

HOLT & DISTRICT FARMERS' CLUB

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www.holtfarmers.club

January 2026 Meeting Review

Mark Nicholas, chief executive of the RNAA, briefs members at the January 2026 meeting.

A five-year investment of £5m has set the scene for the Norfolk showground to become a strategic centre for promoting the agricultural and food sector.

Mark Nicholas, chief executive officer of the Royal Norfolk Agricultural Association briefed members of Holt & District Farmers' Club about the next phase of a long-term strategy to support the county's key food producing industry. The RNAA, established in 1847, was in a special position to help the agricultural industry. While the Royal Norfolk Show was hugely important as a shop window for the county's primary industry, Mr Nicholas said that the RNAA was leading a range of other land-based initiatives. For example, the Opportunities Fund was part of this stable alongside and equally important, the Food & Farming Discovery Trust, led by the enthusiastic Frances Roberson.

Started in 2016, the trust aims to encourage young people to "discover" how food is grown and produced. Other sometimes behind-the-scenes initiatives have included briefings for industry leaders, policy influencers and council officials.

Increasingly, the RNAA was able to bring groups and interests together to think about non-political challenges for the food and farming industry like impending water shortage and supply issues.

As Mr Nicholas stressed, all these activities have to be financed – hence the support of its 2,500-strong membership was an important element.



There has been big investment in key infrastructure including replacement of three electrical sub-stations, dating from the late 1960s, installing solar panels on the Norfolk Event Centre and crucially, the £3m investment in the Norfolk Food Hall.

In addition, the 360-acre showground has become the business hub for groups including Norfolk Federation of young farmers' clubs and Norfolk Farming & Wildlife Group.

But Mr Nicholas said the challenge was to use the RNAA's special position to support the wider food and farming industries. It had launched the Opportunities Fund, which so far has delivered more than £200,000 of investment in young people.

Since 1984, the RNAA has supported Nuffield Farming Scholarships, which currently cost about £21,000 a year. Mr Nicholas urged farmers' clubs and RNAA members to encourage young people, aged under 40, to apply for a study scholarship. He would like Norfolk people to be applying for this remarkable opportunity to broaden horizons. The Royal Norfolk Show, which has become recognised as one of the best two-day shows in the country, had more than "washed its face" last year. The modest surplus will be invested in a range of the charitable objectives, which are key to the RNAA's aims.

He paid tribute to the team of 326 volunteer stewards, who were supported by the 18-strong team of permanent staff. He told members that last year's show had generated at least £25m in revenue to the local economy and attracted a gate of 81,161 visitors. In addition, there had been 706 exhibitors at the show as well as 5,132 livestock exhibits. Another highlight was the remarkable success of the RNAA's "Discovery" strategy as 15,107 youngsters from 123 schools and colleges had visited the show. It even included two school parties from Manchester, one from London and another from Cambridge. Overall numbers had doubled since 2022, he added.

The Norfolk Food Hall, which opened last year, was attracting at least 2,500 customers weekly, now employing 49 staff and providing a shop window for 150 local food producers.

The decision to open the showground trail on September 23 had also encouraged an increasing number of visitors – and by design, the 4km route started close to the Food Hall.

In summary, Mr Nicholas emphasised that while the show was a key element, the RNAA could help to promote and support a series of key educational initiatives – taking farm animals to schools – and highlighting careers in land-based industries.

It was also able to convene or bring together a range of groups and organisations to highlight key industry concerns, for example, water shortages for food and farming.

Staging the annual Norfolk Farming Conference, which takes place on February 10, was just another example. The new RNAA's rural chaplain, Rev Tim Weatherstone, who will stand down from his parish priest role with the Barnham Broom and Upper Yare benefice at the end of March, also spoke of the challenge to work even more closely with the rural communities.



The speakers were thanked by the chairman, Martin Jensen.

Michael Pollitt