

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ON FARMS IN JERSEY

SETTING THE SCENE:

Whatever your preference, we all need food, therefore we all need farmers¹. Just over half of the land in Jersey is under cultivation with 12 commercial Jersey Royal farming businesses, 12 commercial dairy herds and around 40 other approved agricultural businesses operating in a diverse range of enterprises on the Island. All these businesses are working **incredibly hard** to provide us with nutritious food whilst facing many economic, political, social, and environmental challenges. The expectation of a farmer may seem clear – to produce food; however, the complexity and impact of the farmer's role on society and the environment should not be overlooked.

The Rural Support Scheme, which forms part of the Economic Framework for the Rural Environment in Jersey, rewards local businesses, whether they are small-holders or a large commercial farm (*bona fide* agriculturalists), using a points based 'rural credit' system to calculate support payments, rewarding them for providing a 'public good'. Public engagement on farms is an area that is becoming increasingly popular, and this is the 'public good' that this article is focused upon.

A diverse range of 17 farmers/agricultural businesses were interviewed to find out what public engagement is happening on their farms, what may be holding some of them back and to what extent it is valued.

WHY PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ON FARMS?

The feedback from farmers throughout the interview process was that in society there is a definite mix of those who want to know about how their food is produced and the implications of this, but at the same time, there is also a general disconnect between the public and farming, with people being unaware of the specifics of production systems and practice and the lengths, effort and cost that goes into producing a healthy, nutritious product from beginning to end. There is a need to inform and educate people on the role that farmers play in producing their food and managing the landscape that they enjoy. Indeed, farmers are often called 'custodians of the countryside', a title that inherits a lot of responsibility which many do not realise.

All the farmers interviewed thought that public engagement on farms was extremely important and has the potential for immeasurable worth by providing opportunities for consumers to interact directly with them. For the farming community, there is an appetite to communicate their day-to-day practices, high standards, and realities of life on the farm with the public whilst being able to inspire the next generation of farmers. It was also felt that public engagement has health and well-being benefits for the public, there is much research which supports this point, for example the School Health Research Network found that:

¹ In this article the term 'farmer' is referring to any person who has livestock or grows crops of any kind to sell produce, regardless of the size of their holding.

Children are eating fewer vegetables, taking less exercise and are experiencing more emotional difficulties than ever before. Spending time outside in nature has proven physical and mental health benefits. It has been shown that people who visit farms where their food is produced are more likely to make healthy food choices because they have had an opportunity to understand where their food comes from and make connections between how their food is produced and what they eat.²

Engagement with farmers helps to facilitate empathy, appreciation, trust, and importantly, more informed food choices. It was felt by many farmers that despite the potential time and cost involved, public engagement was well worth the effort and that interacting with children and young people in particular, gave them a real ‘boost’. Farmers want to be the face of their products and market them, it all helps to encourage people to buy local, create a supportive network, and promote the industry on the Island in general.

CURRENT LEVELS OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ON FARM:

So, what are some examples of what farmers in Jersey are doing to engage the public? A lot of engagement on farms happens with school children. Jersey Dairy run an education programme where the Dairy and six of the largest dairy farms on the Island host school visits, thus demonstrating the whole sequence from ‘Grass to Glass.’ In 2023, Jersey Dairy organised 24 school visits which involved 471 students. Children are given a tour of the farm including the milking parlour, they are told about how stock are cared for, daily routines on the farm, the technology involved and the countryside management that goes on. Children also get to meet the cows and maybe even watch them being milked or have a go at milking one by hand in some instances. They can then go on to Jersey Dairy and see the production stages as well as learning about exports and having a taste test of some dairy products!

The Jersey Royal Company usually facilitate between 6-10 primary school visits a year, either at their headquarters or out on their fields where they show the children the tractors, diggers, and harvesters used; pupils are given the opportunity to pick and take home a bag of potatoes too. In addition to this, the Jersey Royal company take part in LEAF’s³ annual Open Farm Sunday. The day includes activities such as the above along with tractor rides, packhouse tours and an educational marquee and micro laboratory display. This annual event attracts approximately 1000 people each year.

The Sustainable Cooperative (SCOOP) run an educational programme and work with a range of schools and educational organisations, which have engaged over 400 children and young people to date. Children can visit some of the farms who supply SCOOP, take part in harvesting and then use the harvest to create tasty healthy foods. SCOOP aims for groups to explore the notion of conservation cooking and the impact the food system has on people’s health, the environment, and the community.

² Health Primary School Student Health and Wellbeing Survey – 2021, School Health Research Network, <https://www.shrn.org.uk/national-data/>

³ ‘Linking Environment and Farming’ is a leading global assurance system which recognises more sustainable farmed products.

There are some farms on the Island who have diversified and focus on Educational access like La Cornetterie Farm who run Sprout's Farming Club sessions throughout the week for some 240 children (in 2023) from 2-14 years old between the months of April and October each year, as well as various school sessions and holiday clubs where children get to plant and harvest from their own allocated vegetable patch as well as helping to look after the pigs and chickens on the farm. Children are allowed to take home produce and are given seasonal recipes to try where they can sample the food they have grown.

Master Farms sell tickets for popular family events throughout the year including the Sunflower Spectacular, Pumpkin Patch, and Christmas Fest, where lots of activities are provided and light refreshments available which attract thousands of people each year. Some farms, like Manor Farm in St. Ouen have a more informal approach to their special seasonal offerings like pumpkins and Christmas trees where for example, vast displays of pumpkins are put out for sale and people can come and select their own whilst enjoying seasonal decorations and photo opportunities. These are especially popular with Nurseries, Mont à L'Abbé School and retirement homes who like to return year on year for these memorable outings.

Other farms allow people who are applying to, or already studying, further and higher educational courses the opportunity for work experience, the most common being veterinary students, but also animal management, agricultural, and horticultural students too. These students gain experience on farms ranging from day visits to a stay of up to 2 weeks.

It would appear that the majority of school engagement with the farmers who were interviewed is done with primary-aged children. Some farms have offered secondary school students experiences on school activities weeks or as part of their Project Trident work experience, some have given secondary aged students the opportunity to do data collection on their farms and there have been occasional visits to farms from French secondary schools. Skills Jersey organised a hands on one day 'Farming and Nature Skills Camp' for students in years 7 -11 who visited Jersey Dairy, Trinity Manor Farm and the BirdSong Garden during the Easter holidays in 2023 but for the most part, it is primary aged children taking part in educational programmes on farms.

Apart from school/student visits, farmers are also offering a variety of public engagement on their farms, such as: lambing courses, animal petting sessions, Farm Open Days, food tasting events, and tours for: farming groups, cattle breeders, tourists, supermarket reps, chefs, numerous community groups and politicians. Several farmers let the public walk or ride across their land to enable people to enjoy the countryside which they manage and look after, even though this can cause the farmers considerable problems. Engagement through the means of media interviews is also being increasingly used through the medium of magazine and newspaper articles, TV interviews, websites, and social media platforms. There is not enough space to go into detail about what every farmer is doing to engage the public on their farms but there is also a myriad of public engagement happening with farmers off-site too.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH FARMERS OFF-SITE:

Farmers are attending school skills/careers fairs, giving talks in schools, presenting to businesses in their workplace, representing the industry at agricultural, horticultural and cattle

shows, working with the RJA&HS on projects, and also manning information stands at special events. SCOOP arranges 'Grower Gatherings' to promote more communication and knowledge exchange between producers. Jenni Liddiard has recently even had a book published called, 'The Jersey Sheep Lady' which includes details of her journey to create Field Farm, a 10 acre mixed farm, which could be read to help inspire those who might wish to embark on a similar venture.

RESPONSE ANALYSIS:

Lots of public engagement is currently happening on farms and with farmers, especially with the larger farms who have a central base and livestock. A large portion of those interviewed have contact with primary school aged children, with enquiries mainly being made by teachers through Jersey Dairy or to Sprouts Farm Club. Many farmers mentioned that they would value more interaction with secondary students as it was felt that this is a demographic where a real impact can be made.

There was a division in opinion between farmers and business where engagement with tourists were concerned. Some felt that engaging with tourists would not have the potential for significant impact and would not be the best use of time, with the general desire for engagement being for educational rather than recreational purposes. However, others felt that 'agritourism' has a lot of potential and might help to open up markets or promote Jersey's iconic dairy cow and the Jersey Royal potato which tourists expect to see when they come to the Island, with many creative ideas being offered such as Island farming walking/coach trails, evening talks, and links with hotels and chefs to curate events and local/seasonal menus. A couple of farms have already made links with tour groups outside of Jersey. There was also divided opinion about Farm Open Days. Some saw the value in such an initiative whereas others felt nervous about the prospect of people wandering around their site and preferred the thought of more structured sessions with smaller groups of people. SCOOP arranged a series of structured Farm Open Days with some of their suppliers in 2022 for groups of between 40-60 people, which were extremely popular.

BARRIERS AND CONCERNS:

Having mentioned all the public engagement that is happening on farms, there are also plenty of farms who do not have any on site. When asked what the barriers are, health and safety issues, available time, space for parking and possible costs were among the most common concerns mentioned. The most pertinent issues to growers in particular, were that weather can often dictate where (land can be dotted all over the Island), when, and what they work on, therefore it is hard to plan for groups as circumstances change at very short-notice and there may not be suitable space to facilitate visitors, and when doing so for free, the business has to come first. Issues of concern relating to public access through farms were ignorance and lack of respect for the land and livestock by some, albeit the minority. Ideas were put forward to help mitigate these issues, such as funding for signage and educational initiatives raising awareness of the Countryside Code.

Throughout the interview process for this article, the point that only farmers who could showcase best practice should be visited was frequently mentioned. The need for stringent health and safety requirements, as well as taking seriously the role of being a spokesperson and an awareness of the impact it can have for the industry was a prevalent issue being raised. To turn this point on its head though, perhaps public engagement could be used as a tool for encouraging best practice. Most farmers felt that they would want to be the 'face' of a farm visit and the one answering questions from the public, as the benefits of public engagement are great but inaccurate information could also quickly have a profound negative impact. It seems to be the case that the stories which gain a lot of attention in the media regarding agriculture are often negative, rather than the multitude of positive ones available about the good work farmers do, like for biodiversity and carbon off-setting for example, and who better to hear these 'good news' stories from than the farmers themselves? Farmers readily understand that communication with the public and government is a two-way process; farmers should have the opportunity to explain what they are contributing to society. Public engagement is the opportunity for farmers to tell their story and to promote understanding of the issues they face as well as encourage the public to be more active in supporting them, which for some is crucial to their survival in the current markets.

INCENTIVES:

Unless it is part of a farm's diversification business plan, then a lot of public engagement is not charged for and is happening for free. Seeing as public engagement on farms has the potential to be beneficial for all parties concerned, farmers were asked what would help or incentivise them to host, or host more often. Lots of farmers said that they would appreciate help with the costs incurred by doing public engagement and would also welcome any potential credits from the Rural Support Scheme as a recognition of their efforts, although many stated that this should not be the reason for carrying out public engagement from the outset.

Other incentives mentioned were help with marketing and advertising, advice concerning public liability insurance, hygiene issues surrounding serving food and drink and completing risk assessments – the idea of having a standardised approach and templates was popular and would go a long way to aiding public engagement. Help coordinating and delivering visits was also mentioned as some farmers did not feel confident about hosting and would appreciate a network of support being available to access should they need it.

GOING FORWARD...

The forms of public engagement currently referred to on the Rural Support Scheme are: Jersey cows entered in the RJA & HS shows, and Farm Open Days (the latter will be included in the 2025 Scheme based on 2024 activity). In assimilating the responses from the interviews, aside from what is already recognised on the Rural Support Scheme, public engagement in agriculture on the Island can broadly be divided into the following categories:

- School visits,
- Visits from students in Higher Education in a related discipline,

- Farm tours/information sharing for local adult groups,
- Work experience opportunities,
- Agritourism initiatives,
- Off-site information sharing (e.g. careers fairs, talks with local businesses etc.),
- Public access.

Several questions would have to be considered when contemplating credit allocation with each of these categories, for example, should there be more credits available for engagement with secondary rather than primary children? They seem harder to target due to interest and timetabling constraints but have the potential to be more impactful in captivating interest and up take in the industry. Should public engagement which charges the public from the outset receive as many credits as those farmers who are doing public engagement for free? Should there be a minimum number of people involved in the 'engagement' to be able to benefit from credits? Many farmers cited that they could not cope with more than 30 visitors on a tour at a time due to various restrictions but should tours have a minimum number of people to encourage maximum impact? It would seem necessary that farmers would have to keep accurate records pertaining to their public engagement to be able to apply for support.

As well as being allocated credits by the Rural Support Scheme, many farmers mentioned that they would also appreciate practical support with public engagement (this excludes the school visits which Jersey Dairy run that have many of the following aspects already covered). There is a desire for standardised documentation and even help coordinating and delivering visits (especially where links to the curriculum need to be made) or training to support farmers hosting visits. There is a real interest from the public and schools for climate/environmental education in agriculture which many farmers would relish the opportunity to be a part of and could benefit with support in doing so. Perhaps there is a need for a Community/Education Engagement Officer to offer support to those farmers who would appreciate assistance with public engagement on their farms?

When being interviewed, farmers were asked about the key considerations and advice they would give to others who are doing or considering doing public engagement on their farms, the following are some of the responses:

- Get your insurance sorted
- Make sure you have a toilet and handwashing facilities
- Keep it interesting and relevant
- **Keep your farm tidy, clean and safe**
- Consider access issues, parking and the public's capabilities – how far can they walk, how long can they stand etc.
- If adults are visiting then have some of your products available to sell
- **It is worth giving up the time to do it properly, although time is an issue!**
- Be honest and open to explain the reality of farming
- Don't be afraid of debates – having an interest is good!
- Be as prepared as you can
- **Be aware of Health and Safety issues**
- **Enjoy it, it is worth doing!**

- Work with schools is crucial, connection is important and memorable
- All farmers should want to be active in public engagement – it is a way to advertise and promote what they do
- Need to utilise LEAF education more
- **Make sure you are show-casing good practice**
- **Education is key!**
- Link school visits to the curriculum
- You need to keep reminding people of what opportunities are available to them

SUMMARY:

It is evident that there is real value in public engagement on farms and with farmers themselves. A lot of both paid and unpaid engagement is happening on the Island already but it could be better supported, and more engagement could be encouraged.

The LEAF Marque certification requirements says the following about the importance of engaging society:

A good relationship with the local community forms a shop front for the business...Enjoying explaining farming to the public, suppliers and influencers will help others better understand agriculture and the rural environment. Being connected to your local community and a wide range of people will help address their concerns about the countryside and enable them to become more connected with their food.⁴

To quote one farmer who was interviewed, public engagement on farms is, ‘*definitely worth the effort*’. It has the potential for considerable impact with successful marketing and advertising, promoting the farming industry to new-comers, mutual understanding and appreciation with the public in general and more informed food choices as well as health benefits. The ends are worthy and far-reaching but more support, in various forms, could help increase the impact.

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⁴ LEAF Marque Standard Version 16.1