



# Engaging ‘harder to reach’ farmers: the roles and needs of skilled intermediaries

## Research summary

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# Overview of the research

## Background

This report presents the high-level findings of research led by the University of Sheffield in collaboration with the University of Reading. The research focused on **engaging 'harder to reach' (HTR) farmers in policy design and delivery**. It outlines the role of skilled intermediaries in supporting farmers throughout the post-Brexit agricultural transition, as well as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on farmer engagement.

The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) is currently moving towards piloting and rolling out environmental land management schemes (ELM), starting with the Sustainable Farming Incentive and followed by Local Nature Recovery and Landscape Recovery. Recognising the importance of utilising farmers' experiential knowledge in policy development, Defra has committed to engaging farmers and other land managers in the 'co-design' of the new schemes.<sup>1</sup>

For the successful delivery of ELM, it is vital that farmers who have traditionally been HTR (or 'easy to omit') for Defra and the wider Defra group are included in the co-design and piloting of the new schemes. This will ensure that policy developed fits within farmers' contexts and needs.<sup>2</sup>

This research builds on work carried out in 2020 about HTR farmers and the potential barriers to their engagement in policy development.<sup>3,4</sup>

The new research findings highlight the diversity of business factors and emotional states that make some farmers HTR for Defra, as well as the challenging policy context within which engagement with HTR farmers takes place. The findings also emphasise the important role of locally-embedded skilled intermediaries in helping Defra engage HTR farmers throughout the co-design and delivery of ELM.

Insights from the 2021 round of interviews informed the development of ten key recommendations for Defra, which are presented at the end of this research summary. More detail on the methodology and findings from this research will be available in the full report.

'In most instances, [government] agencies have to admit that we're probably not always the best-equipped entities to reach some people, and that's okay. Instead, we have to figure out who can reach them or who has the most access to them, and that usually means people who are living and working alongside them.' ~ Shiffer, 2016 <sup>5</sup>



## Research aims and objectives

The aim of this project was to **identify how Defra can secure additional embedded resources – skilled intermediaries – to effectively engage with a wider range of farmers**. By providing more detail and clarity on the approaches that Defra can utilise, the research provides an evidence base with which Defra can shape policies and strategies for engagement. The objectives of the research were as follows:

- to explore how Defra can better engage with a range of farmers, including those that are identified as HTR.
- to assess the potential role, motivations, value and needs of skilled intermediaries in this engagement.
- to understand how Defra's engagement with HTR farmers has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit, and to identify strategies and tools to support increased and sustained engagement.

While this research focused on *farmers* within the context of ELM, there are a range of other land managers who are also relevant. Within this report, the term 'ELM' is used to refer to all three of the future schemes, while 'Defra' refers to the wider 'Defra group', recognising that the project's recommendations and findings will be useful for policy teams within Defra, but also within arms-length bodies (ALBs).

'Appropriate intermediary organisations which have contact with farmers should be identified and provided with the necessary training and information so that they can help in the process of generating farmer awareness and interest, providing advice or 'sign-posting' farmers to sources of further information.'

~ Dampney *et al.*, 2001 <sup>6</sup>

## Methodology

Funding for this follow-on project was granted at the end of 2020, around nine months into the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK and nine months after the team's initial HTR research was undertaken. To begin with, the data collected in 2020 was reanalysed to identify research questions that could be explored further in a new round of interviews.

Next, 24 new expert interviews were carried out with a range of people who engage with farmers (half of the respondents had been interviewed in 2020, the other half were new). Respondents held a range of local, national and strategic roles in the farming industry. Their relevant and current experience of farmer engagement provided rich data on HTR farmers.

The 2021 interviews were then analysed, forming the basis of the research findings and recommendations presented in this summary report.



# Research findings

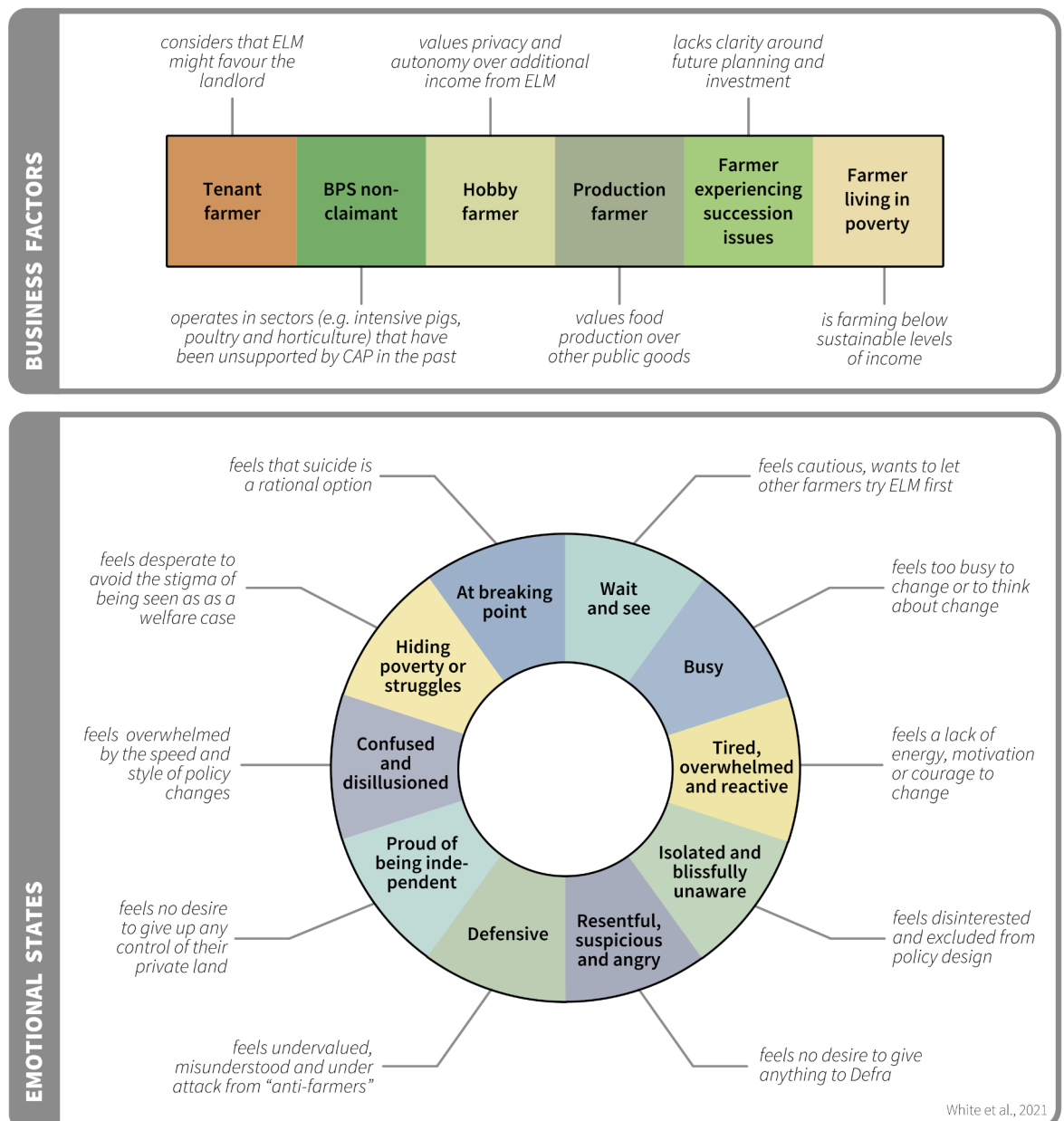
## Understanding the individuality of farmers

HTR farmers are a heterogeneous group,<sup>3</sup> a finding which was validated by the 2021 round of interviews. This heterogeneity makes engaging with the sector challenging, as different strategies of interaction will work for some farmers, but not others.

In an attempt to improve farmers' engagement with policy development, previous research has segmented farmers into different farming identities.<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, this research aimed to identify the business factors and emotional states that can inhibit farmers' ability to engage with

Defra in the context of ELM. The typology presented in previous work<sup>4</sup> was refined based on feedback from participants during the 2021 round of interviews. The new typology (Figure 1) reinforces the diversity of reasons that farmers may be HTR for Defra, highlighting the need for different engagement strategies for different farmers.

It is important to note that these are not fixed categories – farmers can experience multiple emotional states and can fall into multiple business factors, all which can change depending on the farmers' circumstances. An understanding of this typology can assist Defra in developing stakeholder engagement policies for engaging with HTR farmers.



**Figure 1:** Typology of business factors and emotional states of being HTR for Defra in the context of ELM (developed in response to the 2021 round of interviews)



## This is a period of significant uncertainty for farmers

Even before the pandemic, the period between 2021 and 2028 represented significant uncertainty and change for farmers within England, due to policy changes and post-Brexit trade deals.

Respondents identified a range of impacts of the pandemic on farmers and engagement with farmers, including:

- Increased social isolation due to closure of places where farmers normally socialise (e.g. pubs, marts & shows)
- Increased use of online platforms for farmer engagement
- Uncertainty and difficulty planning ahead exacerbating farmers' mental health and wellbeing problems
- Increased public support for local farmers, with farmers being increasingly recognised as key workers

It is through the lens of this complex and challenging context that Defra should plan future co-design activities. More research is needed to identify the long-term impacts of the pandemic on farmers, including how it has impacted on their ability to input into the co-design of ELM.

This research also shows that the pandemic has changed how different groups and organisations engage with farmers. Just as farming has continued throughout the pandemic, engagement with farmers has too.

Respondents outlined the ways they have engaged with farmers over the last twelve months:



**Telephone calls** to catch up and have friendly chats, undertake consultations or discuss stewardship schemes. Multiple respondents described calling farmers to help them build digital skills (e.g. by talking them through how to use Zoom)



**Socially distanced events**, including face-to-face events held in barns or fields

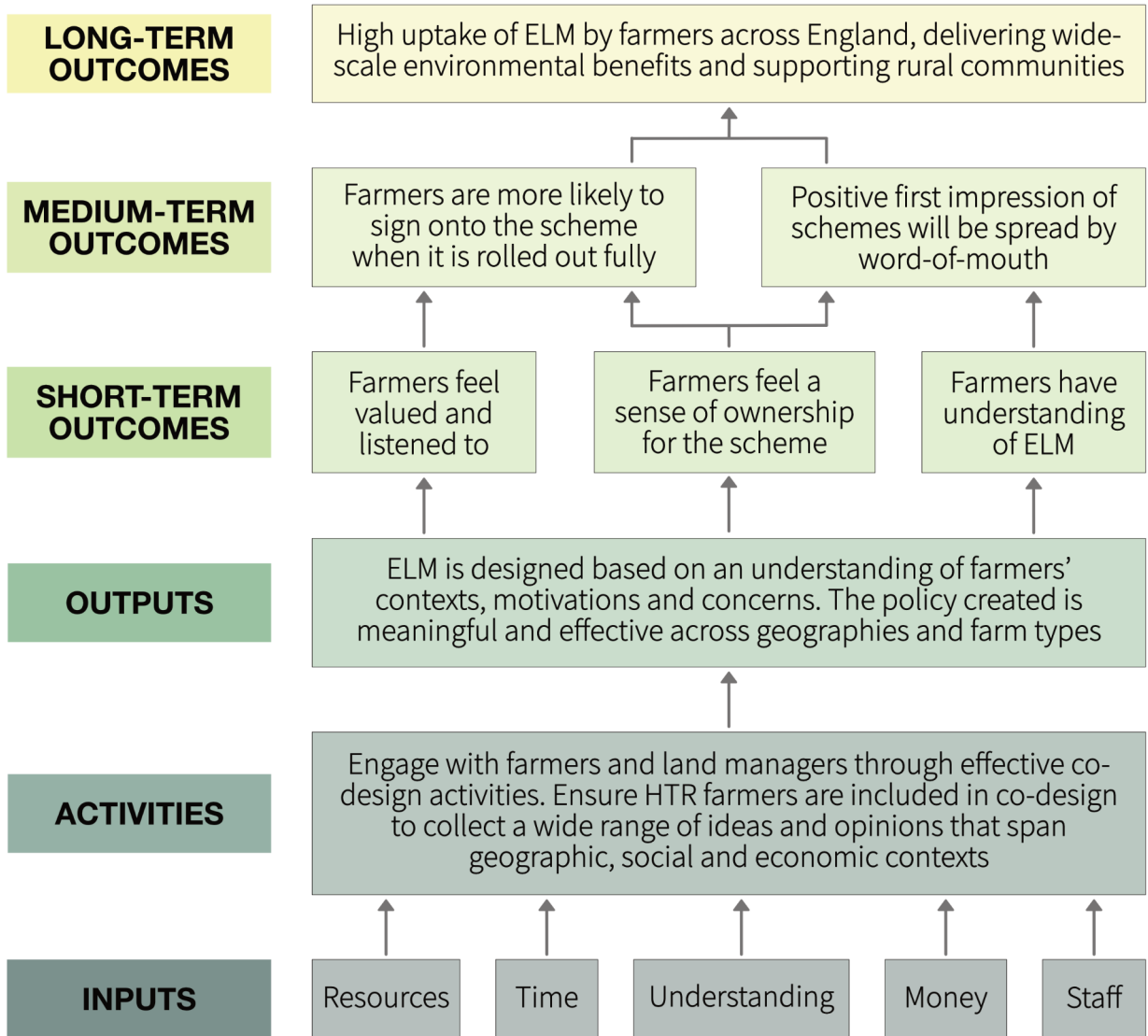


**Virtual & digital events** have become more prevalent over the last year.<sup>8</sup> Some respondents described increased engagement from the switch to online events, but also highlighted that these were likely not reaching HTR farmers due to the lack of digital skills/confidence and infrastructure needed to participate. The so-called 'digital divide' may have reinforced the exclusion of some HTR farmers and further widened the gap between engaged and disengaged farmers. Respondents stressed that digital and IT capacity building is going to be key to successfully engaging HTR farmers.

The stories and experiences described by respondents have highlighted the need for engagement with HTR farmers to be led by people that farmers already know and trust, especially in times of uncertainty.

# AIMS

If the co-design of ELM is successful, there could be numerous benefits for both farmers and Defra...



**Figure 2:** Key risks and aims associated with the co-design of ELM, highlighting the need for effective engagement with HTR farmers

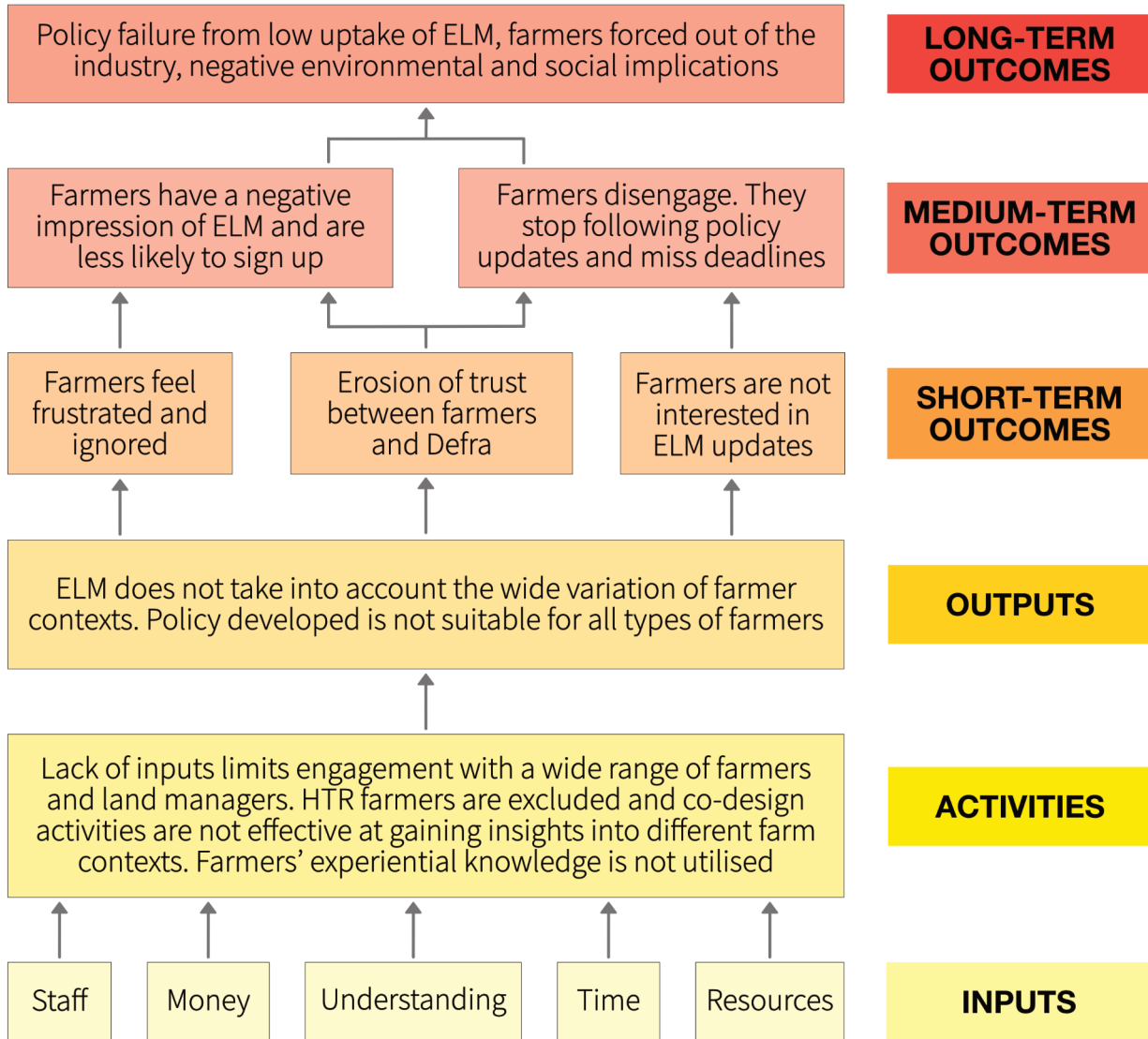
## Risks of failing to engage HTR farmers in policy co-design

Respondents outlined how failing to engage with HTR farmers on the co-design and delivery of ELM can pose risks on three levels: to the schemes, to Defra and to farmers and rural communities.

**Risks for ELM:** Failing to engage HTR farmers in the co-design of ELM risks developing schemes that do not fit within their contexts or needs. Respondents warned that this could result in uptake of ELM by farmers, and a subsequent reduction in the delivery of environmental goods. (Figure 2). This, in turn, may limit Defra's ability to achieve the outcomes in the 25 Year Environment Plan, as well as other policy objectives associated with ELM.

...but if the co-design is not effective at reaching a wide range of farmers, there are serious risks for the delivery of ELM

# RISKS



White et al., 2021

**Risks for Defra:** Some respondents cautioned that if ELM uptake is low and the scheme fails to deliver the public goods it set out to achieve, there may be reputational and public perception risks for Defra.

Additionally, they described how many farmers find Defra 'hard to reach', which may limit farmers' willingness to engage with Defra on the the co-design or delivery of ELM. This challenging relationship needs to be addressed and overcome for the success of future agri-environmental schemes.

**Risks for farmers & rural communities:** Respondents warned that if ELM is unsuccessful at meeting the needs of HTR farmers, there could be negative impacts on farmer wellbeing, with associated reductions in compliance with environmental or animal welfare standards. In addition, many farmers may face bankruptcy or will be forced into poverty, impacts that could have detrimental environmental and social outcomes. Finally, changing land and property prices may alter the societal makeup of rural areas.

# Engaging with HTR farmers

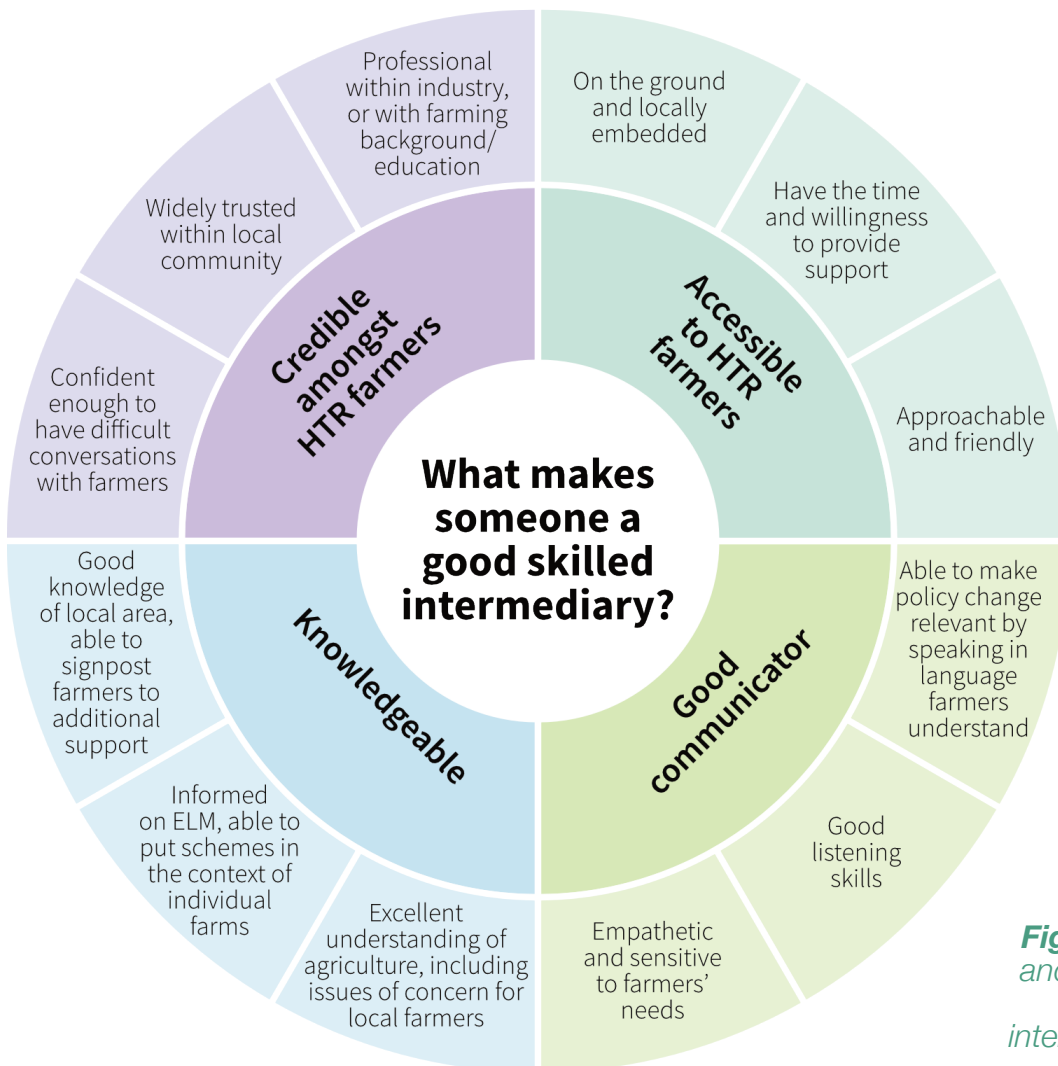
This research defines a skilled intermediaries as ‘a person, group or organisation that can act as a conduit between government and HTR farmers by utilising their trusted relationship with HTR farmers to perform a range of roles, including the provision of pastoral, practical and policy support.’

## Identifying who can help

Locally-embedded skilled intermediaries offer an incredible resource that can be utilised by Defra to reach HTR farmers. These actors are able to use their pre-existing relationships with farmers to provide a range of support in the context of ELM. By utilising their experience and knowledge of the farming sector, they can facilitate knowledge exchange in multiple directions, supporting HTR farmers while also feeding back into Defra on specific challenges facing farmers on the ground.

If Defra is able to utilise this locally-embedded resource effectively, it will be possible to overcome some of the barriers associated with distrust, thereby helping HTR farmers become ‘easier to reach’.

Respondents outlined a number of key aptitudes and qualities that skilled intermediaries should possess (Figure 3). These individuals should also be committed to providing support to HTR farmers over long periods of time, as rapid staff turnover erodes trust.



**Figure 3:** The key skills and characteristics that make a good skilled intermediary, as outlined by respondents



## The many roles of intermediaries

Respondents listed numerous roles that these actors may be able to play to support HTR farmers, and Defra, in the context of ELM. These fall into the following three categories of support:

- **Pastoral support:** attending to the physical and emotional wellbeing of the farmer (e.g. to listen, to recognise if a farmer is struggling with mental health challenges)
- **Practical support:** helping the farmer on a more practical level (to answer farmers' questions, to help farmers build skills)
- **Policy support:** assisting the farmer to engage with policy design and uptake (to provide information about ELM, to help farmers make informed policy decisions)

The evidence suggests that all three types of support are necessary to get HTR farmers involved in ELM. What support farmers need and over what timescale, will be dependent on each individual farmer.

## Identifying skilled intermediaries

The research identified extensive networks of embedded resources that, with appropriate support from Defra, may be able to fulfil these roles. Figure 4, below, outlines the range of potential skilled intermediaries. This list can be used by Defra as a tool to begin identifying the full extent and capacity of this locally-embedded resource.

Respondents stressed that skilled intermediaries should be involved early on, throughout both the co-design and delivery phases of ELM. They also cautioned that choosing someone who does not understand the farm or the local context can prevent the building of trust.

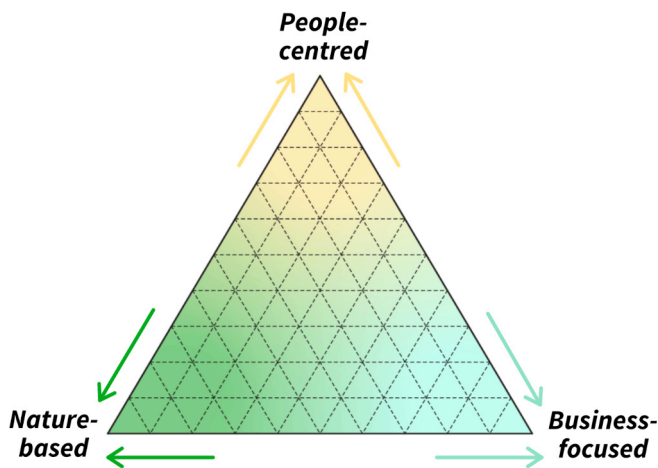
Different farmers will work better with different individual intermediaries, and not all intermediaries will be able to carry out all of the roles outlined previously. To overcome this, a number of respondents emphasised the importance of a networked approach that would enable skilled intermediaries to work in tandem to provide the wide range of support needed, while also providing mutual support to one another.

**Figure 4:** Potential skilled intermediaries suggested by participants in the 2020 or 2021 interviews. A table with more detail (including named organisations) is available in the full report.

<p><b>Farming &amp; rural charities</b> volunteers &amp; staff from rural crisis and farm welfare charities</p>	<p><b>Farming groups</b> farm support groups, farm clusters, farm discussion groups</p>	<p><b>People who do business with farmers</b> vets, agronomists, consultants, feed reps, land agents</p>	<p><b>Women in farming</b> farmers' wives/partners, farm secretaries, women's networks</p>	<p><b>Other farmers</b> farming peers and neighbours, family, young farmers</p>
<p><b>Farming press</b> local farming press, <i>Farmers Guardian</i>, <i>Farmers Weekly</i></p>	<p><b>Mart staff</b> markets and auction marts' staff, auctioneers</p>	<p><b>Agricultural societies &amp; associations</b> breed societies, growing associations, agricultural shows</p>	<p><b>Faith-based groups or people</b> the rural church, agricultural chaplaincy</p>	<p><b>Environmental organisations</b> ecologists, FWAG, wildlife trusts, RSPB, catchment partnerships</p>
<p><b>Service professionals</b> lorry driver, GP, fire brigade, police</p>	<p><b>Large companies</b> supermarkets, processors, buying groups, water companies</p>	<p><b>Trade bodies</b> AHDB</p>	<p><b>Powerful actors</b> Red Tractor, NFU, National Trust, TFA, CLA</p>	<p><b>Local people</b> headteacher at rural schools, individuals from local interest groups</p>

## Motivations of skilled intermediaries

Respondents outlined a range of potential motivations for acting as a skilled intermediary. These can be grouped into three categories (Figure 5). Each individual acting as a skilled intermediary will have a mix of different motivations for helping HTR farmers, which might change over time as the intermediary forms a trusting relationship with the farmer.



**Figure 5:** Visualising the types of motivations for acting as a skilled intermediary. Individual intermediaries will all be present somewhere on this figure, with mixed motivations.

## Investing in working partnerships

Skilled intermediaries can offer a wealth of experience, yet will need to be aided by Defra in order to provide effective support to HTR farmers throughout the agricultural transition period. Respondents described the following types of support that intermediaries will likely require from Defra:

- Accurate, up-to-date, detailed and farm relevant **information** about ELM
- **Funding** that enables intermediaries to go beyond their current job remit and offer additional support to HTR farmers
- **Training** (e.g. on mental health)
- **Independence** from the State

By investing in these relationships with intermediaries, Defra can develop working partnerships that are built on trust and a desire to support HTR farmers.

## Developing effective communication and engagement strategies

Successful implementation will require effective communication and engagement strategies – for Defra to engage with both skilled intermediaries and HTR farmers. Suggestions from respondents included:

- **Developing a multi-directional dialogue** with skilled intermediaries, by fostering an environment in which skilled intermediaries feel that they can ask questions, report problems and feed back into the policy cycle.
- Utilising **multiple methods of engagement**, including digital, offline and in-person communication methods. These should be used concurrently by Defra and skilled intermediaries to reach as many HTR farmers as possible.
- Ensuring messaging about ELM across these platforms and voices remains aligned and **consistent**.
- **Increasing transparency** around who Defra is talking to in the process of policy co-design (and who it is not talking to) and how the outputs of these engagement activities are being used when developing the schemes.
- Ensuring that important reports from Defra are seen as having enough **detailed and farmer relevant information** to be valued and useful for farmers and skilled intermediaries.
- Ensuring that **language and terminology of the schemes within ELM is kept consistent** and easy to understand to prevent confusion amongst farmers and skilled intermediaries.
- Recognising that the heterogeneity of farmers and farming businesses will require **localised messages** (and messengers).
- **Getting the local farming press involved** to publicise where Defra has engaged with farmers in the local area, to generate interest and encourage previously unengaged farmers to get involved.

## Timeframes of change

Recognising the heterogeneity of farmers also means understanding that not all farmers will be able to adapt, prepare and plan for future changes at the same rate as others. HTR farmers in particular may be more vulnerable to changes, while also having less capacity to prepare and adapt.

One of the biggest concerns raised by interview respondents was the lack of clarity and detail about the ELM schemes, which they said is preventing farmers from being able to plan and adapt for the future.

At the same time, there is a lack of detail around the lump sum exit scheme. While respondents agreed that a well thought out scheme could be beneficial to the industry, they felt that the current one-year time frame is unrealistic. One respondent emphasised that farmers do not know what they are giving up, because they do not yet have a clear idea of what ELM is going to offer. Another suggested that the exit scheme be extended until 2024 to give farmers more time to make an informed decisions about whether or not to leave the industry.

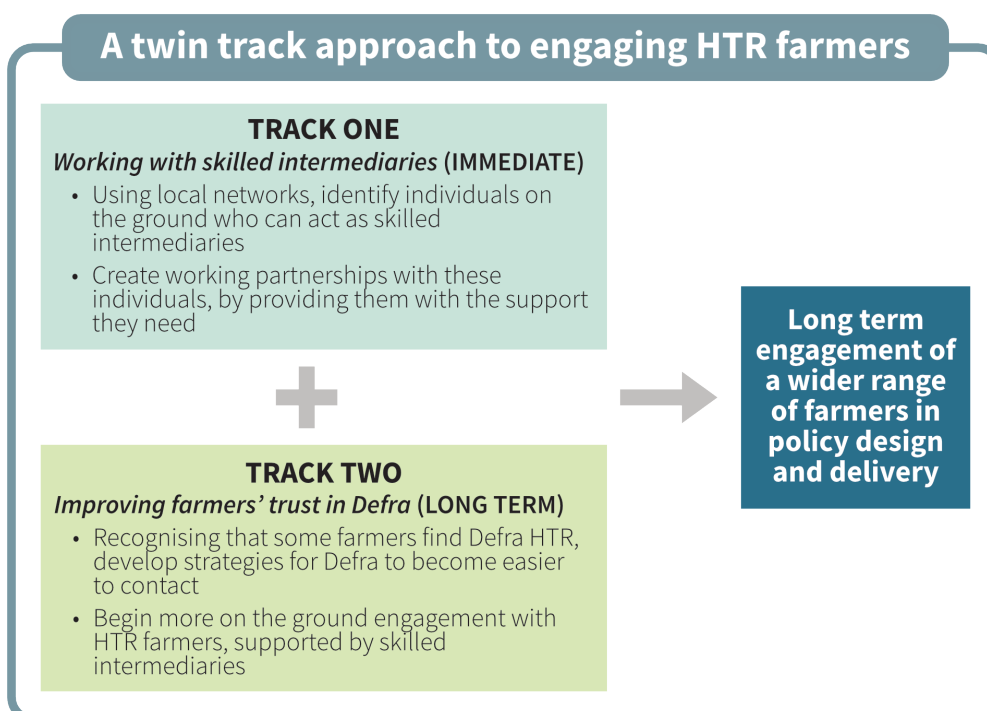
## Developing trust in Defra

With the help of skilled intermediaries, HTR farmers should, ideally, become 'easier to reach'. Yet unless Defra itself becomes easier to reach, any progress made may not be sustainable over the long term. Defra should, therefore, work to overcome the widespread distrust and suspicion of government bodies within farming communities.

Respondents suggested a number of ways that Defra could overcome farmers' distrust and suspicion, including:

- Increasing transparency of co-design
- Building more on the ground engagement, by attending marts, shows and conferences
- Developing easier ways for Defra to be contacted e.g. by having named contacts within Defra that farmers can reach out to
- Reassessing the role of the RPA in the delivery of ELM
- Not overpromising on schemes and then underdelivering

These efforts should be undertaken at the same time as engaging with skilled intermediaries (Figure 6).



**Figure 6:** The twin track approach to engaging HTR farmers (both tracks needed to be undertaken simultaneously)

# Research implications

This research has clear policy implications, providing a framework with which Defra policy teams can think through engagement with HTR stakeholders. Whilst previous research, as well as Defra itself, has recognised the importance of using trusted individuals when engaging with farmers, this research has gone further, by bringing practical and implementable findings on skilled intermediaries to the forefront.

This work has identified who these trusted individuals are, as well as the benefits they can bring to engagement with HTR farmers. It has also put Defra's engagement with HTR farmers in the context of the ongoing

COVID-19 pandemic, a challenging but important lens through which Defra should plan future co-design activities. This project has provided empirical evidence on how to effectively build relationships with a range of skilled intermediaries, thus enabling them to support farmers throughout the agricultural transition. This framework will be beneficial not only to policy teams within Defra, but to teams within the wider Defra group.

Building on this evidence base, researchers at the Universities of Sheffield and Reading are collaborating with Defra to develop an implementation plan to action the recommendations outlined.

The full research report will be available to download [here](#), along with other outputs from this study and related research



# Recommendations

- 1** **Recognise the diversity of reasons why some farmers are harder to reach in the context of ELM**, using our typology of business factors and emotional states to develop and review engagement strategies
- 2** **Recognise the insecure context for farmers caused by Brexit and policy changes, and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic**, as well as the pandemic's disruption to engagement between government and HTR farmers.
- 3** **Communicate internally within Defra (and its agencies) the risks associated with failing to engage with a wide range of farmers**, including failure to achieve wide uptake of ELM and the subsequent delivery of only limited environmental outcomes.
- 4** **Acknowledge the challenges and reputational risks that the Defra group currently faces** in a policy environment characterised by high levels of distrust and suspicion, where some farmers find Defra itself hard to reach.
- 5** **Undertake a thorough socio-economic risk assessment of the potential impacts of scheme rejection** for diverse types of farmers, in relation to farm business disruption or failure, rural communities and farmer mental health.
- 6** **Identify the full breadth of resources that locally-embedded skilled intermediaries can provide**, including pastoral, practical and policy support to HTR farmers in the co-design and delivery of ELM, while also assessing the different roles these actors can play and motivations they may have.
- 7** **Invest in effective working partnerships with skilled intermediaries** by providing them with relevant, accurate and up-to-date information on ELM, as well as the funding, training and autonomy needed to engage directly with HTR farmers. Ensure that relevant organisations are primed prior to engagement with individual intermediaries.
- 8** **Ensure that engagement strategies for communicating with HTR farmers make use of different methods**, including both online and offline methods, and take into account the need for capacity-building (e.g. in digital literacy and infrastructure).
- 9** **Develop a realistic theory of change** recognising that different farmers will need different types of support at different points in the ELM transition, and ensuring that farmers have time to make effective plans. Extend the period by which the lump sum payment is available to 2024.
- 10** **Invest the resources needed to overcome farmers' existing high levels of distrust and suspicion**, through on the ground engagement, relationship building and developing easier ways for Defra to be contacted. Transparency amongst all members of the Defra group will be key to building trust.

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## Acknowledgements

This project was funded by QR policy money from the University of Sheffield, with additional QR money for DCR's contribution provided by the University of Reading. It sits within the broader ESRC-funded project 'Agri-Environmental Governance Post-Brexit: Co-Production of Policy Frameworks' (ES/S007830/1), a collaboration between the Universities of Sheffield and Reading.

The authors of the report are grateful for conversations with representatives from Defra on the co-design of this research, which helped to ensure its relevance for policy and programme delivery. We are also grateful to all the research participants for their generosity of time and valuable insights.

**Please cite as:** White *et al.*, 2021. *Engaging 'harder to reach' farmers: the roles and needs of skilled intermediaries*. Research Summary. Universities of Sheffield and Reading. DOI: 10.15131/shef.data.14806629

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