The Road to 2020
Towards healthy, humane and sustainable food, farming and land use

Soil Association
healthy soil, healthy people, healthy planet
Introduction

These are challenging and pivotal times for the Soil Association. Over the last 65 years we have endeavoured to bring the organic principles of care, ecology, fairness and health, into a world seemingly determined to ignore these values and put its faith instead in excessive consumerism and unconstrained growth. In this unequal struggle between a small charity — albeit not the only one sharing these values — and the might of global businesses driven by the need for shareholder returns, the losers include most other species, our health and humanity.

As we know, there is only one planet with finite resources to provide for the needs of our growing world population. We must find ways of meeting our needs while not compromising the prospects of future generations.

For us, that starts with the soil, that fragile vital layer of living material which sustains and recycles all life. Our core message is that building healthy soil is the most reliable way to ensure we produce enough good food for everyone, while minimising non-renewable inputs and increasing resilience in the face of climate change and a resource-constrained future.

Investing in the future is about people too. The Soil Association has always sought to help people understand the connections and interdependencies between all living things — soil, plant, animal, people — as this understanding engenders an attitude of responsibility and care. We will always campaign for human scale activity, meaningful and varied employment, family farms and businesses, grassroots and community enterprise, and business models that allow for an ethical focus.

The Soil Association seeks solutions that balance the needs of all: society, consumers, business, the natural environment and farm animals, both in the UK and globally. We work with those businesses and community initiatives which are putting organic principles into practice. We help policy makers both with pragmatic next steps and with adjusting the economic and legal framework to ensure that the right incentives are in place to encourage best practice to become the norm, not the exception.

Through our trading subsidiary, Soil Association Certification, we give confidence to people wishing to support the pioneering practitioners who meet tough organic and ethical standards in food and other products. With our mix of deep philosophy and values, real world knowledge and experience, and strong track record of success, we are ideally placed to provide solutions to the challenges ahead.

In this refreshed strategy, we build on our past successes and show how we will focus our work around two major themes, ‘facing the future’ and ‘good food for all’. We want to find the right balance between setting organic standards and other ways of improving the performance of our farming, food and land use systems. Our first major work theme, ‘facing the future’, will promote solutions that meet the needs of people for healthy food, fuel and fibre while protecting the natural world.

Our role in public health should be as powerful as it is in environment and farming. So ‘good food for all’, our second major theme, commits us to ensuring that organic, seasonal, healthy food is accessible to everyone, especially those who will most benefit from the most nutritious diet.

Across the organisation there will be a new emphasis on innovation, and on reaching out to people as citizens, consumers, growers and business people, to show the relevance of our work, even for those who are not eating or producing organically. We will continue to bring all perspectives around our table, to find the best ways of meeting our aspirations for healthy, humane and sustainable food, farming and production systems.

We think that Eve Balfour — who founded the Soil Association to highlight and research the connections between healthy soil, plants, animals and people — would approve.

Helen Browning obe
Chief executive
A new proposition

Our new strategy is built around a refreshed mission — to deliver solutions which secure healthy, humane and sustainable food, farming and land use, for the benefit of everyone.

This mission will be delivered through two key themes: ‘facing the future’ and ‘good food for all’. These themes will be supported by an ongoing commitment to ‘enabling change’ — supporting others to deliver organic, ethical and progressive solutions to the challenges ahead.

The context

- **A CHANGING PLANET**
  The resources we rely on to produce our food — water, soil, oil, phosphates — are running out, but the world population is growing at an alarming rate. Food production needs to meet the challenge of feeding the world fairly in the face of climate change.

- **CHANGING DIETS**
  Changing diets worldwide — especially increased consumption of sugar, refined carbohydrates and processed foods — are leading to an epidemic of obesity and Type 2 diabetes, creating profound public health challenges.

- **INCREASING EVIDENCE THAT THERE IS ANOTHER WAY**
  A number of studies, including the definitive 2008 International Assessment on Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), written by 400 international scientists, show that small scale, agro-ecological approaches to food and farming are likely to be the most effective way of feeding the world.

- **HIGH FOOD PRICES**
  World weather, biofuels, trade policies and commodity speculation have all conspired to increase food prices, leading to political unrest in some countries and inevitably affecting the world’s poorest most. Economic disruption has heightened the inequalities between rich and poor and at the same time seen a focus on ‘value’ food among retailers.

- **CHANGING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE**
  In the UK and internationally, a combination of economic austerity and political ideology is leading to a rapid down-sizing of government, a restructuring of institutions and reductions in public funding with a move towards more focus on community action.

Organic principles

The work of the Soil Association is built on the following organic principles

- **HEALTH**
  The health of soil, plant, animal, human and planet are one and indivisible

- **ECOLOGY**
  Agriculture should be rooted in living ecological systems

- **CARE**
  For the health and well-being of current and future generations and the natural environment

- **FAIRNESS**
  Build relationships with equity, respect, justice and stewardship of the shared world
If everyone in the world consumed as we do in the UK, we would need three planets’ worth of resources to support us. There is widespread consensus that business as usual in our food and farming system is not an option. In seeking solutions, two broad approaches are put forward. The first advocates the continuation of the trend towards specialisation, often industrialisation, increased farm size, fewer jobs and a dependence non-renewable inputs. The other seeks a more human scale, diverse and equitable approach with low use of non-renewable inputs and more skilled jobs.

This more humane approach must also be rooted in robust science and supported by an extensive evidence base. Our role is to show that we can genuinely secure a viable future for all of the Earth’s citizens whilst enhancing the beauty and diversity of the natural world. We will aspire to the organic principles of care, ecology, health and fairness, in everything that we do.

Under our theme of ‘facing the future’, we will work to bring our farming practice ever closer to those principles. This is not just about organic techniques, this is about sharing knowledge across all of agriculture. We must now work even harder to share our knowledge with all those who have an interest in improving the sustainability and resilience of their farming, growing and land-use systems.

There is no room for complacency. We must ensure that the solutions we advocate will genuinely meet the needs of the predicted population of nine billion people by 2050. We need to innovate, to encourage and support new models, to test novel technologies against our values, and demonstrate that we really can deliver optimal production of food, timber and textiles.

We want to provide solutions that help people to live, eat, farm and grow with the resources that are available. We want to pioneer new solutions to tackle climate change, support biodiversity, improve animal welfare and champion fairness. We will focus on what more do we need to deliver to face the future with confidence.
Through this work we want to make sure that we really can rely on organic systems to secure a humane solution to the immense challenges facing us. This means spreading best practice, identifying weaknesses in our current systems, and seeking the innovations that can help us remedy them.

Our organic standards are a vitally important way of improving practice on our farms and businesses. But standards are only one of the tools that we have at our disposal. Advice, advocacy or changing market conditions may sometimes be a better place to start. We can also develop other ways to help businesses improve their performance, as we are doing through our animal welfare work. We hope this approach will support all practitioners, organic or not.

This innovation and best practice should reach beyond the farm gate and beyond the UK. We have always stimulated and supported innovation in new routes to market and this should still be a key feature, especially when it helps tackle inequalities or reach new audiences.

We have perhaps neglected the international perspective, especially the development and poverty agenda. Given the endless refrain of ‘yes, but can you feed the world?’ we will strengthen our knowledge and expertise in an international context, working with partners. We will also continue to support important global initiatives on food, forestry, fishing, textiles and ethical trade.

The rewards of success

- UK governments will acknowledge the crucial role that organic and agro-ecological farming have in meeting the twin challenges of feeding the world while reducing climate and other environmental impacts.
- The total productivity of key crops and organic systems as a whole will be improved sustainably.
- More farmers and land managers will work in line with organic principles, with measurable benefits for people, animals and the environment.

Priorities for our work

- Monitor and communicate the outcomes of new work on ‘feeding the world’, the links between diet and health, and on the way that resource constraints affect farming and food production.
- Influence farming and food research agendas — through campaigns and practical projects like our low carbon farming and climate change programmes — to win farmers and the public a real voice in the research that is done in their name.
- Work with leading academic experts in the UK to improve the scientific methodology and data sets for determining the environmental impact of organic farming and food.
- Develop a soils programme to assist research and knowledge transfer on rapidly increasing the organic matter and carbon content of soils.
- Ensure farm practice delivers a good life for farm animals, through the AssureWel animal welfare outcomes project, and campaign on industrial livestock units and the over-use of antibiotics.
- Initiate road maps for all major sectors (e.g. dairy, health and beauty, aquaculture etc), to collectively clarify our aspirations and how we will achieve them.
- Move practice closer to our principles through learning networks, voluntary schemes, standards development and other initiatives.
- Advocate opportunities for policy makers (in England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the EU) to put in place the right incentives and support to encourage organic and agro-ecological farming and land use.
- Deploy more resource to influence the EU organic regulations, increasing the focus on outcomes.
Good food can transform people’s lives. It’s not just about the health benefits of a good diet. It’s about cultural cohesion, improving life chances and tackling some of the great health and social inequalities in our society. Our second theme — ‘good food for all’ — is not just about encouraging people to eat their five-a-day; it’s about mainstreaming our values, encouraging people to connect with, and care for, each other and the natural world through their relationship with food.

Diet related ill health is one of the biggest public health challenges of our time, already costing the NHS over £6 billion a year. Life chances for those with the poorest diets are dramatically diminished, with diet related diseases meaning that in some parts of the UK life expectancy is actually decreasing. In this context, food has become a key indicator of not only health outcomes, but a metaphor for wellbeing, and of how our resources are used and distributed.

For us, good food, the best food, is organically grown, minimally processed, fairly traded, fresh and seasonal. The work we will do in this area must ‘start where people are’. The most significant first step may be a shift away from over-processed food, the acquisition of cooking skills, or a new relationship with a food producer. It’s not about lecturing, it’s about understanding. Changing what people eat is notoriously hard, but we have experience of success, and an evidence-based approach to support people and communities through real changes.

Good food is a right, not a privilege. We want to promote solutions which make sure everyone can access food that is healthy for them, and the planet. We will campaign to reduce inequalities so that those people who most stand to benefit from good food are not excluded on the grounds of accessibility and affordability. This is not new territory for the Soil Association. Our founders understood the vital connection between food production and diet. Our work under this theme takes us back to the Soil Association’s roots as a key player in the health debate, acting in the public interest.
This work will be rooted in the success of our leadership of the Food for Life Partnership and its approach to transforming food culture in schools. Broadly this approach links changes in catering with food education, farm visits and the development of growing and cooking skills.

We want to secure the future of this work in schools, but also to explore how we can extend the learning from this model to other sectors and expand through concentrated programmes in communities around the UK. We also want to support the development of the Food for Life catering mark to deliver large scale changes to catered food outlets, from hospitals to workplaces.

This work will lead us into some vitally important new territory, tackling issues like the organic price premium and other barriers to access head on. Sometimes solutions will be found in reducing waste, optimising productivity and encouraging access to land for growing. As energy prices spiral organic systems should become a lot more competitive. We need to ensure that fair prices are paid according to the cost of production not as automatic premiums. And we need to challenge perception; already many organic products are no more expensive than a quality non-organic alternative.

The rewards of success

- The work of the Food for Life Partnership will be normalised, reaching at least half the schools in the UK.
- Good quality, healthy food will be the norm in both public sector and commercial catering, with special emphasis on providing healthy options for children and the most vulnerable in society.
- Town and cities across the UK will recognise and celebrate the benefits of a joined-up approach to healthy and sustainable food.
- The demographic profile of organic consumers will broaden — and in growing the market, healthy organic food will be accessible to all.

Priorities for our work

- Secure a future for the Food for Life Partnership, ensuring that the success of the programme is extended to more schools throughout the UK.
- Launch a Sustainable Food Cities Network, inspiring action across towns and cities, working with local and health authorities, producers and citizens to enable positive change that encourages healthy and sustainable communities.
- Extend the reach of the Food for Life catering mark throughout the public sector and encourage take-up in restaurants, workplaces and everywhere that meals are served.
- Research into the quality of food served in hospitals, celebrating the remarkable examples of best practice and encouraging more hospital trusts to follow these examples.
- Successfully conclude our work as part of the Making Local Food Work coalition, supporting a thriving network of community supported agriculture projects and organic buying groups.
- Stimulate and support innovation in new routes to market that meet the ‘good food for all’ challenge — linking producers directly to consumers of food.
- Test new approaches to tackling food injustice amongst those communities experiencing the greatest health inequalities.
Our policy and advocacy work is inspired by the pioneering work of the businesses and community initiatives in the Soil Association network. We are powerful because we represent those who deliver or enable change. We must understand their perspectives and concerns, supporting them to thrive and deliver best practice, making sure their triumphs are celebrated and rewarded.

One of our key vehicles in supporting and enabling change is the provision of an independent and trusted verification of those organisations who support our mission and values. Through our trading subsidiary, Soil Association Certification, we work to create and inspire consumer trust and provide opportunities and support to our licensees for continuous improvement and market development. We also work to improve people’s understanding of organic principles and to ensure that the vision, integrity and trust at the core of our certification process are understood by anyone purchasing a product that carries our symbol.

We want to ensure that we are giving the best possible service and support to our licensees. It is the pioneering business practice of our farmers, growers, retailers and processors which makes our organisation such a powerful voice for change.

We are very aware that the knowledge that is embedded within the organic movement holds many of the answers to the challenges facing the world today. Over the last 20 years we have had some success in increasing the public’s understanding of food and farming. This has resulted in both the creation of a market for ethically produced and certified products as well as encouraging the uptake of organic farming practices by non-organic businesses. We want to grow that public understanding and encourage that knowledge sharing further — to help our pioneers progress as well as to improve the sustainability of all farming and food systems, even if they are unlikely to become certified as fully organic. To that end we will want to ensure that all farmers and growers — whether they are certified with us or not, and whether or not they are organic — feel fully welcomed as producer members.
We are committed to helping our pioneering symbol holders to thrive. To this end we need to ensure we fully understand the values and market drivers affecting all aspects of the sectors our licensees operate in. We will provide resources to help build recognition and demand for products carrying our symbol and we will bring together all parties, to ensure effective organic and ethical supply chains. We will provide tools and develop new opportunities to support a thriving organic and ethical market, including supporting our pioneers in developing their own markets.

We will continue to develop our business model to ensure rigorous efficiencies in our certification processes and cut bureaucracy wherever possible. We want our symbol to represent ‘best in class’ for organic and a crucial part of that is that the experience of being certified by us is respected for its rigour and professionalism. We will continue to invest in our people and in our symbol holders to deliver this core objective, as well as to secure a reputation of integrity with consumers and retailers alike.

The rewards of success

► The market for organic food and other certified products will be growing and vibrant.
► There will be an increased number of thriving Soil Association symbol holders.
► The number of Soil Association producer members, who are not organic or Soil Association symbol holders, will increase.
► There will be a wide range of routes to market for organic and ethically certified products including retail, wholesale, catering, direct marketing, farm gate and through community initiatives.

Priorities for our work

► Share and enable best practice among the pioneering organic businesses we work with.
► Extend the impact of our ideas through certification schemes such as Soil Association organic and the Food for Life catering mark.
► Promote Soil Association producer membership to share organic techniques among the wider farmer and grower community.
► Communicate to businesses and consumers through a range of campaigns, events and communications.
► Make the case for organic food and farming — and ensure that policy makers understand and respond to the specific needs of organic businesses.
► Improve efficiency and reduce the complexity of organic inspection through changes in information technology.
► Provide online tools to assist small and medium sized businesses in reaching new markets and promoting their products.
► Support grassroots and community initiatives through signposting and advice via the Soil Association website and other communications.
► Extend the reach of new schemes, such as our ethical trade initiative.
► Increase our involvement in forestry and agro-forestry systems.
► Deliver schemes that support and celebrate our pioneers and communicate their success widely.
► Work with and influence retailers, to increase listings, improve communication to their customers, and to ensure a fair deal for both producers and consumers of organic food.
► Investigate and promote business and social enterprise models that encourage ethical practice.
To achieve the ambitions in this strategy we need a solid foundation of excellent and motivated staff, a secure business model, sufficient reserves to allow for the unexpected, and the strong support of members, donors and other funders.

The Soil Association is a membership charity, founded to build an informed body of public opinion. That is still our ambition. The new strategy will refine our proposition to our public members and provide them with more clarity about the changes we want to secure in the world. We also want to improve the way we work as an organisation.

We must be rigorous in our analysis; honest and accurate in our presentation. We want to be sure we stand on solid ground. Too often we are cast as ‘anti science’, using our principles rather than evidence to make our case. However on some issues, like our campaigning against the routine use of antibiotics, we have developed real authority and we want to build on this approach, building the expertise amongst our staff so that we can ensure our responses to issues are honest, accurate and evidence-based.

We must reach out and ensure our work is relevant to as many people as possible. Our founders claimed our work concerns everyone, yet too often we have concentrated on talking to those closest to us. Reaching out to new audiences is not only critical to delivering our ‘good food for all’ theme, we want to widen the number of people we speak to, full stop. That means increasing the number of non-organic farmers we work with, continually widening our influence and demonstrating that we have a useful contribution to make.

We will aim to understand our audiences, and start where people are. If we are going to reach out effectively, we cannot expect that people will understand our organic principles immediately. Food for Life has demonstrated that ‘starting where people are’ and providing easy first steps to engage with people can be incredibly powerful. We need to listen to people, understand where they are coming from and find creative ways to engage them in our work and our ideas.

We will aim high and have no complacency about our achievements. The threats we are facing are huge and time is not on our side. We need to think big to stimulate real change in food, farming and land use. We should be unafraid to have high, but realistic, ambitions for our work. At the same time, we cannot rest on our laurels. We should be rightly proud of our achievements, but we must not stand still.

We will continue to support and work constructively with those who share our values. We cannot achieve everything alone. Our future will be built on partnerships with other organisations and individuals who share our vision for the future of food, farming and land use.

We must be bold and fearless in presenting and defending our organic principles. We have something unique and vitally important to say. The philosophy of our founders, based on the inter-connectivity of the health of soil, plant, animal and man, is ever more relevant and inspiring. We are confident and proud to take this vision forward into the world.