Cabinet
9 October 2025
Farms Estate Strategy
For Decision

Cabinet Member:
Cllr R Biggs, Property & Assets and Economic Growth

Local Councillor(s): Various

Senior Leadership Team:
J Britton, Executive Director for Place Services

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Statutory Authority:

Report status: Public (the exemption paragraph is N/A)

1 Executive summary

1.1 Dorset Council's Farms Estate requires a renewed strategic framework to guide its management and development over the next ten years. The proposed Farms Estate Strategy sets out a vision for a sustainable and thriving agricultural estate that supports new entrants into farming, delivers environmental improvements, and enables economic prosperity. This strategy replaces the previous 2016–2021 plan and aligns with the Strategic Asset Management Plan adopted in October 2024.

1.2 The strategy divides holdings into Starter Farms, Progression Farms, Land, and Other Assets to support the development of the estate and its tenants. This approach enables targeted management and investment, ensuring that resources are directed where they can deliver the greatest impact. It also reflects national policy developments, including DEFRA's encouragement for councils to retain and invest in farm estates, and supports Dorset Council's priorities around climate, environment, economy, housing, and community resilience.

2 Recommendation(s)

2.1 Cabinet is asked to approve the adoption of the Farms Estate Strategy for a ten-year period, enabling the Council to deliver a structured, sustainable, and future-focused approach to the management of its agricultural holdings.

3 Reason for the recommendation(s)

3.1 The previous strategy expired in 2021, and the need for a new framework has been crystallised by changes in national agricultural policy and the Council's adoption of the Strategic Asset Management Plan. The new strategy provides clarity of purpose, aligns with statutory obligations under the Agriculture Act 1970, and supports the Council's wider ambitions for economic growth, environmental stewardship, and community development.

4 The Report

4.1 Vision and Objectives
The strategy's vision is to cultivate innovation, stewardship, and growth across the Farms Estate, ensuring a resilient future for Dorset's land and people. Its objectives are threefold: to support new entrants into farming, to deliver environmental improvements, and to ensure good estate management.

4.2 Aims and objectives of the Farms Estate:

- Support New Entrants: to provide opportunities and support for new farmers committed to sustainable agricultural and horticultural practices and sustainable food production;
- Environmental Improvement: to implement practices that conserve biodiversity, improve soil health and reduce emissions; and
- Good Estate Management: robust asset management of the estate, to ensure assets are in good condition, fit for purpose, compliant and future proofed where possible.

4.3 Support for New Entrants
Historically, Dorset Council has played a vital role in enabling access to farming for new entrants. It is proposed that this remains a core function of the estate. The strategy proposes fixed-term tenancies for Starter Farms (up to 12 years) and longer-term tenancies for Progression Farms (up to 25 years), creating a clear pathway for career development in agriculture. These tenancies will focus on sustainable food production and allow for diversification into agri-tourism and other rural enterprises.

4.4 Environmental Improvement
The strategy commits to ensuring that 70% of Council farms are managed using sustainable practices by 2030. Tenants will be supported to engage with national schemes such as the Sustainable Farming Incentive and Countryside Stewardship. The strategy also aligns with the Local Nature Recovery Strategy,

which highlights the importance of producing food in harmony with nature. Pilot projects in biodiversity net gain and renewable energy generation will be explored, including a current study at Clapcott's Farm in Spetisbury, and a renewable energy opportunity in Weymouth.

4.5 Good Estate Management
To maintain the estate's viability, the strategy outlines a programme of strategic asset management, compliance, and maintenance. A better standard of management is required to avoid risks of non-compliance and deterioration. The Council will implement annual inspections, improve tenant communication, and develop asset management plans for each holding.

5 Alternative options considered

5.1 Consideration was given to a commercial-only model, focusing on unrestricted farm lettings to maximise income. However, this approach would not support the Council's strategic priorities to the same extent as the proposed strategy, particularly in relation to supporting new entrants and delivering environmental outcomes.

6 Legal considerations

6.1 Dorset Council manages its Farms Estate in accordance with Part III of the Agriculture Act 1970, which places a statutory duty on local authorities to provide opportunities for individuals to farm on their own account. The proposed strategy continues to meet this obligation through structured tenancy arrangements.

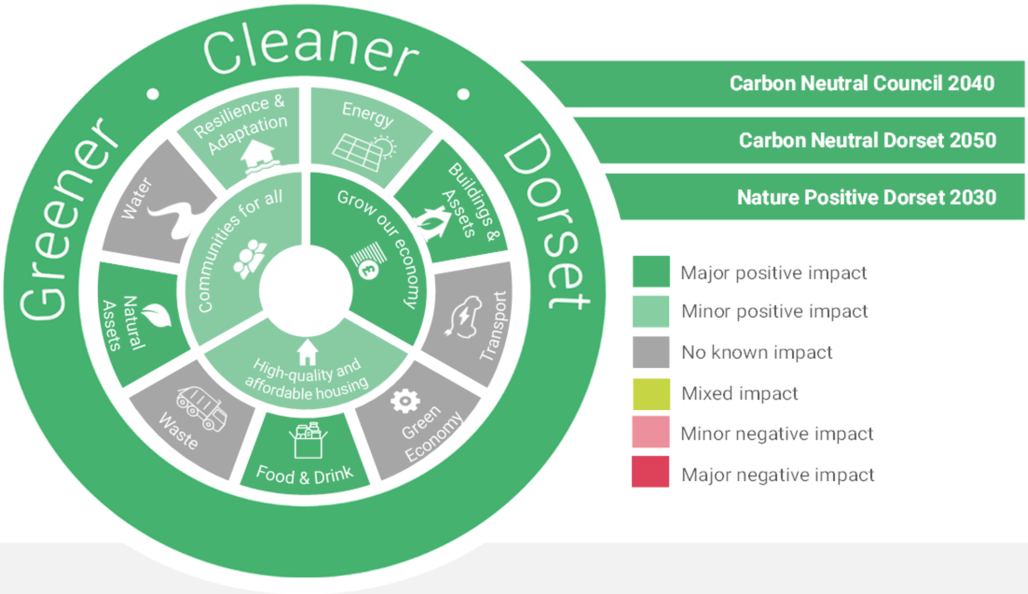
6.2 The strategy also supports the Council's legal responsibilities under the Environment Act 2021, particularly in relation to biodiversity net gain and the development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Legal Services have reviewed the strategy and will continue to provide advice on tenancy agreements, asset disposals, and compliance with relevant legislation, including landlord and tenant law, health and safety, and environmental regulations.

7 Financial implications

7.1 The estate has significant maintenance needs and funding will be required to address these issues, and asset disposals may be necessary to raise capital.

8. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

8.1 The strategy will have a major positive impact on buildings and assets, food and drink, and natural assets and ecology. It supports the Council's climate strategy through carbon reduction, biodiversity enhancement, and resilience planning.



Quantitative Impact on CEE targets (if known)		
	Unit	Number of units (+/-)
2030 - Natural asset extent & condition	Ha	Unknown
2040 - Operational Emissions	CO_2 (tonnes)	Unknown
2050 - County Emissions	CO_2 (tonnes)	Unknown

ACCESSIBLE TABLE SHOWING IMPACTS

Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Strategy Commitments	Impact
Energy	Minor positive impact
Buildings & Assets	Major positive impact
Transport	No known impact
Green Economy	No known impact
Food & Drink	Major positive impact
Waste	No known impact
Natural Assets & Ecology	Major positive impact
Water	No known impact
Resilience and Adaptation	Minor positive impact

Corporate Plan Aims	Impact
Grow our economy	**Major positive impact**
High-quality and affordable housing	**Minor positive impact**
Communities for all	**Minor positive impact**

9. Well-being and health implications

9.1 The strategy provides strategic direction and supports rural livelihoods. While some tenants may be affected by tenancy turnover, clear communication and fixed-term agreements will enable forward planning.

10. Other implications

10.1 None identified at this stage.

11. Risk implications

11.1 HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Medium

Residual Risk: Low

The current level of risk is assessed as medium to high due to the scale of investment required. With effective implementation, the residual risk is expected to be low.

12. Equalities

12.1 The strategy has been reviewed for equality impacts (with input sought from the Equality Diversity and Inclusion Officer) and is considered neutral overall. While opportunities may favour younger individuals, there are no age restrictions. The Council affirms its commitment to inclusive access, including for individuals with disabilities, provided they can meet tenancy obligations.

13. Appendices

Appendix 1 - Farms Estate Strategy

14. Background papers

None

15. Report sign-off

15.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s)