

Evaluation of the Hill Farming Training Project Pilot

The Foundation for Common Land developed the Hill Farming Training project to fill a gap identified by a number of hill farmers, who saw that many of the staff in organisations such as National Park Authorities and Natural England had limited understanding of how hill farming works. This has led to misunderstandings and poorer working relationships between farmers and these conservation professionals. The project also sought to train those working at a more senior level in the design and development of agri-environment schemes that form part of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

Funding

The pilot was funded principally by The Prince's Countryside Fund, whilst additional funding was provided through Fells and Dales RDPE LEADER for Cumbria, and the Duchy of Cornwall for Dartmoor respectively. The evaluation covered pilot courses in Cumbria only.

Evaluation

The pilot phase of the project in Cumbria consisted of 9 one-day courses, held between October 2012 - July 2013. The evaluation aimed to analyse participant and farmer trainer experiences, and identify what influence, if any, the learning from these courses had on the process of negotiating agri-environment agreements, and policy development.

The methodology

Semi-structured telephone interviews were carried out with a representative sample of 20 course participants and all six farmer trainers. Recurrent themes were coded making it possible to quantify answers to certain questions.

The analysis

By analysing the responses from all respondents, three key themes emerged, which help define why the training was so well received.

1. The learning environment - training being held on farms, in an informal, relaxed and inviting atmosphere.
2. The delivery - farmer trainers were perceived to be open and honest, particularly with reference to financial data of their farm businesses.
3. The flexibility - the opportunity to put forward questions or queries and participate in discussion.



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The training has also had an impact on the process of negotiating and perceived importance of agri-environment agreements. Natural England staff reported that they now have a greater understanding of farm finances, suggesting a greater consideration for the implications of conservation measures on hill farm businesses. Analysing the financial data helped participants to see the connection between the importance of agreement designs to the viability of hill farm businesses.

The pilot is thought to have had lesser impacts on national policy development. This was supported by the views of the farmer trainers, who felt that more individuals “higher up the food chain” would need to attend the training in order for it to influence policy at the design level. The training was seen to be part of a longer term, systemic movement towards increased dialogue and understanding between farmers and land management stakeholders.

The farmer trainer perspective

The six farmer trainers saw the project first and foremost as an opportunity to communicate how their hill farm works rather than to address issues they may have had with agri-environment schemes and conservation policy. They were happy with the balance between indoor and practical sessions and enjoyed working in pairs. They were able to support each other to provide detailed answers to a wide range of questions. They noted that the participants began with varying levels of knowledge and understanding of hill farming - a few had a good level of knowledge, but many only had a basic understanding.

They believed participant's understanding of hill farming systems had increased as a result of the training, but it was too early to identify whether this would affect their working relationships with conservation professionals. The farmers noted that the training opened up a two-way learning process, relaying they also had learnt from those in attendance. They were confident that in the longer term this type of training would have positive impacts across organisations, especially if more staff were able to undertake the training.

The participant perspective

All participants within the sample held local or regional, roles within their respective organisations. Half stated they desired to gain a greater understanding of upland farming systems, whilst eight mentioned learning more about the economics of upland farming. Other reasons for attending included assessing the quality of training, networking and reputation within the sector; The National Park Authority also made attendance to courses compulsory training for some of its employees.

The Introduction to Hill Farming course included a number of practical sessions (eg sheep handling, worming and marking) The participants found these enjoyable and memorable. They provided a platform for questions and discussion, and gave a hands-on insight into daily work of a hill farmer.

The Common Land Management training was commended for the detailed technical knowledge disseminated, and the walk out onto the common provided an appropriate and appreciated environment for discussion.

The Hill Farm Business course was commended highly for the case studies of hill farm business accounts, including those of the host farmer trainer. He was praised for his openness and transparency as he provided his own farms accounts for them to review.

All recognised that holding the training on hill farms, delivered by hill farmers was key to their learning experience and made this training special

When asked about the impacts of the training, most stated that their knowledge of hill farming had increased. Those from Natural England tended to focus on gaining a better grasp of hill farm economics, whilst those from conservation NGO's noted that their increased understanding has helped them better communicate with the upland farming community. They believed that that this type of training would be relevant into the future, if updated from time to time to reflect policy changes and development. All were interested in future courses, and suggested that colleagues from their respective organisations would benefit attending the training.

Conclusions and recommendations

Both sets of responses were highly positive, and many were interested in the how the training would progress in the future. The training is known to have increased participants' knowledge of hill farming systems and understanding of farmer perspectives. This is having a positive impact on their relationships and negotiations with farmers. As yet the training has had limited influence on the design of policy. This could be enhanced if more senior staff from organisations such as Natural England and Defra attended courses in the future.

Consideration should be given to four areas of development:

1. The positive nature of the feedback suggests that this type of course might be attractive in other locations or that other organisations would like to attend courses in Cumbria. This would help maintain the momentum created by the current pilot.
2. Future courses could be developed with a wider range of organisations and positions. This will help maintaining the current core group of farmer trainers, although new expertise might be required in some instances.
3. Where a course is developed in a different location the current farmer trainers should be involved in the training of farmer trainers in that location. To ensure that the course format is retained and a strong participant learning experience delivered.
4. New issues that might be covered well in this format would be land management for water (as mentioned by three pilot participants), delivery of ecosystem services and management of historic and cultural landscapes.