



SUSTAINABLE INTENSIFICATION  
RESEARCH PLATFORM



## SCIENCE, POLICY AND PRACTICE NOTE 6 Farmer Collaboration and Engagement



## The Issue

Over the course of their careers, the majority of farmers are involved in collaborating or cooperating with other farmers. They often work together as members of buying or producer groups, and by sharing labour and machinery.

But what encourages farmers to collaborate? What are the barriers to collaboration? What works when engaging farmers in collaborative initiatives?

Farmers report a range of reasons why they collaborate, including financial incentives, cost-savings, efficiency savings and economies of scale. Benefits of knowledge exchange, mutual help and social learning also draw some farmers into working together. Others are motivated by environmental outcomes.

Barriers to collaboration include unexpected economic costs of participating in initiatives, additional workload, perceived unfairness in the distribution of the benefits of collaborating and problems reaching collective agreements.

## SIP's Response

To better understand what enables farmer collaboration we conducted an extensive literature review, developed case studies of 11 collaborative initiatives involving farmers relating to the environment, business and water, undertook a baseline survey with 244 farmers and managers, analysed the results of the Farm Business Survey to understand constraints on collaboration and explored collaboration in six farmer discussion groups. While the economic benefits of collaboration for farmers were apparent from these studies, there are several other factors that support successful collaborative working.

## What SIP Learnt

There are a few key ingredients that clearly enable collaborative initiatives to work:

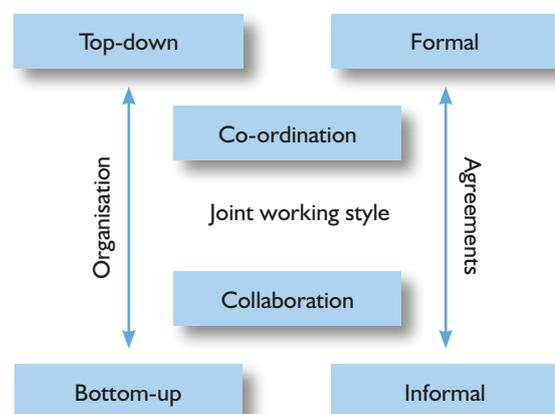
- a strong co-ordinator role
- trust between participants
- shared values
- appropriate joint working style

A strong co-ordinator is needed because many of the problems of collaboration result from differences of opinion about a course of action and different views on a given situation. Facilitation and leadership is critical to resolving differences and reaching agreement. Without appropriate co-ordination the pressures on initiatives posed by unexpected economic costs are less likely to be adequately managed. A strong co-ordinator can also help communicate the uncertainties and risks inherent in collaboration, which mitigates the conflict that sometimes arises from unexpected consequences of participating in initiatives.

Trust is key to working together. There is a general preference for informal collaboration which is flexible and adaptable, but this only works if participants can trust each other to deliver on agreed actions. Even in more formal collaborations where roles are more rigidly defined, trust is vital to success.

Shared values are more important than geographical proximity in collaboration. While geographical proximity is important and there are clear benefits of clustering in environmental collaboration, if participants have similar outlooks and motivations the collaboration is more likely to be successful and geographical proximity becomes less important.

An appropriate style of joint working for any particular initiative must be identified to encourage collaboration. There are two main styles of joint working; collaborative (more top-down and formal) and cooperative (more bottom-up and informal). Participants need to be comfortable with this style of working, and understand its benefits and risks.





## Opportunities for Policy and Practice

### Engaging With Farmers In Practice – What Works?

If you are considering developing a collaborative initiative with farmers, this will at some stage involve convening a group to discuss the proposed project. On the basis of our work we recommend you consider these tips on engaging with farmers.

1. When convening groups of farmers its vital to **ensure that the event is relevant**; the farming community need to know there is something they are going to get of the event, otherwise naturally other priorities will take precedence. An event might be relevant to farmers because it is about regulations, saving money while creating positive outcomes for the environment or accessing grant funding, for instance. Think carefully about why an event is relevant, otherwise it simply will not appeal.
2. **Use bespoke communication.** When inviting participants you may need a generic invitation, but try to tailor this to individuals or groups as much as possible. This will help ensure invitees understand how the event is relevant to them. Avoid jargon. You could use pressing issues to gain interest and secure attendance. Consider building on existing relationships with farmers; are there well-established links to local farmer groups or third sector organisations who could advise or contact potential participants?
3. As far as possible **organise events around farmers' schedules and priorities**; the more flexible you can be with the timing of an event, the better. If possible, identify or contact a group first and then set a date, rather than set a date and then try to find participants. Keep the farming calendar in mind, for instance avoid organising events during lambing and harvest. Farmers are often working both on and off farm so don't over burden them with invitations or multiple meetings. To maintain good will consider whether two meetings could be squeezed into one, for instance.
4. **Diversify the ways farmers can engage:** there's no 'one size fits all' approach that will appeal to all farmers. It is likely you will reach a broader range of farmers if you create a range of ways they can engage with your project. For instance, some may attend group discussions at a venue while others might be more comfortable at one-to-one on-farm meetings.
5. **Invest in an appropriate facilitator and create a convivial atmosphere.** An event should be facilitated by someone that farmers know and trust. Ensure facilitators have the right expertise so that participants get the knowledge they want. Create a genial mood at the event by choosing a convenient location, include a meal and some time for socialising whilst keeping meetings relatively short.
6. **Understand the reasons why farmers are engaging with your project or initiative.** They may want new knowledge or be interested in how other farmers are working; they may engage for social reasons or want to air their views and feed into government thinking. Try to ascertain what farmers want from your event before you meet them, that way it is easier to meet their expectations.

### Supporting Farmer Collaboration

Beyond the level of practical engagement there are several actions that should be taken:

1. **Allocate resources to identifying appropriate facilitators and leaders of initiatives.** The facilitator or leader is key to the success of the initiative, ensure they do not 'burn out' due to extra workload.
2. **Contemplate succession planning** for leadership to minimise the risks of periods of transition and help ensure their sustainability of collaborative initiatives.
3. **Allocate resources to evaluation.** Formal measurement of the benefits of collaboration is rare. Build in evaluation from the project planning stage and help demonstrate the value of collaboration through monitoring and measurement of outcomes.
4. **Create space to consider the difficulties of collaboration.** There can be a reluctance to talk about difficulties and our case study work suggested that few initiatives consider what could go wrong when they are set up. Risk assessment and management at an early stage of development is prudent.



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## Further Resources

The below reports can be accessed via the Defra website.  
Please visit <http://bit.ly/2tYtWnx>

Morris, C., Jarrett, J., Lobley, M. and Wheeler, R. (2017). *Final report on Baseline Farm Survey*. Report for Defra project LM0302 Sustainable Intensification Research Platform Project 2: Opportunities and Risks for Farming and the Environment at Landscape Scales

Wilkinson, T. (2017). *Design Criteria for Formal Collaboration between Farmers at the Catchment-Scale*. Report for Defra project LM0302 Sustainable Intensification Research Platform Project 2: Opportunities and Risks for Farming and the Environment at Landscape Scales

Jarrett, J., Morris, C., Wheeler, R. and Winter, M. (2015). *Literature Review on Farming Collaboration*. Report for Defra project LM0302 Sustainable Intensification Research Platform Project 2: Opportunities and Risks for Farming and the Environment at Landscape Scales

Morris, C. and Jarrett, S. (2016). *Report on Case Studies of Collaborative Initiatives*. Report for Defra project LM0302 Sustainable Intensification Research Platform Project 2: Opportunities and Risks for Farming and the Environment at Landscape Scales

Wilson, P. (2017). *Analysis of Farm Business Survey 2011-12 Business Management Practices*. Report for Defra project LM0302 Sustainable Intensification Research Platform Project 2: Opportunities and Risks for Farming and the Environment at Landscape Scales

Fish, R. (2017). *Farmer Discussion Groups – Key Findings*. Report for Defra project LM0302 Sustainable Intensification Research Platform Project 2: Opportunities and Risks for Farming and the Environment at Landscape Scales

Lobley, M. and Wilkinson, T. (2017). *Report on Socio-Economic Barriers to Collaboration between Farmers and Mechanisms to Encourage Collaboration*. Report for Defra project LM0302 Sustainable Intensification Research Platform Project 2: Opportunities and Risks for Farming and the Environment at Landscape Scales

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*The Sustainable Intensification Research Platform (SIP) is a multi-partner research programme comprising academia, farmers, industry experts, environmental organisations, and policymakers.*

*Funded by Defra and the Welsh Government, the platform explores the opportunities and risks of Sustainable Intensification (SI) from a range of perspectives and landscape scales across England and Wales.*

*The Platform, run from 2014-17, has investigated ways to increase farm productivity, reduce environmental impacts, and increase the benefits that agricultural land provides to society.*



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## More Information

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