PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO AGRICULTURE, THE FARMED LANDSCAPE AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Drawing on published surveys to provide some observations about public priorities, concerns and implications for policy making

January 2010

Discussion Paper prepared for Agricultural Change and Environment Observatory

Illustrative photographs courtesy of Natural England
PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO AGRICULTURE, THE FARMED LANDSCAPE AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT:

Drawing on published surveys to provide some observations about public priorities, concerns and implications for policy making

January 2010

Discussion Paper prepared for Agricultural Change and Environment Observatory

Observatory contact: Tony Pike (tony.pike@defra.gsi.gov.uk)

Summary

At the heart of a democratic society, public policy is expected to be both responsive to societal views and accountable to all citizens. Public policy is informed, but not governed, by public views. In this respect, understanding the attitudes and preferences of the public at large, as citizens, as taxpayers and as consumers of goods and services is important, both in their own right to help shape policy priorities but also as a check on stakeholder and lobby group opinions. Additionally, public attitudes towards farming and the natural environment are important for reasons other than to directly shape policy, as attitudes are a key determinant of behaviours and could influence purchasing decisions. This paper looks primarily at quantitative attitudinal survey data from the public / consumers (basic insight), puts individual surveys into context and also explores some techniques to add value.

This short paper:

- Builds on a previous Observatory study examining the theory of behaviours in the context of farmers (Defra 2008b);
- Draws on a select number of illustrative (rather than exhaustive) surveys commissioned for policy or undertaken within academia and by industry;
- Presents and interprets a selection of the key findings that could inform policy; and
- Discusses how different methodologies can be used for policy (e.g. how to explore complex trade-offs) and any knowledge gaps that need to be explored to improve understanding of public perceptions of agricultural change and the environment.

Key conclusions from the evidence and implications for policy:

- **Take some attitudes as ‘given’**. For the time-being, we can assume the temporal consistency of some attitudes e.g. that farming is important, farmers are respected, the natural environment is valued etc.
- **But there is always going to be a shift over time**. Some attitudes to farming and farmers are embedded but these are gradually shifting with economic and societal change – this is illustrated by a variation in responses by demographic group. The media may influence but Government also has a role to shape the direction of movement of some of these attitudes.
- **Mixed methods are needed for robust evidence**. Attitudinal and public opinion data only give part of the picture for example interesting pointers on sensitivities but not the ‘why?’. Quantitative opinion and attitude data can give an impression of the underlying concerns and priorities of the public, however the level of understanding, knowledge and information to make more complex trade-offs in the development of policy are more suited to different techniques e.g. deliberative qualitative approaches and / or participatory economic analysis.
1. Background

2. Public attitudes towards farming, farmers and the farmed landscape – headline issues
   - Key Issue 1: Farmers are respected...
   - Key Issue 2: Farming is important...
   - Key Issue 3: Generally the public believe financial support for farmers could be justified
   - Key Issue 4: Financial support is not open-ended...
   - Key Issue 5: The priority for farming is for food production...
   - Key Issue 6: Balacing environmental outcomes is an increasing priority...

3. Case studies to help explore more complex issues
   - 3.1. Public attitudes and European agricultural policy
   - 3.2. Can public attitude surveys be used to inform boundaries between ‘polluter pays’ and ‘provider gets’?
   - 3.3. Attitudes into behaviours? – food as an exemplar
   - 3.4. Upland farming as an exemplar of a multi-method approach
   - 3.5. Key conclusions from this section

4. Implications for further research

5. Selected references
1. Background

At the heart of a democratic society, public policy is expected to be both responsive to societal views and accountable to all citizens. Public policy is informed, but not governed, by public views. In this respect, understanding public attitudes and preferences is important, both in their own right, representing citizens, taxpayers and consumers of public goods and services and also as a valuable ‘foil’ to stakeholder and lobby group opinions.

Public attitudes towards farming and the natural environment are also important for reasons other than to help shape policy. In addition to a democratic accountability perspective, the attitudes and behaviours of the general public matter as they can influence a range of private consumption decisions that affect farming competitiveness and the sustainability of rural economies, for example, taking holidays, recreational visits or buying a second home in the countryside, buying local produce etc. Behaviour theory highlights attitudes as a key determinant of behaviours for all groups. A previous Observatory paper provides a focussed discussion relating to farmers but the principles apply equally to the general public, for further details see: https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esp/ace/research/pdf/ACE%20Behaviours%20Discussion%20Paper%20Final.pdf (Defra 2008b). In relatively simple terms, attitudes are formed from a combination of belief (which can be guided by culture, upbringing) and an evaluation of outcomes (i.e. if I buy this ‘local’ product will more be returned to the farmer?). Whilst it is long recognised that attitudes do not automatically translate into behaviours (the value-action gap), they are, nonetheless, an important factor and this paper discusses the links between stated attitudes and behaviours within society. As well as being responsive to public opinion, government has a role to inform and help shape attitudes and behaviour to address public policy targets (where information and awareness is the ‘market failure’) whether it is about healthy eating (e.g. FSA Salt Campaign) or climate change (Act On CO₂).

Within agriculture and environment policy there is a long history of government involvement. A wide array of regulatory and financial interventions affect public opinion in terms of equity and economics (should we be paying farmers and devoting a significant proportion of the EU budget?), social (heritage matters and countryside assets are there to be enjoyed) and also environmental considerations (biodiversity is important as well as food production). Understanding these opinions allows policies to be reflective of societal views within the parameters of EU and UK policy frameworks. As with any diverse audience there is a range of views to take account of and these reflect differences in demographics, locations, culture etc.

Public opinion surveys are generally a snap-shot providing point-in-time views that are shaped by context, questions, method and, to some extent, the survey design / commissioner. This review highlights some elements of opinion where there exists a clear and robust consensus that also reflect trends over time. The underlying, and perhaps more stable, attitudes can become more visible when reviewing a range of surveys which can help ‘iron out’ methodological shortcomings (such as sample sizes) and reduce ‘point-of-time’ factors e.g. public opinion being guided by headlines such as disease outbreaks or economic factors such as rising food prices.

This short paper:
- Builds on a previous Observatory study (Defra 2008b) examining the theory of behaviours in the context of farmers;
- Draws on a select number of illustrative (rather than exhaustive) surveys commissioned for policy and also undertaken within academia and by industry;
- Presents and interprets a selection of the key findings that could inform policy; and
- Discusses how different methodologies can be used for policy (e.g. how to explore complex trade-offs) and any knowledge gaps in the understanding of public perceptions of agricultural change and the environment.
2. Public attitudes towards farming, farmers and the farmed landscape – headline issues

This first section focuses on a select number of relevant surveys to ascertain public attitudes towards farming, farmers and the farmed environment. Rather than a systematic review, exemplar surveys or approaches were selected to cover the range of sources e.g. Defra, EU, academic, industry etc. Although the context of each survey matters, reviewing the data together has highlighted common issues that are relatively stable and, at least at the superficial level, can be fairly indisputable. The following six linked key issues can be concluded from a limited review of existing surveys.

Key Issue 1: Farmers are respected...

The public tend to look upon farmers as respected members of society. This is clearly illustrated by results from the Defra-commissioned Public attitudes towards farmers survey (Defra, 2008a). 89% of respondents had a favourable view of farmers, with 49% having a very favourable view of farmers and 39% quite favourable.

This positive attitude was also reflected in a IGD survey (Understanding consumer perceptions of British farmers for the 2009 Oxford Farming Conference – IGD, 2008) where 58% of respondents agreed strongly and 30% agreed slightly with the statement ‘British farmers deserve the full support of the British public’. This survey also asked quite an interesting word association question i.e. ‘Which words / phrases describe British farmers’. Positive descriptors outweighed negative ones, i.e. ‘hard working’ was identified by 78%, ‘important’ by 51% but only 15% thought they were ‘well-paid’ and 23% ‘moaners’. The word association adds weight to a respect towards farmers as individuals rather than just the range of benefits that they work to provide.

This positive attitude towards farmers is also reflected in the following key issues where the specific elements that can lead to this respect can be seen in relation to financial support and the benefits that farming (both food and environmental protection) provides to society. However, the key point for identifying this first issue separately is that it is important to recognise there is an element of goodwill directed towards the farmer as well as farming more generally.

Key Issue 2: Farming is important...

As an industry, farming itself is also regarded as generally important. The Defra Omnibus Survey (Defra, 2008a) found that a thriving farming industry in England was ‘very important’ to 79% of people interviewed and for 19% ‘quite important’. This was supported by a Eurobarometer survey undertaken in late 2006 (EC, 2007) that found that 77% of residents of the UK thought European agriculture and the rural areas were important ‘for our future’. Further evidence was provided by another IGD survey Connecting consumer with farming and farm produce (IGD, 2005) that found that 59% strongly agreed and 27% slightly agreed with the statement ‘Britain should remain a strong farming nation’ and a high percentage (75%) agreed that ‘without farming Britain would be a worse place’.

These headline figures indicate the perceived general importance of farming. However, quite why this is the case (i.e. the benefits that may arise) may be, to some extent, clarified in the following key issues i.e. links to heritage as well as food production and the environment. The Defra Omnibus survey (Defra, 2008a) did highlight a correlation with age and those most frequently visiting the countryside i.e. those over 35 thought farming to be most important. This finding was also similar in the IGD survey mentioned above (IGD, 2005) where 89% considered farming to be important to Britain. The headline figure hides some variations e.g. those who found it ‘extremely positive’ tended to be older, wealthier, suburban / rural and white and those only ‘slightly positive’ tended to be less than 35, middle income or less well-off, living in London and not white.
Key Issue 3: Generally the public believe financial support for farmers could be justified...

Farmers and farming have enjoyed, and still benefit from, a significant level of public support (both moral and financial) reflecting a number of factors. Arguably both this moral and financial support is rooted in a historical context but to some extent also in recognition of the public benefits that can arise. The relatively high level of financial support, initially for incentivising production and in more recent years to improve environmental sustainability still has a high level of public acceptance. Interestingly, the Eurobarometer survey (EC, 2007) suggests there may be a link between respect (key issue 1) and equity (need for taxpayer support). In a choice of 15 priorities for agricultural policy, the option that was identified as a first priority most frequently (although by a low overall percentage – 16% and a high level of ‘don’t knows’ 27%) was ‘ensuring a fair standard of living for farmers’.

As a general statement, while the general public do consider that there is a need for financial support, the rationale is complicated and there may be some lack of knowledge as to the extent of the levels of support. The following sections illustrate the extent of support and the specific nature of expectations that arise from this support.

Key Issue 4: But this financial support is not open ended...

Whilst there is consistent agreement of the need for financial support, this is not a ‘blank cheque’. The issue of public-funded support is quite complex and it is not clear if the public understand the extent of funding. General awareness is low, for example, in the Eurobarometer survey (EC, 2007), levels of awareness about the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) were relatively low with a majority (53%) of the UK sample having not heard or read about the CAP. Due to complexities and the hidden nature of public support for farming, arguably public attitudes reflect more of an agreement to the principle (as support for a range of benefits) rather than an implicit desire to prioritise over other public services e.g. tackling crime or investing in health provision.

Looking at a series of statements together can help illustrate some nuances in terms of the depth of public support. It is easy to jump to conclusions by picking single statements but, arguably, with the introduction of more trade-offs, boundaries of this support can emerge. Some statements in the Defra Omnibus survey (Defra 2008a) provide an exemplar:

- There is agreement that farmers should receive more financial support from the Government (34% strongly agree, 28% partly agree).
- And this was backed-up by a lack of agreement to the opposing view – 33% strongly disagreed and 27% partly disagreed that farmers need to stand on their own two feet, and should not receive financial support from the Government.
- However this financial support should be for looking after the land in an environmentally-friendly way but not for production purposes or during a crisis (26% strongly agree, 33% partly agree).
- There was however agreement (although less) that farmers should share the cost with the Government for preventing animal disease outbreaks (22% strongly agree and 33% partly agree).

This balance was also evident from an ESRC survey in Northern Ireland (Public attitudes towards the countryside in Northern Ireland, Shorthall, 2007). 22% agreed and 45% disagreed with the statement that Farmers are subsidised too much these days. However in accordance with other surveys, this level of public acceptance is not without limits. Although only 7% of respondents agreed with the statement ‘If farms in Northern Ireland cannot survive without subsidies then they should be forced to sell up just like any other business’ only 23% agreed that farming should be preserved at all costs. The consensus, confirmed by 68% people agreeing, is perhaps summed up by the statement: Farming in Northern Ireland should be subsidised to some degree to help farms survive – but not at any cost.
Interestingly and importantly, this financial support from the public purse comes with some understanding that some societal return is expected. The Eurobarometer survey (EU, 2007) indicated that the public in the UK were comfortable with the concept of cross-compliance. Large majorities felt that linking payments with certain rules for environmental, animal welfare and food safety were either ‘totally’ or ‘somewhat justified’. 42% thought that environmental cross-compliance was ‘totally justified’, 52% for animal welfare standards and 61% for food safety.

Whilst the surveys mentioned above are snapshots in time, longitudinal data on specific questions suggest that the support is consistent over time. The following two key issues explore this in the context of biggest trade-off within this public support - environmental vs production outcomes.

Key Issue 5: The priority for farming is for food production...

Farming is associated with food production, the Defra Omnibus Survey (Defra, 2008a) and IGD survey (IGD, 2008) both highlighted this fact with the highest farmer roles and responsibilities accorded respectively to producing quality food and provide food that meets the needs of British shopper. The IGD survey (2008) also confirmed that to produce food was the single most important contribution that farmers make to British society (61% identified as a first choice). In both IGD surveys, the identification of food comes significantly ahead of all other options. These results are supported by the Defra Omnibus Survey (Defra, 2008a) where protecting plant and animal life is only the first choice for 8% of respondents and protecting birds 2%. When presented with options between environmental objectives and wider social objectives (such as providing for leisure opportunities and maintaining a way of life) and food production, producing food is significantly (and unsurprisingly) more desirable as a primary objective. However the nature of quantitative surveys do not effectively examine the complexity surrounding trade-offs e.g. balance between food and social or environmental objectives. Although only 5% of respondents chose (as a first option) to preserve a traditional way of life (IGD, 2008) this does not mean that the public does not regard wider social objectives as unimportant as in an earlier survey (IGD, 2005) 84% agreed with the statement: it is important to support British farming otherwise we would lose a traditional way of life.

Understandably, the availability of food is a priority for consumers as it is something they are concerned with on a daily basis. However, this does not necessarily imply that increasing food production is also a priority. A survey undertaken in 2006 (Defra, 2006) looked at the balance in between protecting the countryside and cheaper food. Overall 75% agreed that protecting the countryside was most important compared to 15% for cheaper food. Interestingly only 6% answered both / not mutually exclusive. Figures for rural and urban were almost identical but there was a difference (although not huge) between social classes with 10% more ABC1s highlighting importance of protecting the countryside and 7% more C2DEs expressing a preference for cheaper food.

The underlying support for farmers and farming also translates into a positive attitude to British food. A later section (3.3) explores in more detail the complexity surrounding attitudes and behaviours in the context of food purchasing but there is both a desire to support farmers producing food (British food should remain widely available – 89% agreement) and a concern about maintaining food security (It doesn’t matter if Britain produces very little food because we can buy it from elsewhere - 61% disagreement).

Key Issue 6 ...But balancing environmental outcomes is an increasing priority...

The major change in public funding for agriculture has been a gradual transition over 20 years away from support mainly for food production towards support for maintaining or improving environmental assets. Although the previous section highlighted widespread support for food production being the primary goal, there is also a recognition of the links between farming and
the natural environment and a positive acceptance of the need for the public to ensure wider societal goals.

A time series (shown in table 2.1) from the British Social Attitudes Survey and reproduced in the 2002 State of the Countryside Report (Countryside Agency, 2002) illustrates measures of public opinion coinciding with this period of policy transition. In 1985, 53% agreed with the statement: if farmers have to choose between producing more food and looking after the countryside they should produce more food but by 1999 this had declined to 31%. The biggest change came between 1985 and 1989 (53% to 36%) with the results reflected in other questions. Between 1985 and 1989 there was also a significant increase in those agreeing that Government should withhold some subsidies from farmers and use them to protect the countryside, even if this leads to higher prices (47% to 60%) and that modern methods of farming have caused damage to the countryside (63% to 72%). Understanding the magnitude of change between these years may need referral to media stories e.g. whether increased awareness of food mountains or environmental degradation impacted on public opinion. A final question saw a smaller change with a slight decrease in those agreeing that all things considered farmers do a good job looking after the countryside. However in terms of the last question, the same survey suggested that there was temporally consistent agreement that farmers were doing a good job (75% agreement in 1985; 77% in 1999). A number of these questions were replicated as part of a survey undertaken in Northern Ireland (Shorthall, 2007) and bearing in mind the slightly different distribution of population (between rural and urban) the results are still relevant, see last column in the summary table below.

Table 2.1. British Social Attitudes to farming and questions and replicated in a 2003 study in Northern Ireland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1985 (1)</th>
<th>1989 (1)</th>
<th>1994 (1)</th>
<th>1999 (1)</th>
<th>2003 (2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If farmers have to choose between producing more food and looking after the countryside they should produce more food</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government should withhold some subsidies from farmers and use them to protect the countryside, even if this leads to higher prices</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern methods of farming have caused damage to the countryside</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All things considered farmers do a good job in looking after the countryside</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) Countryside Agency (2002)
(2) Shorthall (2007) (Northern Ireland only)

Opinion over time towards the farmed and natural environment is also highlighted in the Survey of public attitudes to quality of life and to the environment (Defra, 2002). There was an acceptance of paying for environmental benefits with about three-quarters of respondents agreeing with the principle to only pay agricultural subsidies to farmers if they protect the environment (1993 – 76%; 1996/7 – 76% and 2001 – 74%) and a willingness to pay farmers to protect and regenerate threatened landscapes and habitats (1993 – 58%; 1996/7 – 62% and 2001 – 69%).

Key issue 5 above indicated that food production was most important and in comparison there was a low percentage of support for protecting the natural environment as the highest priority. However, when presented with the natural environment as a single issue, there was broad consensus across surveys that this was important. Although arguably phrased where the socially acceptable response is obvious, the Defra Omnibus Survey (Defra, 2008a) confirmed that 69% thought that it was very important for farmers to protect native animals and plants.

Taking single answers in isolation may give a misleading impression and it seems that a rounded picture is what is needed when assessing attitudes. It is possible to selectively quote responses from different surveys and over varying timescales to fit any point of view but looking at families of statements can provide a fuller representation. The IGD survey (IGD, 2005) involved qualitative focus groups as well as a quantitative survey and it was quite revealing that:
“The majority of participants in the focus groups failed to recognise a link between farming and the countryside. When discussed further, those that did consider a link did not necessarily consider it to be positive.” This lack of recognition casts some uncertainty over the robustness of headline quantitative results that "... show that 87% of the English population consider that farming has an important role in maintaining the countryside. Particularly striking is the high proportion of respondents offering the most positive attitudes possible.” In terms of the actual statements, 43% strongly agreed that farming is necessary to maintain the appearance of the countryside (77% agreed); 44% strongly agreed that without farming the countryside would deteriorate (72% agreed); 52% strongly disagreed that the countryside would be better without farming (80% disagreed); 45% strongly disagreed that farming damages the countryside (73% disagreed) and 39% strongly agreed that farmers look after the countryside (78% agreed). The recognition of the role that farmers play the Defra 2006 public tracking research found that 82% of the sample agreed with the statement: farmers play an active role in protecting the countryside.

Conclusions from Section 2

This section reviewed, from an objective perspective, a range of mainly quantitative public attitude surveys with the results presented at ‘face value’ within six themes. Interpretation of the data has been fairly shallow and mostly at the aggregate level. The six key issues are broad ‘directional’ conclusions in themselves but aggregate values can, to some extent, mask variability within the data. With many of datasets there was a further disaggregation which, if represented here could have added another dimension to the analysis. Some unexpected variation was noted for example there was some differentiation in terms of location of respondents i.e. between rural and urban (and also those who regularly visit the countryside), which relates to familiarity, interest and understanding influencing priorities. However some differences could be viewed also in relation to social class (income), ethnicity and age. For longer term policy issues, age is important this can be a factor on changes in attitude over time within society. Some of the issues arising are explored in more depth in section 3.
3. Case studies to help explore more complex issues

3.1. Public attitudes and European agricultural policy

The majority of agricultural policy originates from within the European Union (EU) and in this context public attitudes and opinions influence, and are influenced by, the UK negotiating position in relation to policy development. As well as providing an indication of public awareness, understanding and preferences, this section provides a good exemplar of how public opinion may matter in policy development. Additionally, it can serve as a reference example for exploring methodological issues in a very complex area.

**Complexity and confidence in results**

In an ideal world, Government policy is developed with implicit backing from the general public however it is important to recognise the existence of imperfect information or asymmetries which can affect this the robustness of this link (and impact on democratic accountability). In reality, the depth of awareness, knowledge and understanding varies considerably between different citizens and groups. The main source of data available at the European level (the Eurobarometer series) aims to be representative of the EU’s population and public opinion needs to account for all in society and not just those with an interest. Targeted opinion surveys reduce the variability (e.g. it may be safe to assume that those with a rural postcode are more informed about farming than those with an urban postcode) and voluntary surveys can give polarised views. However, in general, farming and the natural environment rarely feature in the top issues that people are concerned with (although there are links i.e. food prices etc) and as a consequence most are not very well informed. In the Eurobarometer survey (EC, 2007) only 26% of the UK sample felt they were well-informed about agriculture issues in general and 15% the CAP. Although these figures were very close to the EU average (and perhaps what would be expected) it does question the extent to which informed opinion on complex issues can be elicited from quantitative opinion surveys. This lack of understanding implies some reliability issues with the subsequent conclusions. For example, when asked about the levels of spending on the CAP, 22% of respondents in the UK said increase, 21% decrease and 26% no change but the highest result was ‘don’t know’ with 31%. Further details on public attitudes towards spending on agriculture are indicated in tables 3.1. and 3.2. below.

**Table 3.1.** Statement: *The EU budget for agriculture and rural development represents around 40% of the total EU budget*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% responding:</th>
<th>EU25</th>
<th>EU15</th>
<th>NMS10</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>Highest %</th>
<th>Lowest %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Greece 41</td>
<td>Denmark 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About right</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Belgium 61</td>
<td>Bulgaria 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too high</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Sweden, Denmark 36</td>
<td>Latvia, Lithuania, Romania 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Bulgaria 58</td>
<td>Greece 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3.2.** Statement: *Over next 10 years, would you like to see an increase, decrease or no change in the amount of the total EU budget allocated to the CAP*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% responding:</th>
<th>EU25</th>
<th>EU15</th>
<th>NMS10</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>Highest %</th>
<th>Lowest %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Greece 60</td>
<td>Denmark 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Sweden 35</td>
<td>Bulgaria 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No change</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Belgium 48</td>
<td>Romania 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Bulgaria 52</td>
<td>Greece 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A key conclusion is rather than a reliance on the actual figures, the survey tends to reflect more of a desired direction without perhaps prior knowledge of the more detailed background i.e. actual size of the EU budget devoted to agriculture or cost to each member of the public / household. In this respect, there is always likely to be a trade-off between breadth and depth of issues and degree of confidence in the levels of understanding within a survey. For example, nearly a third of all UK respondents select ‘don’t know’ as a response and this also raises
questions over the credibility of where a preference was indicated e.g. the ‘about right’ and ‘no change’ options are most popular – could they just be the easiest answer? A broad conclusion that could be drawn from tables 3.1 and 3.2 is that the UK public seem more aligned to the public in ‘old’ member states (EU15) rather than the new member states (NMS10). More people thought the existing budget was too high (20%) rather than insufficient (11%) however the percentages who thought the budget should increase over the next 10 years (22%) was very similar to the percentage thinking it should decrease (21%). Unsurprisingly, respondents in the new member states were about three times more likely to think the existing budget was insufficient (24%) compared to too high (7%) and that the budget should increase (41%) rather than decrease (11%).

Whilst the Eurobarometer survey (EC, 2007) does not provide unequivocal evidence, the variability between respondent countries is apparent and it is these differences that can be important from a UK policy perspective. Comparison between EU states is not straightforward as there are a number of issues that can explain differences. Whilst level of knowledge is a factor (e.g. Bulgaria has a high percentage of ‘don’t knows’ as it was not a full member when the survey was undertaken), there are other factors relating to ‘closeness’ to agriculture and historical context. What emerges within the enlarged community of 25 states is that some of the perceived historical differences that may have been visible over the last 30 years at the political level are not so apparent and instead there are broader emerging differences between ‘old’ and ‘new’ member states. For example for the questions in tables 3.1 and 3.2, the UK and France are very similar (increase budget – UK 22%, France 21%; decrease UK 21%, France 17%) but the divide was now with the new accession states or those more reliant on agriculture e.g. Greece.

Probably the most relevant question in the survey on agricultural priorities provides an exemplar of both interesting information and regional differences across the EU. The text in the Eurobarometer report (EC, 2007) highlighted what has emerged was a “fair degree of divergence between opinion in the 15 older EU countries and the 10 new member states”. What is particularly interesting is perhaps how priorities change according to societal transition stage. For example, those in more developed western European countries place an emphasis on the consumption side i.e. factors relating to the environment, sustainable methods of production, animal welfare and the sourcing of produce. Respondents in the new member states focus more on the economics and producer side i.e. stabilisation of the market, enhancement of rural areas, protection of family farms etc. and this may be influenced by a greater ‘closeness’ to agriculture e.g. more of the population live in rural areas or have ties to it. Exemplars include respondents in Denmark choosing animal welfare (10%) as the single top priority compared to ensuring a fair standard of living for farmers (8%), this contrasts with Romania with 1% and 28% respectively. Table 3.3. below aggregates the top priority and whether identified as a top five priority and shows some broad difference between ‘old’ and ‘new’ in the combined columns. Exemplars of high and low scoring counties are also shown and provide an added level of comparative detail.

Table 3.3. % identifying as first priority (for agriculture policy) plus within the top 5 priorities (illustrating relative priorities and do not add to 100%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% responding</th>
<th>EU25</th>
<th>EU15</th>
<th>NMS10</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>Highest %</th>
<th>Low %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural products healthy and safe</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Greece 67</td>
<td>Latvia 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair standard of living for farmers</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Greece 59</td>
<td>Denmark 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasonable food prices for consumers</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Slovakia 65</td>
<td>Lithuania 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting respect for the environment</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Denmark 63</td>
<td>Lithuania 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm animals well treated</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Denmark 62</td>
<td>Latvia 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing rural areas</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Estonia 58</td>
<td>Slovenia 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favours methods of organic production</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Germany 42</td>
<td>Latvia 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protecting family type farms</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Hungary 38</td>
<td>Denmark 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The issue of lack of knowledge is apparent again as over a quarter of UK respondents selected ‘don’t know’ (27%) which was by far the highest response (next were Eire and Bulgaria with
16%). This makes comparison with other counties problematic. However, supporting discussion in section 2 above, the most popular first priority (16%) was for ensuring a fair standard of living for farmers and this is reflected in the top 5.

A premise for this paper has been that public opinion should help shape policy and as this policy is the result of complex EU-wide negotiation strategies, an interesting exercise would be to see to what extent the negotiating positions of member states reflects their public opinion or how much is it taken into consideration in the process of reaching agreement with the inevitable trade-offs between members. It is long recognised that negotiating dynamics and desired outcomes vary between member states. As negotiation between 25 states becomes more complex, understanding and positively influencing (through a promotion of awareness and transparency of costs and benefits) both UK domestic public opinion and the opinions of others (both public and political) is a relevant objective. The earlier discussion highlighted that opinion was relatively stable over time but that variations exist between socio-economic groups and between rural and urban. Although underlying attitudes will not change year-on-year (unless a crisis happens), over a much longer timeframe societies will undergo a transition and there is increasing European integration, attitudes will shift and could become more harmonised. The quality and robustness of public insights is important and although the Eurobarometer survey (EC, 2007) provides some comparative results at the European level there is a difficulty in assessing changes over time. Additionally, the results arguably pose as many ‘why’ questions as categorical answers.

Conclusion

A key conclusion emphasised by this example is that as a general rule, the more complex an issue, the less-suited it may be to inclusion in a public attitudes survey. Complexity can involve some element of trade-off (e.g. environment v food security) or some level of prior knowledge or understanding (what exactly does public financial support go towards?) and these sorts of issue are more suited to qualitative or deliberative methods. Quantitative attitudinal surveys do not really lead to an understanding of the ‘why’ and ambiguities may arise more when there is a lack of information to make an informed decision. Additionally, there are ways of adding inference to attitudinal surveys e.g. are the ‘strong’ results more important than the ‘slightly’ and does high ‘neither / nor’ percentages suggest a lack of understanding...

Smaller scale qualitative work allow a greater depth of analysis and can get beneath the headline figures to explore the why. Deliberative methods allow for the build up of knowledge and understanding over time and could take the form of a number of methodologically tried and tested approaches from detailed citizen’s juries (where evidence, through expert witnesses, can be provided to cover a range of perspectives) to focus groups, with deliberative polling (which can be time-staggered to allow for this build-up of knowledge).

Rather than relying on headline public opinion data, this should be viewed as only one part of evidence to be supplemented by other methods. For example, economic analysis using willingness to pay (or accept) or contingent valuations implies a level of opinion. A multi-method study highlighted in section 3.4 below and specifically referring to the uplands (International Centre for the Uplands, 2005), provides an exemplar where a contingent valuation exercise suggested that “…on average, each household in the UK would be prepared to pay £47 per year to enjoy the public benefits associated with the uplands.” Whether households would actually pay this amount for landscape, wildlife, amenity and social benefits can be questioned but it does indicate that economic methods can be used to substantiate opinion. Additionally, other ‘insight’ e.g. ministerial correspondence, responses to consultations and the opinions from representative bodies can all be viewed as information contributing to an overall understanding of public attitudes.
3.2. Can public attitude surveys be used to inform boundaries between ‘polluter pays’ and ‘provider gets’?

An issue this paper has sought to explore is whether public attitude surveys can be used to explore people’s views of where the ‘polluter pays’ principle ends and the ‘provider gets’ principle begins. The key question is: what do the general public think that farmers should be required to deliver in terms of environmental performance and when should society start to reward them for delivering benefits above and beyond this? Although there is no clear dividing line and views will differ according to where people see property rights residing, the basic concepts can be discussed within the context of opinion surveys and also through use of more in-depth techniques. In general, any indications about opinions on ‘polluter pays’ or ‘provider gets’ are implied (rather than explicit) within public attitude surveys.

**Provider gets?** Public support for producing public goods (food security, environment, amenity, social benefits etc) is readily acknowledged and this is an accepted social norm. The discussion above confirms in many places an agreement with the ‘provider gets’ principle. For example, key issue 6 highlighted that there was a significant level of acceptance in paying for environmental benefits where a large majority of respondents agreed with the principle to only pay agricultural subsidies to farmers if they protect the environment and a willingness to pay farmers to protect and regenerate threatened landscapes and habitats (Defra, 2002).

**Polluter pays?** Whilst in some surveys there is a recognition of environmental damage as a consequence of modern agriculture, the closest this issue was explicitly examined was in the study conducted in Northern Ireland (Shorthall, 2007) where a question was included about the Water Framework Directive. In answer to the question: which statement comes closest to your own view about who should pay for the extra costs for making sure that our water supply is not affected by farming practices, a majority (59%) agreed with the statement: farmers with financial support from the government. Even accounting for the fact that Northern Ireland is more rural than the UK as a whole, more than double the number agreed that cost should be borne by the government on its own (27%) compared to 12% agreeing that the bill should be met by farmers on their own.

Looking at England, although not polluting in the direct sense, the closest this issue comes to being confirmed is highlighted in key issue 4 where the public agree that cost and responsibility sharing is needed in respect of animal disease. Again whilst not a charge, there is a recognition that there are threshold levels of acceptable farming practice. This is demonstrated in the context of the CAP (EC, 2007) where there is a definite acceptance of cross-compliance with large majorities agreeing that linking payments with certain rules for environmental outcomes, animal welfare and food safety were either ‘totally’ or ‘somewhat justified’. 42% thought that environmental cross-compliance was ‘totally justified’, 52% for animal welfare standards and 61% for food safety.

Complex issues associated with ‘polluter pays’ (especially if directly to inform policy) need to be examined using other more deliberative methods. A ‘polluter pays’ issue was explored in a Citizen’s Jury by the University of Exeter as part of a Defra funded project (for research rather than policy purposes) (University of Exeter, 2007). Taking place over two days in November 2007, 15 members of the public with a mix of backgrounds from Devon were presented with the testimonies of 18 expert witnesses together with a farm visit and laboratory tour. The issue examined was livestock farming and microbial pollution. The jury concluded that steps should be taken to minimise the risk of pollution and that livestock farming plays a significant role in contributing to incidents of microbial pollution. Recommendations from the jury were that good practice should be disseminated but crucially the jury felt that “…there is a strong case for imposing financial penalties on farmers where there have been incidents of microbial pollution linked to episodic failings in enterprise management.” However, the message is not unequivocal as there was a recognition that whilst an ‘industry problem’ there is a role for public policy (and money) in terms of strengthening funding for the mitigation of risk at source: “The jury suggests that the state, not farmers, should play the major role in funding these programmes of assistance.
and mitigation. The jury is clear that those with responsibility for water quality in Defra must influence the design of stewardship schemes so as to produce outcomes conducive not only to the enhancement of bio-diversity, but issues of environmental protection too.” So in short, this study concluded that it was a bit of both – ‘polluter pays’ when error in management but also ‘provider gets’ in terms of taking actions to mitigate...

3.3. Attitudes into behaviours? – food as an exemplar

Key issue 6 above highlighted that there is a recognition that farming is essential for maintaining valued characteristics of the countryside and key issue 1 suggested that farmers themselves are respected for their hard work. These two issues contribute to an positive attitude towards a desire to buy British food. The IGD survey conducted in 2005 (IGD, 2005) specifically sought to explore this issue and the results are used as an exemplar to explore wider attitudinal issues rather than a discussion of British food in the context of food security. In looking at the components of attitudes and behaviours (see Defra 2008b for more details) section 2 confirmed that the British public have positive underlying beliefs e.g. farmers are respected, farming is important and there is a link between supporting farming and the environment. There is also a positive outcome evaluation demonstrated by a recognition that buying British food supports British farmers – 52% strongly agreed with the statement, 34% slightly agreed and only 2% slightly disagreed. Although about half of respondents (51%) answered that they don't mind which country my food comes from, the levels of passive support (I prefer to buy British food but only when it’s the same price and quality as food from other countries - 29%) and active support (I always try to buy British food whenever I’m shopping even if it’s more expensive than food from other countries – 18%) outweigh more hostile views (I try to avoid buying British foods – 2%). So at face value, these figures suggest that for some, country of origin could be a relevant factor in purchasing decisions (intent).

However, in a further question, only 11% put country of origin in the top five most important factors in the purchasing decision. Unsurprisingly price is identified as a factor by 72% with taste and sell by date identified by more than 50% of respondents. Other more significant factors include convenience, appearance, healthy, free from.... and brand. It is not a surprise country of origin is seen as less important by the large majority of consumers but there is gap between desire to purchase and actual influence on purchase. At a very crude level this attitude – behaviour gap is significant (even with the discounting of passive supporters) with marked difference between active supporters – 18% and those choosing origin as a top five influence 11%.

Conclusion

Even a single issue, such as whether a positive attitude towards farming will lead to purchase decisions that result in this support being realised, is inherently complex. For example, it could be inferred that the recognition of support is preferred to be undertaken in a ‘hidden’ or indirect way e.g. via the policy-maker with costs met by the taxpayer rather than via the consumer’s purchasing decision. If this is the case, then this adds weight to the importance of policy-makers adequately reflecting the views of society as they will not adequately reveal their preferences via the market mechanism.

Again, as discussed above, an important issue in the understanding of attitudinal responses is the level of knowledge of the respondents. The Eurobarometer survey (EC, 2007) was explicit about the level of knowledge of respondents by incorporating a ‘don’t know’ response but can one draw similar conclusions from having a high level of middle scores (i.e. neither / nor) in a five point range from strongly agree to strongly disagree. For example, does this imply a ‘don’t (really) know’ and suggests a lack of confidence in answers. Within the IGD survey (IGD, 2005) this could be illustrated in the section on standards which is perhaps ill-suited to the testing of public opinion. For example, four of the five questions on on-farm production standards have neither / nor responses greater than 40% and it would perhaps be unrealistic for the general public to be able to answer with confidence questions such as British farmers have more
inspections than farmers in other countries. Questions which require a level of knowledge to make a choice could be better suited to alternative methods of opinion collection.

A different way of viewing how knowledge (and behaviour) influences attitude is that those who actively intend to purchase British food (I always try to buy British food whenever I’m shopping even if it’s more expensive than food from other countries) are more likely to be cooking from scratch (28%). Although cooking habits reflect, to some extent, social-economic groups, the implication also is that an added awareness of food preparation and ingredients leads to an appreciation of origin. This contrasts with only 9% whose cooking habits during the week are mainly light meals. This is further emphasised by 64% of those whose habits are mainly ready meals expressing a neutral opinion (don’t mind which country my food comes from) compared to 38% for those cooking from scratch.

3.4. Upland farming as an exemplar of a multi-method approach

Farming, and the public benefits that arise, vary both spatially and sectorally and whilst generalised support is recognised in section 2, an area where cultural, historical, social, environmental and amenity issues comes together is in the example of farming in the uplands. Research undertaken for the International Centre for the Uplands (2005) looked at the role of traditional hill farming through a study of social capital amongst farming communities and also wider public attitudes. This research was undertaken in the context of a perceived decline in hill farming. The study suggested that the number of medium-sized farms in Less Favoured Areas have fallen by 17% over ten years and although the number of larger and part-time farms had increased, there was a concern that traditional methods of managing the open fells could decline with impacts on the environment and communities.

As mentioned in the conclusion to section 3.1, the research comprised of a contingent valuation (CV) exercise but also a quantitative attitudinal study and qualitative focus groups. The CV element of the research suggested that both residents and visitors place a high value on maintaining the uplands landscape, environment and community and concluding that, on average, each household in the UK would be prepared to pay £47 per year to enjoy the benefit. The CV was supplemented by a more in-depth analysis of whether this was dependent on traditional farming and whether these values would be maintained in the light of on-going structural changes in the industry.

Quantitative opinion was achieved through a self-completion postal survey of residents in Cumbria and Manchester which focussed on the future of farming. The main conclusions illustrated by figures showing net agreement (those agreeing minus those disagreeing – a minus figure indicates disagreement with the statement) were:

- When asked ‘to what extent do you agree or disagree that the following would happen if farming were to cease?’ the respondents strongly agreed (58%) that the landscape would become less attractive and that local economies (85%) and communities (84%) would suffer.
- Although not as clear-cut, there was also some agreement (25%) that fewer people would visit the countryside. However opinion was evenly split as to whether the quality of lakes and river would improve (4%) or conditions would be more favourable for wildlife (7%).
- When asked about farming support and payments there was general disagreement that farming receives too much support (-18%) and that farm payments result in environmental damage (-24%).
- In general all aspects of the uplands was valued (scenic views, traditional buildings, peace and tranquillity, family farms, farming skills, local culture, social networks) but the public value of wildlife was much higher.

Overall this indicates a fairly supportive public view but the high level of respondents (Cumbria 41% and Manchester 56%) saying they visit upland areas regularly (once a month or more) suggested that some self-selection may have been in evidence. To further explore the public understanding of the upland environment and links with agriculture some more qualitative
research was undertaken using small focus groups. There were three important conclusions for both research and policy:

- There was a general lack of understanding of how agriculture influences the landscape, for example, there was difficulty in making the connection between upland features such as stone walls / scenery and agriculture. This again emphasises the difficulty in dealing with complex issues.
- Although participants perceived that the decline of grazing in the uplands may lead to an increase in biodiversity it can also have negative effects such as increase in scrub, decline in features e.g. stone walls, loss of knowledge and culture and jobs. Interestingly, the increase in scrub and other vegetation was not always viewed negatively. This is an example of the challenge in reconciling public preferences with expert opinion e.g. sometimes the environmental benefits of relatively open upland moorland can be hidden (e.g. biodiversity) and communication of different landscape values is important for influencing public opinion.
- Overall, agriculture plays an important role in shaping the uplands and although there was not a full understanding, participants felt that negative impacts would be considerable if agriculture declined.

3.5. Key conclusions from this section

There are three key conclusions for research and policy from these exemplars:

- **Methods matter.** Survey participants may have insufficient prior knowledge and understanding to make an informed decision on issues that can be complex and involve trade-offs. Survey results are only as robust as the methodology and in many cases a simple attitudinal survey may be too superficial to give a high level of confidence in the conclusions. Qualitative, deliberative and economic analysis all add a further dimension to an understanding of public preferences and views.

- **Attitudes and behaviours.** Expressed attitudes do not always translate into purchasing behaviours and in this respect, stated public preferences might not be manifested through the market mechanism – people may not behave in a way that their stated preference would imply. This may reflect an imperfect understanding of the actions that would be consistent with attitudes or possible differences between expressed and actual preferences. The provision of public goods necessitates some form of public funding (it is difficult for consumers to buy increased numbers of farmland birds through the market even though they may place a high value on them). Policies to provide public goods need to reflect societal views but also to influence these views.

- **The public accept a balance in responsibilities.** There exists a balance between ‘polluter pays’ and ‘provider gets’ and this seems to be acceptable to all (although this can change...).

4. Implications for further research

A research synthesis for the Research Councils UK Living With Environmental Change (LWEC) Programme covering public attitudes to environmental change (Upham etc al., 2009) noted that: “research on UK attitudes to actual and prospective changes in ecosystems, landscapes and species is relatively limited and much of it consists of descriptive statistics based on large-scale, surface-level questionnaire responses, or a small number of interviews or focus group responses... The literature reinforces the common-sense knowledge that places and landscapes are often very important to people, particularly those areas near to where they live... The potential for further research is substantial, but the scope or terms of this will need careful definition if the intention is to inform policy. Most notably... it is important not to simply ask the public abstract / in principle questions: context, contingencies, trade-offs and choices are all key but are rarely explored'.
**Policy-focussed.** There will always be a role for tracker surveys to see how public attitudes are changing but the real need for further work is for applied policy-focussed attitudinal research. The complexity surrounding a number of important issues implies that these need to be explored in a more rigorous and transparent way. This requires less reliance on quantitative attitudinal surveys but more of an emphasis on deliberative methods to really explore the ‘why’ issue, the trade-offs that are inevitable for policy and discussion of difficult policy options for the future. Additionally, multi-method studies can be used as a way of drawing on the best quantitative and qualitative approaches.

**Applied theoretical.** A further piece of theoretical research work could look at exploring cause and effect within policy i.e. to what extent does opinion shape policy and how far is opinion shaped by policy (or is it more subtle and public opinion and policy moves together in a mutually re-enforcing way?). This would require an examination of a particular policy and set out the key influences on policy direction and delivery and on public opinion.
5. Selected references


Defra (2006) Public Tracking Research, Continental Ltd for COI

Defra (2008a) Public Attitudes towards farmers March 2008, prepared by COI


IGD (2005) Connecting Consumers with Farming and Farm Produce. Institute of Grocery Distribution


International Centre for the Uplands (2005) Measuring public preferences for the uplands. Scottish Agricultural College

