



# smallholding



## what is it?

A smallholding is a residential site bigger than a garden, but smaller than a farm, with mixed crops and/or livestock and woodland management for fuel. Often there will be both subsistence farming and cash crops. Crofts (Scotland) are smallholdings with a legally-defined tenure. Smallholdings can be communities, where people pool resources to hold land together.

Smallholding is still the most common livelihood in the world, even though there's a global flow from country to city (in the West, a trickle has started in the opposite direction). The UK has larger farms than the rest of Europe, due to a history of policies to phase out small farms. The Enclosures were the most obvious example. Landowners and factory owners were often in conflict, but were in complete agreement about despatching poor farmers into cities to become factory fodder. There have been some moves that have encouraged smallholding, however. Copyhold tenure came out of the feudal system (after labour shortages caused by the Black Death), setting out the duties of peasant farmers to the lord of the manor. By the 19th century these had turned into freeholds or leaseholds. There was a smallholding revival in the early 20th century. The Liberal Party brought in the Allotments and Smallholdings Act of 1908 that initiated county smallholdings – county councils could buy land and rent to smallholders. Land taxes were introduced after World War 1, and the land resettlement scheme was designed for returning soldiers and the unemployed.

The scheme was finally killed off by Mrs Thatcher, and John Major advised county councils to sell off county smallholdings. Now, as farms go bust, some parts are sold to already large farmers, and some to a variety of individual buyers, including horsey folk, leisure parks and smallholders.



*Offering yurt, tipi or 'glamping' holidays can bring in extra income for smallholders, especially in beautiful areas of the country.*



*There's a range of commercial activities available to smallholders – often it will depend on the local environment. Sheep, for example, are more suited to higher ground.*

## what are the benefits?

**Productivity:** research shows that smallholdings are more productive than larger farms. They can have many uses for the same land e.g. orchard with sheep, chickens and bees. Output can benefit from the inter-relationships between species. For those who think industrial agriculture is more 'efficient', they can surely only mean in the very short term, as industrial agriculture destroys soil, which is catastrophic for farming in the long term.

**Environmental:** many experiment with low-impact practices and technologies such as tree-planting, wind turbines, reed beds, rainwater harvesting, charcoal burning etc. As smallholders can provide more of life's necessities for themselves and their local communities there are reduced transport needs and associated fossil fuel usage. The varied activities on a mixed smallholding allow and encourage more biodiversity and benefits are far greater if the smallholding doesn't use toxic pesticides and builds soil with compost and manure rather than applying synthetic chemicals.

**Social:** smallholdings employ more people per hectare than larger farms, so provide benefits to rural economies in terms of employment and locally-produced goods. This helps keep money local, which is important because stronger rural economies can retain more services, like buses and post offices, and can support traditional skills.

**Personal:** it's no more difficult to make a living from a smallholding than from a larger farm. Smallholdings offer activities that are varied, physically and mentally demanding, healthy, creative, outdoors and close to nature. It's a way of life that is fulfilling, interesting, healthy and we might even say spiritual, with greater independence from commercial pressures.



*Crofts are traditional smallholdings found in the Scottish Highlands.*

## what can I do?

Get some experience, find out what works well and what doesn't, and see if the lifestyle is for you. Use WWOOFing as an opportunity to talk to smallholders and farmers, or an apprenticeship to pick up skills. Work out what you want to do – crops, animals, or a combination of the two; or maybe something more specialised – veg box scheme, bees, mushrooms, flowers, wood fuel, polytunnels or point-of-lay hens. You might need some training, some targeted WWOOFing, or a job at a specialist farm for a while (see resources). You'll need some money. If you don't have a house to sell it's increasingly common to get together with other people, buy the land together and divide it up. There'll be benefits in having a cluster of smallholdings – shared vehicles and equipment, marketing, childcare, labour, and being able to get away for the occasional holiday. Then find land. Word of mouth is good, and c. 5-10% of estate agents specialise in land. More than half of land sales are via auctions – run by estate agents. If the land has a house on it, it's less likely to be sold at auction. Woodland tends to be less expensive than agricultural land, but it's catching up. An online search will help you find sites with listings of land suitable for smallholdings for sale. Your workload will depend on the activities you choose. On 50 acres it might be possible to run beef cattle on a part-time basis, but a smaller, intensively-run mixed holding with vegetables could involve a lot more work. A successful smallholding needs outlets for its produce. To avoid the exploitation of corporate supermarkets,

there are various, local, direct options, such as community supported agriculture, veg box schemes & home deliveries or farmers' markets and direct farm sales.

Unless you have a house to sell, getting a smallholding with a house on is usually prohibitively expensive. But buying land and attempting to get permission to live on it is not a decision to take lightly either. To live on your smallholding – you have to prove to the planners that your enterprise is viable and can maintain a livelihood, and that you have a need to be there for the purposes of the enterprise.

You can apply to your local planning authority to build a house, but the process can take a long time, is often unsuccessful and many people give up. Things are easier if you live in Wales, due to the One Planet Development policy.

One option is to build your house and apply for permission retrospectively. This not an offence, but can take a long time. Permission is more likely for an enterprise that is demonstrably competent and financially viable. If it's neither of those things, you probably won't succeed. You have to put in copious management plans with your application. Write down what you're going to do, the costs, and targeted profits over 3 years. If you build a single dwelling house on your smallholding and live in it continuously for 4 years and can prove it, then you will be immune from planning enforcement (which is the equivalent of having planning permission).

We suggest you do your homework first. See our website for more information on obtaining planning permission generally. Read Chapter 7's website and Rural Planning Handbook, and/or attend a smallholding or a planning course. Also be aware of the Ecological Land Coop, who are successfully buying plots of land and gaining permission for committed growers to live there legally.

## resources

- [lowimpact.org/smallholding](http://lowimpact.org/smallholding) - more information, links, courses & books, including:
- Georgina Starmer, *Smallholding*
- Suzie Baldwin, *the Smallholder's Handbook*
- Sally Morgan, *Living on One Acre or Less*
- [ecologicalland.coop](http://ecologicalland.coop) – land for new entrants
- [wwof.org.uk](http://wwof.org.uk) – volunteering on smallholdings
- [crofting.org](http://crofting.org) – Scottish Crofting Federation
- [farmhack.org](http://farmhack.org) – open source farming resource
- [tlio.org.uk/chapter7](http://tlio.org.uk/chapter7) – planning advice

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