



2024 Journal



Vibrant communities

Helping rural people create sustainable places to live for a lifetime

Future-looking farms

Supporting productive agriculture in harmony with nature

The King's commitment

Fulfilling His Majesty's vision for the countryside

A helping hand for those who want to help themselves

Although farmers and rural people face great challenges, they are resourceful and determined to improve their future. Support from The Royal Countryside Fund enables them to put their ideas into action.



Photo: Training via The Royal Countryside Fund has enabled young farmer Andrew Nicholson to focus on the business side of his family farm

Farming and rural communities are living through uncertain times. The cost-of-living crisis continues, putting pressure on families, particularly in rural areas where wages are lower than urban areas, yet rural residents must spend up to 20 per cent more on everyday items like fuel and transport. Loneliness and isolation are ever present, particularly for older people. And for farmers, the agricultural transition means that government support remains, as yet, unpredictable on top of them having to cope with higher food and fertiliser costs, and recent unusual weather events like storms and floods.

“ We witness the determination of family farms and rural people to carve out a sustainable future ”

Heather Hancock, the Chair of The Royal Countryside Fund, believes that even though 70% of our land is under the stewardship of farmers and around one-fifth of the population lives in rural communities, these people's needs are too often ignored by funders and policymakers. "The rural voice remains faint against the clamour of bigger, more visible needs," she says. "The needs of rural communities are frequently overlooked and just as frequently misunderstood, threatening their social and community fabric."

Yet, she points out, the people of the countryside have ambitions and ideas to improve their lot. "Every day through The Royal Countryside Fund, we witness the self-help instinct, the resourcefulness and determination of family farms and rural people to carve out a sustainable future for their corner of the United Kingdom."

Through The Royal Countryside Fund's grants and support programmes, the charity aims to offer a helping hand to the farmers and rural people who wish to help themselves. As Executive Director Keith Halstead puts it: "We want to power them up, not prop them up."

In the north east of England, the undulating landscape of the Derwent Valley is breathtaking. But for the people living in the villages nearby, unreliable bus services and expensive taxis mean that some of them are unable get out and about to enjoy the countryside, nor easily do their shopping, visit friends, get to work, attend medical appointments or pursue hobbies.

So, in 2014, the villagers who ran the Blackhall Mill Community Association came up with a solution. Building on the success of their state of the art, eco-friendly village hall, they launched an electric community car club. The car club founder and volunteer committee member Michael Marston says that using anything other than electric vehicles was never in question. In the face of the climate emergency, he says, "there isn't any other way", highlighting that since the launch of Derwent Valley Car Club the vehicles have been reliable and efficient as well as keeping the area's carbon footprint light.

Most importantly, the fleet of eight vehicles allows local people to get where they need and want to go. The cars are based in seven different locations, and they are available for car club members to hire. For non-drivers, there are volunteer drivers. "We're striving to create a situation where just because you can't drive or don't have a car, doesn't mean you don't have access to affordable mobility," says Michael.

The association was aiming for the car club, with its low-cost membership fee and hire rates, to be a financially sustainable, useful service for the local area, but what Michael hadn't expected was for lots of other villages around the country to want to replicate the idea. "Other people gradually found out, and to say we have had a lot of interest would be an understatement," he says. The association's small team faced a deluge of phone calls, emails and speaking invitations to share their knowledge and experience. They welcomed the interest, says Michael, but "we needed to take the heat out".





And so they came up with the concept of a “car club in a box”. And now, with £23,000 of funding from The Royal Countryside Fund, Michael and the team are creating an open source, online information site about how to develop and run all aspects of an electric car club, from obtaining the vehicles, to driving the cars, keeping records of the journeys and managing the volunteers. They will also offer in-person assistance to other communities, which they will charge for.

This innovation, recognises The Royal Countryside Fund, will accelerate the speed at which Blackhall Mill Community Association can support others to develop their own car clubs, decarbonise transport, improve accessibility in rural areas and strengthen the sustainability of Derwent Valley Car Club itself. It’s an example of powering up local communities in action.

Like the villagers of the Blackhall Mill Community Association, farmers around the UK are demonstrating resourcefulness in the face of challenges. One farmer who knows this all too well is Crispin Binder, who runs a 400-acre arable farm in Essex. A couple of years ago, the family’s farm business was in financial trouble after struggling for several years, and it was having a devastating effect on Crispin’s outlook on life.

“My family said that they rarely saw me happy any more,” he says. “I felt the weight of responsibility on my shoulders, and I was not finding it easy to cope.”

In desperation and not knowing if there was a way out for his family’s farm, Crispin signed

up for The Royal Countryside Fund’s Farm for the Future programme which offers free training and advice on running farm businesses in England. The workshops are delivered by local farm support groups in various locations across the country, and there’s also a virtual group, which Crispin joined.

This was a massive step for Crispin, who says he always preferred to speak to people face-to-face, and even struggled with the telephone. “I found the idea of interacting over Zoom to be quite off-putting,” he says. But, as the online sessions went on, his confidence grew so he completely overcame his fear of the screen.

Christina Hutchings, who runs the Farm for the Future virtual group, says that initially some of the farmers feel nervous about turning their cameras on and speaking up during the online sessions, but – with support – they usually warm up as they become more accustomed to it, especially as they find that they can share experiences with others who understand what they’re facing.

Most importantly, the Farm for the Future workshops gave Crispin new ideas and insights into how his business could survive. “Almost everything was relevant or useful in some way to me,” he says. The turning point was Crispin’s one-to-one session with a farm consultant which is a core part of the programme.

“This was the final inspiration that I needed to finally take control of my business and also my life,” says Crispin. “The consultant helped me realise that there was a business worth fighting for.”



Photo: Christina Hutchings supports farmers through the Farm for the Future virtual group





“ We have followed His Majesty The King’s lead, connecting people at local level to find solutions to the challenges they have in common and supporting them to apply those solutions ”

Crispin devised a new business plan and presented it to his bank, insisting that it was the direction he was going to take. Today, the family’s business is more secure, and Crispin is feeling much more positive.

“I have become a happier person, and my whole family has benefitted from that,” he says. “Whilst I have no idea what the future holds, or whether the business will survive – which I think it will – the programme has given me the confidence and strength to fight on.”

Young farmer Andrew Nicholson barely has a moment to himself. He is a dairy and beef farmer in County Down, Northern Ireland, working alongside his grandparents, Robert and Doreen Newell, who are in their 80s.

“It’s almost seven days a week for me on the farm with an early start on Sunday to get finished in time for church,” says Andrew. And his grandparents haven’t slowed down yet.

His grandmother keeps the books and his grandad “still runs about like a 30-year-old”. “Whatever he needs to do, he’s out doing it – and keeping me right as well. I’m only 22, so I’ve got a lot to learn yet.”

In spite of being so busy, Andrew realised that he had to take some time out to look at how the farm could work most efficiently, now and in the future. He joined The Royal Countryside Fund’s Farm Resilience Programme which offers free business skills training to farmers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The programme is run by delivery partners who can tailor the training to the needs of farmers in their local areas, and in Northern Ireland, the partner is Rural Support.

The training gave Andrew and his grandparents the opportunity to “gain insights into the important parts of the farm that we don’t often focus on”, he says. “It isn’t all about running about after the stock and driving tractors.” The family looked in depth at their farm accounts, learned about benchmarking against other farms, and tackled the often tricky subject of succession and planning for the future of the family business.

As a result, the family have already reduced some of their costs by re-examining the nutrition their cows are getting to use the farm resources more efficiently. They are also rotating the crops to allow the ground to recover between grazing as well as allowing the drainage and quality of the soil to be improved each season. “A lifetime of work has been put into improving the land,” says Andrew. This year, Andrew has introduced maize for the first time to further improve the quality of feed for the stock.

The family have put some initial plans in place for the future, such as upgrading the milking parlour. “The business can now move forward,” says Andrew, “with everyone singing from the same hymn sheet and working together.”

Since The Royal Countryside Fund was founded, it has supported more than 4,000 farming families like Andrew Nicholson and Crispin Binder, and given grants to around 500 rural communities like Blackhall Mill Community Association. As Chair Heather Hancock emphasises: “We have followed His Majesty The King’s lead, connecting people at local level to find solutions to the challenges they have in common and supporting them to apply those solutions.”

Now, she says, The Royal Countryside Fund is accelerating its progress. “We have set our sights high.”

