

What role will there be for advisers in post-Brexit land management?

Farm advisers could play a key role in helping farmers navigate the changing agricultural and environmental policy landscape following Brexit.



Photo by Chloe Palmer

Policy and Practice Notes

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By applying their field-generated knowledge and targeting technical expertise, farm advisers help land managers to improve existing practices as well as adopting new ones appropriate to their commercial objectives and circumstances. The 25 Year Environment Plan and new food and farming policy have the potential to introduce significant changes to the way land is managed in the UK. Farm advisers could play a key role in helping land managers understand this changing context and support decision-making on and across farms.

What role do farm advisers currently play?

Farmers are required to produce ever more goods and services from their land, and farm advisers:

- Come from a range of professional backgrounds eg agronomist, veterinarian, land agent, surveyor, ecologist, environmental adviser etc.
- Are increasingly employed to support operational and strategic decision-making on farms.
- Work across the public, private and third sectors.
- Already have considerable insights, knowledge and practical experience.
- Can be a key driver in promoting the introduction of new technologies on farms.

How could their role be developed further following Brexit?

Local knowledge and understanding are critical to success. With changes to agri-environment schemes and direct farm payments, farm advisers have the expertise and experience to help guide land managers through these changes and will recognise the particular local challenges and circumstances farmers face. They:

- Have the potential to play a key role in coordinating farm management to increase yields, while also delivering ecosystem services, including protecting the environment and maximising natural resources such as biodiversity, water resources, iconic landscapes and carbon storage.
- Often draw on considerable experience of working with farmers across geographical areas eg through Commons Agreements and are well placed to develop landscape-scale activity.
- Have skills that can help in planning farm succession and diversification strategies.
- Are often aware of funding opportunities which can allow farmers to adopt or trial alternative strategies or technologies.

What can farm advisers tell us already about the adoption of new ideas and practices?

From research carried out we know that advisers find farmers:

- Are interested and engaged in a number of integrated farm management activities already.
- Have a variety of motivations that influence how receptive they are to new ideas.
- Vary in their uptake of practices depending on geography, region, farming system and perceptions of the profitability and safety of proposed measures.

Advisers say that uptake of new ideas and approaches can be improved by:

- Demystifying language and jargon and not overwhelming farmers with data.
- Using a wider range of communications to promote new ideas to industry and advisers. Farmers need consistent messages from multiple sources eg media, advisers, demonstration on farm, etc.
- Providing demonstrations of the potential, relevance and practicalities of new ideas, approaches and technologies on the ground. Farmers are more likely to adopt or consider a technique or idea that is working in their locality or a commercial situation.
- Tailoring activities to clients and making them site specific, taking account of local and farm to farm variation.
- Starting from simpler practices and building on these. Incremental change is as important as developing more significant interventions.
- Choosing the right people to deliver advice. Farmers make judgements about the value of advice depending on who is paying for it and who is delivering it.

How can advisers support farmers to benefit from post-Brexit opportunities?

Advisers have a key role in:

- Helping farmers recognise that payment for ecosystem services or public goods is not just about environmental change but fundamental to business management.
- Promoting practices with potential win-wins for both the environment and business by linking to the farmer's 'bottom-line' need for farming efficiency.
- Informing researchers about which practices fail and which are likely to be adopted.
- Helping to adapt advice for early and late adopters.
- Drawing on their expertise and experience to evaluate what works and check the robustness of data.
- Identifying farmers' wants and needs and understanding how they align with those of industry, government and society.

But they recognise challenges including:

- Demonstrating the benefits of uptake with concrete evidence.
- Breaking habits and generational pressures eg 'Dad always did it like this'.
- The client 'boundaries of service', particularly where experimentation with new methods and practices is associated with risk.
- Existing practices where emphasis is on yield rather than farming sustainably.
- That the increasing specialisation of adviser skills could act as a barrier to more holistic thinking.

What are the benefits and barriers involved in landscape-scale activity?

Collaboration between farmers is not new but new pressures to deliver a wider range of benefits and achieve landscape-scale objectives mean that this way of working may become increasingly necessary. Research has shown that:

- There are benefits of collaboration (eg cost-savings, economies of scale, sharing risk, social interaction).
- There are also barriers (eg unexpected economic costs, additional workload) and trust and shared values are essential but difficult to develop.
- Time, enthusiasm and interest in an area or issue are necessary to develop collaborative working.

What resources are needed to ensure effective collaboration?

Strong co-ordination is essential and farm advisers are well placed to play a role as key facilitators. If collaboration is to be successful this requires:

- Resources to pay for facilitation and leadership.
- An independent facilitator who is able to manage conflict, personalities and communicate effectively.
- The means to bring together farmers, specialist advisers and other key players such as water companies and insurance companies – such coordination requires skilled inter-professional working particularly within and across the advisory community.
- The motivation among farmers to take ownership over time in order for collaboration to be sustained.

How can the advisory professions influence post-Brexit land management?

Individual advisers can:

- Encourage farmer to farmer dissemination and farm to farm influence by highlighting examples of adaptive and innovative practice.
- Play a key role in coordinating landscape-scale interventions.

Professional bodies, associations and trade bodies could:

- Encourage advisers to work together on skills and training around collaborative working and facilitation.
- Contribute to the setting of future research agendas.
- Link up research and industry - organisations such as the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, which has an established relationship with both advisers and farmers, can be a key intermediary.

Researchers need to:

- Establish a dialogue with industry and advisers to inform future research and engage with an array of different professional organisations including levy bodies and other intermediary organisations.
- Consider how research outputs are packaged to ensure data are tailored to specific audiences.
- Recognise that different types of information and levels of technical detail are required by different audiences; this ensures adequate signposting to further information.
- Explore ways of engaging with farmers and advisers, including social media – but face to face remains a key communication method.

Project information

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Based on findings from the ESRC Science in the Field project and the SIP-Landbridge workshops '*Integrated farm management for sustainable intensification: what role for advisers?*', 8 September 2016 at Nafferton Farm, Northumberland and '*Co-ordinating landscape-scale sustainable activity: farm advisers as facilitators?*', 4 October 2017 at the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, Stoneleigh Park. These workshops were funded by Defra and the Welsh Government under the Sustainable Intensification Research Platform (SIP). The platform was a multi-partner research programme, comprising academia, farmers, industry experts, environmental organisations and policymakers, which investigated the opportunities and risks of sustainable intensification from a range of perspectives and landscape scales across England and Wales between 2014 and 2017.

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Further information

Sustainable Intensification Research Platform

www.siplatform.org.uk

Landbridge www.relu.ac.uk/landbridge

Centre for Evaluation of Complexity Across the Nexus CECAN www.cecan.ac.uk – ESRC project ES/N012550/1

Science in the Field – ESRC project ES/F002025/1

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