

SOWING THE SEEDS OF STABILITY

JOANNA POULTON from BI4FARMERS explains the group's vision of a Basic Income for Farmers, Farmworkers, and Food Producers in the UK.

Basic Income for Farmers (BI4FARMERS) is a new lobby group that advocates for a regular, unconditional cash payment made directly to farmers and agricultural workers in the UK. The group is made up of predominantly small-scale growers, farmers and farmworkers who have fallen through the cracks of government support.

The aim of the campaign is to encourage farmers, farmworkers and food producers to discuss possible solutions to the financial barriers they face. Our report, launched in April 2024, was developed over six months of voluntary time and energy of the working group. It consolidates several organised online conversations with groups of agricultural workers. These conversations are ongoing and will form the basis for deeper exploration in the next phase of the work.¹

Next, BI4FARMERS intends to scope out what a basic income for farmers policy could look like, with further input from people on the ground. Later this year we will begin research into how a pilot scheme could be designed and delivered to collect data on the efficacy of the policy, and make the case for systemic change in the financing of farming. The group has gained a lot of media coverage in recent months, and with over 150 farmers actively engaged in the campaign and over 1,000 followers on social media channels, word is spreading fast.

Seeding Stability

In the fertile soil of the UK, inequality runs deep, nourished by a history of land ownership patterns and market dynamics that have favoured the few at the expense of the many. Small-scale farmers and market gardeners, often operating on the margins, face a precarious existence, buffeted by fluctuating prices, unpredictable weather patterns, and the relentless march of industrial agriculture. Meanwhile, farmworkers toil in the shadows, their contributions vital yet undervalued and tenant farmers' livelihoods are often subject to the whims of insecure tenancy agreements.

We need transformative policies that recognise the importance of agricultural workers, shorten supply chains reducing over-reliance on imported produce that undercuts UK farmers, and help us adapt to the climate and ecological crises.

It is hard to deny the reality of low incomes amongst the farming community. In 2023 the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

judged the Minimum Income Standard (MIS), the lowest annual income an individual should receive to meet the demands of living in the UK, to be £29,500. DEFRA figures for 2021-22 show that farm household incomes, which include income unrelated to the main farm business, averaged out for individuals at a staggering £20,700 short of the MIS.²

Basic income could offer social and economic recognition of agricultural work, and serve as a lifeline—a steady stream of support flowing unconditionally into the hands of those who steward the land. By providing financial security and stability, it could empower agricultural workers to invest in their operations, pursue transition to sustainable practices, and weather the inevitable storms, both literal and economic. By softening the constant squeeze of the market, food producers could cultivate a future rooted in resilience and security. This might look like investing time and money in strategic tree cover to reduce flooding, or having enough of a buffer to experiment with diversifying crops. It might look like having enough time to take on trainees to share the load of expanding into more sustainable practices, both environmentally and in terms of personal longevity and wellbeing.

Investing in the People

A guiding principle of the Basic Income for Farmers campaign is trust. We are a group of farmers, growers, food activists and academics who trust farmers as custodians of the land to use the payments in the best way they see fit, as they continue to care for their communities through raising crops and livestock.

Our primary policy objective is to guarantee a level of financial security to all agricultural workers, that underpins and is topped up by the income made from farming. This is a ground up investment in the people at the heart of agriculture.

BI4FARMERS has already hosted in-depth discussions with 18 farmers and growers, and surveyed (online) 130 farmers and growers with the same in-depth questions. When asked what they would spend a basic income on, answers fell into three categories:

- 1) Basics and essentials: payments towards debt clearance, healthcare, housing costs, rent and immediate bills.
- 2) Long-term investments: investing in their future by adding to a pension pot, investing in their food business ventures,



practically maintaining tools and structures at their farms, employing other people to help share the workload, professional development like sector based courses and conferences, and otherwise investing in their local community.

3) Personal and leisure: reducing hours in other part-time jobs to focus more on farming, passion pursuits and restorative time with family and friends.

Mental Health Matters

Improved health and well-being is a well established outcome for basic income, and it is highly likely this would also be the case for a basic income for farmers.³ People can lose up to 10 years of their life from a low income. The sacrifices made by agricultural workers are shown most starkly when looking at the evidence on mental health within the sector. In February 2024, 95 percent of young farmers cited mental health as the biggest hidden danger in the sector. The farming community has a lower level of average mental well-being than the UK population as a whole and those who work in skilled agricultural and related trades are 1.7 times more likely to die by suicide. This should be a source of national shame.⁴

The issue of farmers not feeling valued by the public was highlighted many times in the House of Commons inquiry into Rural Mental Health, and a clear relationship between farming businesses' health and farmer mental health has been shown. Other key sources of stress include regulation, compliance and inspection, loss of subsidies/future trade deals and the broader future of farming.⁵

A basic income for farmers would send a clear message of support for agricultural workers, enhance farmers' ability to maintain the health of their businesses. It would alleviate the stress caused by the loss of subsidies (or fill the historic gap of never having received them) without introducing the pressure of new compliance, inspection, and regulatory measures. It would be an investment both in existing experts and in new entrants to farming, enabling businesses to grow and adapt.

A Truly Just Transition

For a just transition, farming needs to become a viable livelihood. Transitioning into more ecological and regenerative farming practices can have high upfront costs and can require more human power on farms. Growing practices that increase biodiversity and reduce greenhouse gas emissions are desirable and practical, they just need a workforce that is properly equipped to implement them.

A basic income, as a direct, unconditional payment to individual farmers, is a fit for purpose tool to encourage this work by providing farmers with financial security when they are working through the less profitable periods of initially implementing practices like weaning off herbicides and pesticides, planting companion crops and pollination corridors, making their own compost, using herbal leys and green manures, building beetle banks, laying hedges, mulching and much more.

Other incentives towards the adoption of more sustainable practices are of course essential for a full transformation to a robust farming sector that truly addresses environmental and

nature crises. These include education and training programmes, subsidies like the Environmental Land Management Schemes, and legislation against harmful practices. Yet a basic income provides flexibility and security at the level of the individual, that can underpin these higher level measures, buffering workers and their incomes during the transition.

Imagine a landscape dotted with fewer fields of monocultures and more thriving agroecological enterprises, community-supported farms, and regenerative food hubs. With basic income as a foundation, farmers and food producers could experiment with crops and techniques such as trialling heritage grain and building healthy soils, explore niche interests in farming rather than always being on the back foot, and implement flood, drought and wind resilient practices, techniques and infrastructure. From agroforestry and permaculture to farm-to-table ventures, the possibilities are endless.

Diversity is Resilience

My own involvement with this campaign stems from personal experience. As a young-landless-seasonal farmworker I spent my first 18 months in the industry volunteering at projects and taking on unpaid internships, just to gain a foundation of skill that would hopefully help me find paid employment. Once I did find paid employment I was shocked by the low and irregular income, but also by the fact that a lot of the time my bosses weren't even paying themselves. I struggled to see what I was aspiring towards – and I was one of the lucky ones with some savings to support me during this time. I can't begin to imagine how hard it is for others who face even more barriers to entry in this work.

There is a growing problem of falling numbers of young people getting into farming, causing a decline in the farming work force. Barriers to new entrants are numerous, and often income related. The average age of UK farmers is 59, meaning farmers are approaching retirement age with no viable succession plans for their farms in sight. It is widely understood that we need to inspire younger generations to get into farm work, but in a cost-of-living crisis, when most people are spending 30 percent of their income on mortgage repayments or rent, and with the risks of establishing a food enterprise being so high, how can we stabilise the existence of food producers to offer new entrants a way in?

A Basic Income for farmers could catalyse a transformation in the diversity of the agricultural sector, by dismantling barriers to entry and fostering greater inclusivity. Currently, the high cost of land, equipment, and other inputs often acts as a formidable barrier, preventing aspiring farmers, particularly from under-represented communities, entering the sector. By providing a reliable source of income, basic income empowers individuals from diverse backgrounds to pursue their agricultural ambitions without the burden of financial insecurity.

This newfound accessibility would not only enrich the sector but also foster resilience by reducing dependence on monocultures and corporate agribusiness. As a result, the agricultural landscape could become more vibrant, dynamic, and responsive to the needs of local communities, paving the way for a more sustainable and equitable future.

New entrants to agriculture benefit not only the food system but the broader economy. Analysis from the Food and Land Use Coalition in 2019 found that a global investment in training young farmer entrepreneurs of £75- 90 billion over the next decade would deliver a three-fold economic return of £230 billion. It is not only young people fresh out of education that would benefit from the door to the industry being more open. The Royal Horticultural Society reported that a significant number of apprentice applicants were career changers, with 25–34 year olds accounting for 39 percent of applicants, and 35–44 year olds for 17 percent. To enter the industry, people need an income that sustains them. A basic income for farmers could address this directly, providing new entrants with an income without putting pressure on the already squeezed profits of farming businesses.⁶

Cultivating Connection

In the rush of modern life, it's easy to forget the bonds that bind us – to the land, to each other, to our shared humanity. Yet in quiet corners of rural Britain, communities still gather around kitchen tables and village greens, sharing stories, sharing burdens, and sharing dreams. Basic Income nurtures such connections, serving not only as a source of financial support but also a catalyst for social cohesion and collective action. By providing a common foundation of security and dignity, it fosters trust, solidarity, and a sense of belonging. In times of crisis, whether a pandemic or a record breaking weather event, these networks of resilience become lifelines, knitting together the fabric of society and ensuring that no one is left behind.

Navigating Challenges

Of course, the path to this visionary future is not without obstacles. Sceptics raise valid concerns about the cost of implementing basic income, the potential for abuse or exploitation, and the broader implications for the agricultural sector and the economy as a whole. Key areas for further consultation with farmers, policy experts and researchers include:

Eligibility: How recipients are defined must be designed in consultation with farmers and without alienating key groups like new entrants, workers with essential skill sets or small scale farmers. Consideration of migrant and seasonal labour is key.

Payment level and frequency: Level and frequency are intrinsically linked to the impact of the policy, so it is important to get this right based on research into a funding model and consultation.

Funding: A sustainable and redistributive funding model is required: research on the design and impacts of such a model should be produced in the short term.

Infrastructure for delivery: Payment delivery must be seamless. It is possible that existing infrastructure could be adapted, but further consultation on the requirements of this infrastructure and experience of the current systems is needed.

Interaction with other schemes: It is imperative that Basic Income for Farmers does not make recipients or their businesses ineligible for payments from subsidies, social security or any other schemes that provide them with essential income.

A pilot scheme would help build the evidence base and political support for this policy. Various approaches should be considered including government led pilots (such as the Welsh care leavers scheme), national pilots and community led and privately funded pilots.⁷

We intend to produce policy and pilot proposals in the next phase of our work, informed by widespread consultation. As agriculture is a devolved policy area, it is important to consider political pathways towards a UK-wide roll out, as well as individually in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England.

Dreaming Of Abundance

Basic Income for farmers, farmworkers, and food producers is not merely a policy proposal; it is a vision of a better world where everyone has the opportunity to thrive, where the economic and physical harvest is shared equitably, and where the bonds of community are strong and resilient. As Sandhya Anantharaman said, “Basic Income doesn’t solve everything, but it makes every problem easier to solve”. Let us dare to imagine a future where a basic income for farmers is not just a dream but a reality – a reality that sustains us, nurtures us, and empowers us to cultivate a world of abundance and resilience for all.

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Questions from The Land

The report states “Payments should be universal for all scale farmers, from large-scale, mid-scale to 1-acre farmers.” The majority of 1-10 acre “farmers” are hobby or part-time farmers often with lucrative or decent alternative incomes; I [Simon Fairlie] am one of them! I cannot see the point of subsidising us and the cost to the exchequer would be exorbitant. Shouldn’t you weed out people who don’t need it, and how do you do that?

Bl4F: Defining a farmer, farmworker and food producer will be crucial for our next steps. The parameters of this are still being discussed but recipients could perhaps be defined as those growing food for sale, and having the necessary permissions/standards in place for this. Most market gardeners we’ve consulted with work on land that falls into the 1-10 acre size. We would not want to exclude their invaluable contribution to the local food system. If a Basic Income supported hobby or part-time farmers who may already have other income streams, we would see this as a win, for connection to food and valuing all producers equally.

As a Basic Income would be taxable income, those who do earn over the threshold would end up returning the excess income via tax.

Our intention is to not apply any means testing, whether in terms of hours worked, land farmed, or food produced. Tenants and farmworkers do not own land, many farmers cannot afford to work full time (often having secondary jobs off farm to supplement the minimal income through food production), and the foundational philosophy around a basic income is to invest in the wellbeing of the individual, to trust them to use that payment for the betterment of their lives and in turn their business and community. If through consultation we find that some food producers wouldn’t want to claim a basic income, there could be scope to ‘opt out’.

Isn’t this a sticking plaster solution for a systemic problem? Isn’t the correct solution to lower the price of rent/property and increase the price of food?

Bl4F: Yes, a Basic Income for farmers, farmworkers, and food producers could be seen as a temporary solution, to address immediate financial challenges within the agricultural sector. However, it can also serve as part of a broader strategy to address systemic issues. Basic Income can provide immediate relief while longer-term structural reforms are implemented to address underlying issues such as land access, market dynamics, and income inequality.

Is there not a danger that money injected into a capitalist farming economy will find its way back into rental values, land prices and landowners’ pockets (viz Ricardo’s Theory of Rent)?

Bl4F: We recognise the risk that injecting money into a capitalist farming economy could exacerbate existing inequalities, including inflating rental values and land prices. This phenomenon, often referred to as Ricardo’s Theory of Rent, highlights the tendency for increased income in agriculture to ultimately benefit landowners rather than tenants or workers.



To mitigate this risk, policymakers could also explore measures such as a progressive wealth tax, land value taxation, or some form of land redistribution, to ensure that the benefits of increased income are more equitably distributed throughout the agricultural sector. If wealth were taxed at the same rate as incomes currently the UK treasury could earn an extra £174 billion a year. Additionally, oversight and regulation may be necessary to prevent speculative behaviour and ensure that Basic Income funds are used to support farmers and farm workers, and do not have the effect of driving up land prices. We intend to enlist and consult with economists, policymakers and experts in the field to research how to mitigate this risk.

You suggest this could be a revenue neutral policy, but also that it would be additional both to existing agricultural subsidy schemes and to the existing benefits system - so it's not really clear where the savings would come from to fund it. Of course this also depends how much it would cost, which depends in turn on both the number of recipients (do you have an estimate?) and the level of the payment.

Bl4F: The concept of revenue neutrality implies that the funding for the basic income scheme would be offset by savings or revenue generated elsewhere in the system. Some such savings might be made in mental health services: Basic Income trials have shown strong evidence of recipients feeling less stressed, anxious and (in some instances) suicidal. Given the stark

finding that farmers are 1.7 times more likely to die by suicide, this presents a very real and strong case for saving lives as well as finance from mental health services.

In a world where more localised food systems are strengthened, more organic produce will flow into prisons, schools, hospitals and households and we can begin to imagine further health benefits taking even more strain off our healthcare. There is a growing body of evidence on the potential public health impacts of a basic income. Modelling has shown that between 120,000 and 1.04 million cases of clinically significant physical health symptoms could be prevented or postponed by the implementation of a basic income. The same modelling predicted between 130,000 and 655,000 quality-adjusted life years (QALYs) could be gained, valued at between £3.9 billion and £19.7 billion. This neutrality could also be achieved through various means, such as streamlining existing subsidy schemes, reallocating funds from other areas of the budget, or implementing tax reforms to generate additional revenue. However, the feasibility of achieving revenue neutrality would depend on the specific design of the basic income scheme and the broader economic context.⁸

While the basic income scheme may be additional to existing agricultural subsidy schemes and the benefits system, the intention is to provide a supplementary form of support rather than replacing existing programs. The rationale behind this approach is to address specific gaps or shortcomings in the current support systems, such as providing more direct and unconditional assistance to farmers and farmworkers.

Estimating the cost of the basic income scheme would indeed depend on factors such as the number of recipients and the level of payment. Without specific data on these variables, it’s challenging to provide an accurate estimate. However, we aim to conduct a thorough cost-benefit analysis and economic modelling to better understand the potential fiscal implications and identify potential sources of funding or savings. Additionally, exploring alternative funding mechanisms, such as public-private partnerships or innovative financing models, could also be considered to ensure the financial sustainability of the scheme.

Basic Income researchers sometimes approach the question of what level the payment should be set at using the frame of the Living Wage Foundation. This would mean everyone should be receiving a Living Wage of 36.5 hours a week as their Basic Income payment, at whatever their hourly rate figure is. This would be monitored by an external body, such as the Living Wage Foundation or the Low Pay Commission, who currently recommend the level of the statutory minimum wage.