

Engaging 'Harder to Reach' stakeholders for post-Brexit Agri-Environmental Policy



Post-Brexit, English agricultural policy will put an emphasis on environmental well-being by paying farmers for delivery of “public goods” in the new Environmental Land Management scheme (ELM). For ELM to be successful and achieve environmental aims Defra must engage a variety of stakeholders including those that are ‘harder to reach’ and typically have little engagement with Defra. This summary report discusses ‘harder to reach’ farmers and land managers and provides recommendations to increase their engagement in ELM ‘co-design’ and uptake.

Background

Under the European Union Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), farmers and land managers in England receive around **€2.5 billion** in annual subsidies¹. In the new post-Brexit Agricultural policy, farmers and land managers will no longer receive payments based on how much land they have, but instead on how they manage their land and environment.

The new Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme in England will reward farmers and land managers with public money for the provision of public goods¹ including:

- clean air and water
- protection from environmental hazards
- mitigation of climate change
- thriving plants and wildlife
- beauty, access, and heritage

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has committed to co-designing the new ELM scheme with farmers and land managers so they can have their say about how the scheme works. ‘Co-

Overview

- Defra aim to ‘co-design’ the Environmental Land Management scheme to ensure it works for farmers and land managers
- For co-design to be effective Defra must understand the stakeholder landscape including farmers and land managers that are ‘harder to reach’
- Farmers can be ‘harder to reach’, due to negative experiences and lack of trust in government, as well as other practical, attitudinal, and personal barriers
- To increase engagement, Defra must understand the concerns and objectives of ‘harder to reach’ farmers and apply solutions to making engagement easier
- Solutions to engaging with ‘harder to reach’ include: using multiple communication channels, choosing suitable times, reducing ‘red tape’, investing in rural broadband and technology, providing free accessible advice and communicating incentives effectively

design’ aims to ensure that ELM works for farmers, land managers as well as government, taxpayers, and the environment².

Defra wants **82,500 holdings** to participate in the new ELM scheme¹, therefore widespread engagement in both the co-design and uptake of ELM is important. However, research shows that often within policy and outreach activities there is an **overrepresentation of ‘usual suspects’** - individuals that are more engaged and in contact with government and extension services, and an **underrepresentation of individuals that are ‘harder to reach’^{3,4,5} (HTR)** (Box 1).

This summary presents findings from the project ‘Inclusive design of post-Brexit Agri-Environmental policy: Identifying and engaging the ‘harder to reach’ stakeholders’, funded by The University of Sheffield QR Allocation for Evidence-Based Policy-Making and in collaboration with the Universities of Sheffield and

Box 1. What is meant by 'harder to reach'?

- 'Harder to Reach' (HTR) has been used to describe people that are difficult to contact/engage with and often omitted from research and policy^{3,4}
- HTR are often left out because they are said to require more time and resources to engage with
- Not engaging with HTR individuals will lead to bias in the data and an overrepresentation of 'usual suspects'³
- This can negatively impact those that are HTR, as they are underrepresented and underserved by extension services as well as wider research and policy aims^{3,4}
- The term 'Harder to Reach' has received criticisms as it can lead to generalisations, stigma, and prejudice⁵
- In this report 'harder to reach' is used as an adjective (rather than a noun or fixed term), to describe farmers and land managers that have little engagement with Defra.

Reading. Using empirical data in the form of interviews and workshops⁶, and a literature review⁷, the study explored why some land managers (focussing on farmers) may be 'harder to reach', who they are and how can Defra improve their outreach to increase engagement and ensure an inclusive co-design of ELM. As agricultural policy is a devolved issue, this research concerns English farmers and changes to English agricultural policy, however the devolved administrations are pursuing their own forms of ELM.

Why are some farmers 'harder to reach'?

The literature and interviews identified key barriers to engaging with HTR farmers. Understanding these barriers can help to providing solutions to improving communication and engagement.

Lack of time

Many farmers are "*too busy*"⁸ to dedicate time and emotional energy to engage especially in activities such as consultations, discussion groups or farm walks. This is particularly prevalent in part-time farmers and those that commit themselves to off-farm work as another source of income⁹.

Policy and bureaucracy

When farmers do engage with extension services, often it is to discuss short-term advice in relation to the application of subsidy schemes^{9,10}. Previous agricultural schemes have been complex and require a considerable amount of time in application and administration. Farmers seeking advice on paperwork requirements do so at the expense of seeking advice about longer term farm and business development¹⁰. Complex administration and lack of consistency with the agricultural policy and schemes makes it off putting to many farmers¹¹.

Digital divide

Various co-design activities run online, and most schemes require online paperwork in order to participate. However, within the UK there is still a significant 'Digital Divide' – a disparity between those that have access to good broadband and technology and those that don't¹². Many farmers have poor broadband. This makes engagement difficult for them, especially when government use a 'digital by default' approach^{6,13}.

Geographical factors

Technology and broadband limitations are more apparent for remote and rural areas for example in the North East of England which has the highest population of internet non-users and 4G no spots¹⁴. Farmers in remote locations are also more likely to find participating in social events, organisational networks, and co-design activities more difficult^{11,15}.

Lack of social capital

'Social capital' - the networks and relationships you have, can be a great benefit not only on a personal level but also on a practical one¹¹. Farmers with higher social capital can learn from others, gain opportunities, collaborate and be exposed to new ideas more easily¹¹. Those that lack social capital have fewer support networks, less likely to learn from their peers and have fewer opportunities to engage and be influenced by government and other external organisations^{11,15}. They will be less likely to know about or be invited to co-design activities and will often lack the motivation to engage outside of their remit.

Trust

Strong trusting relationships have been shown to be an important factor in the effective delivery of agri-environmental schemes^{16,17,18}. Trust can increase the adherence to sustainable norms of land management and increase the ability of farmer collaboration in achieving environmental goals and delivery of 'public goods'^{19,20}. Individuals that are HTR may lack these trusting relationships, whether with local farmers whom they could collaborate with, or Defra themselves⁹. Previous negative experience with agri-environmental schemes or Defra can cause a general distrust or "*natural suspicion*"⁶ which decreases the likelihood an individual will engage with them. These feelings can be caused by penalties for bad paperwork, failing inspections or receiving scheme payments late⁶.

Low income

As mentioned previously some farmers don't have the time to commit to co-design or participation in schemes like ELM. For some this will be because they are on very low income or are subsistence farmers that are simply '*find[ing] ways to survive*'⁶. These farmers are more likely to be socially isolated, creating both mental and practical barriers to engaging with

peers or organisations¹¹. Some farmers may have a 'present bias' when viewing cost-benefits of schemes, i.e. they put a disproportionate weight on immediate costs over future benefits^{21,22}. They may be more concerned with a decreased revenue associated with reduced yields, than the future benefits of scheme payments²².

Age

Interviews with farm advisors, farm networks and other stakeholders found that age was a common factor that reduced farmers engagement and made them HTR, stating that they are "less inclined to change"⁶ or "don't have the energy or time to engage"⁶ and want to slow down on the farm rather than participate with new schemes and development.

Farm type

The literature highlighted that smaller farms with less resources are potentially at greater risk of adopting new schemes and are generally less likely to adopt new innovations and more likely to be HTR^{23,24}. Hobby farmers, smallholders as well as other farms such as pig, poultry and horticulture may also be HTR because they have not previously been involved with subsidies like the Basic Payment Scheme or previous Agri-Environmental schemes in the CAP^{6,25}.

Disabilities

Senior farming advisors raised concerns and potential impact of learning disabilities on some farmers' ability to engage with co-design activities and agri-environmental schemes⁶. They highlighted research showing increased levels of dyslexia and autism within the agriculture sector⁶.

Who are the 'harder to reach' farmers?

From this research, no clear data or literature was found that could indicate specifically who or how many farmers are HTR. The literature review repeatedly referenced part-time and older farmers, or smaller and remote farms as those that might find it more difficult to engage and have their voices heard⁷. From the empirical research and interviews stakeholders indicated that **HTR farmers** could include anywhere between **5% to 70%** of the agricultural sector⁶.

Using insight from the literature and the information gained from interviews this study developed ten characterisations of farmers that may be HTR for a combination of reasons (Box 2). These categories are only a guide to understanding the concerns and attitudes of farmers, in order to recommend improvements to engagement and co-design of ELM. Typologies are based on assumptions and generalisations and therefore should be used with caution.

Box 2. Farmers that may be 'harder to reach' and their views towards ELM

THE PROUD AND INDEPENDENT	THE BUSY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Proud and Independent - <i>insulted by ELM</i> ▪ Busy - <i>no time to find out about ELM</i>
THE TIRED, OVERWHELMED AND REACTIVE	THE BPS NON-CLAIMANT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tired, Overwhelmed and Reactive - <i>no time to think about ELM</i> ▪ BPS Non-Claimant - <i>doesn't know about ELM</i>
THE HOBBY FARMER	THE RESENTFUL AND SUSPICIOUS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hobby Farmer - <i>doesn't need ELM</i> ▪ Resentful and Suspicious - <i>don't trust Defra</i>
THE ACTIVE AVOIDER	THE ISOLATED AND BLISSFULLY UNAWARE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Isolated, and Blissfully Unaware - <i>have their head in the sand</i> ▪ Poor Subsistence Farmer - <i>struggling to carry on</i>
THE POOR SUBSISTENCE FARMER	THE FARMER AT BREAKING POINT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Farmer at Breaking Point - <i>can't carry on</i>

How can 'harder to reach' be engaged in ELM?

Based on the literature and interviews, recommendations were made to improve the engagement of HTR farmers in ELM co-design activities and ELM participation and these are summarised in Box 3. Whilst the research focussed more heavily on farmers, these recommendations could also be applicable to other land managers.

Make engagement easy and worthwhile

Benefits of farmers participating in ELM co-design and uptake need to be communicated effectively especially to HTR farmers. These should incorporate the particular benefits and objectives of the farmer not just wider policy objectives like 'public goods'. Co-design needs to be an open process where farmers are listened to and Defra need to communicate how farmers have influenced policy design or reasons why particular views have not been considered.

Offline options and improve connectivity/ ICT

Decrease the 'digital divide' by investing in rural broadband and connectivity, whilst supporting farmers who cannot afford ICT equipment. In addition, advice and training may be needed for some farmers to develop skills in IT. As well as investment in technology, non-digital options for engagement e.g 'paper copies', are necessary for farmers that do not currently have online access or prefer offline systems.

Reduce bureaucracy, be accessible

Co-design activities such as workshops and consultations should be delivered in accessible places and at suitable times for farmers and the farming calendar. To reduce difficulty of ELM application Defra

should create accessible guides to ensure clarity with forms and rules of ELM. For those unable to complete administration, support should be available.

Use skilled intermediaries

Collaborating with different groups, organisations, and individuals that farmers trust is likely to increase engagement^{26,27}. Interviewees highlighted several supporters that farmers may trust and prefer to engage with over Defra:

- charities
- fellow farmers
- rural church
- agronomists
- vets
- bank managers
- national park rangers

Farm advisers need strong, interpersonal skills and experience with agri-environment issues. To increase accessibility, they should preferably be paid for by Defra and be encouraged to commit to the position long term to develop a relationship with farmers. Those specifically advising on delivery of ELM also need sufficient ecological skills and an understanding of local context.

Pay farmers promptly

Interviewees highlighted that previous experience with poorly managed schemes and late payments reduced farmers trust in the system and put them off engaging in the future. Delivery of ELM needs to be well-managed and ensure payments are delivered correctly and on time.

Ensure transitions to the new scheme are well-managed

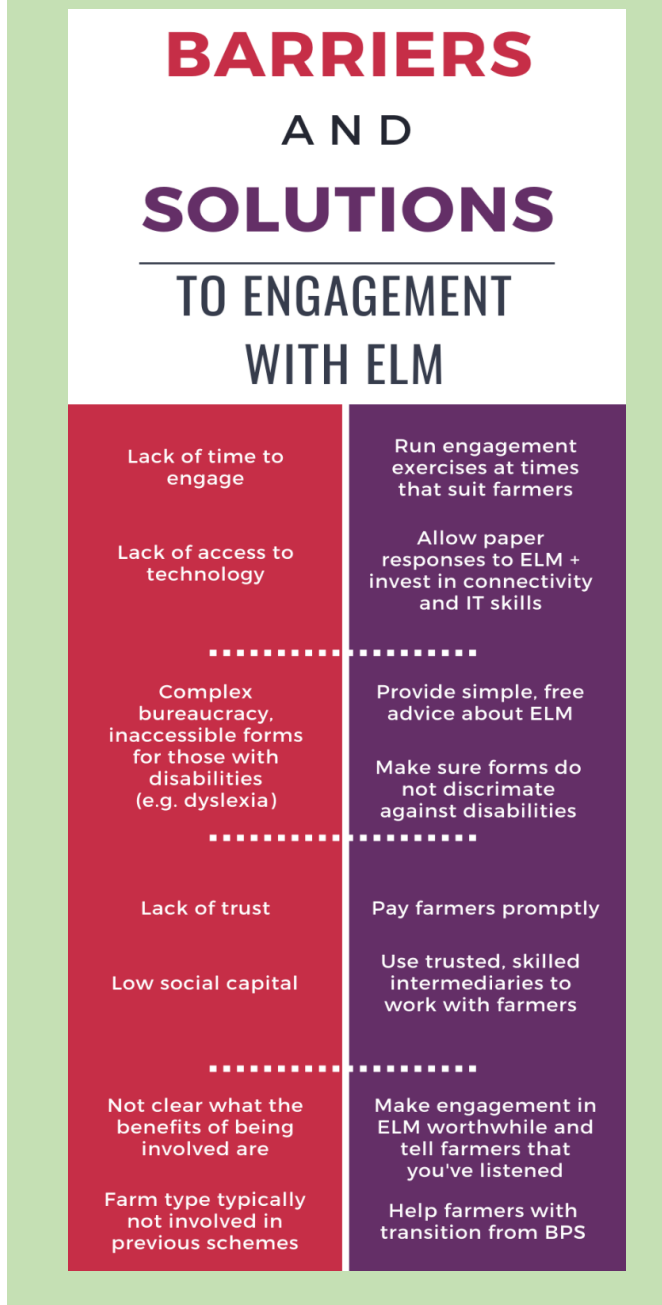
The qualitative research showed that some farmers will find it difficult to transition from the previous system of subsidies, the Basic Payment Scheme, to the new system ELM. Farmers have previously had negative experiences with adopting such schemes early; suffering from teething problems that arose. ELM may suffer from initial low engagement as some farmers rather wait until ELM is running smoothly.

Defra are currently undertaking 'tests and trials' to inform a pilot scheme of ELM that will be delivered in 2021¹. A gradual transition informed by 'test and trials' will likely reduce potential teething issues; however, Defra need to be mindful of individuals that may require more support than others as through the transition.

Conclusion

This research developed a greater understanding of HTR farmers. HTR farmers have an assortment of reasons for reducing their engagement with government and policy processes. These barriers can be practical, attitudinal, and personal, but can also be a result of previous negative experiences and a lack of

Box 3. Barriers and Solutions to engaging 'harder to reach' farmers with ELM



a trusting relationship between themselves and government.

Farmers that may be HTR for Defra in the co-design and uptake of ELM could represent a substantial portion of the agriculture sector and therefore effort must be made to incorporate solutions that will make engagement easier and worthwhile. Defra have acknowledged some of the key issues raised in this study in their most recent ELM Policy discussion document¹. If they continue to commit resources to understanding and accommodating the concerns of the HTR farmers and land managers, it is likely that a more representative co-design could be achieved. An inclusive co-design will lead to a successful ELM that meets the objectives of a variety of farmers and land managers, increasing the likelihood of uptake and participation in ELM, and in turn leading to a greater delivery of public goods.

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