Norfolk Farming in Turbulent Times: Do High Input Systems Still Make Sense?

Norfolk Round Table Discussion 2: Farmers and Land Managers

Summary - 20 April 2026

Round Table Chair Poul Hovesen opened the discussion with invited senior Farmers and Land Managers by inviting all to consider a future in which input costs remain high, commodity markets remain volatile, and global competition continues to intensify. Participants reflected on how their businesses have adapted over recent years in response to policy change, labour pressures, climate variability and market uncertainty, and considered whether high-input systems remain viable under these conditions.

Participants comprised arable, livestock and horticultural farmers, estate managers, environmental organisations, food businesses, agricultural advisers and rural sector representatives from across Norfolk.

1. How have you changed your business over the last five years in response to input costs, policy changes and wider volatility?

Participants described significant structural and operational change across farming systems in response to rising input costs, evolving environmental schemes, labour constraints and increasing weather variability. While the scale and nature of change differed between enterprises, there was broad agreement that resilience, efficiency and margin management have become central to decision-making, replacing more traditional yield-led approaches in many cases. Land-sparing and land-sharing concepts were a point of debate.

Main points:

1. **Improving profit margins rather than maximising yield was a consistent theme.** Participants increasingly emphasised understanding true cost of production, recognising that **tonnes per hectare alone is an incomplete measure** in a volatile input and output environment. Decision-making is shifting towards gross margin per hectare and enterprise-level resilience rather than single-crop optimisation.
2. **Soil health and long-term resilience were repeatedly identified as priorities,** though confidence in interventions varied. Cover crops, companion crops, organic manures and rotational diversity are important tools to improve structure, water holding capacity and nutrient cycling. One arable business (potatoes, sugar beet, vining peas and onions) described soils as their primary asset, supported by 50–60-year-old drainage infrastructure still actively maintained. However, concerns remained around establishment risk and ROI.
3. **High-output farming systems are a focus in Norfolk, particularly in specialist arable and horticultural enterprises** where crop failure or rejection carries high

financial risk. Participants stressed that system change must be supported by robust science, field-scale evidence and clear economic justification.

4. **Drainage, irrigation and water management are foundational to productive systems.** Climate variability is increasing drought and waterlogging
5. risk within seasons. One participant described reducing blackgrass to near-negligible levels through drainage improvement, rotation discipline and targeted agronomy demonstrating input reduction can follow structural investment.
6. **Mixed farming and integration were viewed positively for resilience** through livestock integration, manure use and more diverse rotations, though constrained by labour, infrastructure and market structures.
7. **Participants considered diversification to be increasingly important** to business viability, alongside vertical integration. Examples included renewable energy, anaerobic digestion, tourism and on-farm processing. An anaerobic digestion investment enabled reduced fertiliser use via integrated digestate distribution through underground ring mains. A poultry business provided a contrasting example of a fully integrated, unsubsidised system focused on tight operational control and performance monitoring (feed conversion ratios, mortality and absenteeism), with value added through management rather than external inputs. Use of cover strips and planting was also described, challenging assumptions that intensive and environmental systems are mutually exclusive.
8. **Environmental schemes generated mixed views**. Some highlighted benefits for marginal land; others raised concerns over financial sustainability, policy reversibility and loss of flexibility to return land to production.
9. **Climate and weather volatility are increasingly important in Norfolk farming,** with more frequent extremes such as drought and waterlogging within rotations. Spring cropping for peas was described as higher risk due to establishment failure linked to moisture variability.
10. **Data and benchmarking were widely seen as important**, but many businesses still lack integrated systems to translate data into actionable insight across cost, yield and environmental performance.

2. What would help farmers use inputs more efficiently or reduce risk on farm?

The discussion focused on the interaction between data, knowledge transfer, collaboration and supply chain structure as key determinants of efficiency and risk management. A strong theme was that technological solutions alone are insufficient without parallel investment in skills, interpretation and behavioural change.

Main points:

1. **Better use of data is as a major opportunity.** Participants noted that many businesses still lack a clear understanding of true production costs at enterprise level, which can lead to sub-optimal contracting decisions, inefficient input use and limited ability to evaluate performance across crops and years. One participant described using operational data to identify machinery inefficiencies, including idling rates of up to 30%, enabling immediate behavioural change and cost reduction.
2. **Investment in people is as important as investment in technology.** Training, engagement and decision-making skills are essential to ensure that digital tools,

automation and precision technologies translate into measurable on-farm improvement rather than passive data accumulation.
One estate reported employing a dedicated data analyst at a cost of approximately £3–4 per hectare, generating returns estimated at around three times the cost through improved decision-making and resource allocation.

3. **Collaboration between farming businesses remains limited but is a significant untapped opportunity.** Participants discussed potential efficiencies from shared machinery, labour coordination, infrastructure use and data benchmarking, while acknowledging cultural barriers, trust issues and commercial sensitivity.
4. **Knowledge transfer and independent advice are increasingly important**, particularly in a context where advisory services are often linked to input supply chains. Participants expressed interest in more independent, evidence-based advisory models that separate product sales from agronomic decision support.
5. **Supply chain structure continues to influence farm-level profitability and resilience.** Participants noted consolidation across input supply industries (fertiliser, seed, agronomy and chemical supply) and downstream markets, reducing transparency, leaving farmers exposed to commercially influenced advice and limiting individual bargaining power. This reinforces the importance of efficiency rather than relying on price negotiation.
6. **Capturing value beyond the farm gate are critical for business success**, including processing, integration, direct marketing and closer alignment with end users. The poultry sector was referenced as a benchmark for efficiency - greater vertical integration or coordinated supply chain relationships could help stabilise returns and reduce volatility exposure.
7. **Processing and freezing infrastructure are underdeveloped in the UK** relative to historical capacity. Attempts to develop new processing plants in East Anglia were described as difficult due to investment risk and disputes over margin distribution between growers and processors.
8. **Practical experimentation, on-farm trials and phased adoption are essential risk management tools**. Participants emphasised the importance of testing innovations at manageable scale before committing to whole-farm change, particularly in systems with high fixed costs or tight specification requirements.
9. **Education, benchmarking and peer-to-peer learning are key mechanisms for raising baseline performance across the sector**, with particular emphasis on supporting mid-performing businesses rather than only the highest achievers.

3. Will high-input systems still make sense in Norfolk in five years' time?

The Chair asked the group to consider whether future competitiveness will be driven by input reduction, improved input efficiency, or broader system redesign focused on resilience, profitability and long-term adaptability.

Main points:

1. **Improving input efficiency is more important than reducing inputs,** with emphasis on maximising output and margin per unit of input. Several participants consider that "high-input" systems may become less meaningful as a term as efficiency gains decouple output from input intensity.

2. **Technology, genetics, soil management and precision agriculture are key drivers of efficiency gains,** with ongoing improvements in genetics, nutrient use efficiency and machine precision already reshaping input requirements.
3. **Participants prioritised resilience to weather, market and policy volatility in successful future farming models.**
4. **Collaboration is a key opportunity for improving efficiency, reducing risk and enabling knowledge transfer** through shared data, benchmarking and infrastructure.
5. **Contributors consider that the process of business consolidation will continue due to scale, capital requirements and technology costs**, although partnership and network approaches are also viable alternatives.
6. **Participants increasingly prioritise capturing value beyond the farm gate** through processing, branding and closer retailer integration, helping stabilise returns in volatile markets.
7. **Participants reject the idea that environmental and productive outcomes are mutually exclusive**, arguing that both can be achieved through appropriate system design and measurement.
8. **Skills, management capability and decision-making were consistently highlighted as key long-term differentiators,** alongside capital access and technology adoption.

Overall, participants are broadly optimistic about the future of Norfolk agriculture. **Three areas will provide a future for Norfolk farming: data-driven decision-making, collaboration and the prioritisation of profitability and resilience over output maximisation**. Cultural and structural barriers remain, particularly around data sharing, advisory independence and supply chain power. Businesses that have overcome these tend to share strong data use, adaptive management, investment in people and openness to collaboration.

Acknowledgements

The Round Tables are hosted by the **Royal Norfolk Agricultural Association** and provide valuable insight and discussion that help shape the eponymous annual **Big Debate**, which will take place at the **Royal Norfolk Show** on **Thursday 25 June 2026**.

Our sincere thanks go to the **industry leaders** who generously shared their knowledge and experience, as well as to the **Round Table Chair, Poul Hovesen, President of the RNAA, and the Steering Group** for their invaluable contributions and support.

Participants: Ali Cargill, Christoph Graf-Grote, Julius Joel, Mark Gorton, Mark Means, Eliot Lyne, Richard Hirst, Frances Roberson, Andrew Spinks, Tom Pearson, Clarke Willis

RNAA Big Debate Steering Group: Natasha Grist (NISD/JIF Fellow/UEA), Poul Hovesen (RNAA), Bob King, Mark Nicholas (RNAA), Emily Norton (AHDB, RNAA)

Contacts:
Mark Nicholas, RNAA **(mark.nicholas@rnaa.org.uk)**
Natasha Grist, NISD **(n.grist@uea.ac.uk)** (meeting summary/further copies)