

Case Study

Farmer Engagement in the Shropshire Hills



Summary

A pilot project using pro-active, one to one engagement with upland farmers showed that conservation and business advice schemes are not always reaching those who need them most. An outreach approach to establish contact and dialogue, and signpost to other sources of help, works well and is cost effective. The AONB Partnership was able to add value and co-ordination to the activity of other organisations.

What was done

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership, with funding support from Natural England and Business Link, commissioned a local consultant to undertake farm visits in the upland (Less Favoured Area) parts of the Shropshire Hills AONB. Warren Landles made 35 visits to small (20-100ha) family farms, typically lasting two to four hours. Visits were arranged through around 120 telephone calls following a variety of publicity, including a flier mailed by Natural England, posters on village notice boards and at a vet clinic, through a Beef and Sheep Group linked to the Rural Hub, AONB Partnership contacts and a variety of other organisations. The aim was to involve farmers who might be 'hard to reach' for mainstream schemes.

A key principle on the visits was to let the farmer lead the discussion. He/she would explain their future plans and what they specifically required help with. Allowing adequate time and using a credible, local and impartial consultant were key to establishing a dialogue.

The cost of the work was £6,250, equivalent to £178 per contact (including follow-up letters with contacts and advice).

Findings

Small family farms are under acute time pressures, making looking into new areas or leaving the farm for meetings or workshops very difficult. The vast majority of farmers spoken to were pre-occupied with day-to-day work, with animal disease (such as Bovine TB and Bluetongue) a big source of anxiety. Red tape and bureaucracy is seen as a barrier to Environmental Stewardship, although many of those visited have been in ESA or other schemes. Some were afraid to take decisions for the fear of losing part or all of their Single Farm Payment. Organisation name changes and acronyms (e.g. ELS, UELS, RDPE, REG) all add to the confusion. Many were not aware of Business Link or their services. Wider issues like mitigating climate change did not register among the pilot group.

Outputs

The main direct outputs were referral to other sources of advice:

- 17 farms asked for advice about Environmental Stewardship from Natural England.
- Advice about Renewable Energy was a popular request. In all 10 farmers were sent more information about Re:think grants and Light Foot's AONB farm energy audit project.
- 22 farmers said they would appreciate contact with a Business Link adviser. This was particularly the case for those who were interested in the RDPE Rural Enterprise Grant.

The pilot also provided evidence of the value of this method of engaging with farmers, summarised overleaf.

Lessons learned

- 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.
- There is absolutely no substitute for talking to farmers on a one-to-one basis, to understand their issues and act upon them. This builds up trust and reputation.
- Direct mailing may serve a purpose, but many farmers do not act on it. Making telephone calls may seem labour intensive but leads to effective communication.

Economic benefits - Helping survival of vulnerable small businesses and wider supply chains in a remote rural area. Supporting development of new enterprises.

Social benefits - Assistance and support to farmers under pressure, relief of stress and encouragement of support networks.

Environmental benefits - Opportunities for good Environmental Stewardship agreements, and better understanding of environmental regulations and opportunities.

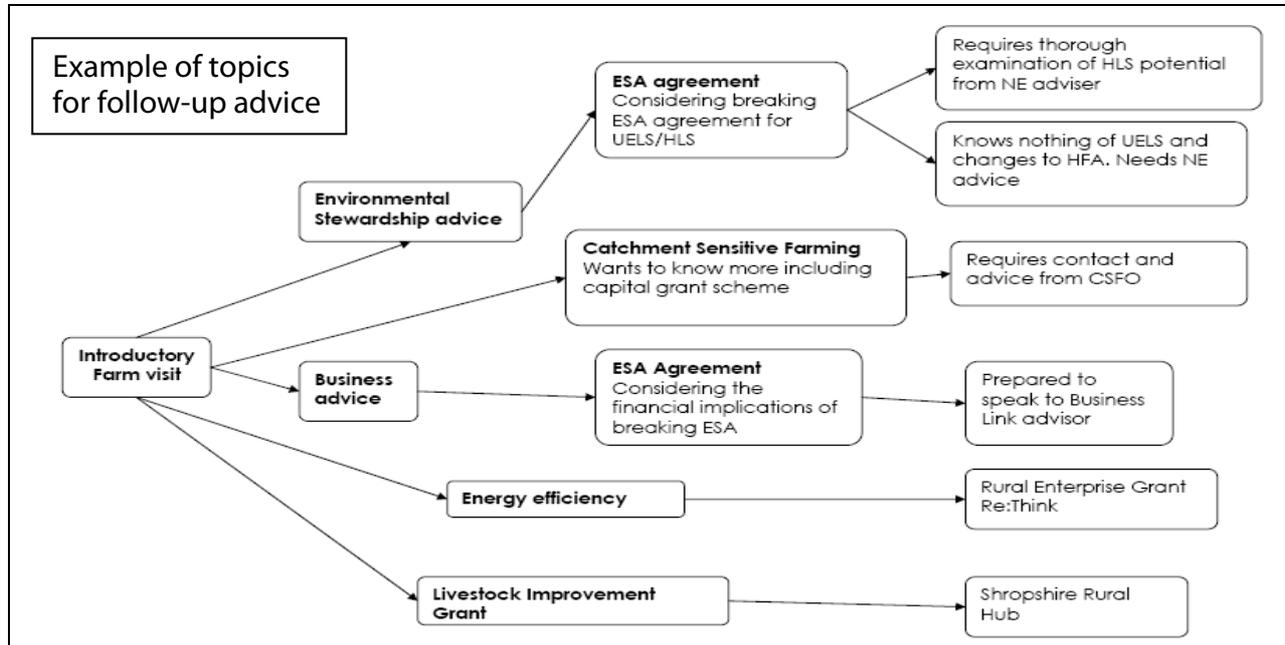
The ideas behind this approach are not new. The Task Force for the Hills in 2001 recommended:

"That proposals for nationwide provision of integrated advice be taken forward swiftly and that where integrated regeneration projects do not already exist in the LFA, a simple fast track application procedure be made available for one organisation per area to deliver this first stop shop integrated environmental and business advisory and facilitation service, deploying the full range of public and private sector resources."

<http://www.hillfarming.org.uk/doc/Task%20Force%20for%20the%20Hills%20Report%202001.pdf>

The Countryside Agency's Land Management Initiatives of demonstrated similar benefits:

http://p1.countryside.gov.uk/LAR/archive/land_management/index.asp



Next steps

Follow up advice to these farmers is ongoing. Business Link are keen to support further similar work, and the AONB Partnership is in active discussion with partners about a follow on project.

Further Information

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