



THE ROYAL
COUNTRYSIDE
FUND

Farm for the Future: a review

Supporting family farmers during the
agricultural transition and beyond



About The Royal Countryside Fund

When our countryside thrives, we all do. But, life in the countryside can be challenging. Hardworking family farms and rural communities face social, environmental and economic pressures that threaten the livelihoods they love. They shouldn't have to face these challenges alone. And with us, they don't have to.

That's why HM King Charles III founded our charity, The Royal Countryside Fund, back in 2010 – to recognise the real challenges that come with rural life and do something about it. We know that change can happen because we see it every day. And it starts with real people with local knowledge, passed down through generations. By working alongside farming families and rural communities, we can truly understand their individual needs and shape our support to match.

Through our locally based programmes across the four UK nations, we help farming families discover achievable ways to build more financially and environmentally resilient farms now, and for generations to come. We also empower rural communities – combining their ideas with our funding and guidance to grow community-led projects that will stand the test of time. So far, we've supported over 4,000 farming families, and invested more than £12 million in more than 500 rural community-led projects.

Bringing people together is at the heart of everything we do. We know that when local people, places, and partners join forces, incredible things happen. We've made a commitment to be the go-to partner for farming families, rural communities, and everyone who values the vital role they play in shaping the future of the countryside. We want to bring as many people with us on this journey. Which is why we share our on-the-ground learnings to spur on progress on a national scale.

When our countryside thrives, we all do.



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Farm for the Future was a Defra-funded project, independently run by The Royal Countryside Fund from 2022 to 2025. It was one of a number of projects funded under the Farming Resilience Fund programme covering England.

The Farm for the Future programme managers at The Royal Countryside Fund were Helen Rivett and Michael Bullen. The programme was also supported by members of The Royal Countryside Fund team: Ellie Burnage, Chloë Goodridge, Heeren Patel, Beth Summers and Maddy Taylor.

The programme was overseen by a board, consisting of Allan Wilkinson (Chair, Head of Agrifoods at HSBC), Matthew Morris (Rural Director at the Duchy of Cornwall), Nikki Jeffery (Executive Director at King Charles III Charitable Fund) and Keith Halstead (Executive Director at The Royal Countryside Fund).

This publication is based on an evaluation report commissioned by The Royal Countryside Fund and produced by Robin Brady and a final project report by Michael Bullen.





Welcome

Family farms are the lifeblood of the UK's rural communities. At The Royal Countryside Fund, we recognise how important the sustainability of family farm businesses is for the stewardship of our rural landscape. This is why we were delighted to be selected by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to be one of 17 providers of support programmes for farmers under their Farming Resilience Fund as the agricultural transition began.

As the only charity providing support to farmers under this scheme, our offering, called Farm for the Future, was unique. The aim was to support farmers to understand the potential impacts of the policy changes at the same time as improving the management of their farmed environment and developing their business models. Building on our 15 years' experience of supporting farmers, we delivered this programme through our network of locally embedded delivery partners, meaning we could extend Farm for the Future to the farmers who were most at risk of being adversely affected by the policy changes sweeping through agriculture. We could also ensure that the programme was tailored to local farmers' experiences. We provided unbiased advice: we had no agenda and nothing to sell. Trust and community were at the heart of our offer.

The Farm for the Future evaluation demonstrates that it had many successes. We succeeded in reaching our target audience of smaller, grazing livestock farms, including 'very hard to reach' farmers. Most of the participating farmers boosted the resilience of their businesses and gained a better understanding of the government's new environmental support schemes.

Our mixed mode of delivery, through workshops, peer-to-peer learning and one-to-one support, worked well in providing an efficient, accessible programme as well as offering opportunities for farmers to make connections, thus improving their own personal resilience and wellbeing.





A welcome consequence of the programme's delivery via our network of partners was that these local groups also had the opportunity to strengthen their technical and financial capacity. The Farm for the Future programme leaves a legacy of improved independent local support for farmers around the country, and we continue to invest in these groups through our Farm Support Groups Initiative.

Our reflections have identified some learning points for the future. As the agricultural transition continues, farmers will require ongoing support as they balance meeting the day-to-day demands of their farm businesses with adapting to wider transformations in policy, the impact of geopolitical events and the effects of environmental change. We look forward to being a trusted partner of funders and governments across the UK to deliver similar programmes in the future.

Supporting people through change is crucial for the implementation of any new policy. It helps build trust, reduces resistance and promotes positive engagement, leading to better outcomes. I hope those farmers who participated in this programme feel that we understood and addressed their individual issues and that they now feel better equipped to plan the future of their farm.

Ultimately, the success of this programme was dependent on a complex mix of local delivery partners, and I wish to conclude by acknowledging my appreciation for all that they achieved in reaching and supporting nearly 2,000 farmers across England. I also wish to thank those farmers for making the time in their busy lives to join us.

Keith Halstead

Keith Halstead

Executive Director

The Royal Countryside Fund



Farm for the Future 2022–25: an overview

The Royal Countryside Fund’s Farm for the Future programme ran between 2022 and 2025 and assisted family farms across England to adjust to the post-Brexit transformation in government support for farmers, which offers not only challenges but opportunities for their businesses.

The programme was supported by the Farming Resilience Fund from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). The Royal Countryside Fund was one of 17 providers of support to farmers under this scheme, and we were the only charity among them. The programme ran in three successive cohorts, the first two lasted 12 months each and the final cohort was for six months.



Facts and figures

Aim 1

To help farmers better understand the policy changes and how they would affect their farm businesses

Aim 2

To offer farmers tools and advice to adapt their business models

Aim 3

To help farmers practically improve the management of their farmed environment

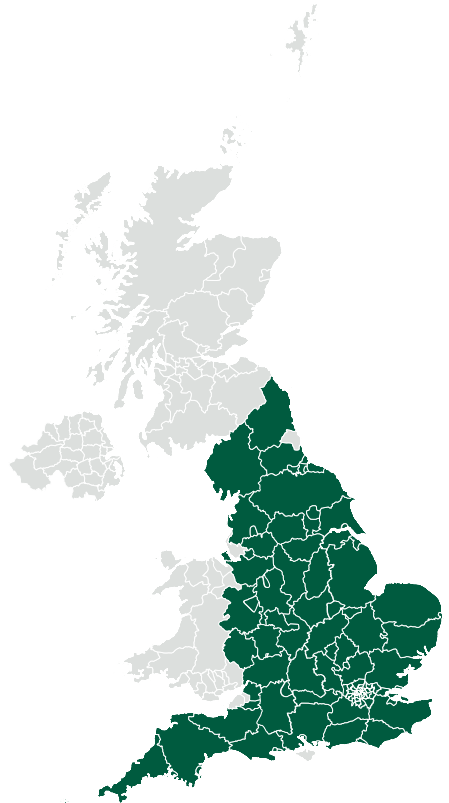
Reach

1,987
farmers signed up

437 workshops held

1,770
one-to-one support sessions delivered

44 English counties this programme ran across



Key successes According to the participants...



89%

had increased awareness of the new environmental land management schemes

85%

demonstrated improved business planning skills



87%

felt better connected to their peers

55%

implemented diversification measures

97%

of workshop participants expressed they were satisfied

74%

felt more resilient

76%

of those who took part in workshops reported an increase in their knowledge







Katie

Cornwall

"Without the programme, we wouldn't have known where to begin. It gave us supportive, neutral advice from people that are experts in their field."





Michaela

West Midlands

"The social aspect of the workshops has been highly beneficial, even if ours were held online. They gave us all a chance to share our concerns and show support for one another."



Practical, accessible, locally tailored support

The Royal Countryside Fund has 15 years' experience providing successful business support to small family farms alongside in-depth knowledge of the rural landscape. Farm for the Future built upon our expertise, allowing us to design a programme that truly met farmers' needs by being practically focused and easily accessible.

The programme had a flexible, farmer-focused design, which meant that farmers could engage with it according to their needs and the time they had available. The programme also evolved as national policy changed. Farmers were offered workshops, online learning, one-to-one support and peer networking opportunities, as well as a library of resources and signposting to further support and information.

We offered the training and support through our network of trusted local delivery partners. These partners are embedded in their communities and could therefore tailor the content to the unique circumstances of the farmers in their areas and the local farming calendar. There were 18 sub-regional groups, and a virtual group was available for participants who couldn't access in-person events.



Farm for the Future programme components



2 core workshops
on business management
and environmental
management

Access to an online library

of learning materials, including videos about soil testing and biodiversity, and publications such as our jargon-buster publication *A-Zero: A farmer's guide to breaking free from environmental jargon* and our healthy soils leaflet *The Great Grazing Guide*

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Support

Optional workshops

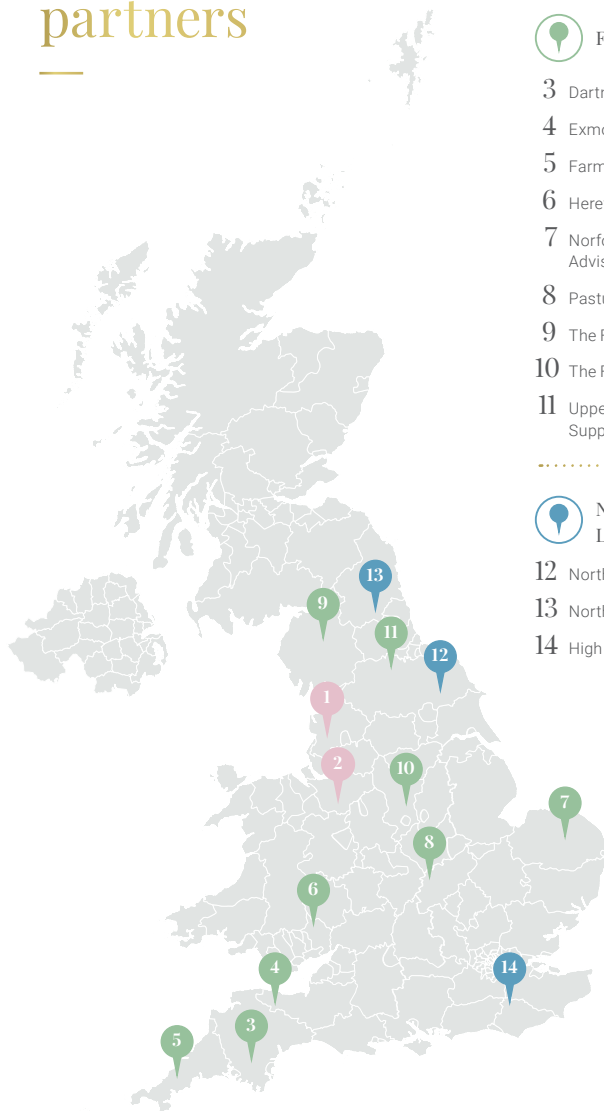
focusing on themes such as succession planning, diversification and animal health

Peer networking

through social media groups and farm visits



Farm for the Future delivery partners



Colleges

- 1 Myerscough College
- 2 Reaseheath College



Farm Support Groups

- 3 Dartmoor Hill Farm Project
- 4 Exmoor Hill Farming Network
- 5 Farm Cornwall
- 6 Herefordshire Rural Hub
- 7 Norfolk Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group
- 8 Pasture for Life
- 9 The Farmer Network
- 10 The Farming Life Centre
- 11 Upper Teesdale Agricultural Support Services (UTASS)



National Park and National Landscape authorities

- 12 North York Moors National Park Authority
- 13 Northumbrian National Park Authority
- 14 High Weald National Landscape

Christina Hutchings
Virtual group coordinator



Reaching out to smaller family farms

Through the Farm for the Future programme, we aimed to reach England's family farms, particularly livestock farmers, and especially farmers which we classify as 'very hard to reach'. This meant farmers who required more intensive support or who had challenges attending workshops because of their remote location, care responsibilities or literacy levels. We wanted those who would be most adversely affected by the agricultural transition to get involved.

Farmers were recruited through national and local media campaigns. Our delivery partners were valuable in the recruitment process, as they had their own networks of communication with local farmers. They could also persuade the most isolated farmers to participate by personally connecting with them through phone calls and visits.

A total of 1,987 farmers signed up to the programme. Often several people from a farming family or farming business participated in activities, so we estimated that we reached up to 2,500 different people; 77 of the total number of farmers who signed up were 'very hard to reach' farmers.

Out of the farm businesses that we supported, 76% were small or very small, and 79% were either grazing livestock or mixed.



Age of participants

18-34

11%



35-44

14%



65-84

19%



45-64

55%



85+

1%

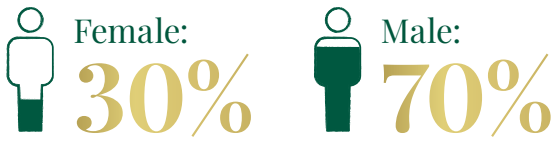


Andrew

Staffordshire

"It is quite isolating on the farm, so it made us feel part of the farming community...it is invaluable."

Gender of participants



William

Somerset

"While everything is changing with agricultural policy, it is great to get as much information as you can, so you can make the right decisions for your business."



Type of farms run by the participants

31%

Mixed

48%

Grazing livestock

21%

Other (including cereals,
dairy, specialist pigs
and poultry)

Size of participating farm businesses

76% Very small & Small
Less than one full time worker One to two full time workers

91% Very small, small & medium
Up to three full time workers

9% Larger
More than three full time workers



Farm ownership of participants

20%

Mixed tenure

64%

Owner occupiers

16%

Tenant farmers

Outcomes

- Farmers have gained confidence
- Farmers have improved resilience and can prepare and adapt to agricultural policy changes
- Farmers better understand how to improve management practices, including very hard to reach farmers

Mick

Lancashire

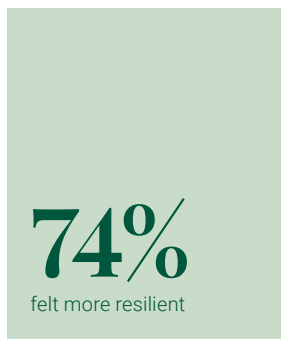
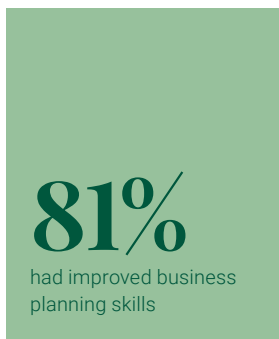
"It was beneficial to be in discussion groups with open-minded people willing to discuss ideas as well as giving everyone an outlook for the future."

Strengthening farming businesses

As the agricultural transition began to take place, we wanted Farm for the Future to help farmers to adapt their businesses to the changing policies. Our evaluation confirmed that, through our programme, many of the participating farmers gained increased awareness of the new environmental support schemes. At the same time, the farmers boosted their businesses' resilience, through improving their skills in business planning, and by introducing diversification and efficiencies.

Our delivery partners' local understanding and experience of effective communication with farmers meant they were ideally placed to engage and establish strong relationships, especially with the 'very hard to reach' farmers. What's more, the virtual group effectively engaged farmers who initially felt less prepared, less confident and more isolated from their local farming communities.

The participants told us...





Michaela

West Midlands

"I have recently returned home to assist my brother and our parents on our 800-acre arable farm. It has been a challenging time due to the phasing out of Basic Payments and all the various policy changes on top of climate transition and price volatility.

The RCF's Farm for the Future programme has come at just the right time to help me understand these various issues and become better connected to experts that can help out.

The programme's workshops have provided me with invaluable guidance. We are now more adept at gathering and analysing relevant data to ensure that we are better informed when making decisions and planning for our business. In particular, it has given us confidence to prepare diversification enterprises, which we feel will help to make our family farm more resilient."



Forging new connections

Too many farmers face isolation, and this often has a negative impact on their mental and physical health, particularly when they are going through stressful times.

Although Farm for the Future didn't specifically focus on wellbeing, we noticed that the activities such as farm walks and networking opportunities during in-person meetings, alongside WhatsApp groups and discussion forums led to the participants feeling much more of a sense of community than before. Even those who took part in the virtual group reported benefits from the social contacts they made.

These support networks are invaluable, particularly for smaller family farmers, and they will endure after the end of the programme, providing a vital legacy.

Joseph and Clare Cumbria

"We run a busy family farm across 500 acres in Cumbria, comprising a robotic dairy, anaerobic digestion plant, solar panels, a farm shop and caravan site. Three generations are involved, the youngest of which are in their twenties and keen to keep the farm going. For us, diversification is key to ensuring resilience."

The workshops were always interesting and provided a good opportunity for farmers to get together and talk about their concerns – particularly for those that rarely leave their farm because they're so consumed by the day to day."





An agile, flexible programme

The Farm for the Future programme was made up of core workshops, which ensured farmers gained coverage of business and environment advice, supplemented by optional demand-driven workshops and one-to-ones.

This mixed mode of delivery meant that the programme was agile enough to flex to the needs of the participants as they changed over time and as government policy developed. For example, during the programme's third cohort, participants wanted more information and advice about succession planning following the UK Government's autumn budget which introduced reforms to inheritance tax reliefs for agricultural property. The virtual group was particularly adaptable, as the coordinator could invite experts from around the country to contribute without them having to travel to a local meeting.

Although one-to-one support required more resources, it was very effective in encouraging farmers to make changes. Workshops were good value for money and provided peer-to-peer learning opportunities as well as social interaction, allowing farmers to share solutions to the challenges they were facing, and gaining confidence.

The specially tailored support for very hard to reach farmers was instrumental in engaging the 77 farmers that were operating in the most challenging circumstances. Meanwhile, nationwide availability of the virtual group meant that a wide range of farmers could join who were unable to reach in-person events.





Workshops

were particularly effective for some types of farmer: livestock and mixed farming business farmers were more likely to attend business and policy workshops and new entrants to farming were particularly engaged in business planning workshops.



Participants who received one-to-one support

were twice as likely to report increased confidence in making farm business decisions, and very hard-to-reach farmers responded particularly well to personalised one-to-one advisory support.



The virtual group

was helpful to engage farmers in remote locations or with limited time available.



Jess

North Yorkshire

"The Farm for the Future programme has been brilliant – informing us and helping us to drive forward on several key issues.

Our family runs a 100-acre livestock farm on the edge of North York Moors, and we carry out some contracting work.

We received loads of free advice under Farm for the Future, all delivered in a very down to earth way. It covered a range of subjects from business and succession planning to all the various Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) options relevant to us. Most of the time, the whole family attended and this was useful as it gave

the older farm business partners their first introduction to the SFI and it provided a basis from which we could talk through succession planning. On top of that, it was very useful to hear the experiences of other farmers at the workshops.

The one-to-one session was really beneficial. The consultant that visited us was great – very thorough in his approach, familiar with the context of our farm and very friendly. There are so many challenges to face up to these days, but we feel a bit better prepared having participated in the programme."





A trusted grassroots network

Our network of local delivery partners was key in reaching out to the most isolated farmers as well as supporting us to create a programme tailored to the unique circumstances of the farmers across the varied landscapes of England.

At the same time, our delivery partners, many of which were small, not-for-profit farm support groups, benefited from their collaboration with us, as a well-established national charity. The programme was instrumental in developing their technical and financial capacity. It also gave them the opportunity to build on their existing networks to strengthen their position as trusted advisory service providers of choice for the small family farms in their areas. This was not a direct aim of the Farm for the Future programme, but demonstrates the wider benefits that such a programme can have.



Margaret

County Durham

"The programme has been really helpful to us, and we particularly liked the local approach, using experts that knew about our farm.

Our family runs a 160-hectare livestock farm in the North Pennines National Landscape. We currently have a Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreement focused on rough grazing for birds, which expires this year, and we've been confused by the wide range of options available.

Our connection with Upper Teesdale Agricultural Support Service (UTASS) goes back a few years and so it was very helpful to have them provide us with extra support through the RCF Farm for the Future programme. We attended several workshops, which introduced the various new schemes and a very timely meeting on succession planning. The social aspect of the workshops was an added

bonus, getting together with other farmers in the area and talking through the challenges we face and how to get through them.

We also received specialist one-to-one support from an expert that was familiar with the farm and the local setting. This enabled her to immediately focus on the scheme options that were most relevant to us. UTASS followed up by helping to explain how to prepare an application on the Rural Payment Agency portal. We feel ready to act, once there's clarity on our switch from the HLS agreement. In the meantime, we completed a project to plant 170 metres of hedgerow, to help make space for nature.

We appreciate the support provided by the RCF through UTASS and we hope it may continue further, to help us deal with all the various challenges ahead of us."



Our delivery partners in focus

We worked with 14 incredible delivery partners over three years. Our model of working with different types of organisations ensured expert, tailored support was available to as many farmers across England as possible. Here is a closer look at some of the people who made it happen.

We worked with two colleges, which were able to use their existing networks of farms and alumni to improve the reach of the programme.

Myerscough College

Founded in 1894, Myerscough College is one of the oldest further education colleges in Lancashire. It runs the Myerscough Farmer Network, a not-for-profit support group that is independently run by farmers for farmers, which has grown from the farmer groups established through the Northwest Livestock Programme. Over the last three years, it has used its network to help deliver Farm for the Future to 148 farm businesses.



Victoria Bracken

National Park and National Landscape authorities are responsible for maintaining national parks and landscapes across the country. By partnering with them to deliver Farm for the Future, we could offer tailored support to those who farm on protected landscapes, which can pose its own unique challenges.

North York Moors National Park Authority

The North York Moors National Park Authority conserves and enhances the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the North York Moors and promotes opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the area by the public. In the final two years of Farm for the Future, North York Moors National Park Authority joined the programme to support its delivery in this area of the country, helping to reach a further 48 farm businesses.



Rebecca Thompson



Farm support groups are deeply rooted within the farming communities they serve. They are trusted resources which work collaboratively to provide support to specific challenges faced by farmers and rural communities. The RCF founded the Farm Support Groups Initiative in 2019 to help these incredible organisations to better collaborate and share knowledge, best practice and advice with each other. We partnered with eight of them to help deliver Farm for the Future to farmers in their own networks.

Exmoor Hill Farming Network

A farmer-led organisation established in 2014, Exmoor Hill Farming Network brings information, training, demonstrations, grants and opportunities to upland farmers across Exmoor. This independent network works in partnership with local farmers, local agencies and the wider Exmoor community to provide a long-term information and support hub for Exmoor's farming community. Exmoor Hill Farming Network delivered Farm for the Future to 121 farm businesses over three years.



Katherine Williams

The Farmer Network

Formed in 2005, The Farmer Network is an independent, not-for-profit organisation run by farmers, which operates in Cumbria, the Yorkshire Dales and Northumberland. It supports 1,400 farmer members to sustain their businesses and maintain the rural communities and environment where they farm. It delivered Farm for the Future workshops to a total of 299 farm businesses over three years.



Veronica Waller

Upper Teesdale Agricultural Support Services (UTASS)

This locally-led charity has worked with farmers across the Durham Dales for more than 25 years. With over 550 member households, UTASS supports and represents the views, interests and needs of local people. It works together with farming families to understand their aspirations and support them to access the information, services and opportunities that they need to be sustainable, including emotional and financial support. UTASS helps farm businesses to focus on the future through learning, development and succession planning. UTASS delivered Farm for the Future to 160 farm businesses over three years.



Grace Crawford



The virtual group was particularly important at the beginning of the Farm for the Future, when the Covid-19 pandemic was still limiting social activities. The virtual workshops made the programme available to farmers who were outside of the sub-regions where there were in-person groups.

Christina Hutchings

Christina is a farmer herself and has worked with The Royal Countryside Fund on Farm for the Future, as well as the Farm Resilience and Savings in Soil programmes. Throughout Farm for the Future, she coordinated the virtual group, which was open to farmers across England to ensure they could receive support even if an in-person workshop wasn't available near them. Christina provided support to 198 farm businesses.



David

Herefordshire

"There's an understanding by The Royal Countryside Fund and its local partners of farming and how it is different in each area and for each farm business."

The programme is run by people in the local area, rather than a large conglomerate somewhere else."



Reflections

At The Royal Countryside Fund, we are keen to build on the successes of the Farm for the Future programme at the same time as learning from the challenges that were faced. We would welcome the opportunity to create future programmes alongside other funders or government bodies. Our reflections for similar programmes are as follows.



For those running the programmes:

Combine different modes of delivery, such as workshops, peer learning, virtual groups and one-to-one support, to ensure that the programme is efficient, flexible and accessible as well as offering opportunities for farmers to make connections.

Extend the duration of cohorts to at least one year, allowing time for deeper engagement.

Simplify evaluation processes and reporting methods to reduce the administrative burden.

Provide tailored support for different types of farmers, according to their age and experience, ensuring flexibility to serve local needs.

Make use of community-based outreach and word of mouth referrals to engage very hard to reach farmers.

Strengthen follow-up support to sustain momentum for business improvements among participants.



For policymakers:

Clear and timely communication about policy changes would encourage participation and reduce uncertainty among participants.

Clearer messaging about the financial benefits of environmental schemes would help farmers to engage with them.

By providing funding for programmes in advance, rather than retrospectively, policymakers could encourage more third sector organisations to become involved.



Crispin

Essex

"When I signed up to the RCF's Farm for the Future programme the family farm had been struggling with profitability for several years and that had been taking its toll on me personally. My family said that they rarely saw me happy any more.

During the programme the topics that we covered were wide and varied.

Almost everything was relevant or useful to me...I now find that I feel happy and more positive most of the time and much more able to deal with issues as they arrive. 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."



Are you a real friend of the countryside?

Across the UK, rural and farming communities are living with immense uncertainty. Becoming a Friend of The Royal Countryside Fund means supporting real people and a real future for rural Britain.



Donate today and help build
a real future for rural Britain

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