



**Keeping the Shropshire Hills thriving – farmer
engagement project report**

**by
Warren Landles
Landles Rural Services Ltd
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the Southern Shropshire partnership**

Natural England, Business Link and Southern Shropshire Partnership logos to
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Summary

Upland areas are unique within the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). While being a home and work place for many, the rich biodiversity, landscapes, views and attractive villages draw in a multitude of visitors and tourists.

Upland farmers are relied upon to manage the landscape and provide the added value of 'sustaining public goods' while producing healthy, traceable beef and lamb.

Upland farming represents one of the few opportunities to preserve an example of a traditional farming system. Traditional farmers have a special connection with the land, which has been built up over generations. They act as educators of the landscape. As family farms disappear, this is increasingly lost and, as a public good, it can never be replaced. Further, structural changes in the farms themselves may have implications for agri-environmental schemes.

Therefore, further loss of traditional farms is a worry. This could be accelerated by changes and confusion linked to the farm payment system, new legislation, rising input prices, the European Commission's strategy to change the way Less Favoured Area (LFA) status is awarded and issues with succession.

Social capital is lost where traditional farms are divided and the land sold creating large units. This is a potential economic loss to communities. In particular, the common areas rely on farmers cooperating and the loss of farmers from within the common can decrease the level of social capital and make management more difficult for those remaining.

Therefore, there is a case for supporting smaller traditional farmers in upland areas of Shropshire. They suffer from a lack of time, often buried by paperwork and bureaucracy, and don't have funds to pay for specialist one-to-one advice.

Importantly, a focus on supporting the next generation and new entrants is required.

The approach of the Shropshire Hills AONB partnership to offer independent, practical one-to-one help is valued by upland farmers.

Study area

Following last year's pilot study, it was decided to focus effort on another area of the Shropshire Hills AONB.

The focus continued to be smaller family farms who are finding it increasingly difficult to compete and find their way through the paperwork. They are also less likely to have regular specialist advice or be part of regional advice networks.

Farmers sitting on the AONB farming working group suggested helping businesses to the west of the Corvedale stretching almost across to Bridgnorth and down Cleobury Mortimer. The working group particularly highlighted farms around Brown Clee Hill and Titterstone Clee Hill, where farms also have common rights and are part of Commoners Association. However, this targeted approach was not at the exclusion of other AONB farms.

Contacting businesses

Lessons learned from the last project included adopting a different approach to contacting farm businesses. The consultant, Warren Landles, worked firstly with several local farmers and other advisors with a deep working knowledge of the area. This proved to be a successful approach in terms of arranging to farmers on a one-to-one basis, as compared to relying on responses from a mass mailing.

It's worth reiterating, that the consultant did not take the place of the current crop of advisors. His role was to pinpoint specific advisors/organisations to help tailor specific farm advice to help AONB farm businesses. He provided a vital link between farmers and advisors.

To recap, this project was looking to make contact with and provide assistance to 20 small (20 to 100ha) family farms in Less Favoured Areas (LFA) with all or part of their land classified as Severely Disadvantaged Area (SDA) land and within postcodes SY7, SY8, DV14 and WV16.

Well respected local farmer Jim Rodenhurst of Upton Bank provided valuable insight and suggested a number of contacts. As did farmer David Watson Jones of the AONB farming working group. Natural England advisor, Wayne Davies also provided valuable background information and was a regular point of contact for advice. Carl Pickup, reserves manager for the Shropshire Wildlife Trust also helped introduce the project to key members of the Clee Hill Commoners Association following his work at Catherton Common.

The consultant contacted the suggested farm businesses by telephone. This was backed up by displaying information about the project (see Appendix 1) on local notice boards, village halls and with local supply merchants. Both secretaries for the Clee Hill and Clee Liberty Commoners Association mailed information to their members following a meeting with the consultant.

Other organisations contacted by the consultant to promote the project were:

- Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership Community Officer
- Vets
- Auctioneers
- Shropshire Rural Hub
- Shropshire NFU
- Shropshire CLA
- Shropshire branch of the National Federation of Young Farmers
- Local land agents
- Agricultural Merchants
- Local show society secretaries
- Shropshire Women's Institute

The consultant also compiled a further list of about 250 farm business using the Yell.com search engine. This list was used to invite farmers to the AONB-organised events (see later).

Farm visits

In a repeat of the successful approach of the pilot project, a 'back to basics' approach was adopted, where the farmer led the discussion. He/she would explain what they specifically required help with and highlighted their future plans. Some farmers required a bit of prompting. The consultant was open-minded and armed only with a blank pad to record the key specifics.

Time spent on farms varied depending on the subject areas. Typically each visit lasted between 2 and 4 hours. Being local, the consultant was able to be completely flexible in attending farms at a time convenient with the farmer. On nearly every occasion the consultant was asked where he lived and who was funding his time.

Getting the right information

With information gathered from each farm, the consultant was able to make enquiries with the appropriate organisations using his own knowledge and desk research.

Organisations contacted where:

- Natural England (Environmental Stewardship and Catchment Sensitive Farming)
- West Midlands Business Link
- RDPE Rural Enterprise Grant team
- Re:think (Renewable Energy)
- Lightfoot Enterprises (Energy efficiency and carbon auditing)
- Carbon Trust
- EBLEX
- Dairy Co
- Shropshire Council
- Sustainable Tourism Business Grants team
- Light Foot Enterprises
- Shropshire Rural Hub
- Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership - (Business clinics)

Feedback

A letter was sent to each farmer outlining the key subject areas they required more detail and help with. Where appropriate, letters directed farmers to individuals and organisations for further information. Letters also set out the next stage, e.g. who would be contacting them next, keeping them fully informed. Natural England advisors were supplied information of farms to contact and Business Link were informed of businesses that requested more help.

Areas where further help was needed

This was dominated by Environmental Stewardship and Sheep EID due to the launch of the new Uplands Entry Level Stewardship (UELS) and sheep tagging legislation coming into force. Coping with the loss of the Hill Farm Allowance and how UEELS will affect their business was a topic discussed regularly.

Just over half of the farmers visited wanted more detail about renewable energy as they looked to save energy costs and generate a revenue from green energy.

Nine wanted help under the Shropshire Hills Woodland Project, which offers free woodland management advice. While 8 farmers were not aware of the Farm Animal Health Planning programme funded through England's Rural Development Programme and wanted more information. Farm skills, particularly for sons and daughters was discussed by almost 1 in 3 farmers.

The common topics where more help and advice was needed. These were:

- Environmental Stewardship/Catchment Sensitive Farming - 16
- Sheep EID – 16
- Renewable Energy/Energy efficiency - 11
- Shropshire Hills Woodland Project - 9
- Farm Animal Health Planning/ Livestock Improvement Grants - 8
- Business clinics organised at the Shropshire AONB office - 6
- Farm skills training - 6
- Other land management advice - 6
- Rural Enterprise Grants - 3
- Free Business Link help – 5
- Tourism/diversification – 1
- Care Farming - 1

With regards to Renewable Energy advice and funding for a feasibility study and equipment, it was disappointing that halfway through this project Re:think had their existing funding stream stopped and never thought to keep advisers up-to-date. This was frustrating for farms whom made contact with the organisation after speaking to the consultant. Warren Landles asked for clarification from Re:think and advised them to update their website to prevent further confusion.

Events and training

In response to farmers' requests from both the last project and this, four separate training sessions took place during February 2010.

What: Selection for slaughter demonstration

When: 11 February 2010

Where: Daysdrove Abattoir, Bishops Castle and Enterprise House, Bishops Castle

Who: AONB, Eblex, Daysdrove Abattoir (manager David Palmer)

Why: **To help producers understand the specifications of the market and to illustrate some of the factors that can affect carcase value and therefore producer returns.**

Attendance: 12 farmers (number capped to this level due to the 'hands on' nature of the workshop)

Promotion: Invitation (see Appendix 2) mailed to 350 farms on AONB contacts list and EBLEX's regional contacts database. Local auctioneers displayed information, both pre and post press release in local press. Information displayed on notice boards throughout the AONB.

Following requests by farmers for help and training, a collaboration was formed between the AONB, Eblex and Daysdrove Abattoir to provide a practical and interactive day.

Eblex provided advice during the day and gave each farmer useful take home literature. Dave Palmer of Daysdrove provided invaluable help. He very kindly gave permission for the event to take place at the abattoir and supplied a number of fat lambs for handling. His team killed and prepared the lamb carcasses for inspection afterwards.



Eblex's Steve Powdrill describes the importance of carcase selection prior to handling some animals.



Assessing conformation - the ability to assess an animal is an essential skill for any sheep or beef producer to identify the best time to sell and therefore maximise returns.



An interactive DVD and further practical advice about selecting livestock for sale was given.



Assessing the carcasses of the lambs graded earlier in the day, Steve Powdrill emphasised the importance of producing lambs that are the right weight, with good conformation and not over fat.

Feedback

Each producer was asked to score the training and provide further feedback. Each felt that the training was practical and had improved their knowledge of the subject area. Ten farmers rated the training as excellent and 2 scored it as good, commenting the quality of the speakers and facilities.

What: Introduction to butchery and meat marketing

When: 12 February 2010

Where: Daysdrove Abattoir, Bishops Castle and The Three Tuns, Bishops Castle

Who: AONB, Eblex, Daysdrove Abattoir (manager David Palmer)

Why: Advice covering the key areas that beef and sheep producers should consider in order to successfully market meat direct to customers.

Attendance: 17 farmers (number capped to this level due to the interactive nature of the workshop)

Promotion: Invitation (see Appendix 2) mailed to 350 farm businesses on AONB contacts list and EBLEX's regional contacts database. Both pre and post press release in local press.

Information displayed on notice boards throughout the AONB.

Following requests by farmers for help and training, a collaboration was formed between the AONB, EBLEX and Daysdrove Abattoir to provide a practical and interactive day.

Eblex provided advice during the day and gave each producer useful take home literature. Dave Palmer of Daysdrove provided invaluable help. He very kindly gave permission for the event to take place at the abattoir and supplied his head butcher to give a carcass cutting and preparation demonstration.



EBLEX's Michael Richardson, provided a running commentary and answered questions by producers who were investigating the implications for selling their own meat.



Producers were given a demonstration on how to prepare different meat cuts and ideas for adding value.



The group learned more about marketing and the legislation that governs food production and sale.

Feedback

Each producer was asked to score the training and provide further feedback. Each felt that the training was practical and had improved their knowledge of the subject area. The majority of attendees rated the training as good.

What: Getting to grips with sheep EID

When: 10 February 2010

Where: Clun Memorial Hall, Clun

Who: AONB, Land, Life and Livelihoods group, Shearwell Data

Why: **To help producers understand their obligations and dealing practically with the new EU regulation regarding the individual identification of sheep.**

Attendance: 48 farmers

Promotion: Invitation (see Appendix 3) mailed to 350 farms on AONB contacts list and EBLEX's regional contacts database. Local auctioneers displayed information, both pre and post press release in local press. Information displayed on notice boards throughout the AONB.

Working with the Land, Life and Livelihoods group in Clun, the AONB organised the speaker and venue to help answer the many questions sheep producers had about EID.

All sheep born or identified after 31 December 2009, which are not intended for slaughter within 12 months of age, must have two identifiers (containing a flock and individual number), one of which must be an electronic form of identification.

The practical advice was given by Andrew Price of Shearwell Data – that specialises in animals tagging and recording. Each farmer received a clear and concise EID guide that had been provided by Clive Brown of EBLEX.

The meeting was chosen as a pilot Lantra training project whereby the speaker was recorded. The information is to be made available via CD/internet to a wider audience.



Sheep producers learned how to tackle the new legislation and got to inspect the varied recording equipment which is available to them.

Farmer comments following the meeting.

A number of farmers were contacted soon after the Clun EID meeting for their initial thoughts by an independent person unconnected to the project

Wayne Davies

The meeting was very good, as was the speaker who knew his stuff and gave the right amount of information out with a practical edge since he is a farmer himself. I went to the meeting not knowing much about the subject, but came away much more informed. The event was well organised and seemed to answer everyone's questions

Cath and Graham Davies, Frodesley Hall Farm, Longnor

A very useful evening. We were interested in the readers and came away from the meeting having decided which reader we need to get. We were pleased we made the effort to get to this meeting and are very satisfied about the event. We heard about the event via the Rural Hub newsletter.

Vic Morris, Whitcott Evan Farm, Clun

We'd had all the literature through from the RPA, but that only gives their point of view. This meeting was useful because it gave us a chance to hear other points of view – from the tag manufacturers and the farmers too. There were some useful ideas and points raised about the usefulness of the whole tagging issue and the fact it is going to cost farmers more money and give us a system that is no better than what we have now. It was useful that the event was so local and timing was ideal (being just before lambing and before it gets too busy).

Raymond Williams, The Bwlch, Five Turnings

Very good event. Best one I've been to (I've been to two previously one of which succeeded in confusing us totally!). It was good that a sheep farmer gave the talk.

Martin Hudson, Mainstone Farm

Yes, it did help a bit but it's a diabolical situation that we are in. I did wonder if the guy giving the talk was doing a bit of a sales pitch, but it was useful – even though I don't feel I'm 100 percent on everything yet. It was useful it was so local – if it had been in Shrewsbury or Ludlow I wouldn't have gone.

Dan Price, Garn Farm, Five Turnings

We use Shearwell for the existing tags and so spoke to them at the Royal Welsh in July so this was an update for us really. That said as feedback it is essential for these briefings to be held locally and at a time convenient for a working farmer so very worthwhile. Shearwell are always clear about the obligations and therefore easy to understand the information clarified the situation even if what they said wasn't always what farmers wanted to hear (i.e. everything thrown out, no need to bother!!). It was good to inform YFC of the meeting - the farmers of the future after all. Would be interested in similar events in area. Thanks to those organising!

Andrew Davies, Amblecote Farm

Very good and interesting evening. Speaker made things easy to understand. I didn't know much about the subject when I went but left knowing what I need to know. He explained everything and it's much easier to go to an event like this than just read the paperwork that comes through.

What: Getting to grips with sheep EID

When: 24 February 2010

Where: Cleeton St Mary village hall, Clun

Who: AONB, Clee Hills Commoners Association, Shearwell Data

Why: **To help producers understand their obligations and dealing practically with the new EU regulation regarding the individual identification of sheep.**

Attendance: 46 farmers (free, open meeting)

Promotion: Invitation (see Appendix 4) mailed to the AONB contacts list for that area and the Clee Hill Commoners Association contacts list. Local auctioneers displayed information, both pre and post press release in local press. Information displayed on notice boards in the area.

Working with the Clee Hill Commoners Association, the AONB organised the speaker and venue to help answer the many questions sheep producers had about EID. This was a lively meeting involving Andrew Price having to answer in excess of 30 different questions.

Each farmer received a clear and concise EID guide that had been provided by Clive Brown of EBLEX.

The meeting was chosen as a pilot Lantra training project whereby the speaker was recorded. The information is to be made available via CD/internet to a wider audience.



Farmer comments following the meeting.

A number of farmers were contacted soon after the Clee Hill EID meeting for their initial thoughts by an independent person unconnected to the project

Katie Stokes, Clee Hill Commoners Association secretary

Thank you AONB for your effort in organising this meeting. We had more than double the attendance of usual Commoners meetings. Our members learned a lot from a good speaker.

Roddy Yapp, Clee Hill Commoners Association chairman

Yes, it was good and worthwhile. I wasn't very knowledgeable on the subject before I went. I'm not very computer literate and not very good with forms, but I felt this is going to be OK. Speaker was good – helpful he's a farmer too. I asked a couple of questions and they were answered very well.

Iain MacKirdy

Event was very interesting. I'd already read through all the literature so know what the government wanted. What was useful about this event was that the speaker spoke more about what the markets were looking for and how to maximise our income. The only drawback was that we are just small holders whereas the information was really designed for the larger farms. Speaker was good. We're hoping that in time someone may develop a system for the small holders. Meantime we'll continue to manually record our data.

Philip Edwards

Yes, very helpful and speaker did a good job. All seemed fine.

Andrew Booton

Yes, very glad we went – we were finally enlightened and feel a lot better about the subject now. It was well worth while going along. Speaker was very down to earth and you could ask questions. Everything was explained clearly. Warren Landles seemed very nice too(!). Thank you very much for organising.



Andrew Price

To help answer the many and varied questions sheep producers have about EID required an outstanding speaker. Sheep farmer Andrew Price who also works for tagging and animal recording specialists Shearwell Data in the Midland and Mid Wales was suggested to the consultant by several in the industry. Judging by the farmer feedback, he gave an excellent, honest and no-nonsense view of sheep EID using his own farming experiences and from the many farmers he helps. He was very personable and gave first-rate presentations, taking questions throughout.

Conclusions

There is certainly a feeling that agriculture is about to enter a period of substantial restructuring. Nationally, the Uplands are currently the focus of interest with the recent publication of Natural England's *Uplands Vision* and the Commission for Rural Communities report.

In line with those reports, a further loss of traditional farmers and the break up of their farms will affect the physical, social and economic values of the upland areas in Shropshire. What's more, which can be overlooked, is that traditional upland farmers are a part of the cultural landscape.

Previous upland farmer studies concluded that stocking levels on the upland remains a matter of tension and dispute. The previous CAP production payments may have encouraged overstocking on some uplands but the frustration for upland farmers is that agreement about the right stocking levels seems to be a matter of guesswork, and it is not clear that those who set the levels are aware of the true nature of upland farming.

In particular, any change in the common grazing numbers has implications for all commoners and affects their ability to co-operatively manage the land may help to maintain traditional management approaches.

These issues were echoed by some of the AONB farmers involved in this project, as was a general uncertainty about the future. Despite a boost in beef and sheep returns, the loss of the Hill Farming Allowance (HFA) will bring new challenges.

HFA provided direct support and formed a vital part of the income for the majority of upland farmers and in many cases, AONB farmers claimed they would not be able to continue to farm and to manage the land with out it.

Many farmers were aware that there is also likely to be a reduction in Single Farm Payments after 2012.

It's too early to assess the impacts of the introduction of the new Uplands Entry Level Stewardship Scheme. This scheme requires a five year commitment and many are concerned that it does not take fully into account complex land rental and grazing rights. Therefore, the scheme needs more communication with upland farmers. This is being tackled by Natural England at farmer meetings and one-to-one on farm training.

Specific help is required by both the Commoners Associations from the project. They require further guidance to enter into a UELS agreement under a single application.

Overall, most the AONB farmers who received a one-to-one visit believe they are environmentally friendly and that the wildlife and habitats on their farms is a by-product of their traditional farming methods. The landscape of their farms means a lot to farmers.

Maintaining the traditional upland way of life is seen as very important by the upland farmers. Therefore, more account needs to be taken of the views of upland farmers and landowners who have managed the uplands for generations and have a deep understanding of the necessary balance, and interdependence, between environment and agriculture.

Many of the AONB farmers are concerned about succession. The impact of an aging farming population and young people leaving upland agriculture has a major impact. A successful next generation are required for communities to work together. Potential successors need to be equipped to design a future for the farm – something that does not appear to be the case at the moment on many farms.

Agricultural policy clearly needs to focus on the maintaining of successors. Initiatives like Fresh Start needs bolstering and better promotion and support. There could be a role for an Upland Farming Traineeship to keep traditional upland livestock farming skills in the countryside. This has already been developed elsewhere by Northumberland National Park Authority in conjunction with Landskills North East, Northumberland College and in association with Dartmoor National Park Moorskills project.

A national focus on upland farming by policy makers is welcomed by many. Previous commentators point out that upland areas need to be recognised as Most Valued Areas and publically supported because they are a vital farmed and managed habitat. The uplands also have a part to play in addressing the impacts of climate change.

The hope is that the CAP reform in 2012 will develop a policy for upland farming that could aid the maintaining the upland rural communities in a manner that provides both an effective solution for farmers and the effective provision of public goods in the future.

But AONB farms need to be part of the debate and take an active role in the future of the Uplands. It's their future, and they shouldn't let others make all the decisions on their behalf.

Communication and providing feedback to legislators and other bodies like Natural England, the Environment Agency, Defra, Shropshire Council remains crucial.

Once again, farmers from this project commented that a one size fits all approach doesn't work. As was the case in the AONB pilot project, there is absolutely no substitute for talking to farmers on a one-to-one basis, fully to understand their issues and act upon them. The need for independent, practical and local advice to explain clearly the challenges and opportunities they face is a welcomed approach.