



The Local Meat Report

April 2025



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Understanding the landscape

There is a very real risk of losing the last remaining abattoir in Sussex, Downland Traditional Meats. This report lays out the importance of [small-scale abattoirs](#) to the local environment, economy and animal welfare, and suggests potential methods for ensuring we do not lose this valuable local resource. Data has been gathered from a range of sources, including NFU surveys, government data and local knowledge. It is our hope that this report can offer a foundation on which to build a stronger, further reaching local meat system for Sussex and the surrounding counties.

Why support local abattoirs in a “post-meat” world?

Whilst the conversation around eating meat and the environment typically demonises grazing animals due to carbon emissions and supplementary feeding, it is important to consider place and the appropriate crop for a landscape. The South Downs are primarily made up of chalk downland with very thin soils and are therefore not ideal for growing crops without considerable inputs. [Historically](#), this land has been used to graze sheep, which were then brought into the fold in valley bottoms at night to fertilise growing land. Whilst deforestation did occur, it happened over the course of thousands of years, and allowed an internationally important habitat, [chalk grassland](#), to thrive. Due to agrolological intensification following the Second World War, the UK has lost [97% of its species rich grasslands](#), and [80% of its chalk grassland](#), in the last 80 years. Chalk grassland is vanishingly rare, [found only in north-west Europe](#), and widely regarded as one of the most biodiverse habitats on Earth. Grazing animals are essential to preserving and restoring this “European Rainforest”. This habitat is as much a defining feature of the South Downs National Park as the extensive forests in the west.

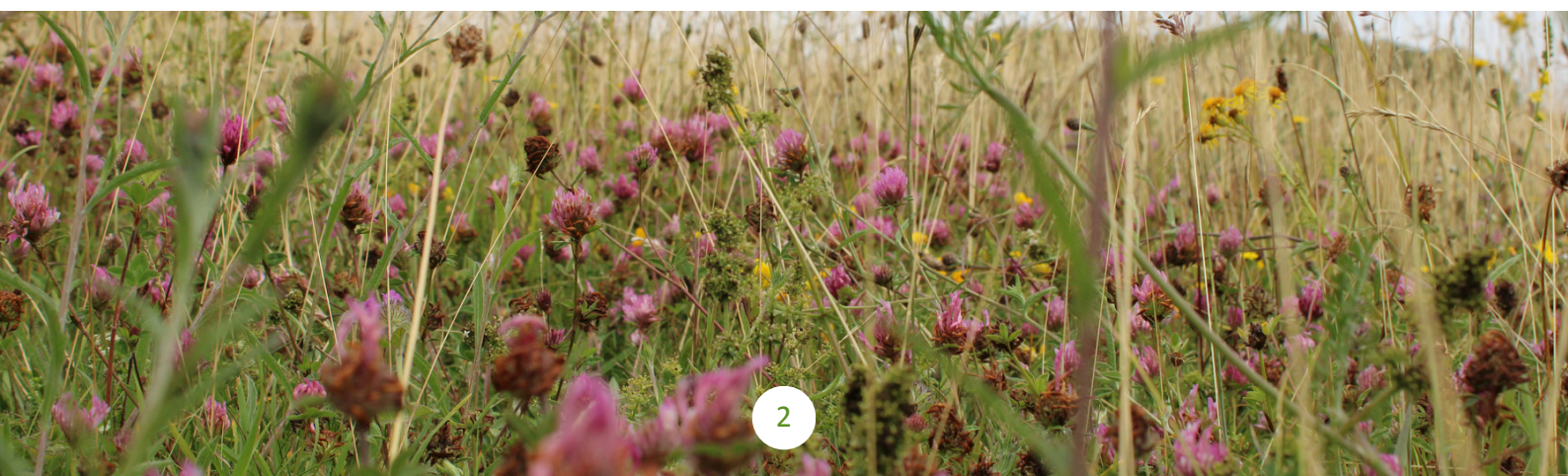
Conservation grazing is the practice of using, primarily native breed, ruminants to selectively graze out “problem” or invasive species, most often without the need for supplementary feeding. In the case of chalk grassland this includes scrub such as hawthorn and bramble, and grasses such as tor grass, reducing crowding and creating the correct conditions for desired species to thrive. This is what connects chalk grassland recovery to local abattoirs. Native breed animals are typically smaller and less homogenised than the products we are used to seeing in supermarkets, who have strict specifications as to what makes an “acceptable” cut. Large scale abattoirs most often supply directly into the wholesale market, meaning that they do not accept these sorts of animals, and farmers have no opportunity to get their meat back. If farmers are able to sell their own meat, they are also often able to make a small premium which tells the story of their farm and recognises the slow and sustainable pace at which these animals were grown, in harmony with nature.

Small scale abattoirs are closing across the UK at an alarming rate. This is having a knock on effect on local farms and businesses, causing some farmers to stop farming or change their locally focused model. As fewer small abattoirs exist, farmers and their livestock are having to travel further distances, driving up food miles, causing unnecessary suffering to animals, and eating into the farmer’s already limited time. This lack of resource is forcing many to feed directly into the national market as most large abattoirs do not offer a kill and return service. There is also an impact on food sovereignty and security: with no abattoir, and a cattle market under threat, Sussex’s main crop is grain followed by a small amount of horticulture.

“Small and medium-sized abattoirs are vital to the food supply chain. The government needs to work with the NFU and help us do all we can to support and seek opportunities to grow this sector.”

NFU Livestock Board chair for the East of England Hugh Broom

In the Southeast, we have lost Tottingworth Abattoir (serving approximately 900 farmers) in East Sussex and Newman’s (PC Turner’s) in Hampshire within the last two years. This has left only two small scale abattoirs remaining; Downland Traditional Meats in West Sussex and Forge Farm Meats in Kent. It is essential that we don’t just watch these abattoirs close as the others did but work proactively to ensure a future for small scale meat production which promotes biodiversity and local food systems in the Southeast.





Demand for local produce

Developing local food systems has the potential to increase [local economies](#), create a local “brand” (as seen with [Sussex Wine](#)), and eventually even make the supply of quality food more [equitable](#).

Brighton and Hove Food Partnership runs a meat box scheme which aims to connect local people with their landscape through food. [Sussex Grazed](#), a Changing Chalk project, engaged 130 customers to January 25, 50% of whom purchased another share. 95% of customers rated the quality of the meat as 5/5, demonstrating the outstanding product we have available here. 80% of these customers said they’d gained new insights into local meat production, and some wouldn’t buy their meat another way.

“I’ve been pescatarian for a few years for ethical reasons. So, I’m delighted to find a source of meat which I’m happy to eat. It’s not only top quality and helps with conservation efforts, but it also actually seems to be more humane right through to the end, which is very important to me.”

Helen, Sussex Grazed customer

Farmers support this localised model, finding that it helps them to tell their story and connect with the public.

“First and foremost having a reliable abattoir in the area gives us the opportunity to supply local customers with locally produced meat - born and raised on the South Downs, being enjoyed locally.

It’s an incredibly important outlet which allows us to engage with local community, as well as educate. Losing another local abattoir stops us from being able to effectively do this. Many people love buying local when and where they can.”

Ed, Local farmer

Restaurants are also seeking out quality meat with a local story, finding that customers are willing to pay a little more for food which does good. [Palmito](#) is a Brighton Restaurant which continues to seek more and more local produce, including Ed’s goats.

“One of the main reasons why my business thrives and local people support it is because we have extremely close ties with farmers. I buy lamb, goats and beef directly from farms in Sussex that are raised and killed locally. Rosie, a local Shepherd that I buy lamb from, loves her lambs and looks after them properly. To have to drive them to be killed in another county would scare the animals and produce bad meat. All her hard work lost.”

Diego, Director, Palmito

With the development of a [Local Food Plan](#), there is potential to not only create a marketable product in Sussex grown meats but also explore links into public procurement so that meat options on [school](#), [prison](#) and [hospital](#) menus are locally and sustainably sourced. Recent work completed by Brighton and Hove Food Partnership and Wealden Food Partnership revealed that there is a strong demand from both farms and schools to link food procurement with education.

NFU Southeast livestock farmers survey

NFU data shows that farmers who use small scale abattoirs are more often than not also in agri-environment schemes. The sudden closure of the Sustainable Farming Incentive earlier in the year is a blow to the agroecologically minded farmer. The survey also shows that many farmers reduced their herds or increased their prices in response to the closure of the Tootingworth abattoir, and the fallout from the closure of Newman's is still being felt. It is worth noting that the loss of an abattoir not only impacts farmers, but associated industries including vets, butchers, and delivery drivers.

- 545 respondents
- 46% of respondents were mixed arable and livestock farmers
- County responses:
 - East Sussex: 20%
 - West Sussex: 14%
 - Kent: 10%
 - Surrey: 10%.
- 63% of respondents were also in an agri-environment schemes
- 60% of respondents were supplying direct to consumers
- 11% of respondents are supplying directly to pubs and restaurants
- 200 respondents used Downland Traditional Meats in 2024
- 65% of those using Turners sent less than 20 cattle or goats, or 50 sheep or pigs a year
- 49.7% of respondents were aware of a small abattoir closing in the last 12 months
- 55% said they have had to increase their prices due to abattoirs closing in the last 12 months
- 14% have reduced their stocking due to abattoir closures



Downland Traditional Meats: An overview

Despite an increase in business due to the closure of other small-scale abattoirs in the area, Downland Traditional Meats (DTM) near Henfield, the last remaining abattoir in Sussex, is still at risk of closure.

Key challenges DTM are experiencing include:

- Limitations of the building, built as a “hobby” for the previous farmer
 - Lack of mechanical lifts meaning staff must lift bodies onto hooks
 - Lack of refrigeration space
 - Lack of lairage
- An aging work force, many of whom are above retirement age
- Lack of willing apprentices
- Financial pressures
 - Cost of tankering away waste (due to new EA requirements in Jan 25)
 - Cost of electricity etc
 - Lack of margin due to labour intensive nature of work in the current building
 - Lack of income to adequately address these issues
- [Food Standards Agency requirements](#) which do not differentiate between small and larger abattoirs
- Lack of resource to be able to deal with ever-changing regulation
- Working over capacity due to lack of other local abattoirs
- Site now owned by Barclays homes, reducing motivation to invest in long term solutions to the above
- The abattoir has a short lease which is due to end in 2031, with a break clause in September 2026

Both Tottingworth and Newman’s cited similar reasons for their closure. A recent example of the challenges small abattoirs face is an FSA requirement to install a head restraint on cattle, with no legal requirement to use it. Whilst the cost of the restraint itself was minimal, installing it at DTM required a new “kill box” as the current one was not compatible, and changes to the building. With significant (£230,000) funding from WSDC, it has now been possible to meet this regulation, but there was no money in the budget to install a piece of equipment which does not have to be used.

DTM offers butchery services and is the only abattoir in the area which can process pigs. Whilst this is an important service, especially for “hobby” breeders, the infrastructure required to maintain this service is expensive and easily damaged. A recent investment in new machinery to remove the hair from the pig carcasses from Horsham District Council has helped to ensure the continuation of this service.

What is DTM’s current weekly throughput?

- 100 pigs plus wild boar
- 60-70 cattle
- 400 sheep + when busy

Since the closure of Tottingworth Abattoir, DTM have increased their delivery fleet from a 7.5 tonne refrigerated lorry and a smaller refrigerated van to include a large, long wheelbase, refrigerated van. This is still not enough to cover demand although they are serving up to 300 customers per week. Deliveries now occur as far away as Reading and Faversham. The most significant thing they have seen is a huge toll on their aging machinery (as demonstrated below by the reduction in pig numbers due to damage to the pig tanks). Many machines are so old that spare parts can no longer be purchased, and the entire piece of equipment must be replaced.

Comparison of DTM Kill Numbers pre and post Tottingworth closure

November 2022

W/C	Pigs	Cattle	Sheep
07/11/2022	71	32	168
14/11/2022	106	32	168
21/11/2022	106	15	208
28/11/2022	103	18	152
Weekly Average	96.5	25.25	174

November 2023

W/C	Pigs	Cattle	Sheep
06/11/2023	88	47	263
13/11/2023	83	51	263
20/11/2023	84	51	236
27/11/2023	87	40	249
Weekly Average	85.5	47.25	252.75

In the 6 months to April 2025, [DTM serviced 573 individual farms and businesses](#) at least once. The linked map shows not only DTM and their customer base during this period, but also highlights other small scale abattoirs, including those which have closed.

This is how DTM's recent customer base breaks down across local counties. You can find a more detailed breakdown sorted by postcode [here](#).

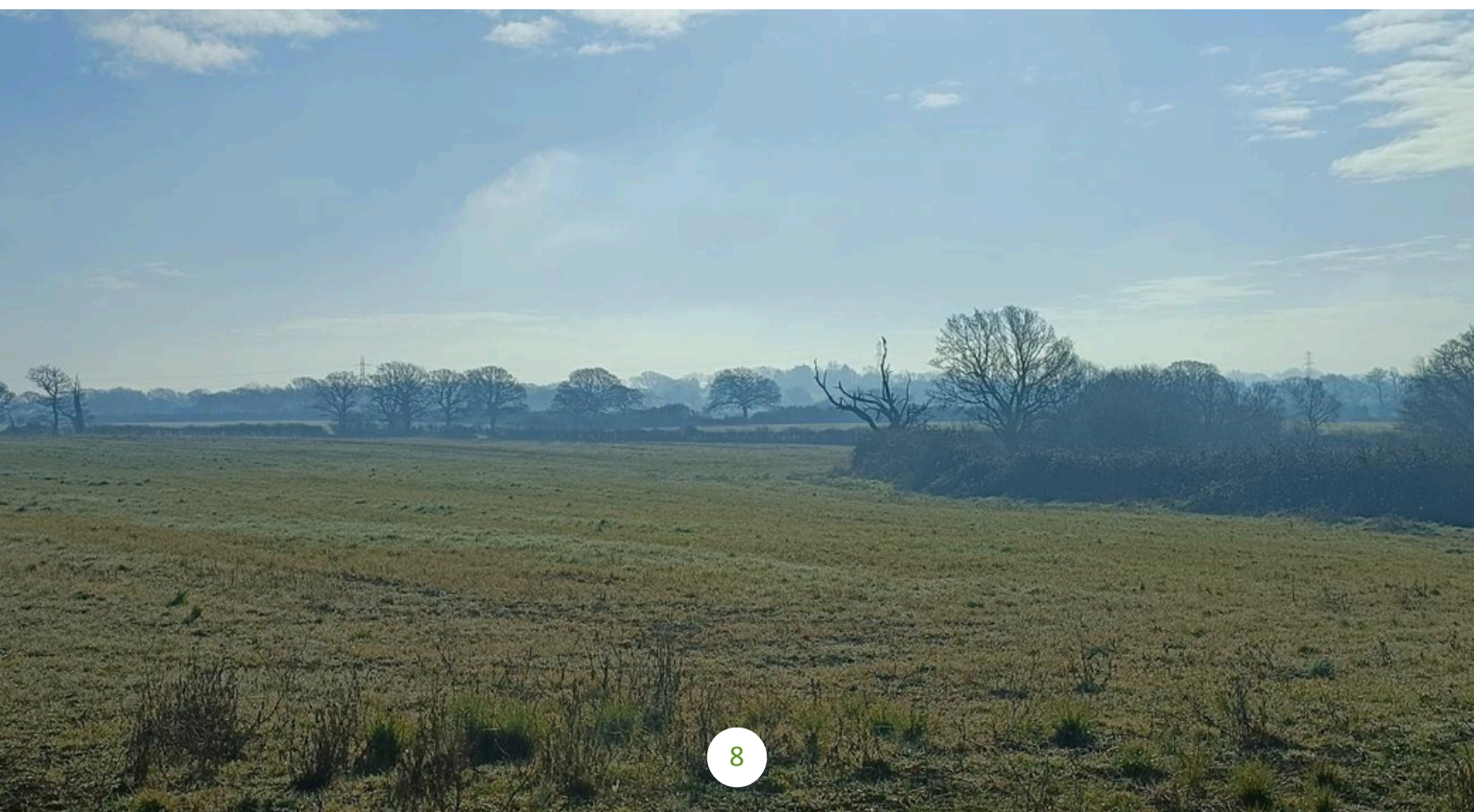
- Brighton & Hove: 13
- East Sussex: 153
- Hampshire: 27
- Kent: 29
- Surrey: 123
- West Sussex: 206

In order to meet increased demand, DTM have increased our number of kill days from 3.5 to 4, with a full kill day on a Thursday. This cuts into the time the team previously had for cleaning, cutting down beef and other behind the scenes tasks.

Key areas of investment

- Purchase of an articulated tanker to reduce some of the cost of waste removal
- Upgrade of cooking facilities to continue to offer hams to butchers and farmshops
- Increase to delivery fleet and number of drivers

Whilst there is strong support for the abattoir from the local council, it remains at risk of closure. The abattoir is ideally located in a secluded area, close to the A23, and not adjacent to residential and other commercial properties.



Hailsham Cattle Market

Linked to the abattoir issue is that of Hailsham Cattle Market. With only Hailsham and Ashford remaining in the Southeast, farmers are also losing options when it comes to selling live animals as “stores” (to be fattened); a useful alternative when conservation grazing. Whilst a charter protects the site at Hailsham, there is an argument to be made that moving the market to a more modern and accessible site would help to ensure its longevity. An ambitious plan to create an “Agricultural Business Hub” for the Southeast, incorporating an abattoir, market, farm supplies and community resources for farmers, could be an intelligent way of solving multiple issues. Care would need to be taken to ensure there is no chance of cross-contamination, but across a large site this is not insurmountable.

Animal welfare

There are very few abattoirs in the South of England, only Scotland has [fewer per square mile](#). There is no doubt that, as small abattoirs close, animals will travel further distances for slaughter; [Scotland provides a perfect example of how this can impact welfare](#). These are the closest alternatives for farmers, which are often species limited:

- ABP Guildford (cattle): 35 miles / 1 hour from DTM
- Forge Farm Kent (sheep): 35 miles / 1 hour 15 minutes from DTM
- Fowler Brothers Essex (multi species inc pigs): 87 miles / 1 hour 45 from DTM
- ABP Yeoville (sheep): 133 miles / 3 hours from DTM

Neither Forge Farm or Fowler Brothers are currently taking on new customers as they are at capacity. Whilst the distance to Forge Farm may seem relatively short, there are no motorways and the road conditions are poor, so the time listed above is likely an underestimation in most cases. ABP do not offer a private kill and return service, so these animals go directly into the wholesale market.

In terms of functioning cattle markets, there are also significant distances involved in finding an alternative.

- Ashford Cattle Market: 47 miles / 1 hour 20 from Hailsham
- Thame Farmers and Auctions: 106 miles / 2 hours 20 minutes from Hailsham
- Frome Livestock Auctioneers: 153 miles / 3 hours 15 minutes from Hailsham

DTM does not butcher for the international market, only domestic. It is likely that, as local routes are reduced, there will be an increase in live exports from Sussex as farmers seek alternative sales channels.

As fewer abattoirs exist, lairage waiting times (max 48 hours) increase. An increased number of better equipped, smaller abattoirs would help to keep this waiting time low and animals moving straight through the facility, making the experience as stress free as possible.

How can we shore up the future of small-scale abattoirs in the Southeast?

Mobile abattoirs: a solution?

Mobile abattoirs are often heralded as the solution, and there's no doubt that the concept offers easy answers to many of the problems raised here, especially the [animal welfare advantage](#) of being slaughtered on the home farm. The problem comes with the practical execution: [the mobile abattoir model](#) currently being trialed in the UK is more "movable" than truly mobile. Physical infrastructure is required to allow it to fully function and meet FSA standards. The following note on required additional facilities is taken from the [Fir Farm website](#):

- Potable water supply and electricity (3 phase for pig equipment).
- Covered lairage and walkways – to include potable water, CCTV and adequate space and lighting to carry out ante mortem inspection. This can be a section of an existing barn providing it meets regulatory requirements.
- Detainment pen with its own drainage, water and separate access for any suspect animal pending re-inspection.
- A concrete hard standing area with drainage to aid cleansing and disinfection.
- Facilities to dispose of washing water – this can be a tank or mains sewer, or the water can be spread on land providing the correct license is obtained.
- Guts and by-products – the mobile unit does not contain its own gut room due to space limitations. Having a small gut room adjacent to the unit would be ideal as this would enable more of the animal to be used.
- Chiller – on a mobile unit, as with some small abattoirs, the chilling space is the most limiting factor and can create a bottleneck that restricts production. The MSU chiller can only accommodate 5 cattle (or sheep and pig equivalent). Ideally, an on-site or additional mobile chiller would be available to continue carcass chilling to +7°C.
- Facilities for the Official Veterinarian (OV), including a nearby toilet.
- Further site requirements include adequate fencing to prevent escape of livestock, suitable access for a 40ft articulated lorry as well as the ability to restrict access should a notifiable disease be suspected.

This means that only a site with these associated permanent buildings and facilities would be able to host it.

Then there is the cost. When first built this unit cost £250,000. These costs will now have increased and, whilst a purpose-built abattoir or investment to update existing facilities would cost more than this, the throughput and efficiencies of a bricks and mortar facility far outweighs that of a movable abattoir. Further investment on top of the original build is required to change the movable facility from a single species (sheep/goats) to multispecies (including beef). This is not currently a practical solution for pigs.

Mobile or movable abattoirs could certainly form a part of the picture of local abattoirs; however, they don't currently offer a feasible alternative to our existing model.

What does the ideal abattoir look like?

- Purpose built to ensure best flow and efficiencies
- Monthly throughput:
 - 1000 sheep
 - 100 cattle
 - 150 pigs
- Staffing: 15-20 including delivery drivers and office
- Location: Near to key routes i.e. the A27, secluded with space for lairage.



Recommendations

- Option 1 – the site is purchased by a local authority (or consortium of local authorities) so that the business can be given a secure lease and feel confident in investing in the site. The rental income would be shared between the group. There are local authorities in the United Kingdom who own and lease small abattoirs such as [Jersey](#) and the [Isle of Mull](#).
- Option 2 – a consortium of local authorities, reputable organisations, and local farm and estate businesses provide an investment package to purchase the site and modernise the operation. The rental income would be shared between the group.
- Option 3 – this same cooperative works with Barclays Homes to secure a longer-term tenancy agreement for the business and provides an investment package to expand the site and invest in modernisation.
- Option 4 – a local authority provides a new and bigger site for the business which would give it the opportunity to redesign the layout and install new infrastructure in a more productive and efficient way (once funding has been secured).

In all these scenarios, the business owner will be expected to provide a level of investment alongside any funding provided from local authorities, organisations, or farms and estates. A cooperative business arrangement would also take pressure off the individual running the business and bring more capacity to running it. Local farmers and estates have shown an interest in coming into a cooperative and this will be followed up with more formal conversations if a route forward can be agreed on securing the site longer-term.

Costings

These figures are indicative and will require further investigation, but they are provided to show an estimate of the investment needed.

- Purchase of the DTM site – approximately £1million
- Modernise the infrastructure – £280k
- Expansion of the lairage – £200k
- Installation of a dry storage area – £100k
- Expansion of refrigeration space – £120k
- Building new abattoir (inc. land purchase) – £5M

Risks and challenges

The primary challenge would be purchasing the site from Barclays Homes who might be unwilling to sell it. Alternatively, they might set a price that is too high. In this scenario, option 4 would be the only route to securing the longer-term future of the abattoir in the local area. Local authorities and estates should explore potential locations for an abattoir.

A lack of return on investment could be a risk if the abattoir struggles to be profitable. This is always a risk on any investment, but there is confidence from abattoir management that a modernised operation would make the abattoir financially viable. Some of this risk can be mitigated by apply for grant funding which would reduce the overall amount of investment needed.

Gaining interest and enthusiasm from local authorities might be another challenge. The sensitivities of this topic are acknowledged and recognised, and some councils might feel that an abattoir is something they cannot support or work with due to the public optics of owning such a facility.

What are we asking for?

Commitment from local authorities and organisations to:

- Discuss the potential for a partnership between local authorities
- Local authorities to meet internally to discuss options
- Lobby DEFRA and FSA to take this issue seriously and act before it's too late



With thanks to

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