



**Farmer Engagement in the Shropshire Hills
- pilot project report**

by

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A Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership project

Funded by Natural England and Business Link





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Summary

Introduction

Environmentalists forget the role of profitable farming in landscape management at their peril. It's inevitable that the survival of many Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) farms will increasingly depend upon annual payouts of 'green' money. But long-term environmental schemes will only succeed on the back of profitable livestock production.

A workable balance has to be achieved between farming and the landscape. Livestock production on Less Favoured Area (LFA) land must remain profitable if holdings are expected to maintain an upland environment.

Crucially, there's an opportunity to reduce inputs and farm the land in line with its true capabilities rather than pushing it to its limits.

About the project

Defra predictions of falling farm incomes would mean a loss of at least £3 million to the economy of the Shropshire Hills, which will have a more significant impact on market towns in the area.

Low income among farmers, especially in the LFAs, has already led to significant structural change and uncertainty in farming structure, including falling employment, changes in farm size and a reduction in livestock numbers.

Levels of funding for Environmental Stewardship from the new schemes is unlikely to sustain income levels for farms in existing schemes, and this is likely to reduce activity in conservation.

The new Upland Entry Level Scheme (ELS) is poorly understood and help will be needed to ensure as many farmers as possible take advantage of it. With farming having the most significant influence overall on the special qualities of the Shropshire Hills AONB the challenges to farming will impact landscape quality and the viability of rural communities.

Farmers in the AONB, particularly upland livestock farmers, are often isolated and work long hours. This means they are unlikely to be engaged in regional networks and unaware of the market opportunities that may be available. Many are also disenchanted with Government policy and suspicious of yet more change.

In 2007 some of those involved in a project called Land, Life and Livelihoods were asked by Natural England to carry out some research to find out how best to deliver their objectives to farmers (NEMO).

Evidence from interviews with 40 local farmers has shown the following caused issues for them;

- 97% - Lack of time
- 87% - Lack of money and/or scheme funding inadequate
- 77% - Lack of labour
- 77% - Bureaucracy, scheme inflexibilities, interference by officials etc
- 67% - Some [agency] staff don't appear to understand farming or their own schemes
- 43% - Age, overwork, stress, motivation
- 37% - Farmers not listened to or asked
- 30% - Farmers not respected and not allowed to make mistakes
- 30% - Single Farm Payment disaster, Higher Level Stewardship money run out, problems with previous schemes
- 20% - Tidiness a barrier to conservation objectives
- 20% - Computer usage and jargon
- 10% - Lack of skills

One to one support will save farmers time by efficient signposting to specialist sources of advice funded through England's Rural Development Programme (RDPE) in the West Midlands, Natural England and other organisations, and will help overcome issues of isolation, lack of time, bureaucracy and red tape.

By bringing farmers together, efficiencies can be sought in terms of shared labour, machinery, expertise and experience. Opportunities for joint marketing will also be investigated.

Methodology

Introduction

Since 1990 there are four times as many smallholdings under 5ha in the Shropshire Hills AONB and 22% more holdings over 100ha. The number of farm holdings between 20 and 100ha has dropped by around 25%.

These traditional family farmers are finding it increasingly difficult to compete and to find their way through the paperwork. They are also less likely to have regular specialist advice compared to the larger landowners.

It was envisaged that this work would target these middle sized farmers, concentrating on those who aren't in the regional networks and don't get sufficient on farm advice presently.

Study area

Farms between Stapeley Hill, the Stiperstones and along the Hope valley were targeted as it was felt there had been less intervention in this area. But this did not exclude farms from elsewhere within the AONB. The project was keen to speak to 'hard to reach' farmers, who do not or very rarely attend meetings.

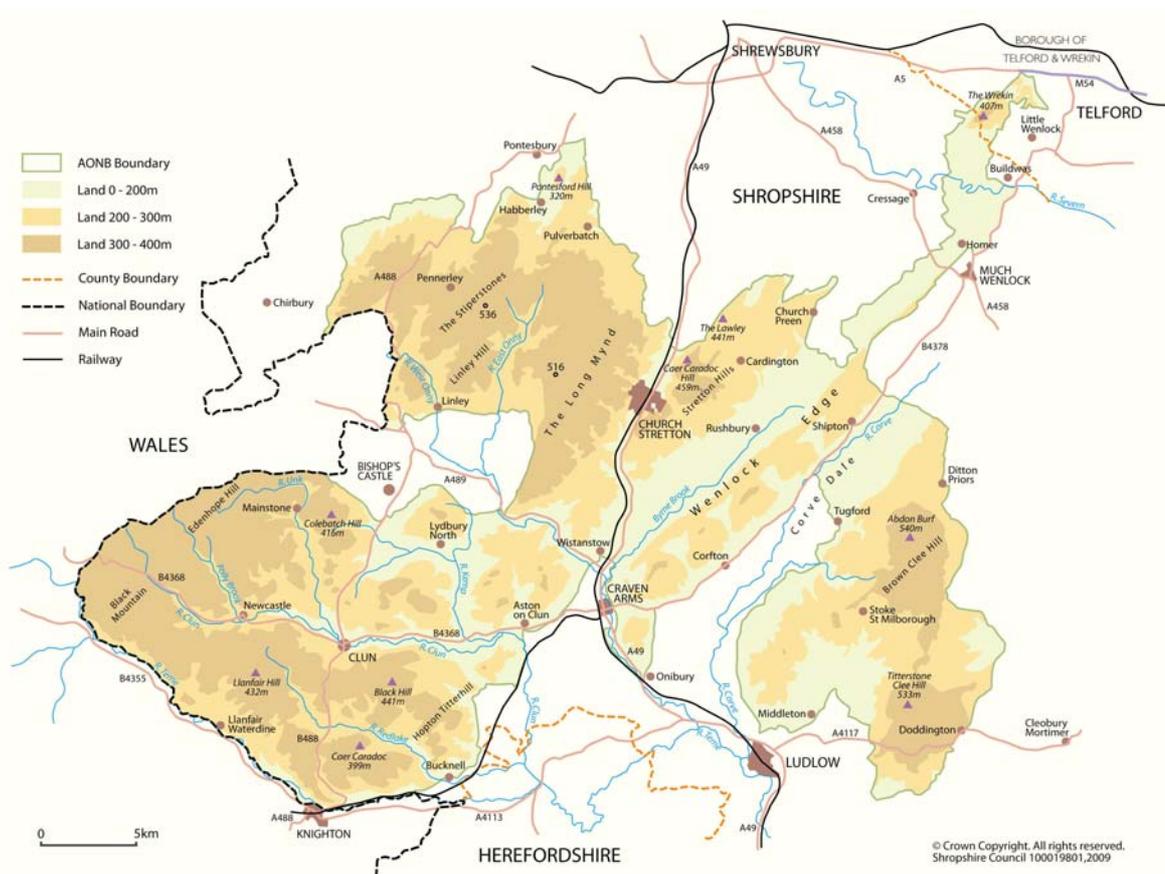


Figure 1. Map of the Shropshire Hills AONB

Methods

A local consultant, Warren Landles, was employed for the period of the project. He was branded as an independent AONB advisor and supported administratively by the AONB Partnership.

Crucially, he did not take the place of the current crop of advisors. Moreover, his role was to pinpoint specific advisors/organisations to help tailor specific farm advice to help AONB/LFA farm businesses. He provided a vital link between farmers and advisors.

To recap, this pilot project was looking to make contact with and provide assistance to 30 small (20 to 100ha) family farms with land classified as Less Favoured Area and within the SY5 postcode. Due to data protection, Natural England was unable to supply a list to the consultant of farm businesses who they wished to target for Environmental Stewardship advice.

However, Natural England mailed out a flyer (see Appendix 4) to farms with a SY5 postcode just before Christmas 2008. The flyer highlighted the potential of RDPE funding and free business advice.

The consultant also added the flyer to local parish notice boards and in several key meetings places like pubs.

The consultant received further help and support from Benno Veenstra of Minsterley-based Stapeley Veterinary Practice. Mr Veenstra understood the value of the project and saw it as a further way of helping his clients. The practice provided a list of 30 clients in the target area.

The consultant already attends the Callow Beef and Sheep Group (a monthly meeting group set up through the Rural Hub) and run by Stapeley Veterinary Practice. He gave a short presentation about the project to about 30 farmers at one of the meetings.

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

- Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership Community Officer
- Shropshire Rural Hub
- Shropshire NFU
- Shropshire CLA
- Shropshire branch of the National Federation of Young Farmers
- Local discussion groups
- Local land agents
- National Trust
- Agricultural Merchants
- Local show society secretaries

At each farm visit, the consultant enquired whether the farmer could suggest friends or neighbours who would benefit from a visit.

The consultant also compiled a list of about 90 farm business using the Yell.com search engine. Each business was telephoned to ask if help was required.

In total around 200 businesses were sent letters and around 120 telephone calls made.

Farm visits

Using a 'back to basics' approach the aim of each farm visit was to let the farmer lead 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. In some instances this meant going to a farm with less than 2 hours notice and also leave if a farmer had to deal with an emergency.

Flexibility was also required during the visit. There were several instances when the consultant followed and talked with the farmer while he was working on jobs around the farm yard. A clear illustration of 'lack of time' being an overriding issue.

On nearly every occasion the consultant was asked where he lived and which area he worked. Around half also questioned how the consultant was being funded.

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)
- EBLEX
- Dairy Co
- Shropshire Council
- Sustainable Tourism Business Grants team
- Light Foot Enterprises
- WiRE (Women in Rural Enterprise)

- RABI (Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution)
- FACE (Farming and Countryside Education)
- Redundant Building Scheme team
- Forestry Commission
- National Care Farming Initiative
- Shropshire Rural Hub
- Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership - (Bulmer Foundation grassland research)

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.

Specific lists of contacts were produced for Natural England, Business Link and the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership so that advisors could make follow up contact.

Workshops/events

Provided there was sufficient farmer enthusiasm the plans for the project had included setting up a number of workshops/events in Feb/March covering the 'hot' topics gathered from the farm visits.

However, due to delays in starting the project and that most farmers were lambing during March this was replaced by five extra one-to-one meetings.

Outcomes

Setting up 35 one-to-one visits with hard to reach farmers and those within postcode SY5 proved extremely challenging within the time frame. In total 18 farms with an SY5 postcode received visits.

Achieving this was broken down by the following:

Natural England mailing (150 businesses)	-	7
Stapeley Vets contacts list (telephone call by consultant)	-	12
Consultant 'cold calling' from own list	-	12
Farmer word of mouth	-	4
Total		35

Major concerns

Small family farms where one person does all the work inevitably creates time pressures. A lack of time to look into new areas and leave the farm for meetings/workshops (as also highlighted by the NEMO research) was an overriding theme of the farm visits.

The vast majority were pre-occupied with day-to-day work, Bovine TB, Blue Tongue. Animal disease remains a serious risk and source of anxiety.

Furthermore, red tape and unnecessary bureaucracy is a barrier to Environmental Stewardship. The point being that land already under existing management agreements should be given a streamlined transfer, rather than the form filling and point scoring. Outreach services like the REG scheme should be common in the uplands.

For some its got to the situation were they are afraid to take decisions for the fear of losing part or all of their SPS or land payment – such is the reliance on those payments.

Organisation name changes and acronyms (e.g. ELS, UELS, RDPE, REG) all add to the confusion. Wider issues like mitigating Climate Change did not register among the pilot group.

Areas where further help was needed

During the course of the farm visits highlighted the common subject areas where more help and advice was needed. These were:

- Environmental Stewardship/Catchment Sensitive Farming - 17
- Renewable Energy/Energy efficiency - 10
- Tourism/diversification – 11
- Livestock Improvement Grants - 8
- Bulmer Foundation grassland research – 5
- Education Access/Care Farming – 4
- Meat marketing/retailing – 3
- Making the most of farm woodland - 3
- Setting up new business – 2
- Succession/inheritance – 2
- Free Business Link help - 22

Environmental Stewardship

A total of 17 farms asked for practical help and advice about Environmental Stewardship from Natural England. Several had finished their existing and historic Stewardship schemes, or were about to reach their 5-year break and were deciding what to do next.

Those with Severely Disadvantaged Area (SDA) land were unclear about the Upland Entry Level Scheme and wanted more details.

Many hadn't contacted/or been contacted by a Natural England advisor in some time and wanted to know who was now their advisor.

Renewable Energy

Advice about Renewable Energy was a popular request, particularly when the Re:think project was highlighted during discussion. In all 10 farmers were sent more information about Re:think along with contact information for Bishop's Castle-based Light Foot Enterprises which are working on a farm energy audit project within the Shropshire Hills AONB.

Tourism/diversification

Eleven farms which had existing tourism facilities or were looking to develop tourism and other diversification projects were sent information about Rural Enterprise Grants, Sustainable Tourism Business Grants and Planning.

Business Link advice

A total of 22 farmers said they would appreciate contact with a Business Link advisor linked to existing and new projects. This was particularly the case for those who had expressed an interest in the Rural Enterprise Grant funding – which requires Business Link assistance.

Next steps

The Shropshire Hills has a special significance for their contribution to rural economies and their key role in landscape conservation, recreational activities, biodiversity, heritage and water management.

The future of the Shropshire Hills depends on the actions we all take today.

Learning from the pilot process (and NEMO) its clear that while times are changing fast, farmers within the AONB/LFA need to get up-to-speed or they will miss out. There needs to be long term thinking about the upland economies rather than knee-jerk reactions.

The next three to four years are going to be stormy. As the Single Farm Payment moves from historic to a flat rate payment and could halt soon after 2012, and moving from ESA payments to lower UELS/ELS payments its likely that very few livestock farms will be able to make a margin in the Shropshire AONB.

Although there has been a turn for the better more recently, with a rise in world sheep and beef prices, this may or may not be sustained, and the broad picture over the last three years is one of severe decline in the income of LFA sheep and cattle farms.

Inevitably this would force farm sales. All too often land is split between the neighbouring farms and houses are sold off separately. The loss of family farms raises a number of concerns over how land will be managed. The problem is that more intensive farming systems tend to replace the traditional farming systems that have shaped the landscape.

Concern that the average age of hill farmers (national average given as 58) raises concerns that the land management skills may be lost over time.

Without doing something now to secure prices and beat production cost rises the family farm may no longer continue.

Farms must be sustainable. They will need new capital, enthusiasm and it will not be a place for those clinging to tradition. The challenge, however, is to ensure the inevitable food supply surge is managed in an environmentally responsible way. Top class research in all sectors will also be required to support these changes and filtered down to where it matters.

Shropshire Hills AONB farmers need to stress the need for stewardship schemes to include payments for valued landscapes and retention of traditional farmstead units and traditional skills.

In addition to seeking justified support payments, by working together, farms should explore other opportunities. Diversification is a phrase continually banded about as a popular policy to help farmers earn a living through traditional agriculture.

While diversification is less common in uplands, some farmers have been able to diversify into services such as bed and breakfast accommodation and camp sites.

These options are not open to everyone. But there are examples of what has worked in other upland areas. Regional Development Agencies could still do more to support the uplands.

Finally, if farmers want consumers to 'Buy British' or 'Buy Local' the public need convincing about why. Consumers are faced with so many food options they need reminding about the benefits of buying food produced in the Uplands, particularly if they are expected to pay a premium. This could be as simple as hosting farm walks and talks, including school visits. Organisations like LEAF can provide advice, training and all the tools.

Overall, farmers should not wait for/rely solely on the Government to produce a vision and clear strategy for the future of the uplands. By getting active and involved now, farmers can shape the direction and leadership for the future of agriculture and the countryside.

We now all enter a new era. A balanced farming sector is needed to play a part in coping with increased demand for food, energy and maintaining a countryside for all to enjoy.

What farmers should consider doing:

- Be part of the discussions and take an active role in the future of the Uplands. It's their future, don't let others make all the decisions on their behalf.
- Work together and collaborate to lower costs and improve efficiency. Share skills, knowledge, labour, machinery. Competition is from overseas, not neighbours.
- Prepare now for changes to Single Farm Payments, ESA cessation, the Hill Farm Allowance replacement, Nitrate Vulnerable Zones and Catchment Sensitive Farming.
- Be aware of increased disease and pest threats. Subtle changes in the climate are already affecting everyone.
- Take advantage of the free advice available through projects like the Shropshire Hills AONB's Farmers Dens organised by FWAG and the Land, Life and Livelihoods group.

This example of a 'translation service' should be rolled out further to help local farmers with form filling thus making grants and funding more accessible to people.

- Look at succession planning and training. Where siblings do not want to farm, new entrants should be encouraged through schemes like Fresh Start and an advice service for farmers that will help develop their businesses and skills and also help those who wish to retire or leave the industry.
- Support local food marketing initiatives like the Bishop's Castle Abattoir Project, Shropshire Hills AONB Buy Local Scheme, etc.
- Work with legislators and other bodies like Natural England, the Environment Agency, Defra, Shropshire Council etc. The people working for these organisations require feedback. Most are willing to offer free advice and adapt measures if they are shown the real value.
- Better promote the work of upland farmers in maintaining the landscape and protecting the environment as a group or through organisations like NFU, CLA, LEAF, Levy bodies etc.
- Encourage visitors and help educate the public about food production and land management in the uplands by taking part in open days like Open Farm Sunday.

A one size fits all approach doesn't work. So say the farmers who sought advice through the pilot project.

The project starkly highlighted the need for independent, practical and local advice. A back to basics approach is required. Having the ability and the time to explain clearly the current jargon and to look forward is a welcomed approach. Someone on the end of a telephone to pick up queries and do the 'donkey work' of finding the right advice would take a lot of strain away from farmers with very little time away from day to day work.

There is absolutely no substitute for talking to farmers on a one-to-one basis, fully to understand their issues and act upon them. This builds up trust and reputation. The majority of farmers liked the one-to-one approach. The consultant has been contacted subsequently by farmers thanking him for the information provided and asking to be kept informed of future projects.

Whilst the feedback from farmers is anecdotal, it shouldn't be ignored. The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership and its partners can take a real lead in helping farming businesses prepare for the future. By starting now, there is a real opportunity to be proactive before the crucial 2012/13 period for so many farms.

Ideally there would be funding available to carry on the approach of the pilot project. Crucially, the follow up work by other local advisers would also be funded.

First and foremost this must start with taking the effort to call farmers to find out if and what help could be provided. Promotional activity like direct mail serve a purpose, but many farmers do not act on them. Making calls may seem very labour intensive but experience shows that this would lead to other ways of effective communication. Very often an issue can be resolved during a single phone call.

Furthermore, working closely with 'next stage' advisors to be able to find practical solutions quickly is another recommendation. Speed of action is key.

Looking at the bigger picture, the European Commission's strategy to change the way Less Favoured Area (LFA) status is awarded could see farmers in the Shropshire Hills AONB lose financial aid. This should be of serious concern given the amount of LFA land farmed within the Shropshire Hills AONB. Ignoring the productive capacity of LFAs is a mistake, and it's generally agreed that the proposed scheme could force farmers to de-stock or quit the industry altogether. Currently farmers are awarded LFA status based on 100 criteria that assess natural handicaps to farming. Under the plans, LFA status will instead be determined by just 8 biophysical indicators, used throughout Europe, including climate indicators.

Should the EU's proposals to overhaul the LFA scheme get off the ground, this will have very wide implications. Are LFA farmers aware of the changes? The AONB Partnership could act as a vital source of information.