



THE ROYAL
COUNTRYSIDE
FUND

Farm clusters: Key steps to success



About The Royal Countryside Fund

We're The Royal Countryside Fund – a UK-wide charity working alongside farming families and rural communities to provide the support and funding they need to thrive.

Right now, 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 alone – and with us, they don't have to. That's why HM King Charles III founded The Royal Countryside Fund back in 2010 – to recognise the real challenges that come with rural life and do something about it.

Our locally based programmes help farming families discover achievable ways to make their farms more financially and environmentally resilient. And by combining their ideas with our funding and guidance, we help rural communities run community-led projects that will stand the test of time. So far, we've supported over 5,100 farming families, and invested more than £12.7 million in more than 556 rural community-led projects.

Whether it's through farming support or rural projects, we're all about bringing people together and making changes that last. Helping countryside communities thrive now and for generations to come.

To find out more, visit The Royal Countryside Fund's website at www.royalcountrysidefund.org.uk

Background

Farm clusters are emerging as an increasingly important structure for delivering landscape-scale environmental benefits and supporting resilient rural communities. At The Royal Countryside Fund, we work with a range of farm clusters across our farming programmes. These groups exist in many forms and have come together for a variety of reasons, from learning about new farming policies to creating habitat corridors. Connecting farm businesses together can have a transformative impact, both on the local environment through collaboration and on the social fabric of the rural community by bringing together typically isolated farmers to learn and build relationships.

In order to increase the effectiveness of our work with farm clusters, we wanted to understand their needs and motivations better. We therefore commissioned Savills to undertake a piece of research with 11 of the groups we work with through a series of interviews. The following outlines the main themes that emerged through these interviews, in particular, how clusters function successfully and where there are gaps in the support they require to thrive.

The main benefits of farm clusters

Farm clusters enable coordinated environmental interventions at both a landscape and very localised scale, improving a range of factors across biodiversity, soil health, carbon sequestration and water management. A collaborative approach increases the ability to access both private and public funding, such as through a Landscape Recovery project to enable environmental improvement. If a group decides to become a legal entity, such as a Community Interest Company (CIC), this can allow them to access a greater range of funding.

Farm clusters provide critical social infrastructure in rural areas, reducing isolation and improving mental health. The sociable nature of a group through WhatsApp chats, meetings held in local pubs and farm visits allows people to build relationships with others who are geographically close to them but who they may not know. Peer-to-peer learning is also a crucial method of knowledge transfer within the farming community. These informal channels have been invaluable for learning about sustainable farming practices and emerging agricultural policies.

Case study A

One group we work with is a cluster of 13 farm businesses in the north east of England that came together around 2023. Similar farm types and geographies meant a cluster was an attractive method of addressing similar challenges together. As a result, this is a group that has seen significant social benefits to its members. The impact of meeting with other farmers in times of difficulty and sharing their experiences is notable for the wellbeing of the group. Additionally, this building of trust and relationships coupled with improving skills and knowledge of new schemes has allowed excitement to build within the group and encouraged positive action at a larger scale.

Key factors in the success of a farm cluster

Clusters are most successful when they are farmer-led from the beginning and remain farmer-driven, with a shared purpose defined by the members. Voluntary participation is key to trust, ownership and long-term sustainability of the group. Early focus should be placed on local relevance and achievable goals to maintain momentum and prevent fatigue.

Establishment of either a formal or informal steering group or governance structure is central to ensuring there is coordination of workstreams and representation of different members of the group.

Facilitators are the number one feature that interviewees highlighted as drivers for the success of their clusters. A funded facilitator keeps a group running, seeking out new funding opportunities, bringing together ideas and moving them forward. Independent facilitators play a crucial role in building trust and ensuring balanced engagement among members and external partners. Where accessible, facilitator training has had a significant impact on the success of farm clusters.

Case study B

This group near the south coast is made up of 19 farm businesses and was established in 2022. They were initially motivated by a desire to sustain family farms through the changing policy landscape, with a particular focus on conservation through joining up areas between SSSIs. Interviewees from this cluster emphasised the importance of being led by the farmers. They have an informal structure with a working group of three to four members, who contribute to the upcoming agendas and themes. Every member is then invited to the annual steering group, where all are encouraged to propose ideas that can inform the programme of work for the upcoming year. They feel this is key for getting support from the members of the group. They learned that it was worth spending the time to find the right organisation to facilitate the group and start with a few farmers with similar mindsets, then scale up gradually.

Establishment stage support

During the early stages of setting up a cluster group, those interviewed highlighted that affordable legal support would have been particularly helpful, for example:

- Guidance on selecting the appropriate legal structure, such as CIC or cooperative.
- Access to solicitors who are familiar with rural and environmental law.
- Signposting to pro bono or low-cost legal services.

Many of those interviewed also expressed that contact with existing farm clusters would have been of great benefit. Speaking with others who have been involved in the establishment of a cluster would have helped with decisions on governance structures and the practicalities of running a group, but many did not have contacts with such experience.

Case study C

This is a group of 40 farm businesses in the north west of England, who came together in 2021 to understand how to continue to farm in traditional, sustainable ways and deliver nature recovery in the context of policy change. When it came to establishing themselves as a farm cluster, the group told us that they would have benefitted from advice from another group who had been through the process. The most valuable advice they received was on how to establish themselves as a Community Interest Company. They were keen to form as a CIC from the start to allow them to access funding, such as Farming in Protected Landscapes, so they sought advice from a local professional who guided them through the process.

Where long-term support is needed

Long-term, there are common areas where groups expressed a need for support. The most frequent of these was access to funding, particularly for cluster facilitators or coordinators. With no further rounds of the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund and the prospect of Farming in Protected Landscapes ending in 2026, most groups are concerned about their future if funding for these positions is withdrawn.

Where funding is available, clusters often struggle with cash flow issues due to reimbursement-based funding models. Groups of small family farms are usually not in a position to front the cost of significant capital works projects, and the increased availability of grant funding would remove barriers to participation.

Participants consistently expressed a desire to learn from those further along in the process. There were suggestions of a national platform or directory to allow early-stage clusters to connect with experienced peers and share best practice.

There was also a desire for low-cost access to professionals such as:

- Legal experts.
- Environmental scientists and ecologists.
- Supply chain and branding specialists.
- Funding consultants.
- Marketing and PR advisors.
- University and research partnerships.

Case study D

This group of 24 farm businesses in the West Midlands came together to connect key habitats through a project led by a combination of a local authority and a major landowner. Though they have made impressive environmental achievements through the cluster, funding their work has not always been easy. They have faced issues with funders not releasing grant payments even after work has been completed, and a lack of flexibility from

fundors to manage delays that were outside of the group's control. Like many of the other clusters we interviewed, funding for a facilitator is critical to the survival of the group. The end of funding for the initial facilitator led to the group seeking out someone from the local farming community who could fill this role from a more neutral position.

Conclusion

This research has been enlightening for understanding the breadth of initiatives carried out by these groups, but also for deepening our understanding of their needs for survival into the future. In a time of significant upheaval for British agriculture, farm clusters are proving invaluable for delivering environmental targets, bridging skills gaps and tackling less tangible issues such as rural isolation and loneliness.

Appendices

Appendix I: Steps to establish a farm cluster

Key things to consider for a successful farm cluster:

Recruitment

- Identify the target area, for example, by geography or habitat.
- Gauge interest from the local farming community; utilise social gatherings.
- Identify potential target-focused and/or operational funding opportunities to help with recruitment.
- Identify potential venues for meetings/social events, including estimation of costs involved.

Establishment

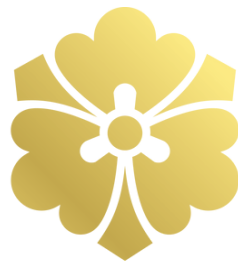
- Form a steering group.
- Recruit members.
- Decide on farm cluster structure, for example a Community Interest Company (CIC).
- Recruit a facilitator.
- Complete required paperwork to set up the structure of the farm cluster.
- Develop plans for initial projects.
- Apply for initial funding source(s) for project(s).

Operation

- Continue to review funding opportunities from public or private sources.
- Review policy changes and assess their impact on your farm cluster.
- Engage with research relevant to your target areas and local habitats.
- Host social events for the cluster and wider farming community.
- Host educational events for the cluster and wider farming community; invite speakers, for example from other clusters or subject matter experts, to provide useful insights or updates on relevant policy.
- Communicate progress and achievements to the local community.

Appendix II: Organisations for support

Organisation	Services
The Cranfield Trust	Pro bono services for charities and CICs, cranfieldtrust.org
RuraLink	Rural facilitator training and career transition resources, ruralink.co.uk
GWCT	Support through Natural Capital Advisory, naturalcapitaladvisory.co.uk and Environmental Farmers Group, environmentalfarmersgroup.co.uk



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