

Shaping Policy for Systemic Change

Farming doesn't change in a vacuum. It changes when the rules, incentives, and public investment around it change.

For decades, agricultural policy in the UK has favoured scale, chemicals, cheap food and globalised supply chains. It has locked farmers into systems that degrade soil, nature and livelihoods.

Agroecological farming offers a proven alternative, but without supportive policy it remains marginal and underfunded.

Taken together, our funded policy work is not about isolated policy wins. It is about transforming the conditions that shape farming.

Since 2019, Farming the Future's pooled fund has focused on shifting the structures that shape farming itself. What began as work to protect environmental and food standards in the post-Brexit transition has expanded into a broader effort: influencing who has a voice in decision-making, who can access land and finance, and what the system chooses to reward.



WHO IS SHAPING POLICY?

Agricultural policy has long been shaped by a narrow set of actors, despite its far-reaching impacts on climate, nature, livelihoods and public health. For agroecological transition to be credible and lasting, policymaking must widen, giving meaningful influence to those who grow food, work the land and organise in communities.

Through our pooled fund, we have supported collaborations that strengthen these voices and expand participation in changing the food system. The projects highlighted here represent a selection of work broadening who shapes post-Brexit food and farming policy.



Young People

Young people will live longest with the consequences of today's policy choices, yet they are rarely central to their design.

Youth-led initiatives such as **Back the Future**, and collaboration between key organisations like Students Organising for Sustainability, National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs and FLAME, have created spaces for young people to upskill and engage directly in food and farming policy debates. This work led directly to the establishment of the **UK Youth Food and Farming Forum**, their vision can be found [here](#).

Through collective learning, advocacy and alliance-building, young people continue to bring climate justice, intergenerational fairness and systemic reform more firmly into agricultural policy conversations.



Minoritised Voices

Structural inequality continues to shape who can access land, capital, public funding and leadership both within UK agriculture and within the agroecological movement, with direct implications for whose interests are reflected in policy design and implementation.

The collaboration behind **Jumping Fences** exposed the systemic barriers faced by Black People and People of Colour entering farming, shifting the conversation about land access from individual disadvantage to structural exclusion. They have since informed subsequent initiatives, such as **Landmatch England**, influencing how land matching services and new entrant support mechanisms address inequity. Our focus has been on identifying inequalities and broadening participation within the agroecological movement itself, with the expectation that a more inclusive movement will carry those values into the policy spaces it increasingly enters.

At the same time, a **partnership investigating migrant land-workers rights**, highlighted how supply-chain pressures, labour regulation and subsidy frameworks intersect. By connecting working conditions to trade and agricultural policy, this work has broadened understanding of what a fair and sustainable food system must include.

Civil Society

As the UK rewrote key food and farming regulations after Brexit, decisions on gene editing and pesticide use risked being driven forward with limited public scrutiny and a narrow technical framing. We supported civil society organisations to re-engage, coordinate and build stronger coalitions capable of articulating systems-based alternatives rooted in agroecology.

Policy recommendations on gene editing were developed to protect agroecology from being absorbed into a "sustainable intensification" model, while strategic planning strengthened efforts to reduce pesticide dependency and related harms.. The **Food Issues Census**, surveying 130 food and farming organisations, mapped the sector's capacity and constraints, providing a clearer picture of the infrastructure underpinning civil society engagement in policymaking.



Farmers & Land Workers

Farmers, particularly those practising agroecology, are often underrepresented in national policy processes. Collaborations like **Making Voices Heard**, enabled farmers and growers to contribute directly to post-Brexit debates on farm support, trade standards and food strategy. **We Feed the World**, strengthened connections between UK advocacy and small-scale farmers globally, reinforcing agroecology and seed sovereignty as viable approaches.

The establishment of the **UK Fruit and Vegetable Coalition** has further aligned organisations across the four nations, positioning domestic agroecological fruit and vegetable production as central to food security, climate resilience and rural livelihoods.



The Agroecology & Food Sovereignty Movements

For agroecology to influence policy at scale, it must be organised, evidence-based and united. Through the **Agroecology Working Group**, the **Agroecology Comms Network** and the **Agroecology Research Partnership**, research, case studies and practitioner insight have been brought together to support agriculture and planning ministries in developing schemes capable of scaling up grassroots agroecological farming.

This collective infrastructure has strengthened agroecology's credibility within formal policy spaces.



UNLOCKING LAND FOR AGROECOLOGY

Land is fundamental to the transition to agroecology, yet it remains one of the greatest structural barriers. High prices, insecure tenancies, planning constraints and the loss of public land have made it increasingly difficult for new entrants and small-scale growers to establish viable agroecological farms.

Without reforming how land is governed, valued, and allocated, ambitions for climate resilience, biodiversity recovery and local food systems cannot be delivered at scale.

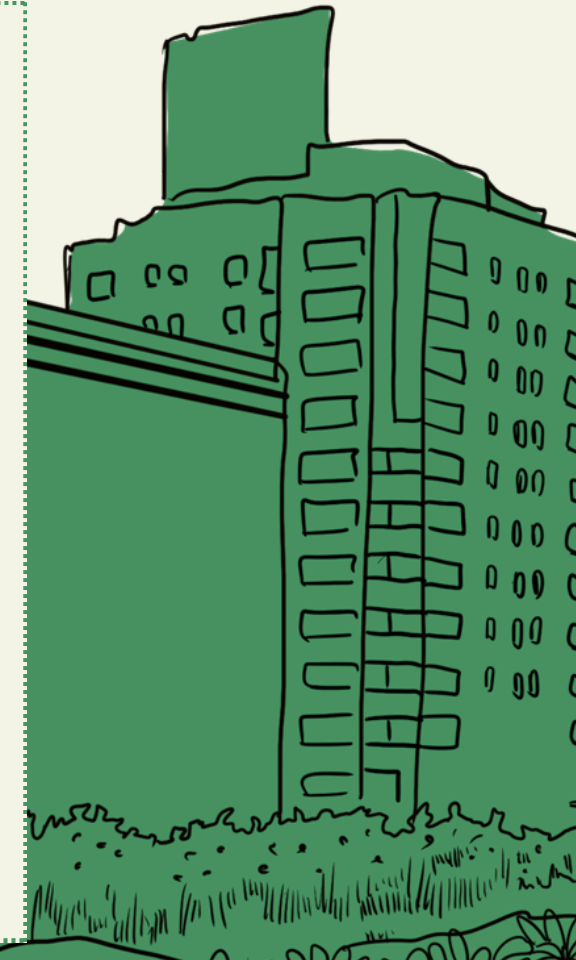
Embedding Agroecology in Land-Use Policy

Unlocking land is not only about who owns it, but how it is governed and supported.

In 2019, we funded a seven-organisation **Agroecology Working Group** led by the Landworkers' Alliance to work directly with agriculture and land-use planning ministries across England, Wales and Scotland. By bringing together research, case studies and farm visits, this partnership supported ministries to integrate agroecology into the design of new schemes and policy frameworks.

In parallel, we supported efforts to create a more enabling environment for agroforestry and farm woodland management. Led by the Soil Association in partnership with the Organic Research Centre, the Landworkers' Alliance and the Farm Woodland Forum, this work advocated for tree-rich farming systems to be recognised and properly supported within emerging agricultural payment schemes.

Together, these strands aimed to move agroecology from the margins of policy discussion into the core of land-use decision-making.



Opening the Urban Fringe

Access barriers are often highest at the edges of towns and cities, precisely where small-scale, labour-intensive agroecological farms can reconnect communities to food production.

Through funding a **Fringe Farming** collaboration led by Sustain, we supported practical pilots to demonstrate *how* public land could be opened up for peri-urban food growing. By combining on-the-ground experimentation with policy advocacy, the project showed local and national decision-makers what was possible and what needed to change to make it viable at scale.

This work positioned peri-urban agriculture as a strategic response to food insecurity, climate resilience and green job creation, not an afterthought.



Reimagining Public Land

Publicly owned farmland holds enormous untapped potential. Yet for years, council farm estates have too often been treated as assets to sell rather than as strategic tools for delivering public benefit.

Through **'County Farms: Public Land for Public Good'** (2019), we funded work to shift this narrative. Partners revisited the evidence base and highlighted councils already using their farmland to:

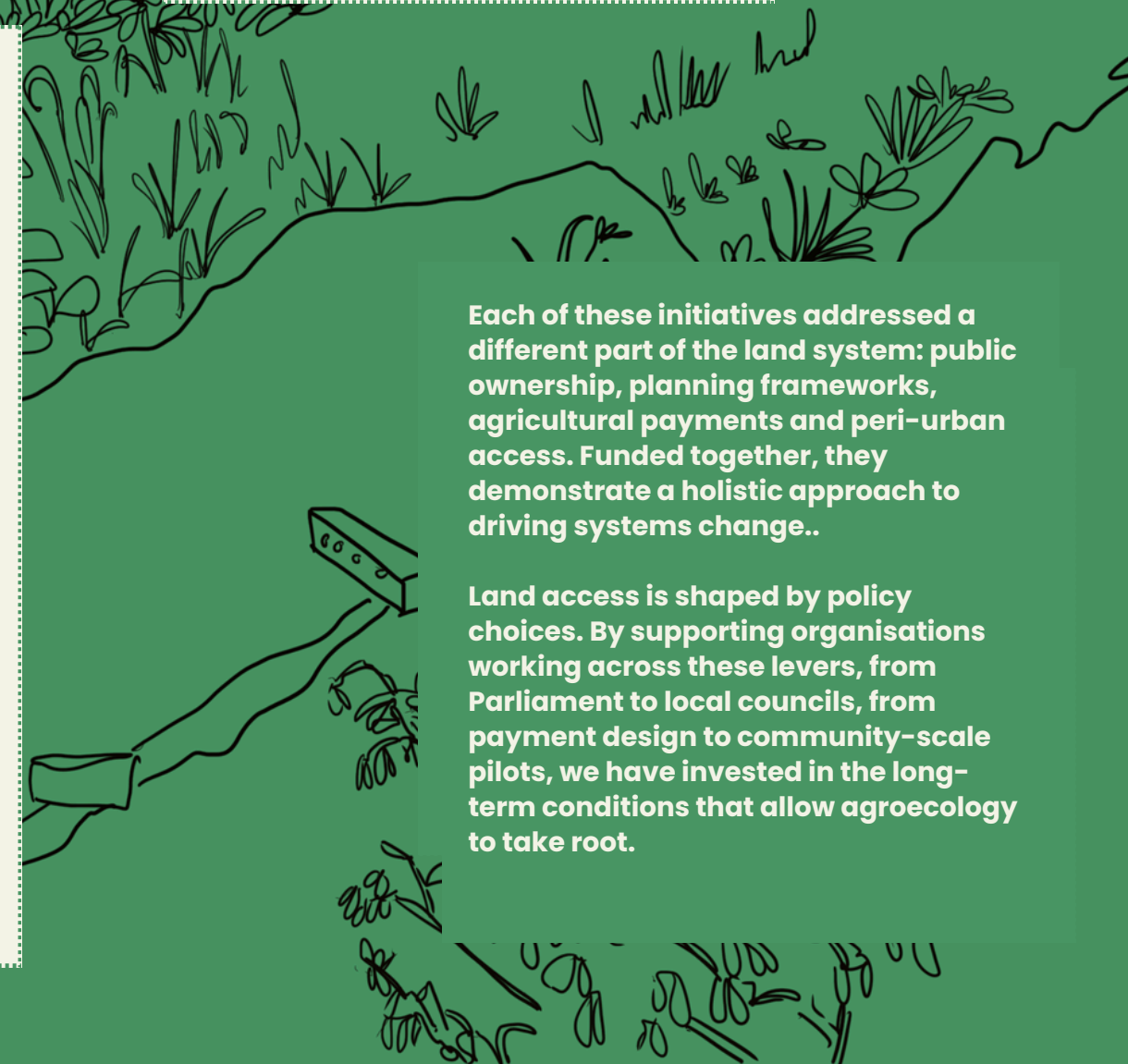
- Lock up carbon
- Restore nature
- Expand public access and
- Create opportunities for new entrants.

At the same time, they explored alternative public and community ownership models — drawing lessons from the UK and internationally — and worked collaboratively with councils to test how these models might operate at scale.

As the Agriculture Bill passed through Parliament, this work helped ensure that council farms were debated as part of the future of farming policy. Public land began to be reframed as a lever for climate action, generational renewal and long-term public value.

Each of these initiatives addressed a different part of the land system: public ownership, planning frameworks, agricultural payments and peri-urban access. Funded together, they demonstrate a holistic approach to driving systems change..

Land access is shaped by policy choices. By supporting organisations working across these levers, from Parliament to local councils, from payment design to community-scale pilots, we have invested in the long-term conditions that allow agroecology to take root.



PROTECTING STANDARDS IN A CHANGING POLICY LANDSCAPE

The post-Brexit period created a profound moment of regulatory change. As agricultural, environmental and trade frameworks were rewritten, there was significant risk that food and farming standards would be weakened in the name of competitiveness or trade flexibility.

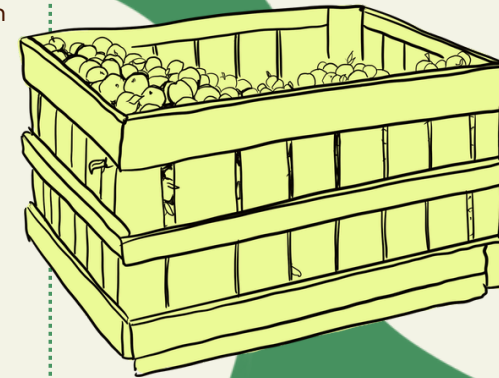
Decisions taken during this period would shape the trajectory of UK agriculture for decades. Across this shifting landscape, efforts focused on ensuring that environmental integrity, public health and agroecological principles were not eroded during reform – and where possible, were strengthened.



Trade, Feed and Supply Chains

Standards are shaped not only by domestic regulation but by global supply chains. **The Soy No More** report highlighted the UK's dependence on imported soy linked to deforestation, connecting trade policy, livestock production and environmental harm. By setting out practical policy steps to support home-grown, sustainable feed alternatives, the report helped shift the debate from exposure of risk to identifying viable solutions.

At the same time, coalitions working through post-Brexit processes, including debates on the Agriculture Act, Environmental Land Management schemes and the National Food Strategy, helped embed soil health, agroecology and fair supply chains more firmly within emerging legislation and policy design.



Safeguarding Environmental and Pesticide Standards

As new trade agreements were negotiated, concerns grew that UK pesticide protections could be undermined by imports produced to lower standards. Coordinated work built on the momentum of **the Toxic Trade** report to expose these risks and propose concrete safeguards for future trade deals. At the same time, engagement with assurance schemes such as *Red Tractor* sought to strengthen pesticide and Integrated Pest Management standards within domestic supply chains, reducing harms to human health and the natural environment.

Together, these efforts sought to reinforce the principle that trade and competitiveness should not come at the expense of environmental and public health protections.

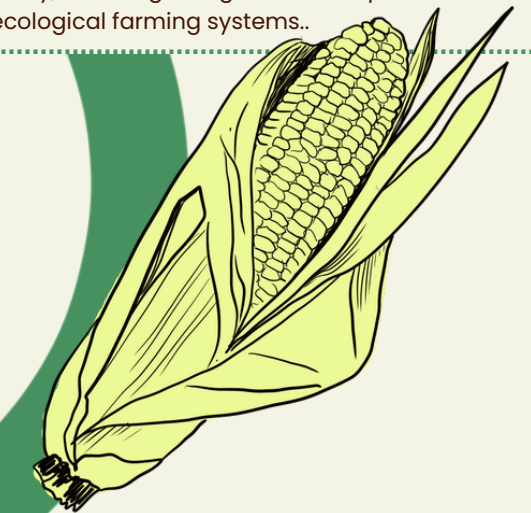


Genetic Modification and Regulatory Direction

Debate around genetic modification resurfaced as the UK government reconsidered regulation outside the EU framework. In 2019, we funded GM Freeze and Beyond GM to scrutinise proposals and raise concerns about the compatibility of gene editing with agroecological systems.

A concrete outcome was a [joint letter](#) from Beyond GM and Slow Food UK to major supermarkets, calling for strong regulation and a clear commitment not to stock unlabelled gene-edited foods. The letter rapidly gained support from over 50 organisations, including the Soil Association, Landworkers' Alliance, Green Christian, Students for Sustainability, and academics such as Professor Tim Lang, attracting social media and trade press attention.

This initiative helped ensure regulatory reform was treated as a question of farming policy and agricultural direction, rather than just a technical matter. As recent legislation moves England toward a more permissive regulatory framework for gene-edited crops, campaigners continue to advocate for transparency, meaningful regulation and protection for agroecological farming systems.



Moments of regulatory change create both risk and opportunity. After Brexit, sustained engagement ensured that environmental and food standards were not quietly diluted and that agroecological principles remained visible within major policy reforms.

Protecting standards was not simply a defensive move, it was about influencing the long-term direction of UK agriculture at a pivotal time.

CHANGING WHAT THE SYSTEM REWARDS

Farming systems respond to incentives. What is measured, subsidised, procured and financed ultimately shapes how land is managed and what food is produced. If agroecology is to move from the margins to the mainstream, the economic signals guiding the sector must change.

Through our pooled fund, we have challenged narrow measures of productivity and profitability, and on developing tools and policy proposals that recognise the full environmental and social value of agroecological farming.



Redirecting Public and Market Signals

Public procurement and subsidy systems play a powerful role in shaping demand. Eating Better's **Less and Better Meat** for Local Authorities proposition linked climate and ecological targets with clear procurement pathways, demonstrating how public bodies can support higher-welfare, agroecological production while reducing overall meat consumption.

In 2025, **the Local Food Growth Plan** has been funded involving three collaborative initiatives focused on infrastructure, procurement and policy. The aim is to strengthen routes to market for local food growers and accelerate the transition to resilient local food economies. Partners are building the case for DEFRA to show how local food can meet the Government's priorities of growth and lowering food prices, exploring how local supply chains can reduce inflationary pressure and engaging producers and farm clusters to ensure infrastructure meets regional needs.

Valuing What Matters

Conventional accounting frameworks rarely capture soil health, biodiversity, community benefit or public health outcomes. Work to evaluate the 'triple bottom line' of organisations such as **Growing Communities** (2019) demonstrated how economic, environmental and social value can be assessed together, strengthening the case for alternative food models. The development of practical valuation toolkits has helped extend this approach beyond individual enterprises, equipping networks of traders and distributors to articulate their wider public benefit in policy and market discussions

Financing the Transition

Access to land and finance remains a major constraint on agroecological growth. **Credit Where Due** highlighted how the post-Brexit transition created an opportunity to direct targeted investment toward nature-friendly farming, making the case that without dedicated financial mechanisms, agroecology would struggle to scale.

In Scotland, discussions around a basic income for farmers, driven by the **campaign group BI4F**, have explored how financial security could underpin climate action, rural resilience and agroecological transition.

These initiatives reflect a deeper shift: from rewarding volume and short-term output towards recognising resilience, ecological restoration and supporting livelihoods.

Changing what the system rewards is complex and contested work. But without reforming incentives, metrics and markets, even the strongest environmental standards and land policies will struggle to deliver lasting transformation.

