

Norfolk Farming Conference 2025

11 February 2025

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Charles Whitaker, Managing Partner

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NFC Programme



This year's programme and speaker line-up:

0815-0900 Delegate arrival – tea/coffee

0900-0905 Launch of Norfolk Rural Business Awards – Norfolk County Council

0905-0915 Welcome and introduction – Dr Belinda Clarke OBE Conference Chair

0915-0945 Opening Keynote Address – Daniel Zeichner MP Minister of State
(Food Security and Rural Affairs)

0945-1030 Session 1 – Changing requirements of the food supply chain

Vidyanath Gururajan – CEO Agri-tech – Branston Limited

Ash Gilman – Director Agricultural Strategy Cranswick Plc

Prof Debbie Sparkes – Agriculture Science Manager Diageo

1030-1100 Case Study 1

James Green – Group Director of Agriculture G's – Implications for Norfolk's farmers

1100-1130 Coffee break

1130-1215 Session 2 – Is the UK prepared? Biosecurity for plants and animals

Prof Jonathan Jones FRS DL – The Sainsbury Laboratory

Richard McIntosh – Assistant Chief Plant Health Officer Defra

Sascha Van Helvoort – Outbreak Veterinary Head APHA

1215-1245 – Case Study 2 – Ian Baker – North Farm Livestock

1245-1345 – Lunch and networking

1345-1425 – Keynote Address – Sean Henry Rickard Economist

1425-1445 – Tea break

1445-1530 Session 3 – Mapping the landscape – Auditing the land for food production
and the environment

Peter Craven – Head of Agriculture Natural England

Sir Charles Godfray CBE FRS – Director Oxford Martin School

Diana Overton – Group Managing Director Frontier

1530-1600 Case Study 3 – Archie Ruggles-Brise – Spains Hall Estate – Land management vision

1600-1625 – Keynote Closing address – Paul Temple
Wold Farm Driffield, Vice-Chairman Global Farmer Network

1625-1630 – Closing remarks – Conference Chair

Conference Introduction

Poul Hovesen

Farming Director and Deputy President RNAA



A turning point, a paradigm shift, a new era, a mindset for change? However we look at Norfolk's farming and agri-industries a new era is beckoning. A need to find solutions not problems, a need to find inspirational people who will enable us to survive and flourish. Norfolk has an abundance of talent whether it is in pure agriculture, science and technology or in retail and professional services, there are opportunities on our doorstep.

This conference offers ideas and case studies showcasing innovation, co-operation, inspiration and leadership plus the opportunity to question and investigate how farming and agri-industries can create a new future for those who wish to think outside the box.

I hope that you will join me and many others for this vanguard conference.

Norfolk born and bred, Belinda is driven by the belief that innovation is a vital driver for agricultural productivity, environmental sustainability and economic growth.

Starting her career in research in Norwich (let's talk crop diseases, and starch production in peas and potatoes), she then developed experience at the interface between industry, innovation and government and became determined to bring farmers, researchers and technology developers closer together to improve the efficiency of communication and understanding between them to accelerate the adoption of new innovations on farms.



Dr Belinda Clarke OBE

Director AgriTech-E

Over the last 8 years she has led the development and creation of the award-winning membership network which is Agri-TechE. With members from across the UK and internationally, Agri-TechE is one of the largest and longest-established agri-tech innovation ecosystems in Europe and in 2019 was named national Networking Group of the Year at the UK SME Business Awards.

Daniel Zeichner has been the Labour MP for Cambridge since 2015 and was previously a South Norfolk District Councillor.

He currently holds the Government post of Minister of State (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) and has an enduring interest in agriculture and food issues.

Daniel Zeichner MP

Minister of State

(Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs)



Session One

Changing requirements of the Food Supply Chain

Vidyanath (Vee) Gururajan is an Innovator, Co-inventor and a chartered Mechanical Engineer.

Vee has been with Branston Limited, one of the largest retail potato packers in the UK for 19 years and has held a varied portfolio within the business, including 15 years as Executive Board Director.

Vee is currently a board member and CEO of a group of Agri-tech companies: B-hive Innovations Limited, providing commercial R&D for Agri industry; HarvestEye Limited, a crop insight company for fresh produce industry

Vidyanath Gururajan
CEO Agri- tech
Branston Limited



Ash Gilman is the Director of Agricultural Strategy for Cranswick Plc, the British premium food producer. Cranswick was founded in 1975 by a group of Yorkshire pig farmers who diversified into milling feed. Almost 50 years later, it is focussed on premium fresh pork, poultry, convenience, gourmet products and acquired a pet food business in 2022. Cranswick is now over 55% self-sufficient in pork, and 100% self sufficient in chicken through its owned farming operations.

Ash has extensive experience in managing large agri-businesses and vertically integrated supply chains direct into retail, food service and processing customers. Starting out his professional career as Farms Manager for Velcourt plc, he was subsequently Farms Director for Norfolk based Maurice Crouch Growers Ltd, a large scale, multi-sited leafy salad and brassica producer.



Ash Gilman
Director Agricultural Strategy
Cranswick PLC

Debbie has a strong agricultural background and 30 years experience in research across crop physiology, agronomy and sustainable agriculture.

Debbie's research has always been industry focussed, working in collaboration with growers, levy boards and the wider agri-food industry. While at Nottingham she collaborated with the BBRO on a range of projects on sugar beet and was a member of their Technical Board and Stakeholder Board.

In April 2023, she joined Diageo as Agave Science Manager where her role focussed on the sustainable supply of agave for tequila production.

Debbie now works as Agriculture Science Manager across a wide range of crops in Diageo's supply chain including barley, sorghum and aniseed.

Prof Debbie Sparkes
Agriculture Science Manager
Diageo



Case Study

James Green

Group Director of Agriculture G's
Implications for Norfolk's farmers



In 2019 James was appointed as Group Director of Agriculture at G's, one of Europe's leading international salad and vegetable producers. James is energised by the opportunity to make a real difference as we enter what he believes is a golden age of agriculture.

"As a seasoned finance professional with extensive experience in the agricultural industry I am interested in quantifying the value we add to each bottom line; profit, planet and people." Prior to this appointment James was most recently the Group CFO at G's (5 yrs) and before that the UK Commercial Finance Director (9 yrs).

Since graduating from Nottingham University in agricultural science and German, James has worked as a Finance professional, gaining his professional qualifications with Deloitte in both audit assurance and corporate finance. During his career James has applied a commercial mentality to the finance function and played a key role in leading the strategic development of the business.

In his earlier career James managed several European businesses, primarily in the broad acre agricultural commodity sector, leading multicultural teams as well as a dairy farming business in Germany and a cotton farming operation in Tanzania.

A fluent German speaker, family man, keen skier and novice sailor!



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Partner, Agriculture

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Session Two

Is the UK Prepared? Biosecurity for plants and animals

After a PhD at the Plant Breeding Institute in Cambridge and a postdoc at Harvard, JJ worked 1983-8 at an early US agbiotech company, AGS. At the Sainsbury Lab (TSL) on the JIC site in Norwich since 1988, he is a leading researcher in plant disease resistance. His lab works on plant immune receptor mechanisms, their diversity and their deployment.

The recent Genetic Technologies (Precision Breeding) Act is enabling his team to develop precision bred potato varieties that are resistant to late blight and to two important viruses (PVY and PLRV). He is an outspoken advocate of modern genetic solutions to crop disease problems and led a recent policy briefing. He co-founded and is a Director of norfolkplantsciences.com and norfolkhealthyproduce.com that brings engineered purple tomatoes to market and is also a Director of BioPotatoes.com. JJ was elected Fellow of the Royal Society in 2003, an international member of US National Academy of Sciences in 2015 and a DL for Norfolk in 2023.



Scan here
to read the
recent policy
briefing

Prof Jonathan Jones FRS DL
The Sainsbury Laboratory



Richard McIntosh is Defra's Assistant Chief Plant Health Officer, with specific responsibilities for leading domestic plant health policy and risk and horizon scanning functions. This includes supporting Ministers and delivering policies and processes to identify and mitigate plant health threats, working in collaboration with plant health authorities across the UK.



Richard McIntosh
Assistant Chief Plant Health Officer
DEFRA

Sascha van Helvoort is the Veterinary Head of Outbreak Delivery at the Animal & Plant Health Agency (APHA), providing strategic, tactical and technical leadership for APHA's operations during the current Bluetongue and Avian Influenza outbreaks. With extensive experience in managing disease outbreaks, her career began with the Swine Fever outbreak in the Netherlands in 1997.

Since joining APHA, she has been actively involved in various Avian Influenza outbreaks and is currently engaged in managing both Bluetongue and Avian Influenza outbreaks.

Sascha previously served as the Veterinary Head of Field Delivery at APHA, following a career as a Veterinary Advisor in the pharmaceutical industry and as a veterinarian in various large animal practices.

Sascha Van Helvoort
Outbreak Veterinary Head
APHA



Case Study

Ian Baker

North Farm Livestock

Ian is a part owner & director of North Farm Livestock Ltd which is an outdoor pig production business supplying free-range pork into a major food retailer. Ian is involved in the day to day management of the business alongside other family members.

Outside of this, Ian is a director at The AF Group and a member of the Red Tractor Pigs Board. Ian's background is in financial services and he has over 25 years of experience in providing support and finance to agricultural businesses of all types and sizes.

Ian spent a number of years working at Barclays, concluding his time there as the National Head of Agri-Food and Landed Estates.



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Keynote Address

Séan Henry Rickard Economist

A professional economist with expertise in policy and forecasting, Sean Henry Rickard served as Chief Economist for the National Farmers Union from 1987 to 1995 before transitioning to academia, where he specialized in the economics of strategy at Cranfield School of Management and directed MBA programmes from 1995 to 2012.

During this period, he also acted as a government academic adviser on food and agricultural policy. Currently he leads his own consultancy, producing economic reports, forecasts and strategies for the agri-food sector.

A visiting lecturer and research fellow at the Royal Institution, he also chairs First Milk's Members' Council and is the author of *The Economics of Organisations and Strategy* (McGraw-Hill).



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Session Three

Mapping the Landscape - Auditing the land for food production and the environment

Raised on a family farm in South Lincolnshire, Peter studied Agribusiness Management at Wye College before returning home to specialise in potato and daffodil production alongside nature.

In 2018, attending the Worshipful Company of Farmers' Advanced Agri-Business Management Course was transformative, leading him to leadership roles, including the NFU Potato Policy Group, the OFC Emerging Leaders Programme and earning a Nuffield Farming Scholarship. After completing the IAgRM Leadership Programme last year, Peter joined Natural England as Head of Agriculture.



Peter Craven
Head of Agriculture
Natural England

Charles Godfray is a population biologist with broad interests in science and the interplay of science and policy. He has spent his career at Oxford University and Imperial College London and is currently Professor of Population Biology and Director of the Oxford Martin School at Oxford.

His research has involved experimental and theoretical studies in population and community ecology, epidemiology and evolutionary biology.

Currently he is working on the control of malaria vectoring mosquitoes using novel genetic interventions, the health, environmental and economic consequences of changing patterns of food consumption and UK land-use policy.

He is particularly interested in food security and chaired the Lead Expert Group of the UK Government Office of Science's Foresight project on the Future of Food and Farming and until recently chaired Defra's Science Advisory Council.



Sir Charles Godfray CBE FRS
Director
Oxford Martin School

Diana has spent the last 12 years with Frontier Agriculture, promoted to Group Finance Director in July 2017, before becoming the Deputy Managing Director in April 2024 and moving into the Group Managing Director role with effect from January 2025.

Diana has most recently had responsibility for Frontier's Technology, HR, Mergers and Acquisitions and Future Group Strategy. Frontier Agriculture is the UK's leading crop production and grain marketing business, recognised for its close customer relationships with farmers and grain consumers and its successful management of the arable supply chain. Frontier's mission is to be the first choice partner for crop production and crop marketing for UK farmers, and the first choice employer in UK agriculture.



Diana Overton
Group Managing Director
Frontier

Case Study

Archie Ruggles-Brise

Spains Hall Estate

Land Management Vision



Archie is a 2025 Nuffield Farming Scholar exploring the title "Balancing the Books. Does Multifunctional productivity represent optimal land use?"

Archie's scholarship is generously sponsored by the Royal Norfolk Agricultural Association.

When not travelling Archie manages the day to day running of Spains Hall Estate's 860 hectares of ancient woodland, grassland, tenanted farms, nut agroforestry and beaver and natural flood management project in Essex.

He masterminded the reintroduction of beavers into a fenced enclosure in 2019 to combat village flooding – the first project of its type in East Anglia. Since then, he has designed and delivered the largest nut agroforestry scheme in Europe, and pioneered an holistic impact appraisal for on farm water called the 'Whole Farm Reservoir'

Archie's external engagements including working with other organisations to explore new sustainable land use projects, enviro-tech and strategic approaches to multifunctional land use.

He currently consults for Zulu Ecosystems and AtkinsRéalis. He is a trustee of the Essex and Suffolk Rivers Trust, Director of the North Essex Farm Cluster, a member of the CLA's Forestry and Natural Capital Committee and adviser to both the Essex Climate Action Commission and Essex Local Nature Partnership.

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Keynote Closing Address

Paul Temple

Wold Farm Driffeld

Vice Chairman of Global Farmer Network

Farmer in a family partnership on tenanted land managing environmental stewardship grasses with a suckler beef herd using Stabiliser genetics. Growing wheat for seed, barley, oilseed rape and beans under Conservation Agriculture. Driven by science and chasing sustainability for the next generation.

Involved over the years in local, regional, national, european and global farming organisations. Currently vice-chairman of the Global Farming Network based in the USA which advocates trade and the adoption of science.

Co-chair of the United Nations Environmental Project Farmers group based in Nairobi, taking the commercial farming perspective into a global environment platform.

Past winner of Farmers Weekly Mixed Farmer of the Year, finalist for Soil Farmer of the Year Award, part of the team that won the FACE - Bayer Inspiring Educator Award.



Norfolk County Council

Norfolk County Council actively supports our rural communities through many initiatives, including our County Farm Estate. This year we are launching our new Rural Business Awards, in partnership with the Royal Norfolk Agricultural Association.

The Categories are:

- Best Rural Community Initiative
- Best Farming Innovation Adopter
- Best Food Producer
- Norfolk's 'Unsung Hero'
- Best Drink Maker
- Best Farming Champion
- Best Emerging Talent
- Best High Growth Business
- Best Sustainable Land Use or Farming Exemplar

Help us celebrate and nominate the people and businesses that fly the flag for Norfolk by visiting and sharing the link:

www.norfolk.gov.uk/business/norfolk-rural-business-awards



Exhibitors



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www.forestryengland.uk

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Broads Authority

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Norfolk Rivers Trust

www.norfolkriverstrust.org

As an independent and trusted charity, our team of experienced ecologists and advisers take a river catchment-based approach (CaBA) to develop practical, cost-effective and integrated long-term solutions.

Working across Norfolk (and in the Cam and Ely Ouse Catchment), the scale of the challenge necessitates partnership working with a wide range of organisations including farmers, landowners, water companies, government bodies and the third sector, as well as the general public.

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Soil Capital

www.soilcapital.com

Soil Capital is a mission-driven company with long expertise in regenerative agriculture and low-carbon transition of farms. It was founded in 2013 as an independent agronomy firm by three farming and finance professionals. The initial structure renamed Soil Capital Farming (sister company) has advised and managed over 200,000 hectares of farmland in transition to more profitable and regenerative agriculture across 15 countries & 4 continents.

These years of experience working alongside farmers led Soil Capital to launch in 2019, Europe's first certified carbon payment programme to accelerate the regenerative transition.

North Farm Livestock Ltd

North Farm Livestock started in 1982 as a family-run business, is renowned for producing high quality free-range pork and operates across several sites in North Norfolk.

Farmacy

www.farmacy.plc.uk

Farmacy plc was formed in 1999 and successfully provides independent agronomy, environmental, precision and nutritional services to UK growers.

Norfolk FWAG

www.norfolkfwag.co.uk

Norfolk Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) is a not-for-profit organisation that is run by farmers and conservation specialists. We are dedicated to supporting Norfolk farmers and landowners to manage their land for the enrichment of wildlife.

Our farming advisory work is steered by our ongoing projects and our farmer members; our services have been created specifically with Norfolk farmers and landowners in mind.

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Natural England

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Food & Farming Discovery Trust

www.ffdt.co.uk

Offering a year-round programme of events for students from primary to sixth-form age, the FFDT seeks to educate and inspire young people about food, farming and the countryside.



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Brown&Co is a leading provider of consultancy, agency and professional services across the rural, agricultural, environmental, commercial and residential sectors, providing a total of 50 different services across 14 offices throughout the UK, Europe and the Caribbean.

"In contrast to recent announcements by Government, our Firm remains dedicated to supporting the British agricultural sector, advocating for policies that protect the interests of commercial & family farms and their businesses to safeguard livelihoods and provide sustainable, profitable returns from land use for both food production and environmental benefits." – Charles Whitaker, Managing Partner, Brown&Co.

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Norfolk County Council

Norfolk County Council is proud to sponsor the Norfolk Farming Conference, as the County Council support the agricultural sector in many ways.

The County Farms Estate offer tenancies of various sizes to those who are looking to get started in farming. We have produced the Norfolk Economic Strategy which includes focus on our important rural areas.

We work with partners such as Water Resources East, the Broads Authority, Broadland Food Innovation Centre, the Agrifood Industry Council and our universities, in developing solutions to agricultural and food processing issues. Visit our event stand for information on business support, grants, staff training, apprenticeship schemes and the second year of the Norfolk Rural Business Awards.

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