



Department  
for Environment  
Food & Rural Affairs

Seacole Building  
2 Marsham Street  
London SW1P 4DF

T 03459 335577  
[defra.helpline@defra.gov.uk](mailto:defra.helpline@defra.gov.uk)  
[www.gov.uk/defra](http://www.gov.uk/defra)

June 2022

**From Tamara Finkelstein CB**  
Permanent Secretary

**To Dame Meg Hillier MP**  
Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts

ELM PAC: Follow up to the response to Recommendations 1, 3 and 5.

Dear Dame Hillier,

I am writing in response to your letter of 16 May and previous correspondence about some of the recommendations in the Committee's report into Defra's Environmental Land Management schemes, published on 9 January 2022.

I agree that our success is very much dependent on how our future farming offer lands with farmers and land managers alike. We are working across the sector to build trust and ensure clarity and understanding about what will be on offer and what it means for farmers so that they can plan ahead. We will be publishing more details this year on the design of the Local Nature Recovery scheme and the further rollout of the Sustainable Farming Incentive scheme which will help provide more clarity and certainty for farmers.

Your understanding of the rhythm for the farmer opinion tracker is correct; the last survey opened at the end of October 2021 and ran until December with results published in February this year. The current opinion tracker is 'live' and will remain open for six weeks from opening in April, to allow farmers time to respond. The provisional date for publication, which follows a further six weeks of analysis, is pre-announced for July 2022. The exact date will be finalised and announced online at least four weeks ahead of publication. We will consider the implications for the Programme once this new data is available and can provide further comparison and assessment.

Meanwhile, we are continuing to engage with farmers both directly and through trusted intermediaries, and we will be communicating extensively with them about the first iteration of the Sustainable Farming Incentive once it is launched next month.

Building trust and engagement is a long-term mission and we do not expect to see immediate results coming through these surveys, particularly not before we start rolling out our new schemes at scale and farmers are able to see that we have genuinely made things work better for them. However, we should see positive results over the duration of the programme, and particularly in the third phase of delivery, when we have built and launched our new schemes and are ready to transition them into BAU operations.

Alongside the survey results, we also look at scheme take-up rates – we have seen a 40% increase in applications for Countryside Stewardship agreements from 2021 to 2022, and our first productivity scheme was significantly over-subscribed. We are taking these as indicators that farmers are keen to engage and take up the schemes that are on offer.

We also monitor how farming businesses are changing as an indicator of likely success of the Transition. Consistently across the surveys, we see an increase in the numbers noting that they need to make changes over the next 5 years, which is clear recognition that information on what changes might be needed are being heard.

Turning to the specific survey responses that you have drawn out in your letter:

- *Farmers on 61% of holdings said that they either fully (7%) or roughly (54%) understand Defra's vision for farming, down from 67% in April 2021.*

The results from this question have been broadly consistent over the last 4 years so we are not concerned at this stage about this reduction from one survey to the next, but we will monitor this in the next survey and respond accordingly. Meanwhile we are about to embark on a period of extensive engagement and communications over the summer period and will take the opportunity to ensure that we are clear about our vision and how the package of farming reforms will support farm businesses, food production and environment, climate and animal health and welfare outcomes.

The free text comments suggest that some of the recent decrease may be due to wider uncertainty around the operating environment for farmers, some of which will be addressed through other Defra and wider government policies such as trade policies and the national food strategy.

- *Farmers on only 37% of holdings think they have all or most of the information they need to inform business planning, down from 40% in April 2021.*

We are continuing to work to make sure farmers have access to all the information they need, including directly communicating with farmers and working with trusted intermediaries to enable them to disseminate accurate and comprehensive information.

We are cautious about reading too much into small changes between single surveys as the confidence intervals presented do not imply robust statistical significance. Whilst this indicator fell slightly in the most recent survey, the results are still improved since the earlier surveys; up from 27% in September 2019 and from 30% in October 2020. We also consider secondary indicator questions which show that more farmers know where to find the information (increased from 19% to 24% between April and October 2021) and fewer responders stating that they do not have the information and do not know where to find it (reducing with each survey from 40% in 2019 to 30% in October 2021). We also recognise that more information was announced about our replacement farming offers in early December and early January; the latter coming after the survey closed.

- *Farmers on over two thirds of holdings (68%) are not at all confident that changes to schemes and regulations will lead to a successful future for farming. 66% are not at all confident about Defra and its agencies' ability to work together to deliver changes to schemes and regulations.*

I am confident we are doing the right things in the right ways to shift the dial on this indicator over time but would not expect that to happen at this early stage in the agricultural transition, before we have started rolling out new schemes.

These two questions were new for the October 2021 survey so we do not have any comparable data yet; they were included so we can get an understanding of a baseline of change. However, we know that we are starting from a low base given historical issues with delivering new schemes and systems, and with making timely payments.

We have carried out significant work to simplify schemes and improve operational delivery in recent years, and we have carefully reviewed the lessons learned from past failures and worked hard to ensure we are putting in place the right partnership working between Defra and its delivery partners. Farmers will only really see the benefits of this work when we launch our new schemes successfully, which we are starting to do in earnest this year. It will then take time for farmers to see and believe that the changes and improvements we have made will be real and sustained.

We will keep this indicator under review and meanwhile continue our efforts to make real, demonstrable improvements.

- *Just under half of farmers on all holdings (45%) feel positive about their future in farming (7% very positive; 38% somewhat positive).*

We do recognise well-publicised pressures on some farming sectors, which are reflected in these results.

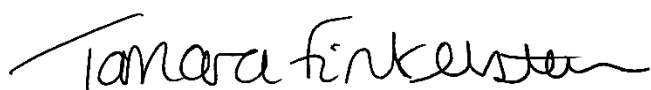
We can look to the open text feedback for context, with many referring to other external pressures not directly related to the policy and scheme changes within the Agricultural Transition. These included farmers feeling they are being blamed for climate change (the survey was live during COP26), rising input costs and, particularly of note given the press coverage during the period the survey was 'live', uncertainties over future trading arrangements at the point the survey was conducted.

For an understanding about confidence in the future of farming we also look at information about the sorts of changes farmers are making. What is notable is that between the April and October surveys more respondents were looking to stay in farming and make 'positive' changes i.e., growing their businesses, diversifying, increasing productivity, and fewer respondents were looking to make 'negative' changes i.e., reducing the business or leaving farming.

We think the agricultural transition is an opportunity to foster a more positive public perception of farming, with greater awareness of the vital role farmers play in producing our food and protecting and enhancing our countryside. We are working with partners to bring about that change, and to provide a positive path forward for farmers through this period of change.

I hope this provides the information and assurance you need and look forward to continuing to engage with you and the Committee as we progress through the transition.

Yours sincerely,



**TAMARA FINKELSTEIN**  
**Permanent Secretary**