



## Rising up from the pandemic

Whether you're a farmer, processor or retailer, there isn't a single agri-food business in the country that hasn't been tested in some way by the Coronavirus pandemic.

For some, the last few months has revealed issues they might not have realised existed in their operations. For others, it has forced them to quickly change and adapt to respond to supply chain demands, bringing both challenges as well as fresh opportunities.

The Promar Sustainability team has been on hand to support clients throughout the pandemic, and we're committed to continuing to provide guidance

and help to food and farm businesses as they navigate this new landscape we all find ourselves in.

From taking a fresh look at the way the supply chain functions, to considering diversification opportunities and assessing business long-term sustainability, we strongly believe that good things can come from the challenges we've all faced.

With that in mind, our first Promar Pulse newsletter not only highlights the positive ways the UK food chain has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also shares the ways the Promar Sustainability team thinks agri-food businesses and the supply chain can come out of this stronger than ever.

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# Putting food chain resilience to the test

**John Giles, Promar Sustainability Divisional Director**

The last few months might have revealed the fragility of food supply chains, but they have also shown us how resilient they can be too. While panic buying led to supermarket shelves being cleared of some products, most retailers were quick to ensure supplies were replenished. Consumers were mostly able to get what they wanted — even if some goods were limited.

For agricultural or food businesses supplying the foodservice sector, where demand almost disappeared overnight, things have been tough, and it has reiterated the need to have a balance in terms of supply channels.

There have been some winners, however: online retail, which has seen strong growth in recent years, grew significantly in a few weeks. Convenience-based outlets and local retailers, including farm shops, have also done well as consumers sought to limit their travel.

## **Testing resilience**

For businesses which have already dealt with Brexit uncertainty, climate volatility and disease pressure this year, the pandemic has been a further test of resilience. Longer-term, consumer confidence could be

a challenge as the economic impacts of the virus take their toll.

Hard-pressed consumers might stop buying high-value products, cut back on purchases, or trade down to more value-oriented options. The foodservice sector could also struggle if restrictions tighten once again during the winter months.

## **Dealing with shock**

For most of the supply chain, the rest of 2020 and beyond will be challenging. Globally, the resilience of agri-food companies and supply chains will be critical. This should be constantly looked at, but it's been bought in to a sharper focus by COVID-19.

While many companies used Brexit as an opportunity to review procurement, buying and selling, staffing, management, supplier relationships and technology, businesses would be wise to perform similar reviews now too. COVID-19 restrictions won't last forever. But the impacts of what we're going through — and what lies ahead for consumers and agri-food businesses alike — may last for some time to come.

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# COVID innovations

Sarah Jones, Promar Sustainability consultant, looks at the ways UK farm businesses refused to let lockdown get them down

There's nothing like a global pandemic to showcase the hard work, entrepreneurship and caring nature of Britain's food and farming community.

Customer-facing local food businesses such as farm shops, local veg boxes and milk delivery services have all benefitted from people breaking their normal shopping habits and buying food more locally. This sudden increase in demand has led to collaboration across businesses.

Locally to me, I've seen butchers and bakers working together, and local food delivery services like [British Food Box](#) and [The Modern Milkman](#) adding more products and services. Other local companies have been sharing resources such as vans to make deliveries.



# A change in direction



Tom Gill, Promar Head of Sustainability, looks at five ways our food systems can change for the better post-COVID

Farmers and food producers may have become accustomed to volatility in recent years, but the upheaval caused by the coronavirus hit businesses in ways few could have envisaged.

Given the speed in which producers, processors and retailers were able to react to some of the immediate — and significant — challenges the coronavirus created, it has shown that the industry is able to adapt in positive ways.

The question now though, is

can that adaptation continue, and could it lead to better things in terms of long-term sustainability?

Things don't simply get better by themselves, and if we want to see meaningful change, people at every stage of the food production process needs to take responsibility to make gradual but meaningful improvements.

With that in mind, here are five ways the agri-food sector can take action to become more sustainable post-COVID.



## 1 Think big, start small, act fast

Agri-food businesses traditionally work independently, so seeing themselves, and their actions, as a piece in a giant jigsaw puzzle can be challenging.

Businesses of all shapes and sizes need to get out of the mindset that collective actions won't have an impact on the wider world.

So what does that mean in



practice? Well, it's about thinking big, starting small, and acting fast.

This doesn't just require businesses to look at the surface of their operations, but to dig deep, analyse data, and identify changes they can make

immediately, before making plans for the next two, five, or ten years.

Analysing data helps to identify hotspots and drive more specific and impactful solutions, and help businesses communicate their plans more clearly, enabling them to justify their actions without fear of criticism.

It's also been interesting to see big business ideas transformed to the farmgate level in terms of maintaining consumer and worker safety.

From online shops to click-and-collect, as well as drive-thru farm shops, small enterprises have moved quickly to set up new ways of doing business.

These stories have been inspiring to my family, who run a livestock and arable farm alongside a farm shop.

We've been facing challenges as a result of Covid-19, and in a currently unsocial world, social media has given us reassurance that other farm businesses are coping in this new world of operating differently.

Of course, having fun and making people smile is important at the moment, and is giving my family food for thought.

We can take these lessons to work with us tomorrow, and help make sure that we are continuing to support the public even when the way we usually support our customers has changed.

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## 2 Engage - especially at a local level

We've seen during the pandemic that local connections matter. Many farms, food businesses and retailers quickly found themselves at the heart of their communities as people chose to buy food locally. While some consumers will undoubtedly return to their 'pre-covid' shopping habits, working to keep those connections in place is something agri-food businesses should work on.

Retailers like Morrisons and Sainsbury's have shown local communities can be partners in driving business sustainability, but it's important to remember that those relationships can't be one-way. Identifying needs, capturing knowledge and finding solutions to local problems will all help maintain food businesses' standing in the eyes of the community.



looking at operations critically and measuring diligently. It's only through understanding its current performance, as well as identifying vulnerabilities and risks, that a business can identify where to make changes, and also monitor the impact of any adjustments. With policy change on the horizon in the UK due to the Agriculture Bill, the Clean Air Strategy and post-Brexit trade agreements, understanding their starting point is key to enabling UK farmers to tell their story, and proving their operations' value.

## 4 Recognise different people value different things

Consumers and stakeholders across the supply chain might value different factors in your business over others, and that might impact upon what businesses measure and track — as well as the broader messages they and the wider industry tells.



This might mean that discussions around the sustainability of British food focus more on the fair treatment of people, or on waste or packaging issues — social and ethical elements which haven't necessarily been prioritised in the sustainability debate in the past.



It's unlikely everyone in the chain will share all the same values, but supporting worker rights, mental health and wellbeing, generating efficiencies, and delivering on big sustainability agendas are factors most people will find some affiliation with.

## 5 Work together

Farmers have always been good at coming together in a crisis, but what's been interesting in recent months is the way the whole supply chain has worked more closely. Through work we've done with businesses such as the Co-Op, Waitrose and Arla, we've seen firsthand that working more collaboratively across the chain can drive innovation and more fairness in the system.



Working together doesn't have to be on a grand scale such as a formal cooperative though — it could be as simple as asking for help from another business or neighbour, or seeking the expertise and guidance of a professional company if they need advice. Having these links and networks can help when it comes to making decisions, sourcing inputs, or being prepared for future shocks.

## 3 Empower your business to be more sustainable

If businesses are serious about becoming more sustainable, then a vital first step is to understand where they are starting from — and that means

If you're wondering what direction to take your business in order to become more sustainable, our team of experts is here to help. From audits and assessments to long-term planning, we can offer the support and guidance you need to make sure your operation is ready for whatever happens next.

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