



Part Time Farming

Improving the nation's health,
supporting a flexible labour force
and building rural economies



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Aim

Our current food production and distribution system is fragile. Food is too cheap for many producers to be able to sustain a decent livelihood, while often poorer citizens are unable to afford good quality fresh produce. Against this background, there is a movement of (mostly) young people keen to feed and care for the world in harmony with nature.

Long hours of physically demanding work too often lead to chronic health problems for farmers, growers and foresters. Conversely those working in desk based sedentary jobs risk suffering from a lack of physical exercise and mental quiet. Many compensate by going to the gym, doing sport or yoga, but what if we could build exercise into our life in a way that had both purpose and financial reward? Part time farming could provide that solution, particularly since Covid when our ability to work remotely has fundamentally shifted how we can work and live for many professions. Living rurally while continuing to do non-farm work is now a genuine choice for many.

In many farming communities there is some disdain towards those who don't farm full time. Labels such as "hobby" or "lifestyle" imply that they shouldn't be taken seriously. There can be embarrassment if one of the family has to find other work off farm to support their income, as if somehow that is a failure on the part of the farmer.

With the right support part time farming could deliver a range of individual and social benefits, such as healthier lifestyles reducing the burden on our national health service, a flexible and motivated labour force for the land based sector, increased food self sufficiency and resilience.

This report identifies two broad barriers to the wider adoption of part time farming

- Opportunity, knowledge and confidence to those from a non farming background to enter the profession.
- Greater support for and recognition of part time farming and employment as a productive and profitable model.



Evidence gathered

The bulk of the evidence for this report comes from the 230 responses to a survey on part time farming conducted in late 2024.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Though some of the issues relating to part time farming are equally challenging to full time farmers, the following would go a long way to encourage a new generation of home grown land based talent.

For government and funders

- Support for new entrants on a part time basis, allowing motivated candidates to transition from non-farming backgrounds. This might include a retraining bonus (like some PGCE teaching bursaries), or support to farmers to employ trainees.
- Support for cooperative farming enterprises, for instance Community Supported Agriculture which already exists as a successful model for part time farming.
- Better recognition in the planning and financial systems towards part time farming enterprises.

For farmer support organisations

- Good case studies of part time enterprises showing it can be profitable, removing the stigma from being a part time farmer.
- Better access to training and advice for part time farmers, for example help on how to make operations more efficient for part time farmers.
- Better links between community farms and gardens, and allotment growers with commercial farming could help build a pathway to professionalising what is currently a hobby.



1. INTRODUCTION

While not a new problem, our current food production and distribution system is fragile. Food is too cheap for many producers to be able to sustain a decent livelihood, while many poorer citizens are unable to afford good quality fresh produce. The globalised food system not only makes it hard for many farmers to support decent farm incomes, but hinders our ability to farm in a way that protects our planet. Many of the costs associated with industrial food production are not reflected in the shelf price and therefore the return to farmers. Our taxes pay for cleaning up our waterways from agricultural pollution. Our insurance premiums pay for the damage done by flooding caused in part by deforestation and deterioration of soil quality. Our desire for cheap meat drives poor animal welfare and environmental damage.

Against this background, there is a movement of (mostly) young people driven by a desire to feed and care for the world in harmony with nature. There is a high risk of exploitation (including self exploitation by those that work for themselves) but even where workers are legally paid and treated fairly there are high levels of physical and mental burnout. Long hours of physically demanding work too often lead to chronic health problems for farmers, growers and foresters.

Conversely those working in desk based sedentary jobs risk suffering from a lack of physical exercise and mental quiet. Many compensate by going to the gym, doing sport or yoga, but what if we could build exercise into our life in a way that had both purpose and financial reward? Part time farming could provide that solution, particularly since Covid when our ability to work remotely has fundamentally shifted how we can work and live for many professions. Living rurally while continuing to do non-farm work is now a genuine choice for many.

The scientific world, and indeed government policy, tends to reinforce the view that growing food using manual labour is a practice to be consigned to history. The modern vision is often one of unpeopled farms worked by robots. This report proposes a different vision, one in which rural economies can be revitalised by tapping into a renewed desire by many to connect with nature and food. With the right support part time farming could deliver a range of individual and social benefits, such as healthier lifestyles reducing the burden on our national health service, a flexible and motivated labour force for the land based sector, increased food self sufficiency and resilience. There are many ways to work as a part time farmer depending on the sector and business. For instance you might spend an hour or two checking stock twice a day, work whole days, or even do your farming work seasonally.

I am not of course suggesting that this is a silver bullet, and as this report will lay out, part time farming has its own challenges. It is clear that a significant proportion of those who contributed to my survey felt forced to farm part time by the economic constraints of running a small farm. There are some countries and areas where this is particularly true,

Ireland, Cornwall, and the Crofts in Scotland all have a history of part time farming on small land holdings. There can be disdain towards those who don't farm full time. Labels such as "hobby" or "lifestyle" imply that they shouldn't be taken seriously. There can be embarrassment if one of the family has to find other work off farm to support their income, as if somehow that is a failure on the part of the farmer.

While the subsistence or homesteading approach suits some, the wider potential lies for me, not in a traditional mixed small holding model, but in the professionalisation of part time farming, running one or two operations or contributing on a part time basis to a larger rural business. These enterprises can be efficient and profitable even if they do not provide a full time income. The part time model is particularly useful for those entering the profession, especially when changing careers and unable to take time off to retrain, or for those winding down at the end of their working life. For many though, as for me, it is a fulfilling way to bring balance and meaning to work and family.

This report identifies two broad barriers to the wider adoption of part time farming

- Opportunity, knowledge and confidence to those from a non farming background to enter the profession.
- Greater support for and recognition of part time farming and employment as a productive and profitable model.

About this survey - Firstly I should point out that I am not a social scientist, I am a professional grower, farmer, advisor and writer. This report is not sponsored by anyone or part of an academic institution. It started as research for an upcoming book on the subject. I had expected to receive a small number of replies that would help provide case studies and personal experience on the topic. However I was overwhelmed to receive over 230 responses to the survey and so decided a fuller report was justified. Though my background and primary interest is food, I have included forestry within my scope as the challenges and opportunities seem similar.

69% of respondents were farmers, 38% of whom were from a farming background. 82% of the farmers who responded classed themselves as part time. 59% were self employed, 33.5% were employed and 7.5% had a mixture of employment and self employment. 83% of respondents were from the UK, with a good response from the Republic of Ireland and 21 replies from the rest of the world.

Respondents were working in a range of sectors with livestock and horticulture the most represented with 38% and 39% respectively. Forestry and arable farming made up 11% each of respondents, while other sectors a further 1%.

More details on who took part in the survey can be found in my longer report - available on [Substack](#).

2. ATTITUDES TO PART TIME FARMING

There are many negative views of part time farming. Some in the farming community see it either as “hobby farming” and therefore not to be taken seriously, or as an admission of failure; that because you have to or decide to take off-farm work you have fallen short as a farmer. Meanwhile, policy makers might dismiss the potential of part time farming to contribute to our food supply and labour force (ironically while encouraging farmers to diversify their farming businesses and effectively become part time farmers). Part time farmers have also been recognised¹ as being harder for policy makers to engage with making it difficult to change this attitude and provide the appropriate support for them.

Many respondents commented on how they feel part time farming is negatively perceived.



More than three quarters of my respondents however had a strong positive view of part time farming, even many full time farmers. If we compare each group to the total by percentage Fig. 1 shows that respondents who view part time farming most positively are those currently not farming. Might that change once they started farming?

Negatively, Neutrally and Positively

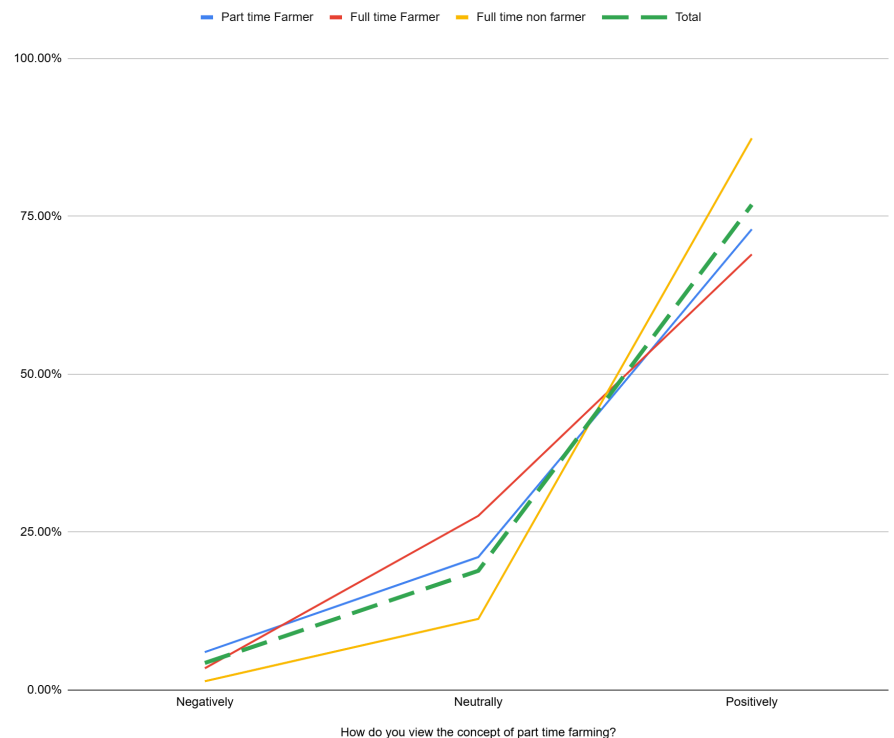


Figure 1: Attitudes to part time farming from survey respondents

¹ Paul Hurley, Jessica Lyon, Jilly Hall, Ruth Little, Judith Tsouvalis, Veronica White, David Christian Rose
Co-designing the environmental land management scheme in England: The why, who and how of engaging 'harder to reach' stakeholders 29 March 2022

We also asked those who were full time farmers what their preference would be for the future. 33% said they prefer to stay working full time, 25% would like to be part time while the rest would consider part time. Here are some of the reasons given

I like / would consider working part time in farming

- I'm not sure it's sustainable for me physically to work full time in farming for the long term, and I would like to have a better work life balance, i can be too knackered by the job to get enjoyment out of other things at the moment
- I would like to have a balance of part time practical farm work with a side job of farm advice or consultancy.
- I love farming but with our size holding it's probably best not to depend on it. Also it's very solitary and I would like to meet people and be out and about. My wife works off farm and I do envy her at times
- Too old now for full time

I prefer to farm full time

- I like the job and prefer to work alone.
- Food production doesn't pay minimum wage
- I have farmed part time in the past and found it exhausting to juggle with other poorly paid and fairly demanding jobs. I would like to farm part time in future, but only alongside a desk-based job with decent enough pay to top up the low wage I get from the farm. I'm currently farming full time.
- I enjoy my job so I am happy to work full time. But full time doesn't mean 7 days a week
- Worked part time at farming in the early years of the business (with a mix of other work to supplement income / doing childcare). Only became full time once business grew and was established.

Employing part time staff - Of the 29 respondents that expressed an opinion on employing full or part time staff, there was a broad three way split with 9 preferring full time, 12 part time and 8 saying they used both

The cost of training and administration was the main reason for preferring full time. The extra hassle was also cited "It takes longer to handover / need more robust communications / people aren't tuned in to what needs to happen." There were other respondents who suggested that though the business could use extra staff they were not in a position to even consider employing due to cost.

For those preferring part time workers the flexibility was seen as a major advantage, though the cost saving against a full time worker was also cited. Part time employment can also be seen as a way to find specialist skills that might not form a full time job as one respondent said "The attraction would be that part time staff could be asked to work on specific tasks that may not fill the whole week but need to be done regularly."

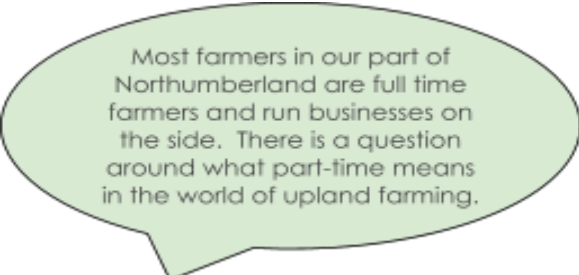
3. ECONOMICS IMPACTING PART TIME FARMING

When asked, nearly half said they worked part time by necessity rather than choice. The two main, and connected, reasons cited were money and time. This report cannot do full justice to the many factors affecting this, such as the price of land and therefore viable size of farm that can provide a full time income, or the lack of affordable accommodation in rural areas. A 2016 Prince's Countryside Fund report² goes into these in more detail. Support for farmers also tends to favor larger scale farmers with the time and scale to make it worthwhile investing in complex applications and reporting.

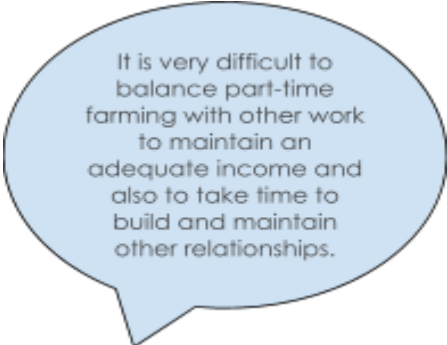
Pay - Agricultural wages are generally low, with many workers on or near minimum wage. For those that are self employed the long hours worked may mean that actual pay is well below minimum wage. While it would be better that producing food was rewarded properly, one of the potential benefits of part time farming is the ability to earn more from your non-farming work to subsidise a farming job. 63% of respondents said they earned their main income from their non-farming work, with less than a quarter earning more from their farming work. The qualitative answers showed that more people would farm full time if the economics worked for them.

Total hours - Despite the economics of running a small farm necessitating part time farming for many people, this does not necessarily mean short hours. The majority of those who responded are working well over a normal 40 hour week. This reflects the TUC stats on Union Learn website which gives an average of 58 hours a week for farming and 57 for forestry, ranking them as the 6th and 9th respectively on the list of longest working hours chart by profession.

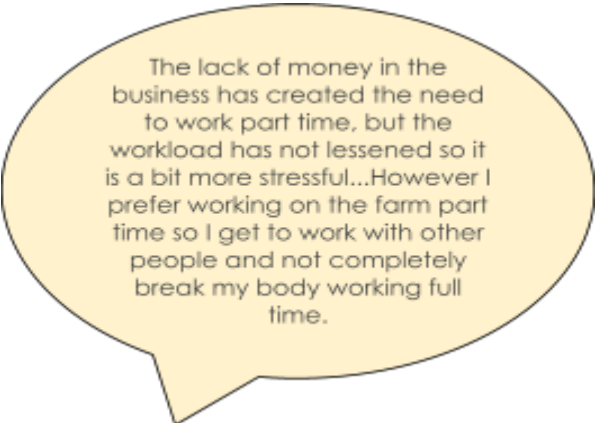
For part time farmers not only were total hours a problem, but also the struggle of balance, and trying to fit farming demands, which can vary according to weather and season, with their non farming commitments. Here are some of the responses on managing time and balance of work.



Most farmers in our part of Northumberland are full time farmers and run businesses on the side. There is a question around what part-time means in the world of upland farming.



It is very difficult to balance part-time farming with other work to maintain an adequate income and also to take time to build and maintain other relationships.



The lack of money in the business has created the need to work part time, but the workload has not lessened so it is a bit more stressful...However I prefer working on the farm part time so I get to work with other people and not completely break my body working full time.

² Winter, M. and Lobley, M. (2016) Is there a future for the small family farm in the UK? Report to The Prince's Countryside Fund, London: Prince's Countryside Fund. ISBN 978-902746-36-7

4. BENEFITS OF PART TIME FARMING

I asked respondents to rate the effect that working part time had on their work life balance, and on their mental and physical health, compared to their experience of working full time in either farming or non farming jobs. Fig 2 shows how beneficial part time work was felt to be on mental and physical health with 68% and 70% respectively saying it was better. Work life balance scored lower with 50% saying it was beneficial and a further 26% saying it was similar. This perhaps reflects the challenge of juggling the farming, non farming and other commitments which came through strongly in the qualitative responses, even where people also saw benefits of working part time.

Effect of working part time compared to full time farming or non farming

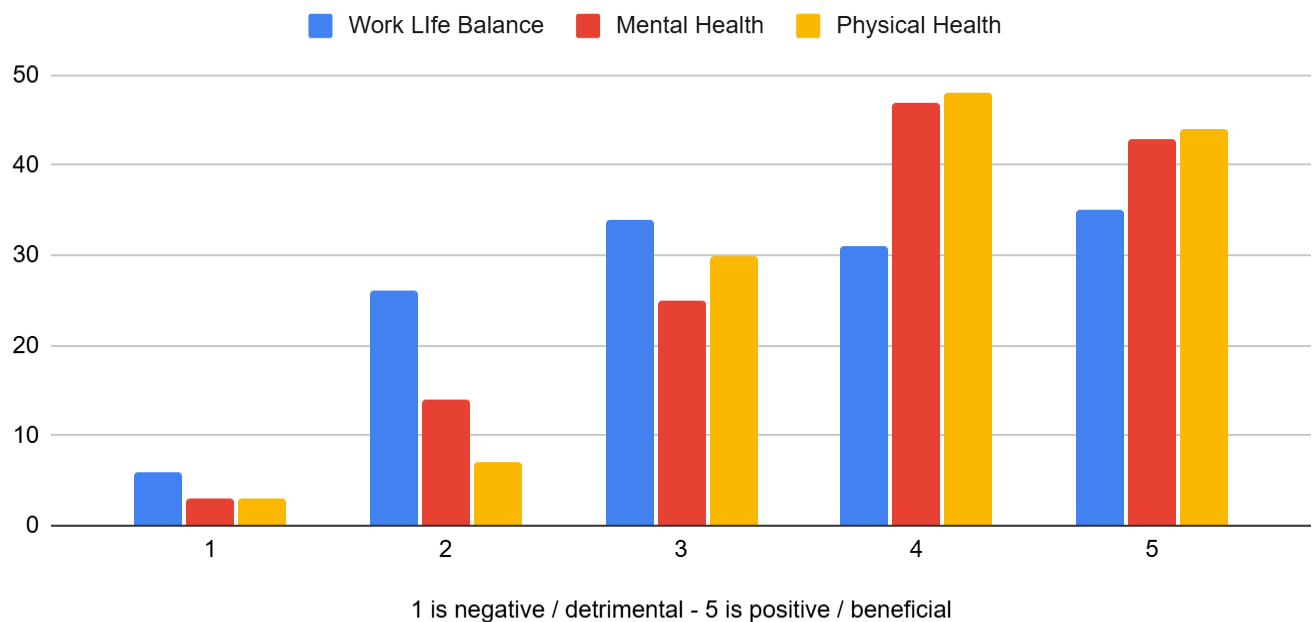


Figure 2 Effects of working part time compared to full time farming or non-farming

The positive effects on mental and physical health were very strongly reported. 68% of respondents said it was better for their mental health, with only 13% saying it was detrimental. For physical health it was slightly higher with 70% reporting benefits and just 8% declaring a negative impact.

Benefits of part time farming

As three women with three children in the mix this works really well. We can be flexible where we need to be, we don't get too knackered and we can build a system that works around our home lives.

I have worked full time as a food grower for 25 years. I employed lots of people part time and found mostly they were happier and more useful to the project compared to full time employees.

I am certainly fitter and more robust than my former life!

I spent over 20 years part time farming, I was more productive, profitable and sustainable than others who were full time farmers.

As a researcher stuck in front of a screen for most of the day, the opportunity to do farm work provides a good balance to allow physical exercise (green gym!), fresh air, and perhaps most importantly, to gain a true understanding of the challenges and opportunities within the farming sector. This can then feed back into the research to ensure it is relevant for farmers.

5. THE COVID EXPERIENCE

Covid lockdown was a life changing experience for many, leading to changed working patterns, and re-evaluation of work, life and community. I was interested to see how my respondents felt about their time during Covid and whether there were any learnings related to part time farming.

32% of those that replied to this question (201 respondents) reported that nothing much was different during covid. The majority of these were part time farmers and it seems that they continued working on their farming work or at home. For many, however, living through covid had a significant effect on their life. 24% reported a positive impact with just 9% describing a negative effect. A common theme was that those who had access to being outside, whether part time or full time, and being able to "carry on as normal" in some degree coped better than others.

What respondents said about their Covid lockdown experience

Positive

- It was a real turning point as I was able to live and volunteer at a sustainable community, learning to grow food and raise animals, which taught me how to work and the conditions to enjoy truly meaningful labour, sustainably (in many senses).
- The widespread shift to/acceptance of virtual working has allowed me to work from home full time which helps me fit farm jobs around work.

Neutral / Mixed

- I was already 'working from home' so the only impact was that everyone else was too and virtual communications became the norm - it made the world much smaller, and more connected. It emphasised the importance of face-to-face contact, however. Growing can be isolating and so can working from home!
- I was full time on a farm during COVID and the long hours got even longer, with extra stresses, although also rewarding with the new outlook on the value of local food production in our community

Negative

- I was working flat out through covid, initially on two farms, then juggling farming with multiple other roles (where subsequent lockdowns interfered with the work I was meant to be doing). Honestly it was so stressful. It's definitely made me want to redress my work/life balance and have a bit more flexibility in the work I'm doing. In future I would like to shift to part time farm work.
- Covid closed all the markets I supplied and left me with no income on an already financially challenged system. I have never caught up.

Forced a rethink

- I was working full time at a desk job in the media before and during covid. Covid highlighted the fragility of the global food system and highlighted the need for more local growers and food producers. I quit my job after lockdown and trained in horticulture. Covid changed everything for me.
- The strain of COVID with children out of school was too much and I wanted to leave farming
- That's how I became a farmer. My friend lost her agency worker veg pickers so employed her mates out of work. Me and my partner loved it, moved onto the farm and he still does it full time. I had to go off and get a different part time job as two seasonal incomes were too unstable.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Though some of the issues relating to part time farming are equally challenging to full time farmers, the following would go a long way to encourage a new generation of home grown land based talent.

For government and funders

- Support for new entrants on a part time basis, allowing motivated candidates to transition from non-farming backgrounds. This might include a retraining bonus (like some teaching courses), or support to farmers to employ trainees. Examples of this exist in other countries for instance the Japanese “Investment Fund for Farming Human Resources” programme³.
- Part time farming often relies on co-operation and shared responsibility. Support for cooperative farming enterprises, for instance Community Supported Agriculture which already exists as a successful model for part time farming.
- Better recognition in the planning and financial system towards part time farming enterprises. As one respondent put it “There are still old attitudes about 'hobby farming' from planners, Defra, banks etc. Small land areas can be very productive producing high yields (often through polycultures) and public goods.”

For farmer support organisations

- Good case studies of part time enterprises showing it can be profitable, and removing the stigma from being a part time farmer.
- Better access to training and advice for part time farmers, for example help on how to make operations more efficient for part time farmers.
- Better links between community gardens and allotment with commercial farming could help build a pathway to professionalising what is currently a hobby.



Part time farming has always happened, the professionalisation of farming has often been assumed to be by necessity full time, but this does not have to be. Developments in technology mean that farming now has access to a huge pool of talented and willing people. This transition could have a significant and positive effect on rural societies and our nation's health, however maximising this potential requires support and encouragement.

³ <https://ap.fftc.org.tw/article/1365>