



Rethinking Food in Wales

Soil Association written evidence to the Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee of the National Assembly for Wales, September 2017

Introduction

1. The Soil Association welcomes the opportunity to submit written evidence to this inquiry and would be pleased to provide any further information.
2. The Soil Association was formed by a group of farmers, scientists, doctors and nutritionists in 1946, to pioneer a world where we can live in health and in harmony with nature. Through our trading subsidiary, Soil Association Certification, we work with over 6,000 businesses including farmers, growers, foresters, caterers, processors and manufacturers. We collaborate with organic and non-organic farmers to innovate and implement practical solutions that create a better future for people, farm animals, and the natural world.
3. We have focussed our comments on what the Welsh Government should do to ensure a healthy and sustainable food system for the Welsh public that maintains and enhances the environment and benefits human health. Our position is that these goals would be best delivered through the expansion of organic production systems, including improved animal welfare, and improved public procurement.

What is your vision for the future of food in Wales and what needs to be done to achieve it?

Healthy ecosystems and organic food production

4. The Soil Association would like to see an increased emphasis on climate-sensitive and environmentally-sustainable farming in Wales. The challenges to creating an environmentally-sustainable food system are monumental, and topping them is climate change. In signing the [Paris climate change agreement](#), the UK has pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by [80% by 2050](#). The Welsh agricultural sector accounts for [13%](#) of Welsh emissions. To meet the climate targets for the future and to support climate change mitigation efforts, Welsh farmers are going to have to act to reduce their emissions. This focus is echoed by the [Committee on Climate Change](#) that has called for stronger focus on reducing emissions on agriculture over the next 5 year period.
5. When considering the future of food in Wales, we would like to see stronger recognition of the role that organic can play. Evidence for the environmental, animal welfare, economic and social benefits of organic farming continues to grow. Recent reviews and meta-studies find that organic farms deliver:
 - More wildlife and biodiversity - [50%](#) more abundant wildlife, with a third more species on average, including almost [50%](#) more pollinator species and [75%](#) more plant species.
 - Healthy soils and carbon storage - organic soils sequester up to 450kg more carbon per hectare than non-organic farms, and soil organic carbon stocks [are up to 3.5 tonnes higher](#) per hectare than nonorganic farms.
 - Protection against flooding - Healthy soil reduces the risk of floods and droughts by storing as much as [3,750 tonnes of water per hectare](#), the equivalent of one and a half Olympic swimming pools.

- Clean water - [35-65%](#) less nitrogen leached from arable fields.
 - [Significantly lower](#) pesticide use.
 - [Significantly lower](#) use of antibiotics.
 - [More jobs](#), including younger people and new entrants to the farming industry.
 - Food security - modelling by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) concluded organic farming can [play a major part](#) in increasing global food security.
6. There is nothing to stop other farmers using the same methods, and more and more are taking up organic techniques to improve their soils and tackle problem weeds. In practice, however, it organic farmers are independently assessed and certified and consequently, are obliged to adopt a whole system of ecological practices that reliably deliver such benefits.

Growing the organic market in Wales

7. British consumers are demanding more organic produce, with the UK organic food and drink market seeing four years of successive growth. Welsh farmers can increase their share of the UK market. With organic farmland acreage stagnant, much of this [growth is being met by imports](#), particularly of raw materials for animal feed. Welsh farmers could help to meet this growing demand.
8. Experience from elsewhere shows lessons that Wales could embrace. When calculated in 2010, [8%](#) of farmland in the Wales was managed organically. In some other countries, organic farming has reached a tipping point, where organic food directly accounts for up to a fifth of production. According to IFOAM EU's [data-set](#), the share of land farmed organically in Austria is over 21%, Sweden 16.9%, Switzerland 13% and Italy 11%. The success of organic farming in other countries has helped to unlock wider support for organic. It has gone hand-in-hand with more support for innovation in nature-friendly methods, sometimes tighter regulation of pesticides and antibiotics in farming, and more progressive public procurement.
9. In the past, the Welsh Government has been strongly supportive of organic farming. The support has helped develop world-class organic businesses that supply both domestic and export markets and has helped the overall organic market to grow (over [7% UK-wide growth](#) in 2016 for a total of [£2.09billion](#)). It is therefore particularly disappointing to note Welsh Government's recent decision not to commit to any further organic conversion assistance during the present rural development programme. This decision makes it unique amongst the devolved nations of the UK, such as in Scotland that has made a firm commitment to organic. As Wales and the rest of the UK considers the future of agricultural policy after we leave the European Union, such differences will need to be addressed so as to create an equal playing field. If Welsh businesses are to meet the demand for organic food, it is incumbent on Welsh Government to provide the necessary support.
10. To help grow the level of organic and sustainable food in Wales, the Welsh Government should revise and update the Organic Action Plan for Wales, which was [originally published in 1999](#). This revised Action Plan could be similar to the one that the [Scottish Government launched in 2016](#), which was co-produced with the organic sector and with funding to support implementation. The Soil Association would recommend this this revised Organic Action Plan should include the following policies:

- Expand organic promotion and marketing with the government committing to raising the profile of high quality, Welsh produce both domestically and globally.
- Specific support for Welsh organic farmers for conversion and maintenance
- Integrated supports for Welsh organic farmers to help maintain standards
- Better public procurement should promote organic, seasonal and nutritious food

Animal Welfare

11. Wales should also aim to become a world leader in animal welfare standards. Farm animals should live a very good life, in settings where they can act on their instincts to care for their young, graze, root, peck and play. However, the majority of pigs, chickens and increasingly, dairy cows, live all of their lives indoors in cramped and dull environments. Even if their health is assured, they have no opportunity to fulfil their instincts by caring for their young, scratching around outside, or playing in the sun.
12. We can do better than this. The Welsh government should support the development of a rigorous framework that scores farms, supply chains and assurance schemes against the criteria set out by the Farm Animal Welfare Council's Five Freedoms:
 - Freedom from hunger and thirst
 - Freedom from discomfort
 - Freedom from pain, injury or disease
 - Freedom to express normal behaviour
 - Freedom from fear and distress

Improving Public Procurement

13. The UK public sector serves some [3.5 million meals each weekday](#) across settings as varied as schools, nurseries, care homes, hospitals and prisons. In total, it spends [£2.4 billion each year](#) procuring food and catering services. While this accounts for little [over 1%](#) of the total food retail and catering market, its influence is significant. Food in schools and public institutions sets norms for the public and consumers, signals values, and gives integrity to government priorities and policies. Making the most of public procurement could be game-changing.
14. Wales could improve the health and food habits of the next generation by further upping ambitions for school food, including by encouraging schools to work towards achieving the Food for Life School Awards. It could also help drive demand for food that meets the highest standards, helping to achieve economies of scale in processing and lowering consumer prices.
15. The past decade has already seen progress. After a succession of public procurement initiatives, Defra has recently introduced a Balanced Scorecard in England. This allows caterers to balance straightforward criteria, such as cost, against more complex criteria, such as health and wellbeing, resource efficiency and quality of service.
16. Soil Association's Food for Life Served Here standards covers [1.7 million meals](#) a day. Membership of the scheme provides caterers with independently verified evidence of their achievements and incorporates a wide range of product assurance schemes including Red Tractor and other farm assurance schemes – Fairtrade, LEAF Marque, Marine Stewardship Council, RSPCA Assured, and Organic. [One million](#) of the meals are at the scheme's Silver and

Gold level, with significant spend on food produced to higher environmental and welfare standards. Food for Life Served Here has already been achieved by:

- Aberystwyth University for three restaurants
- Cardiff University for three student/staff restaurants
- University of South Wales (listed as University of Glamorgan for Stilts Food Court and University of Wales, Newport for a cafe on the Caerleon Campus)
- University of Swansea for two food halls
- Eden Foodservice – for 48 schools in Anglesey

17. One factor limiting further improvement is the higher cost of sourcing higher quality ingredients. However, this can be counterbalanced by re-formulating the menu. [71%](#) of public sector institutions meeting Food for Life Served Here criteria report that implementing the scheme's sustainability criteria was [cost neutral](#) and [29%](#) report overall cost savings. Research by the New Economics Foundation demonstrated [£3 in social return for every £1 invested](#) in Food for Life, with most of the benefit experienced by local businesses and local employers.

18. The Welsh Government should adopt Food for Life Served Here in its own catering service and should promote uptake of the standards throughout the public, private and third sectors. All public procurement decisions should place a weighting of at least 60% on quality, with price not to exceed a 40% weighting. The relative weightings given to price and quality in public sector catering tenders have a big impact on the quality of food provision and the benefits to farmers. In recent years, as local authorities seek to make challenging budget cuts, there has been a worrying shift towards tenders giving 60-80% weighting to price, effectively ensuring that the cheapest bid wins. Safeguarding a 60% minimum quality weighting will incentivise a 'race to the top', with benefits for consumers, farmers and food business.

Conclusion

19. There are no quick-fixes to tackle the many significant and urgent challenges we face within our food system. To meet the demands of the future, we must adopt a holistic landscape approach to food and farming in Wales and transition to a more sustainable vision of agriculture, including organic. If implemented effectively and at scale – with the full support and conviction of government – these proposals have the potential to positively impact the future of food, farming in Wales. While significant, we know that the scale of change required is both achievable and necessary. By integrating these policy recommendations into a holistic vision of food, farming and land use in Wales, we can create a system that better addresses the needs of Welsh farmers, consumers and citizens today and into the future.