



## Putting the Spotlight on Farming Communities

The role of Farmer Networks in challenging areas

Funded as a co-operative action by Solway Border & Eden and Cumbria Fells & Dales LEADER Local Action Groups





The Royal Agricultural Society is very supportive of co-operation amongst farmers. Across England there are many different examples of farmers coming together for mutual benefit. This report highlights a particularly important approach to networking. At its core sit a number of networks which provide a “joined up” means of tackling the challenges and opportunities facing farmers. These networks are successful because they are local in focus, comprehensive in scope and owned, directed and valued by the farmers who are their members.



The Farmer Networks we have profiled here deliver significant economic, social and environmental outcomes as well as building the capacity of farmers to find and deliver their own collaborative cost-effective solutions, thus enabling them to become more effective and successful. As we move into a new funding phase from 2014 onwards these networks provide food for thought about how best to shape the use of those funds to achieve our national and EU rural development priorities. They are a potent and farmer owned means of sustaining agricultural jobs, sustaining agricultural communities and sustaining some of our most precious landscapes. Most importantly of all, they harness the wisdom, energy and commitment of the farmers themselves who are the key to future of the industry.

Chief Executive

Royal Agricultural Society of England

The new priorities set out for the future European Rural Development Programme are about: fostering knowledge and innovation, enhancing competitiveness, protecting the environment, strengthening resource efficiency, promoting social inclusion and reducing poverty. The Farmer Networks set out in this document help their members contribute to every one of these priorities. Importantly they are a powerful local response to that old mantra ‘think globally act locally’. These networks are not about farming in some abstract or narrow sense. They have wider beneficial impacts for the communities in which they are based and the environment. They help farmers to pool their expertise and energy and make a very significant contribution to the sustainability of some of the most challenged rural communities in England.



Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Hill Farming

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## Executive Summary

This report was commissioned by the Royal Agricultural Society of England. The impetus for it came from a St George's House consultation in 2010 "Securing a Positive Future for England's Uplands". It has been taken forward with significant input from the Farmer Network and with financial support from Solway Border & Eden and Cumbria Fells & Dales and Leader Local Action Groups, the Sustainable Development Fund at the Lake District National Park Authority, Natural England and The Prince's Countryside Fund.

## Findings

The report has identified that whilst there are many types of networking activity amongst farmers, a specific 'holistic' category of Farmer Networks can be identified.

Five case studies showcasing core common characteristics are set out in this report: **Exmoor Hill Farm Project**, **FarmCornwall**, **The Farmer Network Ltd**, **Upper Teesdale Agricultural Support Services (UTASS)** and **Warwickshire Rural Hub**. Two further case studies offer interesting examples of cooperation amongst farmers, but contrast with the core farmers networks, were also selected as case studies: **Anglia Farmers Ltd** (commercial: the largest farmer-owned agricultural purchasing co-operative in the UK with a turnover of £250 million) and **#AgriChatUK** (an online Twitter community). The final case study, **The Skylark Foundation**, is an international example (comprising 30 farmer clusters operating across the Netherlands) which demonstrates the wider relevance and applicability of farmer networks operating around localities.

The core Farmer Networks which are the focus of this report have the following characteristics:

- They make farmers more self-reliant by engaging them in taking ownership of the key challenges and issues they face in their neighbourhoods, often through the work of local paid Co-ordinators. The Farmer Network Ltd, for example, has 24 Co-ordinators operating across Cumbria and the Yorkshire Dales.
- They build the capacity of farmers by getting them to work together, learn from each other and support each other, usually in facilitated groups and events. The Exmoor Hill Farm Project works with Duchy College to run bespoke seminars and events for its members on this basis.
- They focus on localities, getting to the nub of issues and challenges which are pressing and immediate to farmers 'in their own backyard', often - as in the case of

FarmCornwall - getting them together around the 'farm table'.

- They are farmer owned and led, with farmers taking responsibility for delivering their services, setting their direction and governing them. The Warwickshire Rural Hub, a Community Interest Company, has farmers on its board.
- They have broad social and altruistic as well as commercial objectives – this involves undertaking projects and activities which have an impact in the communities in which they operate in addition to concentrating on the technical aspects of farming. UTASS provides children from farming families with a youth club, whilst FarmCornwall runs a reminiscence group for retired farmers.
- They operate as trusted intermediaries between farmers and statutory bodies, helping organisations such as Natural England, the Environment Agency and National Park Authorities to understand and interact with farmers. The Warwickshire Rural Hub organises a Soils Group in partnership with Natural England across the whole West Midlands.
- They provide a holistic service to their members. This involves being prepared to look at any issue or challenge raised by their members. At times this work will involve diagnosing the needs of farmers in detail and signposting them to sources of support. In some instances, they use farmers to deliver that support directly. FarmCornwall, for example, offers a full Farm Business Advice service through a dedicated outreach worker.

Farmer Networks make a major contribution to sustainable rural communities. They help farmers to become more competitive through collaboration and they deliver economic benefits for their members and large scale social returns on investment. In this report we cite individual projects which have delivered a £3-£4 social return on investment for each £1 invested. The impact of Farmer Networks is particularly powerful in upland environments and Areas facing Natural Constraints.

Farmer Networks provide the following benefits:

- They spread technical good practice through seminar programmes and peer to peer learning. The Farmer Network Ltd, for example, operates a significant North West Livestock training programme for its members.
- They tackle the workforce challenges facing farmers, helping with succession planning and supporting new entrants to the farming profession through training and loans. UTASS developed and delivered a 'Farmers of the Future' scheme to help young people become farmers and farm contractors.

- They develop food and wider branding opportunities for their members, helping them to diversify into other aspects of the food chain and add value to their produce. FarmCornwall has developed food branding initiatives for early Cornish New Potatoes.
- They represent the interests of their members to third party organisations such as the NFU, CLA and Government Departments. There is regular liaison, for example, between the Exmoor Hill Farm Project and the Chair of the NFU Hill and Upland Farming Group.
- They positively raise the profile of farming in specific localities; this involves organising key festivals such as ‘Fell Gather’ in Cumbria and the ‘Festival of the Harvest’ in Warwickshire.

Farmer Networks need sustained planning and investment over a 5-7 year time horizon, but once embedded have the potential to be sustainable for the long term. They make the communities in which they operate more resilient, delivering economic, social and environmental outcomes. We have identified that for every £1 invested in the establishment of Farmer Networks by the public purse they have the potential to raise over £3 of other funding towards the costs of their direct activities.

Farmer Networks have a particular affinity with the Leader approach because of their ability to deliver rounded outcomes for business, the community and the environment; they are very powerful drivers of rural development. All five of the core Farmer Networks identified have directly delivered or been involved in Leader funded projects.

## Recommendations

The research from the report leads to the following recommendations:

1. Upland policy in relation to rural development should incorporate the establishment of Farmer Networks in Areas Facing Natural Constraints as a means of building their resilience.
2. Established Farmer Networks should be recognised nationally and promoted as examples of good practice in addressing the challenges facing farmers.
3. More work should be commissioned to capture further international examples of good practice in relation to Farmer Networks. This will build the positive bank of knowledge about the potential to deliver resilience for farmers and their communities through networking.

4. The particular affinity between the Leader approach and Farmer Networks in the context of rural development should be acknowledged. New Leader areas should be encouraged to think about the development of Farmer Networks as a particularly powerful response to the challenges they are seeking to address.
5. An annual symposium of Farmer Networks, based on sharing and disseminating good practice, should be established and supported. This would help drive ‘super networking’ amongst Farmer Networks as a group and build their capacity. This should have an international dimension.
6. A central point for the collection of information on Farmer Networks, supporting their establishment and disseminating their good practice should be established.
7. Farmer Networks need encouraging as they both offer solutions to address farm poverty and support entrepreneurial farmers to help grow the rural economy.

## Introduction

*“The richest people in the world look for and build networks, everyone else looks for work” – Robert Kiyosaki*

This report was commissioned by the Royal Agricultural Society of England. The impetus for it came from a St George’s House consultation in 2010 “Securing a Positive Future for England’s Uplands”. It has been taken forward with significant input from the Farmer Network Ltd and financial support from Solway Border & Eden and Cumbria Fells & Dales Leader Local Action Groups, the Sustainable Development Fund at the Lake District National Park Authority, Natural England and The Prince’s Countryside Fund.

The purpose of this report is to: (i) understand how existing Farmer Networks operate, (ii) find other examples of Farmer Networks that are less well known (iii) consider the value of Farmer Networks and the positive change they bring to farming livelihoods and communities, and (iv) to inform stakeholders of the benefits of Farmer Networks and how they can be enabled and sustained.

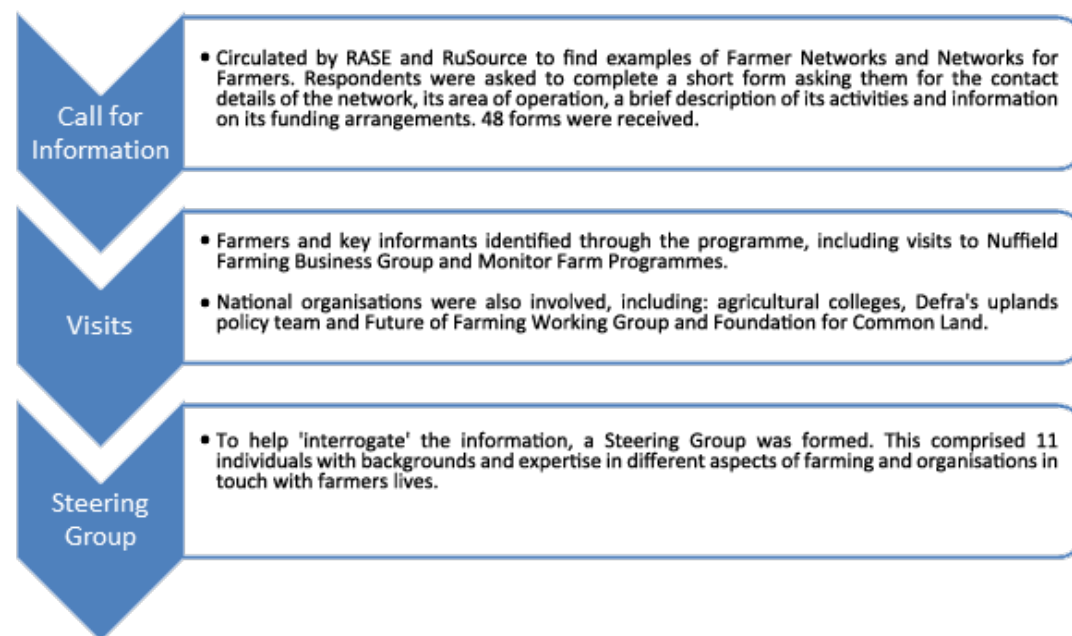
This research is timely in view of proposed changes to the focus of European Rural Development Regulation in 2014 and in the context of the wider debate about the role and nature of farming communities. In addressing the themes set out above, we have considered how networking approaches can build the effectiveness of farmers through co-operation and deliver wider benefits to both communities and the environment through the outcomes of that co-operation. We have sought to ask whether Farmer Networks make neighbourhoods more resilient. We have also considered whether their outcomes are equally effective over different geographies or whether they deliver more impact in some communities than others. Finally, we have considered the challenge of establishing and sustaining networks in the context of the debate about how best to use public funds to address the issues facing rural and specifically farming communities.

The report has three components: a detailed analysis of the research findings, five core case studies setting out the nature and operation of Farmer Networks, key conclusions and recommendations for the future.

## 1. Understanding how existing Farmer Networks operate and identifying farmer based approaches to collaboration

### Methodology

The project took place between December 2012 and April 2013 and involved the following stages:



Through this process, we identified 48 specific examples of Networks for Farmers and wider references to many more. Networking is not new and takes many forms in farming, including for example: buying groups and machinery rings. Whilst there are clear benefits to this activity, it is largely delivered on a commercial basis from day one through the operation of the free market in farming communities. There is also a wealth of information already in place about these forms of co-operation. Our interest has been to sift through the examples of networks we received to find those which have a broader impact on farming and farming communities as a whole in a given geography. Working with our Steering Group, we identified five 'core' case studies which showcase this broader category of network. To ensure we had not ascribed the holistic characteristics underpinning the operation of these core networks to other well established forms of networking, we also undertook

case studies of two other types of network: (i) Anglia Farmers Limited, a highly successful purchasing group; and (ii) #AgriChatUK, a contemporary information network based upon the use of social media. We are also aware that there is an international dimension to the issues we are considering; we therefore looked at the operation of the Skylark Network in the Netherlands which demonstrates the wider existence of our core farmer networks outside of the UK.

By comparing the operation of the core Farmer Networks with the other UK case studies (and in conjunction with our international case study and the Steering Group), we have established the following defining characteristics of a Farmer Network. None of these characteristics are unique to Farmer Networks, it is the combination and interplay of them that define the Networks this report is concerned with.

## **2. Key characteristics and operation of Farmer Networks**

### **Self Reliance**

Networks engage farmer members in taking responsibility and ownership through working together to find solutions to farming issues, design services and projects (and in some cases deliver services themselves) for the benefit of the wider farming community. In all cases, these networks pro-actively bring farmers together in groups to share experiences and identify potential opportunities and solutions. FarmCornwall, for example, through the work of the Farm Business Adviser brought farmers together to develop a novel crop growing project after identifying a gap in the UK Supply Chain for the provision of specialist vegetables to ethnic restaurants. Warwickshire Rural Hub has established a soils group through the enthusiasm of one of its board members. The group is supported by the Network Co-ordinator and is funded by Natural England on a West Midlands wide basis. The Farmer Network Ltd in Cumbria developed an innovative loan scheme to help young people begin a career in farming, supported by the Princes Trust. UTASS supported Middleton-in-Teesdale Auction Mart in the development of a successful Leader bid which not only provided new refreshment facilities but has also become a facility for the wider community. All these examples demonstrate how ‘animation’ by dedicated workers at the local level can enhance the individual benefits to farmers through collective action. The key point we established from the case studies was that without specific input through a dedicated worker they would not have been able to deliver benefits of this type at all, or in some cases, as quickly or as effectively as they have done.

### **Building Capacity**

Networks share good practice and build the capacity and confidence of members. We established a range of examples of how this operates. The Farmer Network

Ltd has developed a local coordinator role, where a paid individual brings together farmers in a given locality to work through the issues and challenges they face. This involves peer to peer support and learning. The Exmoor Hill Farm Project has developed a farm mentoring programme for its members in conjunction with Duchy College. The UTASS ‘Farmers of the Future’ project helped transfer learning and good practice between farmers providing training placements. The Board of FarmCornwall brings successful farmers together to consider how they can support the challenges facing individual farmers referred on by its Farm Business Adviser. Peer to peer learning is also a core part of the operation of the Skylark Foundation in the Netherlands.

### **Local Focus**

Networks relate to a locality relevant to their members. All five core networks have specifically defined geographical spheres of operation which in relation to the work of the Farmer Network Ltd, for example, break down to eleven localities. National Park Authorities have had a specific role to play in supporting Farmer Networks; the Yorkshire Dales Farmer Network Ltd and the Exmoor Hill Farm Project have both been supported by their respective Park Authorities. UTASS sits at the centre of a complex and finely tuned series of organisational relationships which harness support from across the whole voluntary, community and private sectors to support farmers across the Durham Dales. This network involves, for example, signposting and referrals to the Farm Community Network, Durham County Council and land agents.

### **Farmer Led**

One important distinction which arose during this research was the difference between Networks for Farmers (i.e., networks which are organised externally to support farmers) and Farmer Networks (i.e., those which are farmer led and owned). Our Networks are in the latter category. The leadership and engagement they engender has a key role to play, not only in directing the successful take up of their activities, but also in building the capacity of their members. Key examples are Warwickshire Rural Hub and FarmCornwall which are Community Interest Companies; the Farmer Network which is a Limited Company; and UTASS which is a Charity. In all these cases, farmers have lead roles and personal legal responsibilities linked to the operation of the Networks.

### **Social/Altruistic Objectives**

Whilst all the networks studied had entrepreneurial characteristics, through generating business opportunities for their members (such as the group purchasing activities of the Farmer Network or the business development focus of the

Exmoor Women's Farming Group), they operate for a wider membership or social benefit. This is set out clearly through the legal parameters of their governance arrangements. For example: at UTASS, FarmCornwall and the Warwickshire Rural Hub it is a requirement that any surplus is retained for the benefit of the organisation.

### **Trusted Intermediary**

We found significant evidence that once Farmer Networks reached a certain level of maturity they were able to harness their membership to create a bridge between farmers and statutory bodies in a given locality. For the role of intermediary to work well it is important that the Networks are not perceived by their members to be delivering the agenda of the statutory bodies and therefore not able to operate independently. Examples of intermediary work in action includes the central role played by FarmCornwall in the development of the Penwith Landscape Partnership (funded by Natural England); brokerage activities to bring together farmers around environmental improvement undertaken by the Farmer Network Ltd with Natural England; and the work of the Exmoor Hill Farm Project to promote and widen engagement in National Park Authority consultations with the farming community.

### **Diagnostic and Signposting**

An absolutely core principle of the operation of Farmer Networks is the work they undertake to diagnose, signpost and (where practical) directly address the needs of farmers in their local area. They provide a 'one stop shop' to support farmers. This support is provided in a range of ways. FarmCornwall has a Farm Business Adviser who visits individual farmers to offer support; UTASS provides an in-house farm business advice service; and the Warwickshire Rural Hub responds to farmer enquiries both electronically and over the telephone. The Farmer Network Ltd can be accessed in a range of ways, but in common with the Skylark Foundation in the Netherlands, has a first contact facility through its network of twenty-four local coordinators.

### **Holistic in Character**

Farmer Networks respond to all aspects of the farming agenda in the widest sense. They offer a whole farm service for any member issue linked directly to farming. They also address wider issues pertinent to farmers. UTASS, for example, organises social activities for children in the farming community; FarmCornwall co-ordinates a reminiscence group for retired farmers.

## **3. The value of Farmer Networks and the positive change they bring to farming livelihoods and communities**

Details of the achievements of Farmer Networks are set out in each specific case study. It is possible to group their outcomes and contributions to both farmers and their broader localities, including:

### **Spreading technical good practice**

Farmer Networks are key vehicles in their localities for cascading good practice. This has involved hosting a series of key training events for farmers, which using its role as trusted intermediary, has enabled the Farmer Network Ltd to generate significant take up for the North West Livestock Programme. The Warwickshire Rural Hub organises an arable benchmarking group for its members and UTASS hosts a Monitor Farm Programme in its locality.

### **Co-ordinating information and events for farmers**

Through their role as a one stop shop for local farmers, Farmer Networks help to focus the range of support offered by external agencies to their communities and in many cases secure excellent take up of the facilities offered. For example, the Exmoor Hill Farm Project and Duchy College work in partnership to offer farmers a training programme; UTASS and Durham County Council's Trading Standards department jointly provide information and advice; and the Warwickshire Rural Hub organises events and visits on behalf of the Environment Agency.

### **Addressing workforce issues**

Farmer Networks have been active in addressing workforce issues for their members. The Hill Farm Succession Project at the Farmer Network Ltd and 'Farmers of the Future' programme at UTASS, have both enabled young people to develop careers in agriculture in their locality. Other examples include brokerage work by FarmCornwall to support the search for specialists skills and equipment by their members in West Cornwall.

### **Food and wider branding and marketing activities**

Farmer Networks have been actively involved in supporting the development of farmer led activities around adding value to their produce and diversification into the wider food chain. Examples include: the partnership between the 'Love Food' project and UTASS; and the development of the 'Healthy Boxes' scheme and 'Deliciously Dirty' Cornish New Potatoes Campaign by FarmCornwall.



## Advising National Bodies on Policy and Practice

Whilst none of the core networks we identified were political or lobbying organisations, they do have a track record of providing advice and information on policy issues to third parties – ranging from the NFU to Defra. There is ongoing dialogue, for example, between the Exmoor Hill Farm Project and the Chair of the NFU Hill and Upland Farming Group. UTASS has hosted visits from Defra Ministers and HRH the Prince of Wales. The Chair of the Warwickshire Rural Hub is involved in the business groups of both the Local Enterprise Partnership and the Local Nature Partnership.

### Raising the public profile of farming

The Warwickshire Rural Hub and the Farmer Network Ltd organise broader promotional activities linked to farming such as the ‘Festival of the Harvest’ and ‘Fell Gather’ respectively. UTASS plays a significant role in underpinning the successful operation of the Langdon Beck Show Committee. All five core networks have members that participate in Open Farm Sunday. UTASS organises educational visits for local schools to the Middleton-in-Teesdale Auction Mart.

## 4. How Farmer Networks deliver wider outcomes

Specific examples of outputs in the context of Farmer Networks are set out in the case studies that follow. Taken as a collective, the five core networks have made a significant contribution to sustaining the operation of farmers who have been able to either become more competitive and/or able to sustain their farm businesses. The five networks profiled have had a direct positive impact on 3930 farmers, businesses and individuals within farming communities.

In addition to the quantifiable outputs of these networks, they deliver wider outcomes which make them popular with their members and wider stakeholders. Many of these outcomes have a broader impact in sustaining the communities across which they operate. We have provided three examples of these outcomes in the ‘Social Return On Investment’ section of the report. The three examples demonstrate that for every £1 invested in the networks concerned, they have the potential to deliver £3/400% in social returns. Towards the end of the report, in the ‘Broader Return on Investment’ section, we set out the direct financial growth sustained by the Farmer Network (as an example of one Network in action) arising from the initial start up funding with which it was provided. This demonstrates how, for an initial investment by the public purse of £759,350, the return on investment it has achieved in activity terms is approximately £3million; for every £1 invested the economic return is £3.95 (over 20 years assuming a 3% interest rate). It is clear from our research that Farmer Networks also deliver considerable environmental

benefits and there is merit in further work to establish these in detail.

## 5. Enabling and sustaining Farmer Networks

European and national policy recognises the need to support the development of all economic sectors. The challenges facing farmers, particularly in Areas Facing Natural Constraints, are recognised as being particularly acute in this context. There is now a widely held recognition that the benefits delivered in terms of not just farming but also (and importantly) environmental management and social cohesion justify public support.

This study of Farmer Networks has indicated, particularly where they operate in upland environments, that they are able to:

- Improve the financial performance of farmers through collaboration.
- Enable farmers to participate more effectively in environmental management through their role as a trusted intermediary.
- Deliver wider social benefits, where sustainable farms form a significant proportion of the overall economy of a given area.

Over time, the investment of funding in the development and evolution of Farmer Networks (in Areas Facing Natural Constraints particularly) provides the potential to make farming communities - and more specifically farmers themselves - more self-reliant and financially independent.

This study of Farmer Networks illustrates how each one is involved in a development journey. We have split the development path for Farmer Networks into four stages: establishment, growth, development and consolidation. The position of each Farmer Network on this development path has an impact on the nature and scale of the funding required. Funding is derived from a range of sources at each stage:

**Establishment phase** - largely public funding is traditionally used to establish the network, with potentially some membership fees and modest commercial income from the sale of services delivered by their core team.

**Growth phase** - at this stage, Farmer Networks have become less dependent on public funding and are exhibiting the capacity to grow their membership fee income and commercial income from the sale of their services.

**Development phase** - here the Farmer Networks have become largely self-funding, with a robust membership fee income, a number of commercial income streams and the capacity to develop new self-financing services for their members.

**Consolidation phase** - at this point, the organisations have become fully self-funding, have the scope to deliver a surplus to develop and strengthen their capacity to serve their members and can begin to consider expansion into both new geographies and service areas.

Our work with each network suggests that the speed at which each stage is reached is conditioned by their individual circumstances (e.g. the views of their boards and/or nature of their geography). Sustainable networks do, however, take some time to develop in any set of circumstances and the journey from establishment to development/consolidation can take between 5 and 10 years. The reason for this timescale is that the networks need to become truly embedded and ‘owned’ by their members if they are to drive enhanced economic performance amongst farmers and develop sustainable funding approaches.

We identified that there is not one specific ‘button to press’ in terms of developing Farmer Networks. Some have been the product of agricultural shocks (e.g. Foot and Mouth) whilst others have evolved from specific interventions by organisations such as National Park Authorities. The absolutely crucial ingredient in relation to establishing each network, and the defining value of the networks as they have evolved, has been the issue of farmer engagement, trust and development. This is captured in the strap line of the Cumbria Farmer Network Ltd which describes its mission as to “inform, support and educate”.

Although there is no single or simple ‘route to market’ in terms of an approach to generating new Farmer Networks – we believe, to be effective, they need:

### **Initial financial support**

All five core networks had (and in most cases retain) public funding towards their operation. Leader Funding has been a particularly powerful tool for supporting Farmer Networks. The rural development objectives of Farmer Networks and the locally owned, neighbourhood focus of Leader has particular affinity. The fact that Farmer Networks deliver both social and economic outcomes which are the twin rural development objectives of Leader makes them an ideal vehicle for Leader support. Whilst the need for public funding declines significantly as Farmer Networks make the transition to greater independence, to deliver the level of support to make a real difference, build their membership base and plan a long term future, they need enough support to enable them to operate professionally.

### **Dedicated staff resource**

The key to farmer engagement and ownership of Farmer Networks is dedicated and independent facilitation. It is clear from our dialogue with all five core networks

that an independent co-ordinator (ideally with some direct experience of farming) is crucial to the effective operation of a network. Key members of staff in all of the core networks studied had significant prior experience of farming. Both farmer members and Farmer Network boards/trustees/steering groups identified this as being essential to building the effective approach and trust required to make the operation of the network successful.

### **Statutory agency engagement**

The involvement of statutory bodies and organisations linked to them (such as Rural Community Councils) is crucial to the establishment and successful ongoing operation of Farmer Networks. UTASS and the Farmer Network Ltd were both set up, at least in part, by their local Community Council; the Exmoor Hill Farm Project and the Yorkshire Dales Farmer Network were both supported by their National Park Authorities; and FarmCornwall received start up support from the former Penwith District Council. Once established, statutory agencies have realised the value of Farmer Networks in ‘providing a route to market’ for them in engaging with farmers. All five core networks bring farmers into positive structured contact with statutory bodies, including Natural England and the Environment Agency. In managing this role, it is crucial that Farmer Networks are seen to be independently run and organised and able to be assertive (where required) in representing their views to statutory bodies. Farmers have indicated that they would not have confidence in the value of Farmer Networks if they were seen to be the agents of statutory bodies.

### **Farmer “owned” and managed**

To build the capacity of farmers through the development of the ‘networking habit’, evidence from all five core networks demonstrates the importance of involving farmers directly in the development and governance of the organisation. This has taken place at FarmCornwall and the Farmer Network Ltd where as soon as practically possible the leadership and governance has been handed on to farmers themselves. Farmers also play a key role in leading the other three core networks. We have set out the nature of their leadership roles in detail in each case study itself.

### **How to Stimulate Farmer Networks**

There is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to developing Farmer Networks. Building on the experience of our case studies we have scoped out the following phases of the life of a farmer network:

Key elements include:

- A) *Establishment phase* - this involves engaging key farmers and building trust. There is a need for some 'quick wins' to give the emerging group confidence that their involvement is worthwhile. In this first stage, Farmer Networks have a relatively high need for funding support.
- B) *Development phase* - this involves widening the farmer membership of the network, building the capacity of staff to deliver more services/benefits and developing a track record of useful outputs. In this second stage of development, the need for funding support begins to decline as project income becomes established.
- C) *Growth stage* - this involves offering more services to a wide range of stakeholders, developing new funding streams, promoting widely and raising awareness of the network. In this third stage, while the requirement for public support continues to decline, Farmer Networks may still deliver projects funded by statutory agencies (but for a delivery fee rather than for their core activity).

D) *Consolidation/adaption phase* - once established, Farmer Networks have a constant need to innovate/adapt to maintain interest/remain relevant and satisfy their members increasingly sophisticated needs. The need for external support now diminishes significantly as they develop their own robust portfolio of projects and member funded/commercial activities to meet their needs.

The key stages in the establishment phase, which will be of interest to any organisations wishing to consider setting up a network, are set out in the diagram below and expanded upon in the "How to" guide which is available as a companion document to this report.

## 6. Summary

As we move into a new European Rural Development Fund Programme (from 2014), engaging farmers in taking ownership at the local level for delivering the six priorities within the programme is a challenge and an opportunity. We believe this report provides significant evidence that there is real merit in seeking to address this challenge through the support and promotion of networks of the type set out at the core of this report. Addressing this challenge could also extend to identifying the potential for new networks in areas which do not currently benefit from this approach.

Establishment Phase	Top Tips	Resources (examples of funding sources include – RDPE, Leader)	Development Phase	Growth and Consolidation Phase
<p>Organise local start-up meetings with small groups, of up to 15 farmers, ideally using farmers from other networks. Make sure key farmers who are respected are in attendance.</p> <p>Meetings need to be facilitated well by an individual who understands farming in the area.</p> <p>This work can be led by any trusted organisation. It should have the backing of a farmer steering group that has been brought together from the first open meetings. Maintaining feedback to participants is important at this stage.</p> <p>Develop an Action Plan.</p>	<p>Use a facilitator who is perceived to be from within and/or has an understanding of the community and who is known and respected in the locality.</p> <p>Avoid meetings dominated by one strong personality. You can guard against this by splitting into small groups to discuss a presentation.</p> <p>Apply for sufficient funds to give continuity so the benefits can be seen and farmer capacity and confidence built on a sustainable basis.</p> <p>Avoid being too ambitious at the start. Progress has to be at a speed that suits the whole group.</p>	<p>Start Up Costs: typically 5 meetings (£3,000 - £3,500):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Room hire / refreshments.</li> <li>Travel expenses/time for invited farmers from other networks.</li> <li>Facilitator time.</li> </ul> <p>Running Costs: There is a likely need for funding in a completely new area for 7 years; if linked to an existing network, this period can be reduced to 5 years.</p> <p>Co-ordination, including costs to pay for farmer time and expenses (typically £50 -£70k/year).</p> <p>Resources to run meetings, set up services that will develop a track record, and engage farmers in driving the agenda (typically £30 - £40k/year).</p>	<p>Build trust, strengthen engagement, set up a formal management structure.</p> <p>Facilitator to start to challenge and be clear about the organisation going forward now farmers are starting to see benefits / potential and think about sustainability issues. This will help to drive what the organisation does and how it is organised. This will also focus attention on other sources of funding and possible organisational structures.</p> <p>Need to build a track record before significant income can be generated. Beware the central office facility pressing / directing without farmer involvement.</p> <p>At this stage, the staff requirement changes from facilitation to organisational management.</p>	<p>Increase focus on financial viability with minimal public subsidy.</p> <p>Greater responsibility on the management group.</p> <p>Introduce new services and consider extending geographical coverage.</p> <p>Enhance marketing, networking and management skills.</p> <p>Manage ongoing challenges around operating assumptions, expanding membership and continuing to focus on delivery.</p>

Case studies

A baseline was established to select the farmer networks to explore in greater depth:



Although there is no widely held definition of a Farmer Network, three core types were identified from the initial research:

- 1. **Commercial:** networks which provide technical, financial, agronomic and/or livestock advice to improve the efficiency and profitability of farm businesses.
- 2. **Social:** networks that specialise in agricultural matters but provide support to the wider farming community.
- 3. **Representative:** networks that provide professional representation and services to farmers.

A detailed study of networks led us to identify a number of examples within these three core types that had the common and locally focused characteristics (set out

in the preceding section of the report).

Five case studies showcasing these core common characteristics are set out in this report: **Cumbria and Yorkshire Dales Farmer Networks Ltd**, **Exmoor Hill Farm Project**, **FarmCornwall**, **Upper Teesdale Agricultural Support Services (UTASS)** and **Warwickshire Rural Hub**.

Two further case studies offering insights into co-operation amongst farmers but that contrast with the core farmers networks were also selected: **Anglia Farmers Limited** (commercial: the largest farmer-owned agricultural purchasing co-operative in the UK with a turnover of £250 million) and **#AgriChatUK** (an online Twitter community). **The Skylark Foundation** is an international example (comprising 30 farmer clusters operating across the Netherlands) which demonstrates the wider relevance and applicability of Farmer Networks operating around localities. In its character and operation it is very similar in structure to the five core Farmer Networks selected.

As a means of establishing how the core nature of the Farmer Networks differs from a purchasing group (Anglia Farmers Limited) or an information network (#AgriChatUK), we have considered these two case studies alongside the key characteristics underpinning our definition of a Farmer Network:

Key Characteristics of Farmer Networks	Anglia Farmers Limited	#AgriChatUK
<i>Trusted Intermediary</i>	Similar level of activity, although exclusively linked to members	Similar level of activity
<i>Dedicated Staff Resource</i>	Far higher level of capacity	Operating on a purely voluntary basis
<i>Signposting and Referrals</i>	Significantly lower level of activity and exclusively for members	Lower level of activity
<i>Holistic Agenda</i>	Core focus on purchasing with some ancillary activity for members only	Information focus only
<i>Local Membership Structure</i>	National membership base with some specialist member categories. Considering local area representation	National focus
<i>Farmer Governed</i>	Fully farmer governed to the same degree as Farmer Networks	Mixed informal governance arrangements linked to voluntary organisers/hosts





# Cumbria Farmer Network

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The Farmer Network Ltd  
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The Farmer Network Ltd stems from the 'Rural Futures project', an initiative arising from Foot and Mouth in 2001 that saw a number of farmers recruited as coordinators to be a link between Defra and the farming community. The project took place between April 2002 and July 2006, was funded by Defra and managed by Voluntary Action Cumbria (Cumbria's Rural Community Council). The Cumbria Farmer Network Ltd was established in 2005 as a follow on from the Rural Futures Project; with some initial funding provided by Northern Rock Foundation, Hadfield Trust and Cumbria Community Foundation. Its mission statement is to: "Inform, Educate and Support those involved with farming". Current membership fees for the Network are £50 per year.

*"Our group has looked into Anaerobic Digesters. The Network found funds, relevant experts to reduce the risks; just really helpful"*

- Terry, Farmer.

*"If you are willing to put in a little bit of effort to work with like minded farmers you get on with, you will get a lot out of it"*

- Kevin, Farmer



*"Since the project started the Farmer Network Ltd has shown a detailed understanding of Hill Farming in Cumbria and been an extremely useful resource for The Fund. They are particularly well connected amongst the farming community which is extremely valuable and we often use them as an example of excellence"*

- Victoria Elms, Programme Manager, The Prince's Countryside Fund

## 600 Farmer members 500 Cumbria - 100 Yorkshire Dales

### Staffing

1 FT, 4 PT Core Staff  
PT local organisers/project workers (Cumbria 19, Yorkshire Dales 5)



### Company Limited by Guarantee

**Governance Group:** 2 members from each county group, Managing Director & co-opted member.

Cumbria Farmer Network & Yorkshire Dales Farmer Network (10 elected farmer reps on each)

### Support for young people

- Hill Farming
- Apprenticeship
- Training Vouchers
- 15 - 40 year olds
- Grants and low interest loans

### Group Activities

- Marketing Group
- Buying Group
- Equipment Sharing
- Plastic Recycling
- Group Carcass Disposal
- Local neighbourhood specific groups supporting clusters of farmers

### Administration & Compliance

- Farm record and policy checklist folder
- On farm support to prepare for inspections
- Advice service in relation to new regulations and requirements

### Community Focus

- School visits
- Farm walks
- Farming interpretation at shows/events (Fell Gather Roadshow)

### Grant Funding

- Helping farm businesses to maximise their efficiency and the utilisation of their assets (including through diversification) in identifying sources of grant support and helping with the development bids

### Knowledge Transfer Events

- Programme of focused training and support for members through key initiatives such as the North West Livestock Scheme

Farmer focused, farmer directed and farmer delivered at the local level. Commercial and comprehensive in its activities. A trusted intermediary, working to “inform, educate and support” all those involved with farming in Cumbria and the Yorkshire Dales.

Key outputs from the Farmer Network Ltd since 2006 are:

The Farmer Network Ltd has also developed strong links with other organisations and been a key partner in developing new projects and initiatives of benefit to farmers:

## Cumbria

**200**  
Plastic recycling participants

**8000** visitors to Fell Gather, **200** farm walks, **41** school visits

**200**  
Knowledge Transfer Events, over **2200** farmers attending

**1 million** litres p.a. fuel buying scheme

**11**  
Low interest Loans

**526**  
Peak farmer members

**216**  
Training Vouchers

**15**  
Hill Farm Apprentices / Technical Training Students

**20**  
Participants in Group Carcass Disposal Scheme



Training vouchers set up, policy/regulation folders for members; fuel buying scheme, first major public education event – “Fell Gather.” Discussion with Yorkshire Dales farmers.

2009

Started Hill Farm Apprentice scheme; started Low Interest Loan Scheme. Yorkshire Dales Network now set up.

2011

Increased fuel buying scheme (£1m litres/yr), started consultancy for agencies.

2012

Business Plan revised to take the company forward.

2013





# Yorkshire Dales Farmer Network

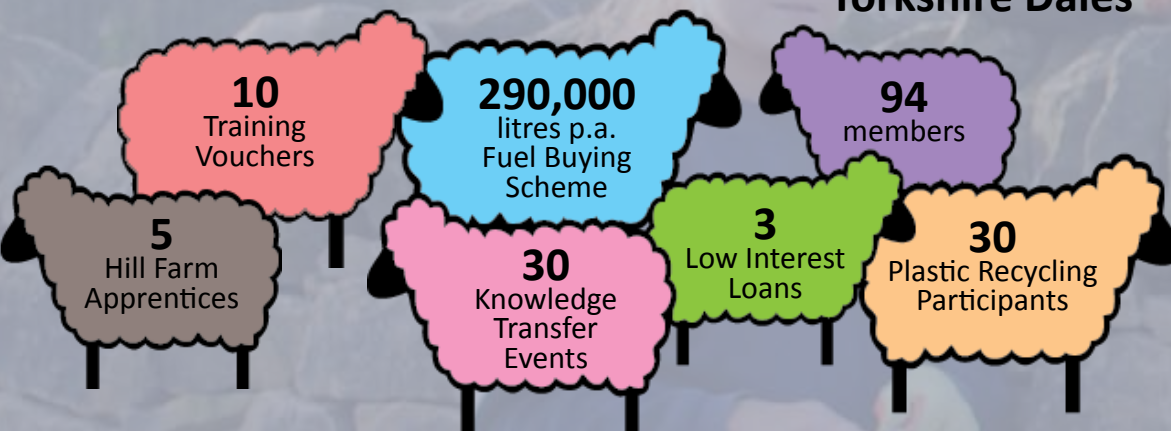
Paul Harper  
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Initial discussions started in late 2008/early2009 and the Farmer Network Ltd was set up in January 2010 to support the formation of a separate group in the Yorkshire Dales. This group is independent but shares overheads and central costs with the Cumbria Network.

Key outputs from the Farmer Network Ltd are:

## Yorkshire Dales



*"The Farmer Network Ltd is very well embedded in local communities and have their trust and confidence"*  
- Julia Aglionby, Director, National Centre for the Uplands



*"I have heard the Network has found funds to set up a low interest loan scheme to support young people entering farming. I think this is really great"*  
- Richard, Farmer

5 Meetings arranged by Yorks Dales National Park with Dales farmers and the Cumbria Farmer Network to test interest

2009

Network established initial offer to members: Group buying of fuel, silage wrap, fertiliser, etc. very limited knowledge transfer events, funding for group purchase of machinery, Policy folder, 4 Newsletters/year, grant update

2010

Hill Farm Apprentice Scheme; Low interest loan scheme; Training vouchers

2011

Improving links with AONB and Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority

2012

Increasing interest to use the Network by NE, AONB and YDNP to engage local farmers re environmental schemes.

2013



# Exmoor Hill Farm Project

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Project Co-ordinator  
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Wheddon Cross  
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Website: [www.exmoorhillfarmproject.org.uk](http://www.exmoorhillfarmproject.org.uk)

Exmoor is an area of hilly open moorland, spanning the boundaries of West Somerset and North Devon it was designated a National Park in 1954. Farming on Exmoor has faced significant challenges in recent years with Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD), bovine TB and environmental schemes all impacting upon morale and farm incomes.

The Exmoor Hill Farm Project (EHFP) was set up in 2009 as a direct result of an identified need to provide specific assistance to livestock farmers. The EHFP has received 100% funding over a four year period (2009-2013) from the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE). There is no cost for membership of this network.

*"It's very accessible to the farming community. Staff at the project are Exmoor people who understand what is needed...they're good at getting firsthand knowledge out...it's evident that farmers want and do get involved"*  
- John, Exmoor Farmer.

*"Farmers come out because they think it's worthwhile and they'll try that. It inspires them to try a bit harder... rather than being reactive they're proactive...its farmer driven and led by what they want"*  
- Jayne Budd, Training Co-ordinator, Duchy College.



*"The people involved are trusted by farmers...the staff are from farming backgrounds, which really helps. They understand the issues facing farmers and always provide input when we're working up a project. They're a key partner in delivering the Park Authority's Strategic Partnership Plan"*  
- Tim Stokes, Sustainability & Economy Manager, Exmoor National Park Authority.

*"Farmers don't want big amounts of money...they want help with fencing, hedging, cross compliance...we facilitate farmers helping themselves through a network of mutual support"*  
- Kate Harris, farmer co-ordinator, EHFP.

## 740 Farmers & Land Managers

**Project Team**  
1.5 full time staff  
(2 project coordinators  
& admin support)

**Steering Group**  
11 local farmers

**Advisors**  
North Devon+  
and National Park  
Authority

**Access to Grants and Funding**

- South West Agricultural Resource Management (SWARM)
- Farming & Forestry Improvement Grant (FFIS)
- Moorland Management Fund (MMF)

**Exmoor Healthy Livestock Programme**

**Training and Skills Development**

- Programme of events with Duchy College & Rural Focus
- Study Tours

**Newsletter and e-bulletin**

**Mentoring Scheme**

**Facilitating Learning Groups**

- Women's Farming Group
- Forward Farming Group & Farm Business Programme



Catalysing farmers to maintain and enhance the special qualities of the Exmoor National Park whilst improving the viability of their livestock businesses.

The project facilitates training, extension and networking in order to improve the viability of farm businesses. Since 2009, the EHFP has delivered the following outputs:



The EHFP has also developed strong links with other organisations and been a key partner in developing new projects and initiatives of benefit to farmers:





sound, practical, realistic & confidential advice

Edward Richardson  
Farm Cornwall CIC  
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Business Centre  
Long Rock  
Penzance  
TR20 8HL

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Email: Edward@farmcornwall.co.uk  
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FarmCornwall Community Interest Company (CIC) has evolved from research originally undertaken in 2000 (Agriculture in Penwith) which clearly showed that many small family farms in West Cornwall faced significant economic challenges. In 2002 the 'Penwith Farming Forum' was set up as a 'not for profit' constituted group consisting of 5 farmers and two land agents. In June 2002 they employed a Farm Business and Rural Outreach Worker (FBA).

The role of the FBA was to assist farmers and their families in the Penwith area. Queries ranged from financial and debt advice, benefit and welfare advice, family support, off farm job opportunities and training. A Resource Centre was also set up to provide up to date information and free access to the internet. In 2011 the original group became a CIC. FarmCornwall provides a universal service to all farmers in West Cornwall and more widely by request. Its activities are limited by its resources.

*"They helped get my mind around things. Working alone you don't think of everything, only some things. They helped lengthen my season and I have to change my beef as it isn't making me any money."*  
- Godfrey, Farmer.

*"There was no one to help me with ELS scheme application – I may have missed the deadline without them."*  
- Michael, Farmer.



*"The project is very effective because it's delivering what people need to farmers and businesses who aren't able to or couldn't access the help they need"*

- Richard, FarmCornwall CIC Board Member

*"They give free advice not like other advisors that charge up to £80 an hour, there's so much paperwork in farming now...FarmCornwall reduces pressure on farmers"*

- Steve, Farmer.



## 400 farmers and stakeholders in the wider farming community

**Project Team**  
2 full time staff  
(Farm Business Adviser & Admin support)

**CIC Board**  
5 local farmers and 3 wider stakeholders

### Crisis Support

On farm help including negotiating with banks, landlords, suppliers etc. Exploring the options and likelihoods of various outcomes. Working with external partners to support the family including: sub letting, paid employment or negotiating with creditors.

### Farm Support

On farm advice and group meetings to build farmers capacity for change by ensuring that they are aware of best practice and regulation.

### Administration and Compliance

Includes: Single Farm Payment, Annual Statements, Tax and bank requirements. Although many farmers pay agents to undertake the work this service builds the capacity of the farmer to manage the issues themselves on a sustainable basis

### Farm Training

The Resource Centre gives farming families a single and first point of contact towards informal training. Bespoke group training events are also based on current issues facing the community.

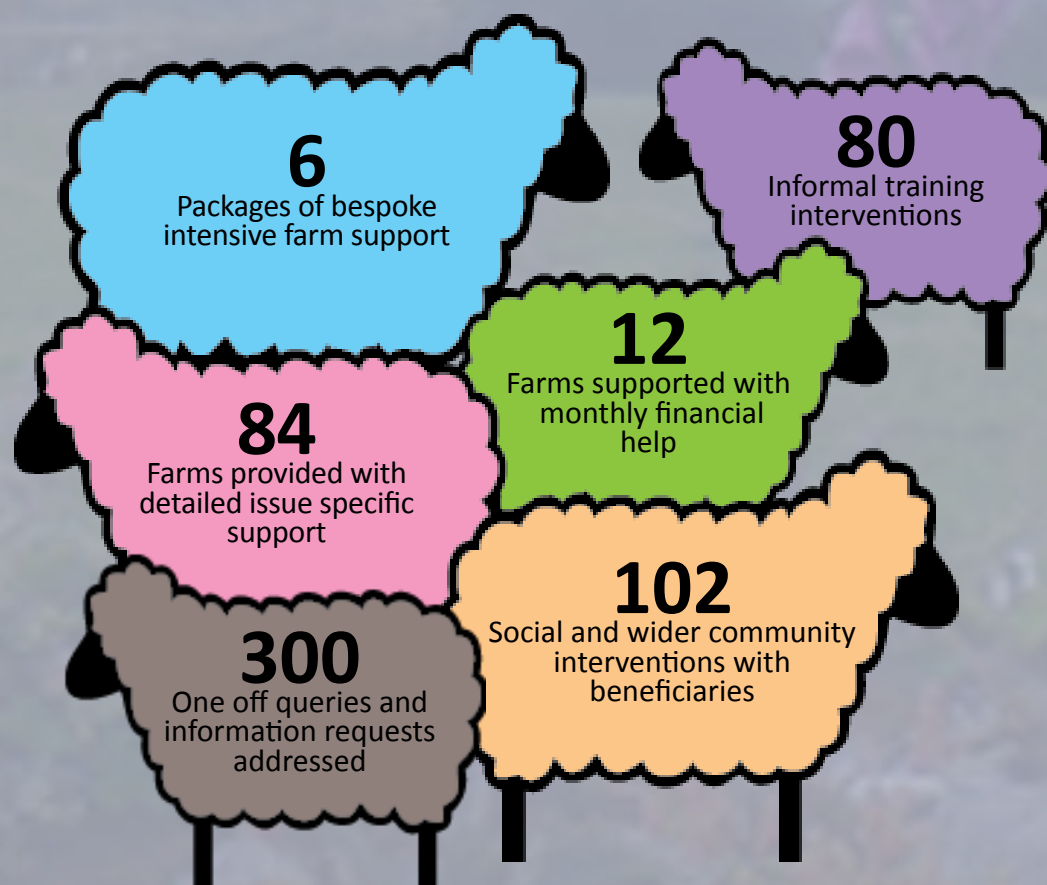
### Grant Funding

Helping farm businesses to maximise their efficiency and the utilisation of their assets (including through diversification) in identifying sources of grant support and helping with the development bids



An on-farm outreach service involving successful farmers and other intermediaries who govern it. Sustaining farmers in their communities, through a Farm Business Adviser, in West Cornwall.

Average annual outputs from FarmCornwall CIC are:



FarmCornwall CIC has also developed strong links with other organisations and been a key partner in developing new projects and initiatives of benefit to farmers:



Farm Business Adviser area expands to cover West Cornwall as a whole becoming FarmCornwall

2009

RDA closes. Second Leader grant to support the ongoing work of the organisation

2010

Organisation governance reshaped to become CIC

2011

New Business Plan developed to take the project forward. Consolidating current project portfolio

2013



# Upper Teesdale Agricultural Support Services

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Project Manager  
UTASS  
9-11 Chapel Row  
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Telephone: 01833 641010  
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Website: [www.utass.org](http://www.utass.org)  
Facebook: Utass Upper Teesdale

Upper Teesdale Agricultural Support Services (UTASS) is a community led organisation which began informally in 1993 after eight people committed suicide locally in a 6 month period. The project was originally managed by Durham Rural Community Council (DRCC) until 2002 when UTASS became an independent organisation and registered charity. UTASS provides support services for farmers, their families and wider communities across the Durham Dales; assisting them to combat stress, isolation and poverty. The charity aims to prevent problems from getting to the desperate stage. UTASS has an initial company membership fee of £1 and no other membership costs.

*"Without your help I simply wouldn't have managed the paperwork and my farm business would have gone under"*  
- Philip, Teesdale Farmer.

*"On behalf of all my family – I can't thank you lot enough for all the help you've given us. You've kept us going when we felt like packing in"*  
- John, Teesdale Farmer.



*"Working with UTASS has meant we can deliver advice to harder to reach clients and more isolated communities. The trust that UTASS has built up within the farming community has enabled people who have been reluctant in the past to seek help to feel happy to come to us. Working in the same building means we can easily pass on useful information about local initiatives, policy changes and welfare reforms"*  
- Tracey Wills, Teesdale Citizens Advice Bureau.

*"UTASS came to the Dale during difficult farming times - and like a good friend is always there to listen and help"*  
- Jean, Community Member

## 1700 Farmer and Community Members

### Staffing

1 Full Time Project Manager &  
8 Part Time staff

### Board

11 Trustees

### 7 Patrons

Farmer Briefings &  
Community Newsletters

Agricultural  
Secretary Work

Training

Topical Farmer  
Meetings

Youth Group

Chlamydia screening /  
condom distribution

Monitor Farms

Social Events

Provide Meeting  
Facilities

Lamb Bank, Sales &  
Wanted

School Visits to  
Auction Mart

Outreach / signposting

Use of Community  
Computers

Practical help completing and submitting  
complex paperwork

Support Agricultural Shows, Grazier Groups,  
Heritage Group & Farm Watch

Local people began meeting informally to try and address the problems in the community

1993

'Sources of Stress in Upper Teesdale' research project undertaken

1997

Durham Rural Community Council (DRCC) employ 3 part time project staff

2000

Foot and Mouth Disease struck - massive upscale

2001

Became a registered charity - independent of DRCC

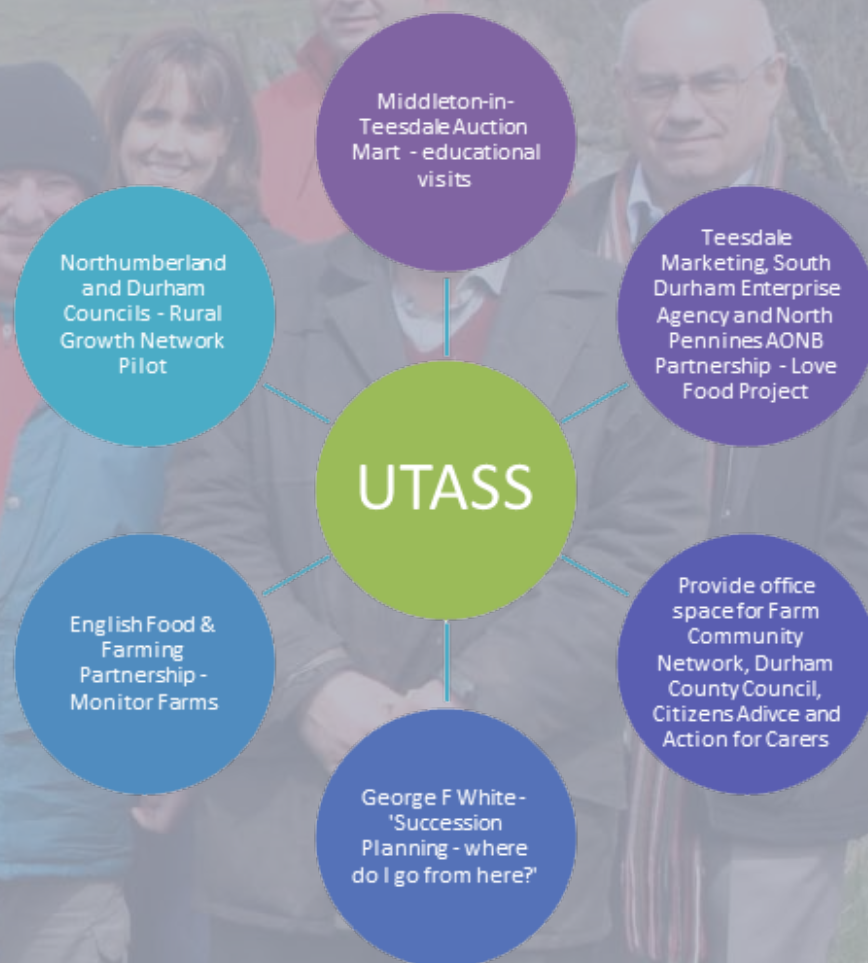
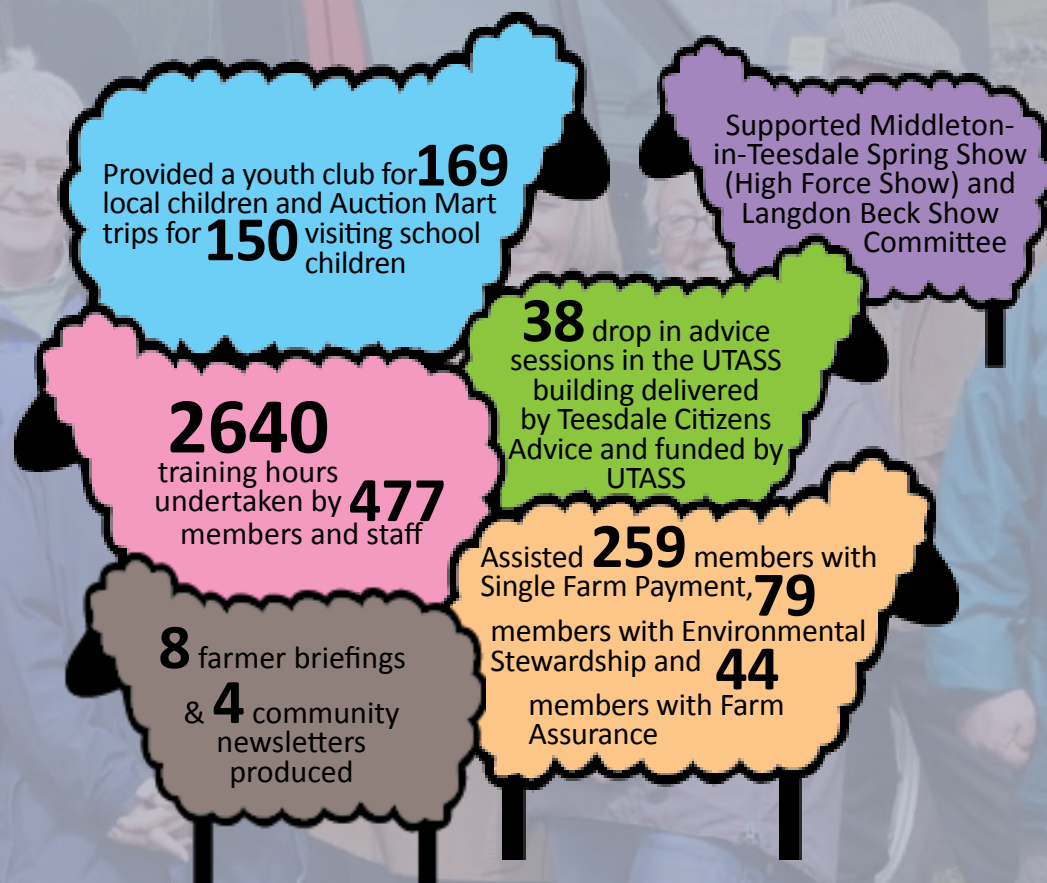
2002



A junction box - providing help and support whenever it is required by farmers, their families and the wider communities of the Durham Dales – that takes a truly holistic approach to rural community development.

Support is available from UTASS 24 hours per day, seven days a week throughout the entire year. In 2012, UTASS delivered the following activities for public benefit:

UTASS provides venue and outreach facilities for a range of agencies and organisations:





# Warwickshire Rural Hub

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Hub Co-ordinator  
Warwickshire Rural Hub CIC  
Arthur Rank Centre  
Stoneleigh Park  
Warwickshire  
CV8 2LG

Telephone: 024 76 858 242  
Email: [carrie@ruralhub.org.uk](mailto:carrie@ruralhub.org.uk)  
Website: [www.ruralhub.org.uk](http://www.ruralhub.org.uk)

The Hub was set up in October 2003 by a group of farmers who wanted to take control of their own destiny. Initially funded by the Rural Development Service and then later by Advantage West Midlands as one of five county wide hubs to promote the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) to potential applicants and facilitate collaborative working; in December 2011 the Warwickshire Rural Hub became an independent farmer-led Community Interest Company (CIC).

*"The hub has provided this gap for technical training that is needed. The soils group and other business groups are excellent. We are kept up to date on regulations and what is new in the industry"*

- Harry, Warwickshire Farmer.

*"Anyone can ask for a subject to be discussed and events are arranged around people's commitments. The networking that occurs is very important...being able to share experiences and knowledge"*

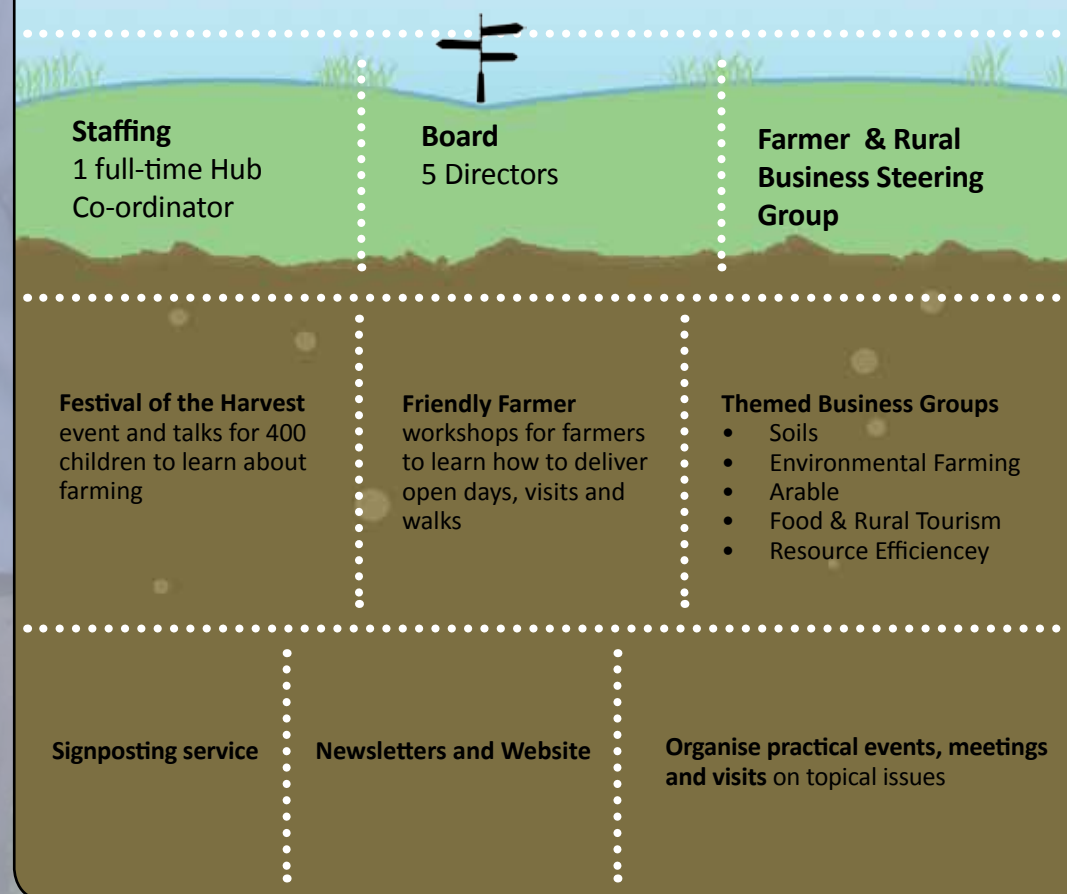
- Tom, Warwickshire farmer.



*"Partnership working is key. They provide so much fantastic support for me in delivering training and events...The breadth and field of knowledge and expertise that they can offer is very good. The people within the hub are very approachable, it works"*

- Melissa Hoskings, Upper Avon & Leam Catchment Advisor, Severn Rivers Trust.

## 1490 Farm and Rural Businesses



Hub started with support from the Rural Forum and Rural Development Service

2003

Begin delivering workshops & information to Hub members

2004

'Stimulating Rural Enterprise' project ends. Hub assists farmers and rural businesses to access £2.1 million over 3 years.

2005

The Hub welcomes its 1000th member

2007



An organisation led by farm and rural businesses across Warwickshire and Solihull – inspiring them to develop innovative, profitable and market-led enterprises.

The key objective of the Hub is to support farm and rural businesses to develop innovative, profitable and market-led enterprises. The Hub also supports those looking to diversify their farm business and membership is open to any rural business in the county. 1,100 members of the Hub are farmers.

Since 2009 the Hub has delivered the following outputs:



The Hub shares its experience and liaises with rural delivery networks in the locality and nationally, including:





# Anglia Farmers Limited

Anglia Farmers Limited  
Honingham Thorpe  
Colton  
Norwich  
NR9 5BZ

Telephone: 01603 881881  
Fax: 01603 881890  
Email: [info@angliafarmers.co.uk](mailto:info@angliafarmers.co.uk)  
Website: [www.angliafarmers.co.uk](http://www.angliafarmers.co.uk)

Formed from the merger of Mid Norfolk and Loddon Farmers in 2003, Anglia Farmers (AF) is the largest agricultural purchasing group in the UK with an asset base of £2 million and a turnover of £250 million. AF operates nationally from a purpose built office on the outskirts of Norwich. It is an Industrial and Provident Society with a board of 12 farmer directors and is funded by an annual membership fee and by a levy which is charged on every purchase.

## How AF operates

AF is a farm business one stop shop operating for all its members. The group operates as a central purchasing department for members, with 60 dedicated category specialists working with 1,700 suppliers:



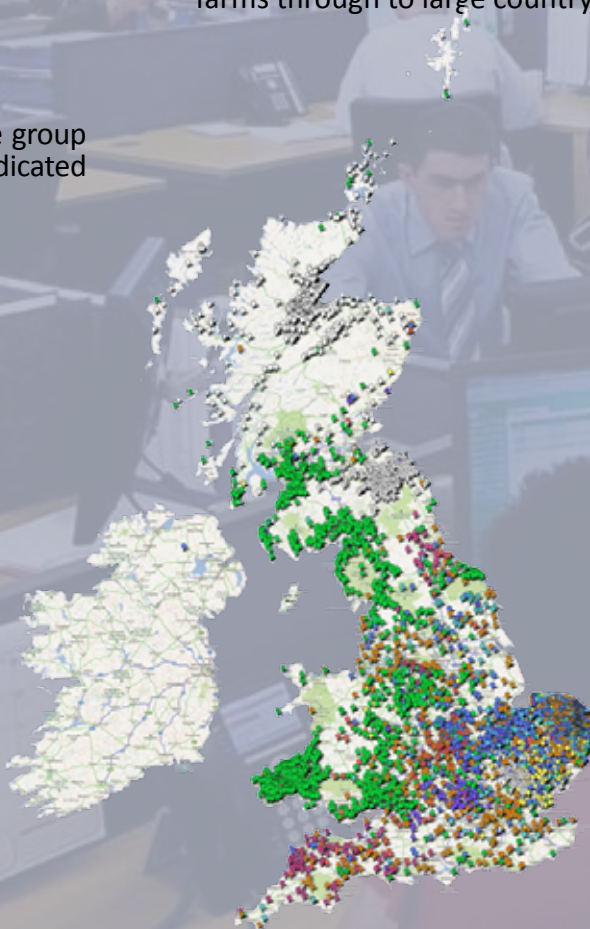
## Membership

AF has more than 3,500 shareholder members whom collectively farm more than one million hectares of land. Members range in size from small, family farms through to large country estates.

There are two levels of membership: (i) *full membership* – for businesses buying from major product groups such as agrochemicals, fertiliser, fuel and seed; and (ii) *associate membership* - for smaller farm businesses and those likely to spend less than £15,000 per annum on main farm inputs. Each member receives an annual membership card which can be used to place orders over the counter with AF suppliers.

Members can make significant savings on main farm inputs (e.g. average savings of 10-20% on animal health products, 15-20% on vehicles and 15% on insurance) as well as miscellaneous products such as stationery and building materials.

Members are encouraged to forward plan their requirements for farm inputs to enable AF to collate bulk orders and negotiate prices based upon accurate volumes:



*"Membership of AF gives us a way of buying a vast range of products utilising AF's buying power. You can speak to someone with knowledge in a particular field and know that they won't be led astray"* - Rob, Norfolk farmer.

*"Our £250 million buying power gives us tremendous negotiating strength whilst our philosophy continues to be service to our members. We are continually focused on translating our growth into real savings for our members"* - Clarke Willis, Chief Executive, AF Group.



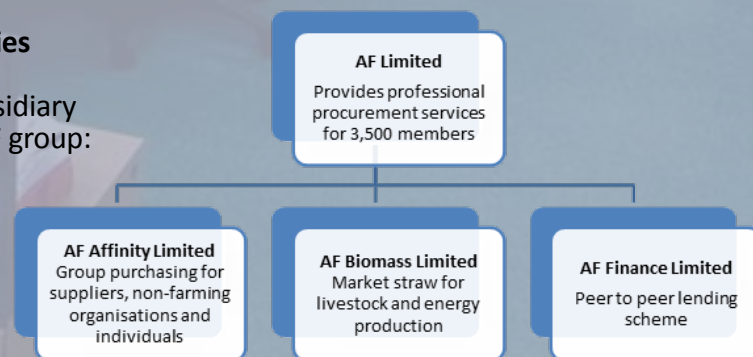
The largest and most successful farmer-owned agricultural purchasing co-operative in the UK. The professional team of staff provide members with services that in most businesses would be a pipe dream. AF's scale gives it the ability to change the way supply chains operate in a global world.

- Main farm inputs: AF sources 8% of the UK's agrochemicals and fertiliser.
- Fuel: AF purchases 1.5 million litres of bulk fuel a week generating typical savings of 1.5-4p per litre on gas and 3p per litre on kerosene. 2,400 Allstar Fuel Cards are used by AF members with a combined annual spend of £4.8 million.
- Communications: AF handles 14,000 mobile phone accounts, 2,500 fixed lines and 1,000 broadband accounts.
- Vehicles: AF procures 450 vehicles and £2 million tyres each year.
- Electricity: AF manages 5,650 sites.

In addition to helping members to make product savings, AF works in collaboration with a number of other farmer owned organisations. It provides bespoke packages for producers supplying Waitrose and Morrisons and provides the procurement services for First Milk through AFFM. AF facilitates Special Interest Groups covering, for example, Soil Management, BASIS, and an Estate Managers Forum where large farming businesses of more than 5,000 acres sharing common business challenges come together. AF organises an annual Supplier Conference (attracting 300 suppliers).

### Subsidiary Companies

There are three subsidiary companies in the AF group:



These subsidiary companies carry out trading that falls outside the scope of AF's core membership of farm businesses. For example, AF Affinity works with Norfolk Rural Community Council and InTouch Systems to provide wireless internet for homes in Norfolk and Waveney which lost out to the broadband postcode lottery. AF Affinity also provides procurement services to local businesses including The Norfolk Constabulary and a employee benefit scheme to 50 organisations.

AF organises the annual Norfolk Farming Conference and supports a number of charities such as Norfolk Young Farmers Club and You Are Not Alone (YANA). The AF Ag-Inflation Index has become an industry benchmark on input costs and Farm Conservation Limited, a not-for-profit organisation formed to continue the work of Norfolk Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG), operates as a separate charity. The 'EDGE' apprenticeship scheme, a joint venture that includes AF and AtlasFram Group, is encouraging farmers and agricultural employers across the East of England to take on 440 apprentices. EDGE is co-funded by £1.4 million investment from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) and is being delivered in conjunction with Easton and Otley College, New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils.

### Future directions

Since 2003 AF has experienced a decade of unprecedented growth in membership and geographical reach, by personal recommendation not direct advertising, yet the business model set up by Mid Norfolk and Loddon Farmers remains in place. The group continues to add new products and services to its extensive portfolio - in April 2013 launching the AF Health Trust, offering private medical insurance to members, their families and employees. AF aims to continue to grow to achieve even better purchasing power for its members, whilst maintaining the same high levels of service.

*"AF understands the product lines, the levels of buyer and caters for a huge scale and type of farmers... We value the AF service and relationship hugely"* - Jamie, Norfolk farmer.

*"We consider our relationship to AF to be an integral part of our wider agricultural sustainability programme. It helps our farmers to save money, become more efficient and, ultimately, build better, stronger farming businesses and deliver the best quality livestock, fish and produce for our customers"* - Heather Jenkins, Director of Agriculture, Waitrose.



A variety of social networks are emerging to help people in farming connect and share online. Although each network has its own distinctive community and purpose, all have a shared interest in the future of the farming industry. #AgriChatUK is an example of a network that is completely virtual with no offline activity.

#AgriChatUK began informally in March 2011 when the hash tag was created on Twitter. In March 2012 it was developed to provide a weekly two hour virtual discussion for anyone involved in or with an interest in farming to share ideas, discuss pressing issues, debate current topics and/or simply connect with people in the industry who they may otherwise not have access to.

## How #AgriChatUK operates

#AgriChatUK has six 'hosts', volunteers who take it in turns to organise and run the weekly discussions. With backgrounds in farming, technology, journalism, academia and legal services – each host selects a topic (from suggestions made by followers), recruits a panel of up to 4 recognised professionals in that field and facilitates the discussion. Panel members and followers then ask and/or answer questions by posting text messages of up to 140 characters known as tweets.

#AgriChatUK weekly online discussions			
<b>Technical Advice</b> innovation, precision farming, diversification	<b>Policy and Regulation</b> Single Farm Payment, the future of upland farming, Levy Boards	<b>Environment</b> climate change, renewable energy, wildlife	<b>Community</b> road safety, Open Farm Sunday, mental health

## What #AgriChatUK delivers

#AgriChatUK provides an important platform for addressing isolation as farmers can join the discussion and tweet from anywhere. Between March 2012 and March 2013, #AgriChatUK has:

- Hosted 56 online discussions – with topics covering all aspects of farming from field to plate.
- 80-100 people participate in each discussion and post, on average, 575 tweets. The most popular discussions have included: mental health (130 people participated, tweeting 1,158 times to an audience of 173,000 people); farming and the barriers to entry (175 people posting 1077 tweets) and the future of the uplands (106 people tweeting 737 times).
- Become a trusted intermediary – with discussion topics suggested by the organisers of Open Farm Sunday, Defra's 'future of farming group' and National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs.
- More than 8,000 people follow the #AgriChatUK hash tag.
- Become the UK's largest weekly farming discussion on Twitter.

For farmer users, #AgriChatUK provides opportunities for them to share their experiences and stories with each other while at the same time interacting with policy and decision makers, support organisations and the (non-farming) public.

Although the discussions take place in 'real time', the project has a dedicated website which the hosts use to post the discussions as well as farm pictures, testimonials and Farming Hall of Fame (recognising people who have made outstanding contributions to the industry). The hosts also work with Farmers Weekly, the NFU and RuSource to disseminate the discussions.

## Future directions

#AgriChatUK is creating a repository of information and professional data for followers and people interested in farming. This new virtual network is not only providing knowledge to benefit farm businesses but also providing farmers with a platform to educate people about growing food. The hosts are seeking to identify and map these economic and social outcomes.

*"I believe that social networking is key to spreading messages about farming and giving farmers a voice to say what and why they do it. #AgriChatUK on Twitter is a brilliant medium to do just that, leading to social interaction beyond UK borders and connecting everyone else who is interested in food, farming and the environment"* - Adam Bedford, host #AgriChatUK.

*"Twitter is a great way for people linked to international food production to bring their ideas together...a powerful tool for all of us"*  
- Stuart, farmer in Buckinghamshire



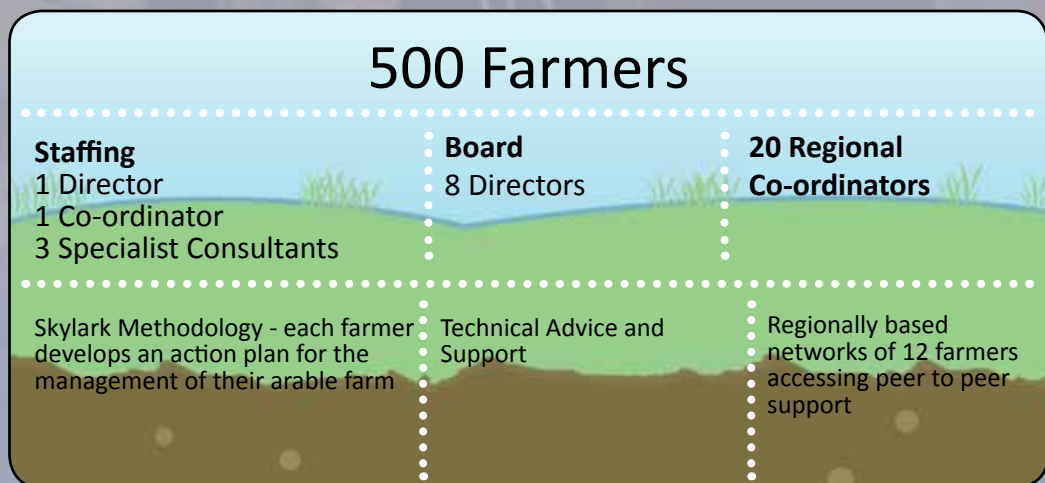
# Veldleeuwerik: The Skylark Foundation

In the Skylark Foundation, arable farmers, agricultural merchants and food processing industries work together. The three core activities of the Foundation are: stimulating sustainable production, facilitating the organisation of sustainable supply chains and “restoring” the social context of the relationship between food producers and consumers

Website: [www.veldleeuwerik.nl](http://www.veldleeuwerik.nl)

The Skylark Foundation comprises arable farmers and food processors working together to improve sustainable arable farming. Each farmer member develops a sustainability plan. The Plan positions the farmer and his activities against 10 key indicators as a framework for sustainable farming. These indicators are: Product Value, Soil Fertility, Soil Loss, Nutrients, Crop Protection, Water, Energy, Biodiversity, Human Capital and Local Economy. The farmer then works with consultants, where required, and with a group of peers, organised in regional clusters, to implement and refine the Plan. Each network is convened and facilitated by a local co-ordinator.

The network began in 2002, initially in Fleavoland, with a network of 12 farmers. It now has 30 local networks operating across the Netherlands. It is based on farmers realising a long term vision for the development of their farm business – over a typical time period of 20 years – but also recognises the need to increase the short term profitability of farms by reducing costs and implementing best practice. In common with a number of the English networks identified the Local Economy element of the plan considers and seeks to maximise the beneficial impact of the plan on the local economy – considering issues such as local employment, farm diversification and local purchasing.



*“Using the Skylark methodology, the present situation of the farm and the quality of the soil is mapped. This mapping is the basis for regional group discussions on how to improve. This leads not just to putting ambitions into plans, but it also delivers incentives to make and conduct yearly actions”* – Richard, Farmer

*“We are proud that Skylark adopted the ten indicators for sustainable arable farming Unilever developed and uses. We see great opportunities to start Skylark initiatives together with our suppliers and peer companies in other regions, also outside the Netherlands.”* - Sikke Meerman, Food Industry Member Unilever

## Social Return On Investment

Using a Social Return On Investment (SROI) approach, we have been able to ascribe values to the wider social impacts of Farmer Networks. We have taken three examples which demonstrate the broader community benefits that Farmer Networks deliver. A similar approach can be applied across the activities of all the networks, demonstrating the considerable value of their impact. SROI is a methodology supported by the Cabinet Office. It measures social, environmental and economic outcomes and uses monetary values to represent them. This enables a ratio of 'benefits to costs' to be calculated.

Our examples are: the *Hill Farm Succession Scheme* (which has helped engage young people in Cumbria with Hill Farming), the *Exmoor Women's Farming Group* (a networking, information and social group for ladies on Exmoor involved in farming in some way) and *Middleton-in-Teesdale Auction Mart* (the construction of a new community facility on the site).

We have considered the costs of setting each project up and the key outcomes

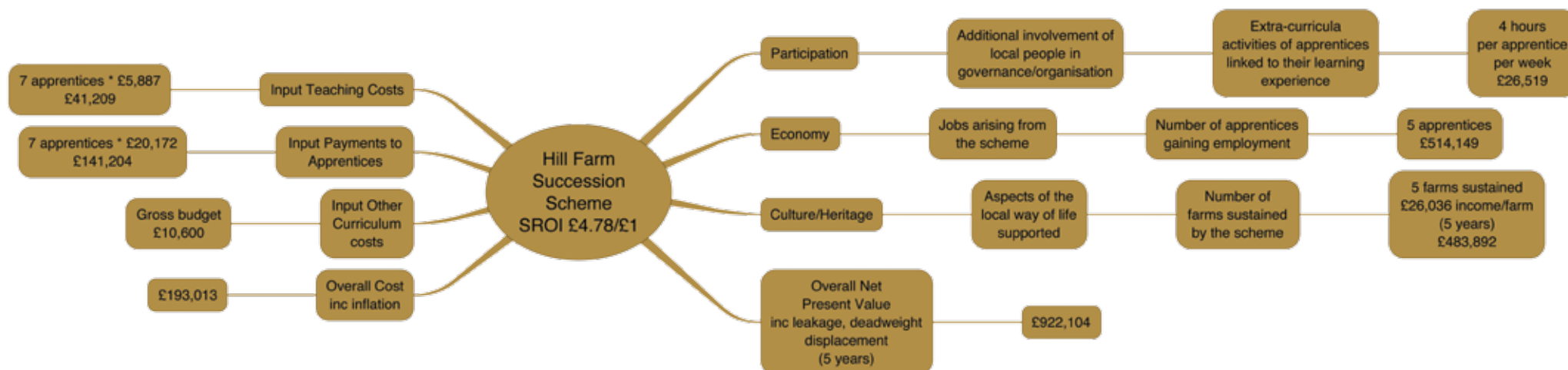
which it has delivered. We have identified an indicator for each outcome (and in conjunction with those involved in each project) developed a value for that outcome. We have taken account of deadweight, displacement and leakage and projected the duration of the outcomes over time to derive a real term (2013) value for the outcomes achieved.

Our case studies deliver the following SROI:

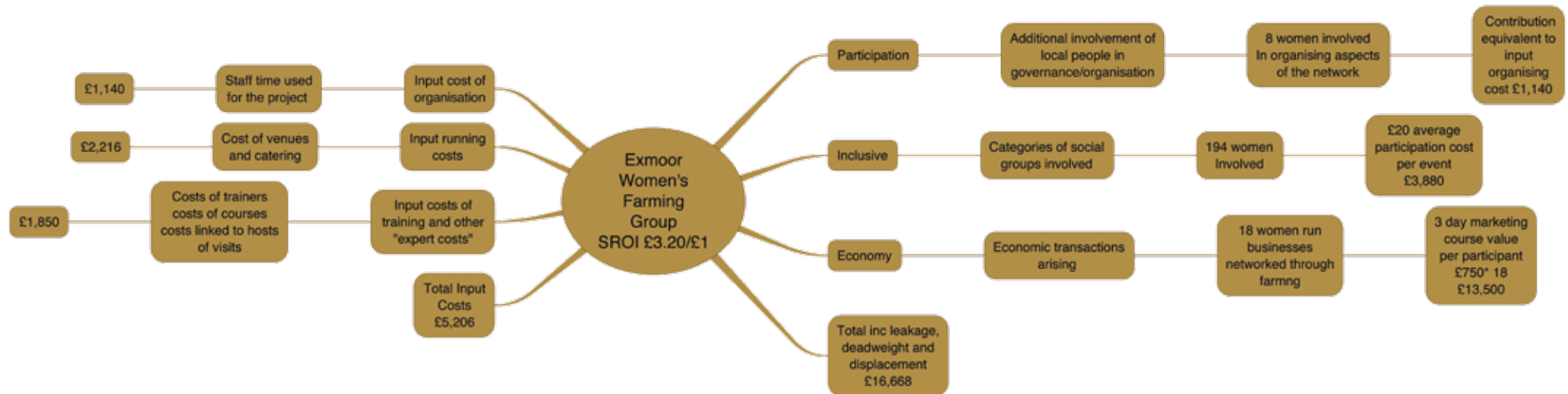
- *The Hill Farm Succession Scheme* (over 2 years but with an impact which sustains farms over 3 years): £4.78 for each £1 invested.
- *Exmoor Women's Farming Group* (projected over the first year of its operation): £3.20 for each £1 invested.
- *Middleton-in-Teesdale Auction Mart* (a capital project over 10 years): £3.06 for every £1 invested.

The diagrams which follow set out our approach in more detail.

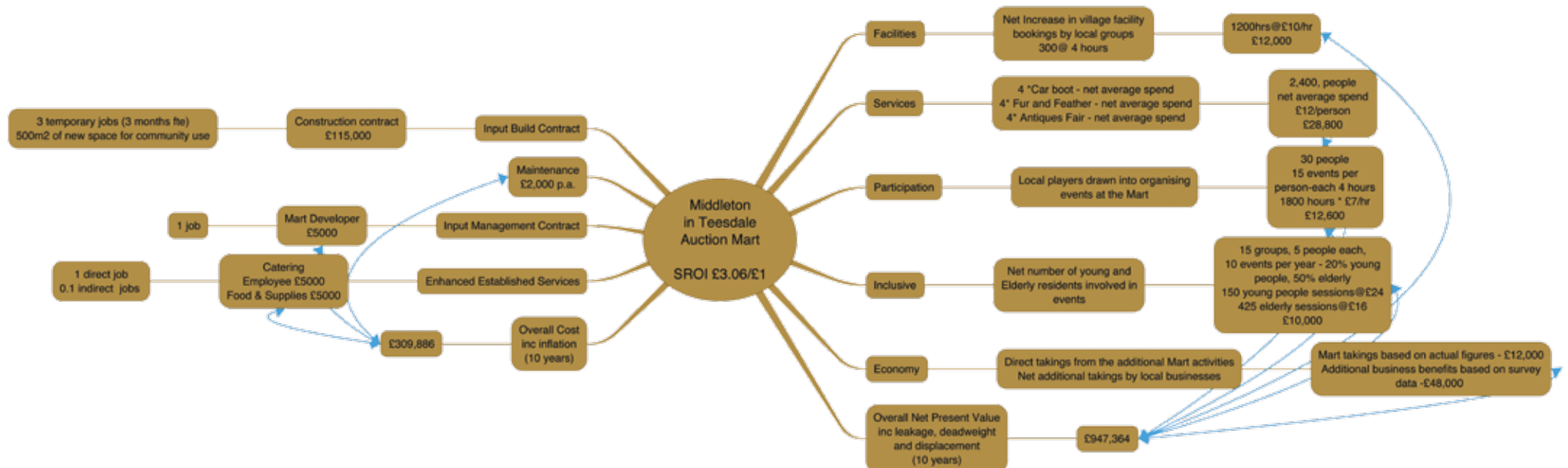
### Hill Farm Succession Scheme SROI £4.78/£1



## Exmoor Women's Farming SROI £3.20/£1



## Middleton-in-Teesdale Auction Mart SROI £3.06/£1





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## Broader Return on Investment

All core Farmer Network Ltd have made progress at different levels towards achieving financial independence. The table below sets out this ‘journey’ from the perspective of the Farmer Network. It illustrates what is possible in terms of network development and that whilst there is an ongoing challenge to keep Farmer Networks viable even in difficult financial times a combination of project funding, membership income (which is particularly crucial to the financial viability) and commercial income can be achieved to enable this to happen.

### Example: The Farmer Network Ltd

	2002- 2006	Jun/Aug 2006 - Aug 2007	Sept 2007 - Aug 2008	Sept 2008 - Aug 2009	Sept 2009 - Aug 2011	Sept 2010 - Aug 2011	Sept 2011 - Aug 2012	Totals
Public Expenditure								
Rural Futures Project (Rural Expertise Scheme)	720,000							720,000
Yorkshire Dales LEADER Programme + YDNP Sustainable Development Fund					17,829	21,521		39,350
								759,350
Income								
Membership/private sponsorship		36,055	20,668	30,804	40,323	32,400	34,953	195,203
Charitable Foundations to cover set up costs		52,450	23,550					76,000
Charitable Foundations/private sector income (including farmer contributions) to pay for projects requested by members		2,280	20,226	26,797	7,763	76,424	174,544	308,034
Public sector income to pay for projects requested by members		93,013	46,680	18,159	6,405	40,982	136,345	341,583
Private sector income to pay share of public projects requested by members		23,276		5,811	6,405	18,528	51,319	105,337
Public sector income to run projects that have been tendered for and would have been done by others if we were not successful		13,438	7,606	23,274	55,272	93,525	71,915	265,030
Commercial income (sales of videos, farmers payments for commercial activity, consultancy etc)		3,346	27,154	16,106	25,898	28,133	21,309	121,946
		223,857	145,884	120,950	142,065	289,992	490,385	1,413,133
Annual income received to benefit farmers that would not have taken place without the existence of the Farmer Network Ltd (public and private)		210,419	138,278	97,676	86,793	196,467	418,470	
Current value of receiving £200k/year for 20 further years at 3%							2,976,000	

This table demonstrates how, for an initial investment by the public purse of £759,350, the return on investment to the community has been targeted at around £3million (or for every £1 invested, the economic return is £3.95 - over 20 years assuming a 3% interest rate).

## Conclusion

Networks make a significant difference to the viability of farmers. This report identifies the characteristics of holistic Farmer Networks. Through a process of brokering collaboration, these networks make both farmers in particular and their communities in general more sustainable. Farmer Networks deliver potentially powerful outcomes in Areas Facing Natural Constraints and upland communities. The secret of their success involves getting farmers to build their self confidence and capacity by working together with their peers to tackle common challenges. Once up and running, Farmer Networks deliver a significant return on investment to both their members and the public purse. We have identified three examples in this report and to illustrate this Social Return On Investment. These examples demonstrate that for every £1 invested, there is a £3/400% return to the community.

Farmer Networks have arisen organically and/or as a crisis response. Significant benefits can be achieved however for rural communities where Farmer Networks are encouraged. Developing Farmer Networks takes 5-7 years in the experience of those networks we have identified. The key justification for considering the provision of support to facilitate more Farmer Networks is that they make the areas in which they are based more resilient. They achieve this through building collective endeavour and freeing up the creative potential of individual farmers. In a consideration of how the 6 priorities set out in the post 2014 Rural Development Regulation can be achieved, Farmer Networks offer one potentially powerful part of the way forward. This is particularly true in the context of Areas Facing Natural Constraints and upland environments where farmers are hardest pressed economically and can perhaps gain most from working together.

To be successful Farmer Networks have to be farmer 'owned' and governed. Whilst they need initial facilitation, Farmer Networks will only become embedded if farmers are encouraged to 'take the reins' at the earliest possible opportunity. Farmer Networks will only work effectively if they have enough start up resource to offer a sustained and professional service to their members. Over time, however, the good news is that Farmer Networks have the potential to become self-sustaining. Farmer Networks are not simply an English phenomenon; we have identified a Dutch example (Veldleeuwerik/The Skylark Foundation) which demonstrates their wider impact and utility.

The key phases in the life of a farmer network can be interpreted against a number of benchmarks set out in this report. The case studies we have provided offer the scope for those interested in Farmer Networks to learn from the direct experience of established networks. The time is ripe - in the current transition to a new era in the context of the European Rural Development Regulation and in view of the domestic economic challenges facing farmers - to embrace Farmer Networks. This should be done because of their ability to address the challenges facing farming communities, particularly in upland areas.

## Recommendations

1. Upland policy in relation to rural development should incorporate the establishment of Farmer Networks in Areas Facing Natural Constraints as a means of building their resilience.
2. Established Farmer Networks should be recognised nationally and promoted as examples of good practice in addressing the challenges facing farmers.
3. More work should be commissioned to capture further international examples of good practice in relation to Farmer Networks. This will build the positive bank of knowledge about the potential to deliver resilience for farmers and their communities through networking.
4. The particular affinity between the Leader approach and Farmer Networks in the context of rural development should be acknowledged. New Leader areas should be encouraged to think about the development of Farmer Networks as a particularly powerful response to the challenges they are seeking to address.
5. An annual symposium of Farmer Networks, based on sharing and disseminating good practice, should be established and supported. This would help drive 'super networking' amongst Farmer Networks as a group and build their capacity. This should have an international dimension.
6. A central point for the collection of information on Farmer Networks, supporting their establishment and disseminating their good practice should be established.
7. Farmer Networks need encouraging as they both offer solutions to address farm poverty and support entrepreneurial farmers to help grow the rural economy.



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