

Soil Health Industry Platform (SHIP)
Scoping Proposal

1. Background and Context

The Soil Health Industry Platform is a collaborative initiative that aims to discuss, harness, align and amplify the efforts of major food and drink businesses (retail and manufacture) to improve soil health and address soil damage throughout the UK supply chain.

It was prompted by the recommendations of the December 2021 '[Soils in the UK Supply Chain](#)' (SITSC) report by the Sustainable Soils Alliance (SSA) and the outcomes of the October 6th workshop at which representatives of participating businesses discussed the report's findings, including the five recommendations and 15 'actions' (Annex I). During the workshop, there was clear consensus among the participants about the merits of a more collaborative approach among businesses, and the value of a platform for discussing these actions and identifying those that would deliver results.

There was also agreement during the workshop that soil health was a particularly 'live' issue with multiple policy, corporate and stakeholder initiatives addressing the soils issue over the next 12-18 months (see Annex II). This strengthened the case for greater collaboration - both to ensure that businesses align with and amplify these initiatives and to send consistent and coherent messages to farmers, stakeholders and other supply chain players.

2. Objectives

The objectives of the platform are as follows:

- To identify and understand the tools and processes whereby food and drink businesses (individually and collectively) impact upon soil health and agree and pursue actions/projects that will make a clear, tangible and measurable difference to delivering regenerative farming, Net Zero and biodiversity targets and outcomes.
- To develop and adopt a shared public commitment to soil health built around specific actions, agreed outcomes, metrics and progress indicators – and a delivery roadmap. This will demonstrate leadership and alignment, galvanise the rest of the industry and showcase clear intent to high, universal standards to farmers and stakeholders and support for achieving them.
- To promote and share best practice with regards to the development, measurement and reporting of relevant initiatives between participating businesses that can then be converted into universal practice.
- To ensure business efforts and initiatives align with and where appropriate exceed emerging (devolved) policy developments (education, incentivisation, regulation) that impact upon soil health.
- To connect with, ensure consistency with and amplify the efforts of established initiatives (LEAF, AHDB, WRAP) that have important leverage over specific aspects of soil management.

Each of these objectives will have distinct outcomes, however to ensure the Platform is more than a talking shop, its focus should be on the delivery of the first two, namely tangible actions and a shared commitment. These are the critical metrics against which the success of the Platform should be judged.

3. Process and key elements

The core elements of the Platform will be:

- A shared public commitment to address soil degradation and promote soil health, underpinned by a suite of actions and ambitious roadmap for delivery. The nature and scope of this commitment will be a Platform priority, with a view to adoption during 2022.
- Regular (bi-monthly) meetings which will provide the forum for discussing the commitment, progress against it and the actions required to take it forward and how (through projects). Meetings will also provide an opportunity to learn about recent, relevant business, policy and stakeholder

developments, timely issues (e.g. the definition of regenerative) and individual business initiatives. Where appropriate/valuable third party speakers will be invited to attend and present to the group.

- The projects will be the specific actions identified and agreed by Platform members. These will include specific actions that underpin the commitment (e.g. those 'actions' proposed in the SITSC Report), or initiatives that address particular knowledge gaps or deliver specific outcomes (e.g. research undertaken/commissioned).

4. Membership and Responsibilities

Roles and responsibilities for participating organisations will be as follows:

- The SSA will be responsible for the day-to-day running of the Platform, including:
 - Secretariat for the Platform
 - Workshop organisation, minutes, speaker invitation engagement etc
 - Research and drafting of supporting materials and proposals for action
 - Stakeholder engagement
 - Communications (media, website etc)
 - Budgeting

The SSA will also 'own' the Platform but be responsible for identifying and driving all opportunities to integrate it into existing, established protocols (e.g., WRAP/Courtauld) if it is agreed that that will provide a better platform to achieve progress.

- Membership of the Platform will be open to all businesses with a significant impact on UK farming practices who are willing to make a tangible contribution to Platform objectives. As a first instance, all businesses that participated in the SITSC report will be invited to join, however others can be nominated and (subject to SSA approval) invited to join. Members will share the Platform costs between them (see below).
- Individuals representing third party organisations that have a significant impact on/knowledge of soil management will be invited to join the Platform with observer status. These will include LEAF, WRAP, Environment Agency, NIAB etc. Observers will not be required to contribute to the Platform budget.

5. Benefits for participants

The Platform will benefit all participating businesses by helping them embed soil in their Net Zero, biodiversity and regenerative agriculture targets (both individually and collectively), communicate their efforts to internal, farmer and stakeholder audiences and facilitate industry collaboration and alignment around soil health. It will also benefit participating individuals by providing:

- Up-to-date knowledge and understanding of relevant policy, business and stakeholder initiatives relating to soil health.
- The opportunity to learn from industry peers about how best to make the case for business investment in regenerative farming etc in a pre-competitive space.
- Understanding of the emerging science base connecting soil carbon with Net Zero targets.
- A platform to engage with relevant stakeholder organisations.
- Answers to ad-hoc soil-relevant information requests (via SSA).

6. External Communications

- All workshops will take place virtually (unless participants see the merit in a face-to-face meeting), and under Chatham house rules. Meeting summaries will be published on the SSA website.
- The SSA website will also look to include detailed case studies and best practice examples that emerge from the report and ongoing discussions – to demonstrate industry efforts underway.
- More proactive communications (media/stakeholder engagement) will be subject to agreement by Platform members. Any actions/projects or other announcements arising from the Platform will have their own communications/engagement strategy to be agreed and budgeted separately.

7. Timing

- The Platform will convene in March 2022. Before then, the SSA will discuss the proposal with participants, identify actions for initial discussion/prioritisation and circulate a draft industry commitments(s) for discussion.

- We envisage 4-6 meetings taking place in 2022. At the end of 2022, Platform members will review progress and agree the need/merit for the Platform's continuation.

8. Budget

- We estimate the overall running costs of the Platform as £24,000 (meeting organisation x4-6, research, drafting, stakeholder engagement etc) for a 12 month period.
- Based on an estimated 8 participants, membership costs will be £3,000 for participating businesses. Observer organisations will not be asked to contribute.
- Individual projects/actions will be budgeted separately and might be driven/funded by all Platform members or a 'coalition of the willing' who see particular value in a specific outcome.
- The membership fee reflects the fact many of these activities (research, stakeholder engagement) will overlap with those undertaken by the SSA under the terms of their existing funder agreements. The SSA is largely funded (50%+) by a grant from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, on the understanding that that figure will be matched by contributions from other organisations, including corporates.

Annex I

Recommendations (bold) and suggested actions from Soil in the Supply Chain report.

1. Ensure you and your intermediates suppliers are not contributing inadvertently to increased soil degradation and decline. Explore the role of all mechanisms (advisors, contracts, certification schemes) to embed regulatory compliance and safeguards against soil-damaging practices into supplier relations.

- Analyse and understand the impact that supply chain processes and dynamics might have on soil management, in particular contract and tenancy lengths. The following might support this:
 - Survey supplying farmers to understand how/where pressure points are that might lead to soil damaging practices.
 - Consultation with the Environment Agency, water catchment schemes etc. to better understand the nature/cause of soil degradation and how it can be remediated.
 - Examine the knowledge/awareness of in-house/contracted agronomists about both recent science and policy as it relates to soil.
- Evaluate how farming regulations are currently reflected in farmer contractual relations. Establish whether safeguards are in place to ensure farmers are not required to deliver produce in a way/timeframe that places them in breach of critical regulations.
- Review existing certifications/standards (LEAF, Red Tractor, Soil Association) to establish whether they go far enough to protect and improve soils. A baseline should include regulatory compliance and the requirement – not recommendation – to regularly monitor soil health.

2. Show your commitment is real, tangible, traceable and measurable. Develop metrics and performance indicators that connect corporate regenerative ambitions with on-the-ground projects - and regularly and publicly report on progress against them.

- Review existing regenerative/sustainable farming policies alongside existing and proposed corporate objectives and identify gaps. Examine how this link can be strengthened through the use of tangible internal metrics and KPIs (e.g. soil health measurements, farmers reached, area of land affected).
- Develop toolkits to educate and inform corporate leadership about the importance and complexities of soil as a critical pillar of sustainability – one that is a shared responsibility like clean air, water etc. This process should demonstrate what a realistic ambition should look like, the role of that organization in achieving it and where collaboration is needed. Where possible, personal senior buy-in should be sought (through farm visits etc.).
- Promote and incentivise soil monitoring by farmers throughout the supply chain using all consistent, universal, farmer-friendly metrics and Soil Quality Indicators. This should be based on available best-in-class tools ([Soil Biology and Soil Health Scorecard](#)) and consistent with 'official' guidance (e.g. SFI soils standards) to demonstrate to farmers consensus about core parameters of soil health

3. Make the most of available and future research. Ensure it translates into practice change on the ground as widely as possible.

- Create a forum for sharing research, best practice, case studies amongst industry farming experts and advisors. This should include both academic and in-field research, and relate to behaviour change and soil science. Collaborate with established mechanisms for knowledge dissemination (AHDB, LEAF etc.) to signpost to farmers what research is underway, and pick and choose which research to learn from and engage in. This can also be a mechanism to enable sustainability experts to benchmark soils policies.
- Establish an industry-led open access repository of soils data and knowledge based on consistent monitoring, collection and submission of soil health statistics. This should sit alongside existing data sources (RPA etc.) to help build a nationwide picture.

- Promote the use of farmer-farmer information channels (farm clusters, demonstration farms, living laboratories and lighthouses) as the most effective means of transmitting expertise and experience.
4. **Be a catalyst for system-wide change. Spread ambition and best practice throughout the industry both vertically – via intermediaries that source on your behalf - and horizontally to competitors and hard to reach/invisible supply chains.**
- Create a pan-industry written commitment to long-term soil management outcomes. This commitment should reflect an agreed role for industry – one that is ambitious and proportionate. It should signpost to internal audiences a clear pre-competitive ‘space’, and to farmers the common ground and intent to avoid conflicting advice. By way of a model, consider the WRAP Courtauld commitment to *Reducing food waste, cutting carbon and protecting critical water resources*.
 - Underpin this commitment with a delivery roadmap, based on realistic but tangible outcomes, indicators and accompanying timeframe. As well as being measurement-based, it should incorporate a consistent approach to terms like ‘regenerative’.
 - Create toolkits for intermediary supplier businesses to embed soil/regenerative practices in their own supplier relations/farmer contracts and align them with the commitment of the larger brands. This might (for example) define what the component elements of a regenerative farming policy should look like. It should be aimed at all players in the supply chain – and act as a galvanising force for those back-markers to consider the transition.
5. **Anticipate and address farmer needs at a time of great uncertainty. Demonstrate alignment with policy-makers, market forces and other drivers through whole system thinking, consistent metrics and leadership.**
- Identify and fill the knowledge gaps relating to soil carbon measurement, reporting and verification so that its impact on climate change and other public goods can be better understood and reflected in Net Zero accounting and GHG reduction strategies. This will ensure that future ecosystem markets are credible, verifiable and follow industry-agreed, scientifically robust best practice
 - Survey farmers to better understand their needs and concerns about the changing policy and market dynamics, and hence their requirements of customers and advisors. This should include all the relevant market ‘forces’ (carbon markets, SFI etc.), and reflect the fact that farmers are increasingly looking at their soil as a commodity that can generate income.
 - Engage with governments across the UK. Volunteer research and support to help the communication and the roll-out of future farming schemes (e.g. SFI), and alignment with the core structures (metrics etc.) proposed.

Annex II

Soil relevant policy, corporate and NGO initiatives in 2021-2022:

- Development of a Soil Health Action Plan for England (SHAPE), scheduled for end 2021.
- Launch of Defra’s Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), including the Standards for soils.
- Creation of a Farm Soil Carbon Code.
- Development of a target and shadow target for soil for England’s 25 Year Plan for the Environment and underlying guidance, benchmarks and metrics.
- Sustainable Food Trust Global Farm Metric (including Soil).
- Courtauld Agreement Commitment: Supporting the drive for GHG reductions in UK agriculture (ongoing).
- Fallout from government Net Zero strategy and COP26., including a likely call for evidence on the inclusion of nature-based GGRs in the UK ETS
- Defra response to the National Food Strategy for England.