience in agriculture. Toby contributed how math was his favourite subject at school and showcased how many calculations go into farming.

### **What can we ask from teachers?**

Andy responded that all he would ask from the teachers of the schools, colleges and careers advisor is to take a moment to consider the resource that's provided to them.

Shan shared that they face difficulties in showcasing the wide range of careers available in agriculture. Despite offering workshops on technology and various career paths, she feels that career advisors do not fully recognise or promote these opportunities.

*“It's only as a team that we're able to change that and work together to kind of convey the different opportunities there are in agriculture. So I think it is just putting their eyes on the opportunities that are out there.”*

### **Do we get farmers to make food and farming more interesting? If farmers are growing for nature, or talking about a gut farm, to attract our young people?**

Gaina discussed making farming visually appealing to Gen Zs. She mentioned how young people have a strong food culture; they care for the environment; go out for meals; they Instagram and Snapchat their food.

Lynsey emphasised the importance of relatable content. Toby oversees their Instagram page, and will publish the interesting tasks happening on the farm, and the young people actually doing the task.

Shan shared that she didn't think that farming needs to be more interesting than it already is.

She asked: *"Now, did a farmer go into farming because they're great at marketing? Probably not. They went into farming because they're great with the land, they're great with livestock. So how can we expect farmers, who've got real passion for what they do, to be great at marketing, to be great at social media?"*

Her opinion was that farmers don't need to be better at social media. Instead, they need to be able recognise the opportunity when someone who is passionate about food and social media wants to come in and work with them and use their skills.

*"I think farming is interesting. We don't need to change it, but perhaps inviting other people into the industry with the skills who are able to help create this culture around young people and the food that they're eating."*

Gaina rephrased the question and opened it to the room, she mentioned how arable farming isn't relatable as goes for animal feed. **So should there be vegetable production in a market garden, for example, in each farm? Should there be more forestry or hemp production? So should there be more diversity on farms to bring more interest in?**

A point was raised about the cost for farmers. They need profits to keep themselves going, and that level of diversification can be a big leap of faith. It was mentioned that there's a bigger role in government to encourage that - certain professions like the police, the army, teaching, social care often see marketing pushes for recruitment.

Another comment discussed that to generate interest among young people into farming, they need to understand what it would actually to follow that career path. What does being a farmer mean? How do we demystify and how to actually explain this is what farmers do, this is what goes on on farms, this is how food is produced.

One suggestion was to showcase some examples of good practices and bring some human stories of those farmers to the fore.

It was mentioned that working alongside academy trusts can ease the difficulties of engaging with schools. Because if you get the academy trust to buy in to a principle, you are then embedded within the Trust as opposed to an individual teacher.

An audience member brought up the home education community. She mentioned how the home-ed community is growing, as that becomes a viable option for families. Shan mentioned that the School and Farm County Fair and the Food and Farm Student day are open to thirty home-ed students. She suggested that sometimes it might be better to explore online networks. Gaina also advised building a relationship with your local farm. She mentioned that there is a push for a permanent, salaried person in every district with the responsibility of connecting and building relationships between primary, secondary and farms.

There was also mention about the lack of work experience opportunities at farms. Shan mentioned the [Tractors in Schools](#) project under development, which connects local farmers to a school and they take their tractor in. She explained how there is so much nervousness about opening your farm up, unless you do it regularly.

Related to that was the difficulty of finding job opportunities. Where does one look, and how do we channel people into these fields?

There's a missing link between the work done by the panellists and the real people working on the land: the government support to connect the dots and bridge that gap.

It was shared that the new government's shift towards prioritising experiential learning and work experience is something to look forward to. There is a need to align with this change of curriculum to match the opportunities for work experience. There was a comment that colleges also need to know what employers want.

**Action for community / partnership:** We need to work with college advisors, courses etc., to portray different farming linked opportunities in agriculture. It is easier for learners to see farms and courses first hand rather than have a leaflet.