

MORE THAN A MART



THE PRINCE'S
COUNTRYSIDE
FUND

How the UK's
auction marts can
step up to secure
a brighter future
for farmers and
rural communities



“Livestock markets are so important in helping to maintain the rural community and the farming community and I do hope that they have a durable and sustainable future.”

HRH The Prince of Wales, Louth Auction Mart, 2018

This publication summarises a study commissioned by The Prince's Countryside Fund from the Centre for Rural Policy Research, University of Exeter: Nye, C., Winter, M. & Lobley, M. (2020). *More than a Mart: The role of UK livestock markets in rural communities*. Full Report to The Prince's Countryside Fund, London: The Prince's Countryside Fund.

www.princescountrysidefund.org.uk/research

Photography: Cover, p6, p7, p8, p16, p21 and p23 by John Bentley; p9 courtesy Melton Mowbray Market; p11 courtesy Llanybydder Livestock Auctions; p17 by Ben Curtis.

ISBN: 978-1-8384516-1-5

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS FROM THE RESEARCH TEAM

The research team would like to thank the many farmers, auctioneers, auction managers and community members who participated in this study by taking time out from their busy schedules to be interviewed, complete surveys, or submit evidence for the research. We would also like to thank Chris Dodds of the Livestock Auctioneers' Association for assisting and advising the team throughout the process, and to Emma Tranter for her consistent support administratively and otherwise.

And finally, we would like to express our gratitude to The Prince's Countryside Fund and the John Oldacre Foundation for funding the project, as well as for allowing us the opportunity to conduct such an important piece of research. Particular thanks go to Claire Saunders, Beth Summers and Ellie Jesson of The Prince's Countryside Fund.

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WELCOME

The UK's auction marts can play a key role in supporting Britain's family farmers to thrive through challenging times.

Here at The Prince's Countryside Fund, our role is to support all those who live and work in the countryside, with the aim of building confident and vibrant farming and rural communities.

Agriculture today is facing some of the most significant changes in living memory, following Britain's exit from the EU. On top of this, the Covid-19 pandemic has placed new day-to-day pressures on people living in rural areas, at the same time as encouraging the wider community to appreciate more the role of British farmers in providing local, sustainable food supplies.

Britain's family farmers need support, not only to survive these seismic shifts in their environment, but also to thrive by making the most of new opportunities.

In this publication we draw upon research we commissioned from the University of Exeter's Centre for Rural Policy Research to examine the often hidden role of the UK's auction marts – the places where farmers buy and sell their livestock.

The research, entitled *More than a Mart: The role of UK livestock markets in rural communities*, confirms that auction marts can provide a good deal of useful advice and services to boost farming businesses. They can play a part in improving farmers' health and wellbeing. The researchers also discovered that many auction marts already step way beyond their core role of buying and selling, and many others have the potential to hugely expand what they do.

Through this publication, we illuminate best practice and offer new ideas to rural communities about how auction marts could broaden what they offer to more effectively support not only farmers, but also the towns and villages in which they are based.

It's by building connections that these changes can be made. We want to see discussions take place between those working in agriculture, along with town and district councils, health services, local community groups and businesses.

Together we can all make the most of our local auction marts to help secure a real future for rural Britain.

Keith Halstead
Executive Director

The Prince's Countryside Fund



FOREWORD

It is important that our auction marts adapt so that they can continue to prosper into the future.



Livestock markets have been at the heart of the rural community for generations, not only in playing an integral part in the red meat supply chain, providing the much valued independent, transparent, open and competitive forum used to determine the true market value of livestock, but also through providing a myriad of alternative services and support for the local farming community. One such benefit that all livestock markets create, during every market day, is the greatly valued “social hub”, where farmers and friends meet and socialise whilst conducting their business.

The Livestock Auctioneers’ Association welcomes the valuable report, *More than a Mart*, which is summarised in this publication, and we support the opportunities it will create. The report highlights the valuable role livestock market businesses play within UK agriculture and rural life generally, but equally importantly, it identifies many additional opportunities available to the operators of markets to enhance the services and support platforms they provide, all of which will benefit the wider community.

For many within farming, especially livestock farming, the short to medium term outlook may appear daunting. However, despite the many challenges on the horizon, there are also real opportunities and we must all take up the challenges presented and embrace and develop them to our advantage. The UK’s exit from the EU, the removal of farm support in the form of direct payments and the Covid-19 pandemic, to name but three, highlight the transition and challenges farming families are facing.

The Prince’s Countryside Fund report findings and recommendations will assist auctioneering businesses throughout the UK to prepare and equip their businesses for the many changes we all face, ensuring that the services and support they provide continue to develop, prosper and deliver true benefit, whilst strengthening their position and resilience within the agricultural sector and the wider rural community.

It is important that livestock market businesses adapt and continue to prosper through the changing times ahead, ensuring that they can continue to provide both core and associated services to the farming and wider rural communities.

Chris Dodds FLAA, ARAgS
Executive Secretary
Livestock Auctioneers’ Association



AUCTION MARTS:

MUCH MORE THAN BUYING AND SELLING

“I think we have a responsibility not only to look after the farming livestock that is sold here but also to look after our flock of customers.”

Auctioneer



“I just like the atmosphere. I like the staff there, and it is like having a family really...everyone is on first name terms. You know all the auctioneers, all the yard men, everybody.”

Farmer

“I think that everybody in the livestock industry underestimates how important it is that people meet each other in a space that they feel relaxed in, and they can talk about good things and bad things, and trade, and the weather.”

Auctioneer



“A lot of farmers...they are just in to get a lunch, talk to their friends. It is very much a social hub.”

Auctioneer



“I don’t think markets are just there to sell. Markets are there to act as a hub and they’re there for the health and wellbeing of the farmers and the country community every bit as much as they are to make money.”

Farmer



“And so the farmers went to market – in hundreds and then in thousands they went every week to their local mart. Not only to the sale but to meet their corn merchant, their seedsman, their implement merchant and their friends. Getting on their better boots, they made it the focus of their week.”

John A Thomson, author of *Farmers Went to Market* (2015)





A DAY AT THE MARKET

The tradition of auction marts runs deeply through generations of farming families. But developments in transport and changes in agriculture threaten their survival today.

The sale of pigs, poultry, cattle, sheep and horses through auction marts has been a feature of agricultural life in the UK for more than 200 years.

A day at the market would often be a day away from the farm for the whole family. Weekly auction marts were held in town centres, and other agricultural trading would happen on the same day. The farmer made the most of the opportunity to chat to other farmers and tradespeople, and their family would come too, benefitting from a visit to their local market town.

In the early days, animals were 'driven' by drovers on foot to market, which meant that most towns would have their own auction mart. But the advent of the railway offered a new way to transport livestock,

meaning farmers could travel further to more popular centres. Some of the thousands of smaller auction marts began to close.

Later, local railway lines were shut down at the same time as motorways and new vehicles increased still further the distance that animals could be transported. More small auction marts perished.

More recently, changes in farming have put new pressures on auction marts. Some farmers now sell livestock directly to supermarkets or consumers. And infectious diseases, such as foot and mouth and bovine TB, have dampened the enthusiasm of some farmers for mingling their animals with others at marts.



In response, more auction marts have closed and some operate much less frequently. Some have relocated, moving out of town to bigger 'agri-business sites'. And many now offer more services – not only agriculture-related services, such as accountants, feed stores and equipment sellers – but also hairdressers, food stalls and even wedding venues.

In the face of massive pressures, auction marts have survived because of farmers' continuing preference to see first-hand the stock that they buy. They can be essential to local communities, bringing customers into pubs, cafes and other businesses. Crucially, they are central to many farmers' lives, offering much-needed social and health services as well as practical support.

As the UK's agricultural industry steers itself towards an uncertain future, how can auction marts not only ensure their own survival but also continue to support farmers and rural communities? The Prince's Countryside Fund aims to find out.

"When I started on buying lambs over 30 years ago you used to see the housewife, the son, the daughter and the farmer there. Then as the years went past, the wife went out to work and you'd only see the son and the daughter. But by now you only see them when on the farm, and a lot of farmers are only working part-time anyway, so that's how agriculture has changed."

Farmer

939

auction marts in the UK
in the early 1960s

142

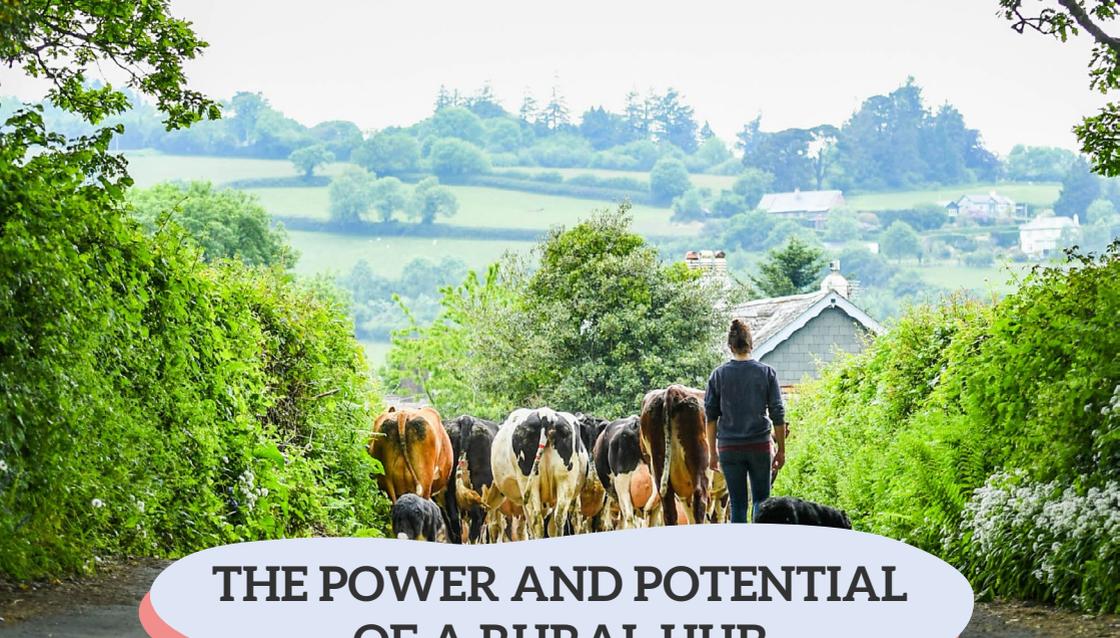
auction marts in the UK
today (approximate)

MELTON MOWBRAY MARKET

Melton Mowbray Market describes itself as the largest town centre livestock market in the country, with a history going back 1,000 years, predating the Domesday Book. With a friendly, welcoming and accessible atmosphere, it attracts not only farmers to its sales, but also members of the public.

The market hosts regular livestock auctions, but has also diversified, offering a bar, shops, an antique market, car boot sales and a hairdresser. For farmers, there are land and estate agents, insurance brokers, animal feed stores and farm vehicle sellers. What's more, its banqueting suite hosts weddings, conferences and wakes.





THE POWER AND POTENTIAL OF A RURAL HUB

Farmers are increasingly isolated, but their local auction mart can play a vital role in reconnecting communities and supporting agricultural workers' health and wellbeing.

Farming can be a lonely job. Post-war changes in agriculture mean that farms have become bigger and there are fewer people working on them. Even on family farms, time and financial pressures mean that different family members will often work in different places rather than together, and many spouses work away from the farm to supplement the family income.

Social isolation can cause or exacerbate mental health issues, and this is one of the biggest challenges among farmers, with anxiety, depression and stress all prevalent. Farming is also an occupation with one of the highest risks of suicide in the country.

Physical health problems are an issue too: farmers are widely recognised to be reluctant to seek medical advice until

**"Farming is so lonely at times...
you can be at home day in day out."**

Farmer

84%
OF FARMERS
UNDER THE AGE OF 40
say mental health
issues are the
greatest invisible
challenge to farming

*Farm Safety Foundation,
2020*



they're seriously ill, and their round-the-clock commitments on the farm can make it difficult to book and keep health appointments at busy local surgeries.

In some areas of the UK, farms have become detached from the towns and villages around them – some farmers say that they rarely meet other farmers or neighbouring members of their communities.

And while it's important to remember that auction marts are principally businesses, our research shows that the increasing levels of social isolation and associated issues in the agricultural community have encouraged many marts to explore their potential as rural hubs. A trip to the market is one of the only opportunities for farmers to get out and about, and, from marts, other services can reach out to the farmers who need their support, as well as enabling connections to be made between members of the same community.

SUPPORT FOR PHYSICAL HEALTH

Auction marts provide an ideal opportunity for health services to offer an easy way for farmers to get the medical attention that they need.

"I can certainly think of one auction mart, where the first time it was done, almost 30% of the farmers that were seen were strongly advised that they must see their GP urgently."

Farmer

Some marts host health check stands, roving nurses, and pop-up or permanent clinics. The key is to offer quick appointments and to gain the trust of farmers.



LLANYBYDDER LIVESTOCK AUCTIONS, WALES

Llanybydder Livestock Auctions has been run by the same family since 1895 and is a small, town centre livestock market. Its unique atmosphere reveals a strong sense of community at the same time as being very welcoming to newcomers. This ambience has resulted in many loyal customers over dozens of generations.

As someone who knows the mart well said: "Whatever they're doing, they're doing it right. There's a really good community feel there. They are very welcoming."

Our research shows that the marts offering health services report good attendance after farmers have overcome their initial reticence to engage. And these health services are picking up significant problems such as blood pressure issues, high cholesterol, diabetes, over-reliance on tobacco and alcohol, and poor diets, as well as more serious problems such as heart defects.

SEDGEMOOR AUCTION CENTRE, SOMERSET

In 2018, the Derek Mead Clinic opened at Sedgemoor Auction Centre. It's a purpose-built facility designed especially for the agricultural community, named after a local councillor and farmer who created and ran the auction mart.

The clinic offers not only basic health checks but the opportunity for farmers to discuss other issues, such as stress, depression and anxiety.

"We wanted to make something that was easily accessible for them," says a representative of the auction mart. "They could just roll up, turn up in their wellies, any time, no booking, and talk to a really approachable person."

A rural chaplain is also always available at this agri-business centre to discuss personal, business or spiritual matters, and other support services are signposted throughout.

SUPPORT FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Our research identified that the mart café plays a pivotal role at auction marts. It offers farmers and auction workers the opportunity to eat a decent meal at the same time as discussing business matters, trading tips and sharing gossip – and these conversations help support good mental health. What's more, auction managers estimate that between 5% and 20% of mart visitors come for social reasons alone.

The rural chaplain is one of the unsung heroes of the auction mart, according to our research. The role of the mart chaplain is to be recognisable, present and available to farmers, auction workers, and other visitors too. Some chaplains have training in mental health awareness and others have extensive experience working within agricultural communities. As an impartial presence, chaplains get involved in all sorts of conversations, including celebrating a good price, sharing family issues and unloading financial worries.

In our research, everyone with experience of rural chaplains spoke highly of them and recognised their value to the wellbeing of their communities.

Some auction managers too play an important role, getting involved in conversations with their customers about personal problems or financial worries.

Farmer support organisations sometimes have a presence at auction marts with representatives who mingle among attendees or who have a stand, or, at the very least, some posters and leaflets.



The Prince's Countryside Fund's *National Directory of Farm and Rural Support Groups* lists organisations that provide support, advice and guidance to farming and rural communities. It is a valuable signpost for farmers in crisis. It is available online here: www.princescountrysidefund.org.uk/directory

Farming Help is a confidential national helpline to support the farming community. It is open every day from 7am to 11pm. Call **03000 111 999** or see www.farminghelp.co.uk for more information.

OTHER SERVICES AND TRAINING

As changes in agriculture continue apace, farmers need to keep up to date with what's going on, and ensure that they have the necessary skills to move their businesses forward.

While informal knowledge exchange is valuable, some marts also host formal training on subjects such as health and safety, beef and sheep finishing and bookkeeping. Some offer discussion groups, such as supporting young people to learn more about farming. The Prince's Countryside Fund runs its Farm Resilience Programme at marts around the UK, a series of workshops focusing on developing skills such as business planning, budgeting and sustainability.

"If somebody's struggling with the TB test or sheep dipping or whatever it happens to be, the market is the place to come and have a word with somebody."

Auctioneer

COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

In some regions of the UK examined by our research, farmers reported feeling a strong sense of belonging to their wider communities. But in other regions, farmers stated that they barely knew their neighbours. Auction marts offer the opportunity to bridge this divide between farmers and their communities. All auction operators believe that narrowing the gap between farming and consumers is vitally important to the livestock industry.

And there's an opportunity, according to our research, for more auction marts to offer other support services such as retirement and legal advice, and help with administration and paperwork.

Farmers and others told our researchers that they would be enthusiastic to attend training events at their local mart.

CUTCOMBE MARKET, DEVON

Cutcombe Market hosts the Exmoor Hill Farming Network, a very active farmer support organisation which works with more than 300 farming businesses.

The mart acts as the headquarters of the Exmoor Hill Farming Network, and its support in facilitating the connection between its visiting farmers and the network has contributed to the network's popularity. The network offers a range of services to its members, including information, training and demonstrations, plus support groups for women and younger farmers.

Some auction marts host events which are open to the general public, such as carol services, boxing matches and vehicle rallies.

Such efforts at integrating the general public with their local agricultural community were perceived as being extremely important by almost everyone interviewed for the research, overcoming the detachment that has occurred in many places between farm and fork.



WELCOMING WOMEN

Women play an important role in family farming businesses, but some auction marts need to increase their efforts to include them.

In the past, it would have been rare to see many women buying and selling animals at auction marts, but the number of female farmers in the UK is increasing slowly. In farming families, women often play a key role as accountants, administrators and hands-on workers, and sometimes they are the person in the family who makes the most critical decisions about the farming business. Some women work outside the family farm too.

Our research showed that some women farmers felt uncomfortable or lacked confidence at the thought of conducting business at auction marts.

Even if women don't go to the marts to buy and sell, they could benefit from other support services. They too can suffer from isolation, mental health issues and difficulty finding time to get to their local GP surgery.

So, bearing in mind the increasingly significant role of women either as farmers or as behind-the-scenes support, our researchers emphasise that marts should ensure that all members of farming families – whether male or female – are welcomed.

“You’d be surprised how many women are actually carrying the can on their own, perhaps been farming with dad all their life and dad’s died or husband’s died...and they’re actually managing on their own. But then there’s all sorts of training things that have been put on...food hygiene, health and safety, first aid, bookkeeping, and keeping up with whatever the latest legislation is.”

Farmer



“For myself, personally, [the mart] has been a huge boost. It has given me so much more confidence to do things and I do feel that I can talk to people, and sometimes it’s easier to talk to people outside the family than it is inside the family.”

Female farmer

For example, adverts to bring in clients targeted at ‘men’ or ‘lads’ could be reconsidered. While some auction marts already offer specialised support to women farmers, more moves could be made by marts to host programmes aimed at women, or they could invite women speakers to events or shows; collaborations could be made with women’s farming groups too. Women should be made aware of the support services on offer and there should be sufficient facilities available for men and women on-site.

17%
OF FARMERS
ARE WOMEN
and this number
is rising





BOOSTING AUCTION MART BUSINESSES

These are challenging times for auction marts, but action can be taken to increase the health of the business.

The golden years for auction marts are over, according to our research. Auction marts are no longer easy businesses to run and they are economically vulnerable due to a number of factors, including changes in farming practices, an ageing clientele, high overheads, the weight of bad debts, fewer farms and disease outbreaks.

Our research emphasises the crucial role played by auction marts in the health and wellbeing of members of the agricultural community, but it is important to bear in mind that the most critical role of the

auction mart is to offer a transparent, fair and competitive open market for the trade of livestock. Auction marts claim to act as a pricing mechanism, without which the value of livestock might well fall, detrimentally affecting producers and having a negative knock-on impact on rural communities and associated industries.

It is, therefore, crucial for the farming community that auction marts continue, and our researchers have identified six key ways to help auction mart businesses stay healthy.

“After holding a customer meeting to ask what the customers want – and explain that you use it or lose it – it was agreed to change the time of the sale, and this strategy has so far been successful.”

Research contributor

SIX TIPS FOR AUCTION MARTS SURVIVAL

1. Keep the business running well

Running an auction mart is not an easy task, especially with all the challenges buffeting the agricultural sector. The auction marts that have survived so far are often running sound businesses incorporating some or all of the following factors:

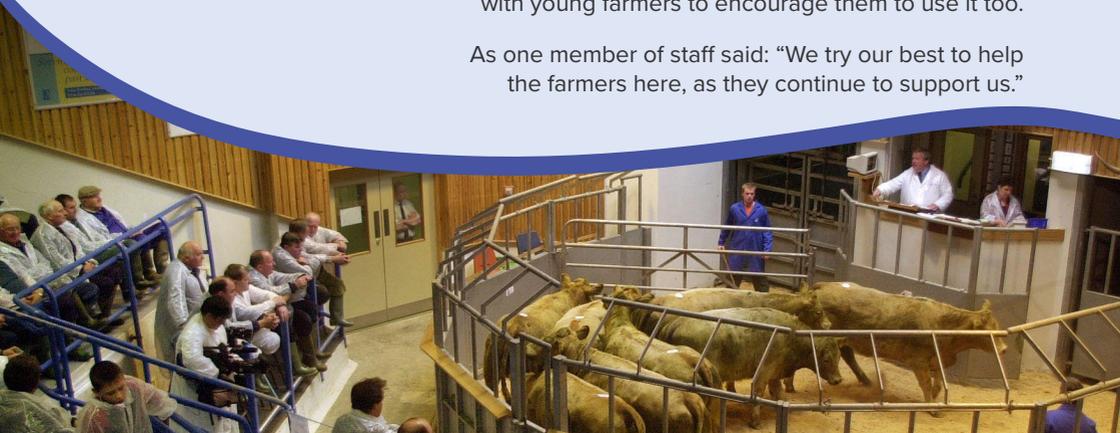
- Building a strong team of staff
- Encouraging a loyal customer base
- Creating a welcome space, especially for new customers
- Working to the strengths of the mart, such as specialist sales or the auctioneer's reputation
- Effectively managing bad debt
- Ensuring all health and safety regulations are strictly observed
- Building a disaster-ready infrastructure in case of future crises
- Seeking the advice of professionals, such as business diversification advisors
- Investigating collaborations with local food hubs to shorten the supply chain between producer and consumer
- Asking the customers what they want
- Working with local authorities rather than against them
- Ensuring good vehicle access and parking
- Considering what the mart has to offer from the customer's point of view

ORKNEY AUCTION MART

Orkney Auction Mart has looked at what its customers need and it has created an infrastructure which supports local farmers from both mainland Scotland and the islands to attend. It also works hard to counter unexpected events such as extreme weather.

It began in 1901 and became a co-operative in 1953 with more than 1,000 shareholders today. The mart's efforts to maintain high animal welfare standards are exceptional and recently the people running the mart have taken part in discussion groups and become an informal support system for local farmers. The mart offers vital employment and business opportunities for many islanders and works closely with young farmers to encourage them to use it too.

As one member of staff said: "We try our best to help the farmers here, as they continue to support us."



2. Marketing, especially to younger farmers

With an ageing clientele of visiting farmers, it's important that auction marts appeal to the younger generation. Marketing through social media can attract the attention of younger farmers as well as the wider rural community.

Additionally, younger farmers should feel interested, engaged and included when they do visit, and schemes directly aimed at them can help with this, such as awards and training opportunities.

BALLYMENA LIVESTOCK MARKET

Ballymena Livestock Market is one of the largest livestock auction marts in Northern Ireland. Younger farmers visit for both business and social reasons. Social media and working closely with the local Young Farmers' Club has helped to draw them in.

"Now if I have something, we fire it up on Facebook and I can get pretty much an instant response to it."

Auctioneer



**There are
22,000
MEMBERS
OF YOUNG
FARMERS' CLUBS
across England and Wales**

3. Diversify, diversify, diversify

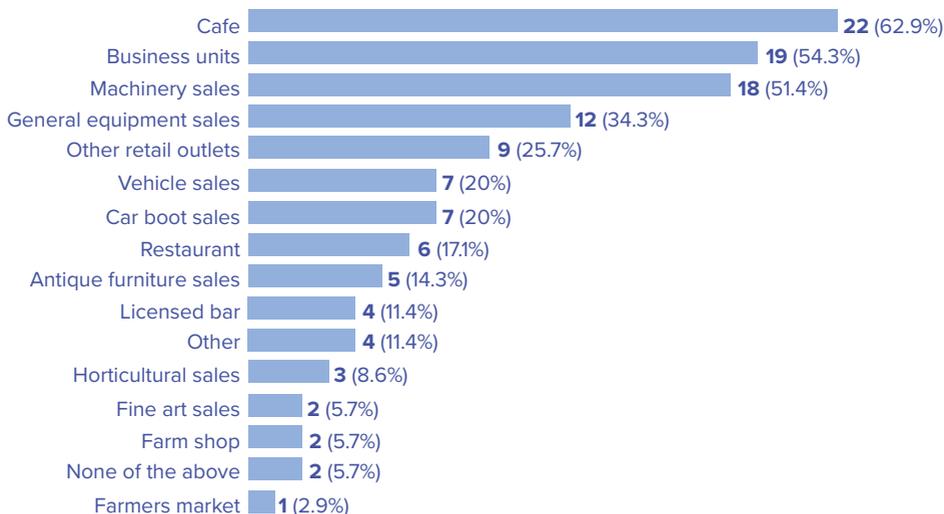
Diversification helps auction marts' businesses to become stronger in the face of changing market forces. Often marts can rent out business units or other parts of their space and different activities can also draw in a variety of customers.

Some marts host businesses directly related to agriculture, such as feed and farming supplies; others have services that will appeal to the general public too, such as hairdressers, takeaway food, fine art sales and car boot sales. Some even have the space to host big events like weddings and conferences.

"[If we hadn't diversified] we wouldn't be in existence. We don't make money selling the livestock. It's the other things that we do."

Auctioneer

Diversification helps strengthen auction marts' businesses: proportion of marts surveyed which hosted other businesses on-site



4. Farming business support

By creating a one-stop-shop for farmers through offering support services such as training and networking opportunities, auction marts can help ensure that their customers' farming businesses stay strong, thereby ensuring healthy custom into the future.

5. Farmers' health and wellbeing support

Auction marts are ideal sites from which to offer physical and mental health services for farmers.

6. Reconnecting farm with fork

Auction marts can bridge the gap between farmers and the wider public by bringing the whole community into the mart through a range of different activities. By demonstrating what the mart and its farming community can offer, local communities are more likely to want to support local food production, as well as being willing to support the mart if it's under threat.

Ready to take your auction mart business further?

There is much more detail as well as practical advice about how to make auction mart businesses more resilient in the full report, including tips on how to set up a health hub. See:

www.princescountrysidefund.org.uk/research





TOWARDS A BRIGHTER FUTURE

By becoming a hub for their communities, auction marts can secure their own survival as well as that of farming families and the livestock industry.

Auction marts have their own culture. They are each their own community. They are not merely sites where trade takes place, but intricate assemblages of people, animals and networks. As different as each livestock market may seem, they are all operating using a traditional system that is deeply entrenched within the lives of their customers, and, as they evolve and transform, they are still somehow linked to the generations that have come before them. Few other trading experiences can be compared to a day at the market, and while locations and technology and society have all transformed, the actual experience of the sale itself has changed little.

The livestock auction mart is well-placed to act as a hub for business health, community health, and the physical and mental wellbeing of all of the stakeholders who use it. As other possibilities for social activity and networking among the farming community have gradually diminished, the mart has come into its own. By acting as a crucial platform for the livestock industry, not only to buy and sell animals, but also to support those who are the backbone of that industry in as many ways as possible, auction marts can encourage not only their own survival into the future but also that of the livestock industry.



The mart is a place which can create positivity in the life of a farmer, be it through the pride achieved through showing an animal, meeting up with friends, or learning something new. It is a space for networking, getting a meal, and receiving updates on all of the news.

No set auction model exists to ensure business success. The simplest of town centre marts seeing minimal change over many years might be as popular as the newest mart, purpose-built for both business and customer in modern times. But all businesses should seek to be as versatile as possible by diversifying their business where there is potential, as well as collaborating with key organisations and individuals to deliver a variety of services which will serve the local community. There has never been a greater need to bring the livestock industry back into public view in as positive way as possible, an opportunity best harnessed by the livestock auction mart and the communities to whom they belong.



RECOMMENDATIONS FROM OUR RESEARCH

For The Prince's Countryside Fund

- Through The Prince's Countryside Fund farm support coordinator, continue to encourage close working relationships between farm support groups and auction marts, strengthening the position of auction marts as trusted places of advice.
- Disseminate findings from this research through a best practice/how to guide.

For central and local government

- Make use of auction marts as essential centres of learning to engage with the farming community on, for example, agri-environment schemes and other policy changes.

For auction mart operators

- UK auction marts should implement best practice and pursue business diversification.
- Auction marts in England should engage with their Local Enterprise Partnership to ensure that they are part of local initiatives which will benefit from the Prosperity Fund.
- Engage with existing industry events to showcase how mart activities can benefit the local community.
- Look to bring younger farmers into auction marts through targeted activity.
- Proactively seek relationships with town councils, local authorities and other similar bodies, as well as farm support organisations in your local area.
- Ensure staff are supported to deal with mental health challenges, both their own and for mart attendees, through appropriate training such as suicide awareness or mental health first aid schemes.

For livestock farmers

- Engage with support services and social activities at your mart.
- Take advantage of events, training, discussion groups, networks and other business support offered by livestock markets to better inform both personal and business decisions.

For farmer support organisations

- Proactively work with your local auction marts to offer support to the farming community.



“The point about the auction mart is that it is a meeting place. It’s a place where people are drawn together.”

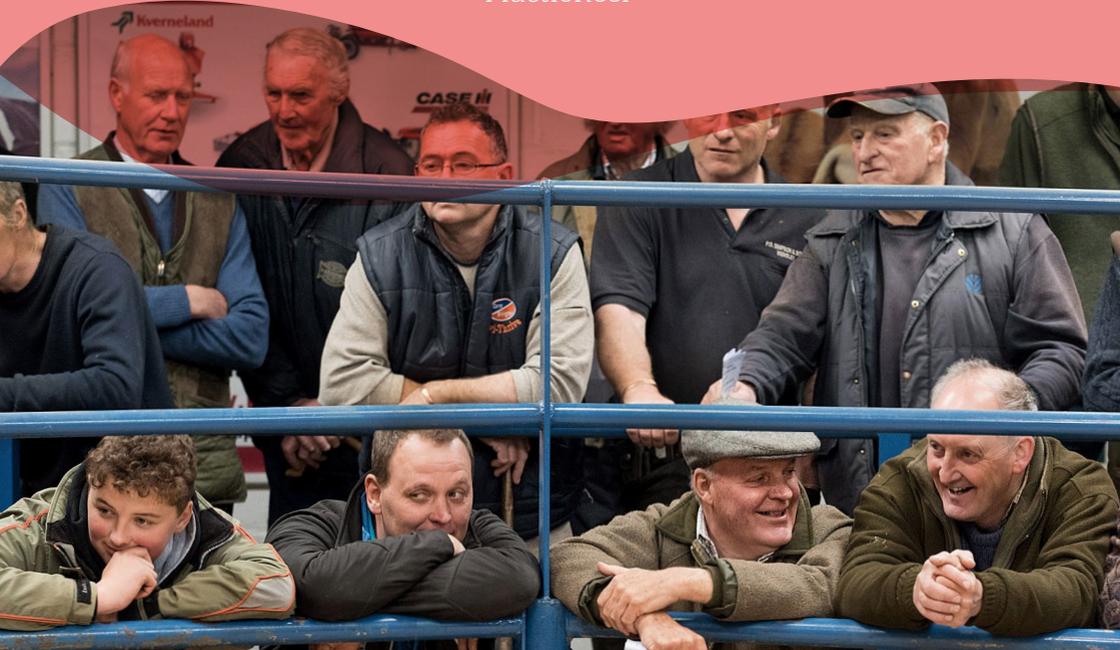
Research contributor

“Despite the many challenges on the horizon, there are also real opportunities and we must all take up the challenges presented and embrace and develop them to our advantage.”

Chris Dodds, Executive Secretary,
Livestock Auctioneers’ Association

“We try to be a bit more than just a place to come and sell and buy livestock.”

Auctioneer



“Together we can all make the most of our local auction marts to help secure a brighter future for the British countryside.”

Keith Halstead, Executive Director
The Prince’s Countryside Fund



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Registered charity numbers: England and Wales 1136077, Scotland SC048055
Company limited by guarantee number 07240359