

**NATURAL ENGLAND MULTIPLE OBJECTIVES
PROJECT (NEMO)**

**FARMER CONSULTATION
IN THE SHROPSHIRE HILLS
AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY**

**A RESEARCH STUDY FOR NATURAL ENGLAND
AND THE SHROPSHIRE HILLS AONB
CARRIED OUT BY “LAND, LIFE AND LIVELIHOODS”**

**Joy Greenall and Michael Whithouse
Land Life and Livelihoods
c/o Cow Hall, Bettws-y-Crwyn, Clun
Craven Arms, Shropshire SY7 8PG
01588-640307**

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1. Introduction

Natural England is the new organisation formed by bringing together English Nature, the Countryside Agency and Rural Development Service of Defra. Its purpose is to work with people, places and nature – it aims to inspire, motivate and engage people with the natural environment.

With reference to the Natural England Strategic Direction 2006-2009 booklet and other background documentation, we summarised the objectives of Natural England as being to:

- a) conserve and enhance landscapes, biodiversity and wildlife
- b) contribute to the sustainable management of natural resources (soil, air, water, minerals etc)
- c) provide incentives for farmers and landowners to manage their land in environmentally friendly ways
- d) act as a regulator and to advise government on how policies affect the natural environment
- e) promote access, recreation and public well-being
- f) help the public to understand farming, food and timber production
- g) raise awareness of the need for society to live within the limits of the planet

The work of Natural England, with the common feature of connecting people and the natural environment, will focus on four major areas:

1. Sustainable land management
2. Human health and the natural environment
3. Climate change
4. The marine environment

In the spring of 2007, Land Life and Livelihoods (LLL), a group working towards enhancing the quality of life, the landscape and environment for farming and communities in the Clun Valley within the Shropshire Hills AONB, were invited by the AONB to carry out a farmer consultation as part of Natural England's Multiple Objectives Project (NEMO).

NEMO is a three year project under which Natural England wishes to identify the most effective ways to carry out its work and meet its various objectives. In the Shropshire Hills AONB the aim of the NEMO project agreed by Natural England and the AONB is:

To understand - current challenges to farming and woodland management

- barriers to conserving and enhancing natural beauty
- opportunities and solutions for the future
- how Natural England can best work with farmers to overcome the challenges in order to meet its objectives

Following agreement to undertake this research, careful thought was given by LLL to the formulation of effective interview questions, a training day for interviewers was organised, a project information sheet prepared and subsequently 40 interviews have been conducted with and by farmers in the catchments of the Rivers Clun, Onny and Corve. These catchments cover a range of farming activities from small livestock enterprises in the hills to large arable holdings in lowland areas.

2. Interview Process and Analysis of Interview Responses

Farmer interviewers and interviewees were provided with a copy of the project information sheet including our summary of Natural England's objectives (points a to g in the Introduction section of this report). When interviewed they were then asked whether they agreed with these objectives and it was notable that 100% indicated support for them. They were also asked whether any of the objectives are more important than others and whilst some responded to this, many said that the various objectives are of equal importance.

Questions were also asked with a view to understanding (i) the current challenges to farming and woodland management (ii) the barriers to conserving and enhancing natural beauty (iii) the opportunities and solutions for the future and (iv) how Natural England can best work with farmers to overcome the challenges in order to meet its objectives.

2.1 Current Challenges to Farming and Woodland Management

Interview question: *What concerns you about the future for your farm, your family and the land that you manage?*

The responses made by the interviewees indicated the following concerns and challenges as being significant to them:

- 87% - Economic viability of farming
- 60% - Survival of family farms
- 47% - Lack of strategic importance placed on farming, food and timber production in this country by politicians
- 40% - Housing and succession worries
- 37% - Low level of public understanding and respect for farmers
- 27% - Overwhelming bureaucracy and regulation
- 23% - Climate change

“In the 1950s for every pound spent on food 50 pence returned to the farmer, the figure now is calculated to be 7.5 pence”

“The single farm payment scheme and ESA ceasing – what then? Impact on conservation?”

“TB is a major concern”

“Bureaucracy causes very negative feelings towards the environment when actually I'm very interested – sometimes I just feel like selling up”

2.2 Barriers to Conserving and Enhancing Natural Beauty

Interview question: *Referring to the list of Natural England's work on the Information Sheet, are there things that make it difficult for you to contribute to this work on your farm?*

The responses made by the interviewees indicated the following issues as being important factors to them in connection with the barriers to meeting Natural England's conservation objectives:

- 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 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% - Tidyness a barrier to conservation objectives
- 20% - Computer usage and jargon
- 10% - Lack of skills

"Office work has become more important than animal husbandry"

"Complexity of forms puts many people off completely"

"Labour and livestock are essential for nature and landscape conservation but poor returns mean neither can now be afforded"

"Intensification in order to survive means too many livestock and too much fertiliser use to achieve conservation objectives"

"Finding skilled labour for livestock enterprises is becoming a major problem"

"Insufficient income to pay younger workforce what they demand and can get elsewhere- skills not being passed on"

2.3 Opportunities and Solutions for the Future

Interview question: *Considering the list of Natural England's work, what would you like to be able to do on your farm now and how could Natural England help you?*

In order to explore opportunities and solutions, interviewees were asked about what they would like to do on their farms now and in addition about their involvement or interest in current schemes, as follows:

- Entry Level Stewardship (ELS)/Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA)

83% - Already in ELS or ESA agreements
17% - Interested in joining ELS

- Higher Level Stewardship (HLS)

23% - Already in HLS scheme
33% - Already in ESA agreements
37% - Interested in joining HLS scheme

- Organic Farming

7% - Already farming organically
40% - Interested in converting to organic
23% - Interested in traditional farming c1950s low inputs and lower intensity

- Education and farm visits (helping the public to understand farming etc)

17% - Already doing it
63% - Interested in getting involved

- Managing carbon (such as planting woodland, growing energy crops, reducing fertiliser use, organic farming and generating renewable energy)

33% - Already involved in at least one managing carbon activity
64% - Interested in getting involved

- Marketing produce locally in collaboration with other farmers

10% - Already doing it
80% - Interested in getting involved

"In principle farmers are in favour of co-operative working for conservation management but legal agreements must not be too complex and initiatives must be from small beginnings on the ground"

"To date advice and literature doesn't promote farmers working together"

2.4 How Natural England (NE) can best work with farmers to overcome the challenges in order to meet its objectives

Interview question: *Natural England is a new organisation wanting to work effectively with farmers so that the countryside and everybody who lives and works in it are in good heart. Do you have any practical suggestions as to how the admin and advisory staff of Natural England can best work and communicate with you?*

The responses made by the interviewees provided the following recommendations on effective partnership working between NE and farmers:

- 87% - NE staff to visit and understand farming systems of the holdings they deal with
- 80% - Reduce red tape and form filling – use plain English
- 70% - Establish better working relationships – accept mistakes happen on both sides
- 60% - Adopt policies to help farmers feel valued
- 23% - Farmers to have one personal contact in NE, ideally who knows their farm
- 17% - Time schemes to fit better with farming year – livestock and arable
- 7% - Re-instate advisory panels to government with individual farmer representatives

3. Suggested Action Plan for the Future

We recommend the creation of a farmer working group with the support of NE and the AONB to further explore the issues identified in this study. The aim of the group would be to find practical workable solutions on the ground to overcome the challenges this consultation has identified and achieve NE's multiple sustainability objectives working for all people, places and nature.

The issues that a farmer working group need to consider include:

- viability of agriculture and fair returns
- land based jobs, training and skills transfer
- integrated schemes with clear objectives and adequate funding
- personal on farm advice and understanding of farm practices
- exploring options for carbon and water management by farmers eg incentives for woodland planting, organic conversion and renewable energy generation
- investigating the way markets and supply chains can adopt sustainable practices and at the same time add value
- looking into the special situation of tenants
- paying farmers for professional input and expertise
- ways to improve overall communication with the farming community and the farmer role in helping the public to understand farming and food production

Farmer responses on effective partnership working with NE produced many individual suggestions beyond the points detailed above in section 3.4. Analysing these suggestions exceeded the scope of this project and the time available. However, we consider that it would be very worthwhile studying these in greater detail and perhaps exploring them further with farmers in the catchments of the Rivers Clun, Onny and Corve.

In addition to our specific recommendation to create a farmer working group, wider issues of policy and practice relating to achieving NE's integrated objectives need careful consideration. The consultation produced very wide ranging and interesting responses which are also relevant to the remit of Central Government, DTI (now known as BERR), DEFRA, Environment Agency, Forestry Commission and the Shropshire Hills AONB. We would like to be able to consider the implications of these in more depth in order to provide follow up policy recommendations.

4. Conclusions

The consultation process has produced far reaching and valuable findings. It should be added that a number of the interviewees commented that they appreciated being consulted and asked the type of questions we posed. A key message for us is the need for farmers to be consulted and heard. In addition, we are struck by the unsustainably low returns for many behind a very beautiful and well cared for landscape.

It would be desirable to further analyse the results for the different areas along with the types and sizes of farms. Also, the difficult situation for upland livestock farmers should be urgently considered. Follow up work with the farmers already consulted and with other land managers would, we believe, be very fruitful.

From the responses obtained, there is little doubt that motivation is a significant issue with the farmers interviewed. They have great concerns and uncertainties about their futures and many find the bureaucracy overwhelming, but nevertheless if encouraged and approached in the right way they are sympathetic to participating in achieving NE's objectives. Due to past and recent experiences, much bridge building is needed but the formation of the new organisation may make this easier. The business and personal situations of the farmers who were interviewed are extremely varied and it seems likely that most success will be achieved through local and individual solutions. By pursuing the suggested action plan for the future, in conjunction with the farmers who have contributed positively to this consultation, we trust the multiple objectives of NE can be achieved.

5. Bibliography

Natural England Strategic Direction 2006-2009

6. Summary

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In the Shropshire Hills AONB the aim of the NEMO project is to understand (i) the current challenges to farming and woodland management (ii) the barriers to conserving and enhancing natural beauty (iii) the opportunities and solutions for the future and (iv) how Natural England can best work with farmers to overcome the challenges in order to meet its objectives.

Following agreement to undertake this research, careful thought was given by LLL to the formulation of effective interview questions, a training day for interviewers was organised, a project information sheet prepared and subsequently interviews have been conducted with and by 40 farmers in the catchments of the Rivers Clun, Onny and Corve. These catchments cover a range of farming activities from small livestock enterprises in the hills to large arable holdings in lowland areas.

The results of the interviews indicate that in these very uncertain times farmers most urgent concerns are the immediate economic viability and survival of their farms. Climate change is a significant long term concern for a few but current economic considerations predominate. Other key concerns raised include the lack of strategic importance placed on farming and food production in this country by politicians; the low level of public understanding and respect for farmers; housing and succession worries; the loss of the younger generation to careers other than farming; the erosion of skills; the scale of bureaucracy, impractical regulation with the risk of severe penalties for mistakes; and the impact of unrestricted food imports.

When asked whether they agreed with the objectives of Natural England (NE), it was notable that 100% of the interviewees support them. However, one farmer expressed the view that the most important objective is missing, ie that farmers should be able to get a realistic income from their customers and that other desired objectives would follow from a "healthy" agriculture. Another farmer felt that all NE staff should spend a week on a farm each year.

Barriers to achieving NE's objective of conserving and enhancing natural beauty are primarily seen as being lack of time, money and labour. There are also generally held views that some staff (not necessarily those who work for NE) representing government agencies and departments dealing with farmers are sometimes remote and don't appear to understand farming and its practicalities. Schemes are felt to be inflexible and often implemented in a heavy handed manner and there is too much red tape. Many expressed opinions that they were being dictated to, not asked for their views or listened to, their expertise is not used and they are not allowed to make mistakes. However, to put this in context, several farmers mentioned that they have found the administrative and advisory staff of NE to be helpful and have been provided with good advice. They had issues with the systems rather than the people.

Problems with previous schemes, the Single Farm Payment difficulties last year, and the unavailability of funds for Higher Level Stewardship were mentioned as factors putting people off applying to participate in schemes run by any organisation connected with the government! In addition, the inappropriate timing of schemes in relation to the farming calendar, application periods being too short and insufficient funds being made available (eg reference was made to the recent England Catchment Sensitive Farming Delivery Initiative) are demotivating farmers from getting involved.

As regards opportunities and solutions for the future, there is enthusiasm to participate in (i) adequately funded agri-environment schemes (ii) helping the public to understand farming and food production by means of education and farm visits and (iii) managing carbon. Several farmers are interested in converting to organic production and there was significant positive support in principle to work in collaboration with other farmers to market produce locally and/or to achieve conservation objectives. Various suggestions were made to improve the working methods of NE, such as proposing that NE staff should visit and understand the farming systems of the holdings they deal with, and many expressed a desire for one to one contact, lighter touch regulation and to work more in partnership with NE.

From the responses obtained, there is little doubt that motivation is a significant issue with the farmers interviewed. They have great concerns and uncertainties about their futures and many find the bureaucracy overwhelming, but nevertheless if encouraged and approached in the right way may respond positively to participating in achieving NE's objectives. The business and personal situations of the farmers who were interviewed are extremely varied and it seems likely that most success will be achieved through local and individual solutions.

We recommend that NE's action plan for the future includes creating a farmer working group to further explore the issues identified in this study with the aim of finding practical workable solutions on the ground to overcome the challenges and achieve NE's objectives to sustainably work for all people, places and nature.