ISSUE 16 • SPRING 2025 • WWW.FWI.CO.UK/TRANSITION

FARMERS WEEKLY

VITAL STATISTICS

How data can boost your bottom line

TRANSITION

Securing a sustainable future for your farm business

How to secure a profitable future

Welcome to *Transition* – the quarterly supplement from *Farmers Weekly* to help you secure a sustainable future for your farm business. There are less than two weeks to go before our Transition Live event on 8 May.

We would like to invite you to join us to network with hundreds of other farmers, experts and industry leaders. This year's event – at Leeds University's Spen Farm – boasts a wealth of experts to help secure a profitable future for your farm business. To find out more, see **p10** or visit **fwi.co.uk/transition-live**.

It is also an opportunity to see the university's cutting-edge regenerative agriculture research unit. Our cover story this issue focuses on costs and profitability. Farmers and growers are rightly twitchy when someone stands up and tells them to cut costs. But new thinking suggests a sub-field approach can help maximise margins.

Many farms were wrong-footed by the government's recent move to halt the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI). With a new arrangement due to be unveiled this summer, we ask experts "Where next for the SFI?"

We also look at the latest upgrade for Northern Ireland's farming scheme. The rebranded Sustainable Agriculture Programme contains incentives for beef producers – and a transition payment for farmers.

With government investment dwindling, it could be time to consider supply chain funding. We examine rewards for regenerative farming practices, baselining and continuous improvement – which are all on offer. As always, we are grateful to everyone who has taken the time to share their stories with us as they strive to secure a sustainable future for their businesses – including our Transition Farmers, who are working to embrace positive change.

We are equally grateful to our Transition Partners for sharing their expertise and advice along the way. For more about our Transition initiative, visit our knowledge hub at **fwi.co.uk/transition**.

Johann Tasker, *Transition* editor

MAIN PHOTO: GNP

OUR PARTNERS

The *Farmers Weekly* Transition Partner Network is a UK-wide community of farmers, industry stakeholders and influencers working together to secure a sustainable future for UK agriculture. If you would like to join and want more information, contact Anna Eccleston at **anna.eccleston@markallengroup.com**

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CONTENT HIGHLIGHTS

PARTNER PERSPECTIVE

How to ease the process of succession planning

Succession planning can be one of the most difficult, but important, conversations a farming family will have. Here are some top tips on how to approach the process to secure your farm's future

Succession planning has become more important than ever following the changes to the inheritance tax regime, but conversations need to be focused on more than just tax and the transfer of assets.

"Successful succession planning is about making sure everyone within the family can move forward with clarity and confidence," says Jack Bull, farming consultant with Strutt & Parker. "It's a long-term, strategic process which is about ensuring business continuity, financial stability and avoiding family disputes."

Every family and business is different, so succession plans will need to be tailored – and the earlier you start the process, the better.

What matters most is being open and honest from the outset, managing expectations through clear, consistent communication.

The first step should be about establishing the facts of the business – even if you think they are obvious.

"This means confirming the exact ownership of assets, the status of tenancies and timescales, mortgages, overdrafts, pensions, investments and cash," says Jack.

"Then you can start the conversation about what everyone wants and how they see the future. People often have different ideas and opinions that may never have been voiced before."

There is always the risk that small differences of opinion can turn fractious. This is why having a third party facilitate a family meeting can help things to run more smoothly and ensure everyone has their voice heard.

"Dealing with your own family can be challenging, as personal relationships and business ones overlap. Having someone independent in the room can help you navigate any divisive situations and establish a clear path forward.

"Decisions about the future of the business are also likely to have legal and tax implications, so it is vital to discuss any proposals with your land agent, solicitor and accountant to make sure any changes are made as efficiently as possible."

Drilling into the detail of each family member's expectations is the key to long-term motivation and happiness.

For example, understanding what the next generation want from their working life can prevent issues down the line.

"In farming, there are naturally periods that are busy and the work must be done, but identifying when people can take time off and establishing a fair reward structure can go a long way in avoiding resentment or jealousy."

It is equally important to explore what the older generations think retirement looks like, as it often means different things to different people.

"This can then facilitate a discussion on how retirement can be managed – and financed. Will they stop work entirely, or phase out gradually? Will retirement be funded through the farm or personal pensions/investments? Can the business support any drawings?"

While those actively engaged in the farm are likely to be most involved in discussions, it is also important to include any 'off-farm' children and the partners of all interested parties.

"I have helped a number of farming businesses successfully navigate this process," says Jack. "For many people, this will be the most important decision they make. Every situation is different, but the key to success is honesty and openness. It may be uncomfortable in the short term, but it makes for smoother sailing when big decisions are made."

To find out more
Call 07384 821901
Email jack.bull@struttandparker.com
Visit rural.struttandparker.com

Meet our Transition Farmers

These 16 farmers are sharing their journeys with us as they adapt their businesses

Karen Halton
Cheshire

Farm size 240ha

Enterprises
530-cow dairy herd

Transition goals
- Recruit/retain staff
- Maintain animal health and welfare
- Increase direct sales

James MacCartney
Rutland

Farm size 162ha

Enterprises
Beef and sheep

Transition goals
- Reduce disease in sheep
- Be better than net zero
- Establish herbal leys

Vaughan Hodgson
P17
Cumbria

Farm size 244ha

Enterprises
Cereals, grassland, broilers

Transition goals
- Support the next generation
- Replace lost Basic Payment Scheme income
- Adapt to uncertain weather

Alan Steven
Fife

Farm size 138ha

Enterprises
Potatoes, brussels sprouts, parsnips, malting barley

Transition goals
- Reduce cultivations
- Improve soil health
- More resilient rotations

Andrew McFadzean
Ayrshire

Farm size 285ha

Enterprises
350 beef cattle, wheat, beans, barley, fodder beet

Transition goals
- Slash finishing time
- Reduce dependence on inputs using solar energy
- Improve grassland

Rachel & Richard Risdon
P27
Devon

Farm size 161ha

Enterprises
300-cow dairy herd

Transition goals
- Secure adequate labour
- Better understanding of Environmental Land Management
- Reduce carbon footprint

Kit Speakman
Essex

Farm size 275ha

Enterprises
Mixed arable, beef and sheep

Transition goals
- Bridge income gap
- Fully diversified business
- Widen the rotation

Eddie Andrew
P30
Sheffield

Farm size 73ha

Enterprises
Dairy, milk delivery service, ice cream parlour and farm shop

Transition goals
- Co-operating to reduce costs
- Establish a new dairy
- Reduce carbon footprint

Irwel Jones
Carmarthenshire

Farm size 375ha

Enterprises
1,500 ewes on owned and rented land, suckler cows and followers, root crops

Transition goals
- Manage natural woodland
- Plant hedgerows
- Rely less on volatile inputs

Andy Bason
P9
Hampshire

Farm size 800ha

Enterprises
Cereals, spring beans, oats, linseed and oilseed rape

Transition goals
- Cut carbon emissions by 30%
- Establish 10ha of agroforestry
- Establish 10ha of woodland

Duncan Blyth
Norfolk

Farm size 2,650ha

Enterprises
Cereals, oilseed rape, sugar beet, pulses, grassland, woodland, wetlands

Transition goals
- Improve soil health
- Develop natural capital revenues
- Achieve net zero by 2030

Fergal Watson
P13 and 17
County Down

Farm size 285ha across three units

Enterprises
170-cow suckler herd, beans, wheat, spring barley, oats

Transition goals
- Recruit/retain farm staff
- Restructure suckler herd
- Improve business resilience

Philip Vickers
County Durham

Farm size 1,250ha

Enterprises
Winter wheat, oilseed rape, spring barley, spring beans, lupins, rotational grass; share-farming agreement with tenant sheep farmer

Transition goals
- Maintain margins while changing approach
- Improve soil health and resilience
- Enhance natural environment

Kate and Vicky Morgan
P27
East Yorkshire

Farm size 1,700 breeding sows

Enterprises
Weaning 1,000 pigs a week – finished on-site and through B&B arrangements with local farmers, 140ha rented out

Transition goals
- Facilitate structural change in supply chain
- Establish more influence over own destiny
- Diversify

Ed Shuldham
P25
Wiltshire

Farm size 1,800ha

Enterprises
Cereals, oilseed rape, oats, forage and grain maize, peas, solar, biomass, anaerobic digestion, events and property diversifications

Transition goals
- Help shape Sustainable Farming Incentive through participation in pilot
- Make more use of data
- Take natural capital

Matthew Williams
Shropshire

Farm size 1,100ha

Enterprises
Cereals, oilseed rape, winter beans

Transition goals
- Improve profitability and margins
- Continue to improve soil health
- Control and optimise input use

Long-term thinking key to helping UK farming thrive

Changing weather patterns, rising input costs and an uncertain global economic landscape are just some of the challenges currently facing farmers and putting enormous pressure on the UK agriculture sector.

Natalie Smith, Head of Sustainable Agriculture and Fisheries at Tesco and Stephen Shields, Technical & Sustainability Director at Huntapac

Tesco Future Farmer Programme 2024 alumni

This is why farmers need the support of both the government and the wider supply chain, including retailers, to secure long-term, viable farming systems that balance food production with nature restoration and climate change mitigation.
This means that after years of changing policy, it's crucial for government to set a clear vision for the long-term future of farming, avoiding a short-term mindset that creates uncertainty and a hesitancy to invest.

This need is particularly clear in Tesco's Greenprint for UK farming report, which highlights that a lack of clarity is affecting farmer confidence and preventing them from making the changes required for long term sustainability. When asked 76% of the farmers surveyed for the report felt unable to implement the environmental measures required to future-proof their businesses.

"Government policy needs to aid food security and sustainability, not work against it," says Tesco Chief Commercial Officer Ashwin Prasad.

"Removing barriers and putting the right incentives in place will allow UK agriculture to reach its potential."

But it's not just a clear vision that is needed, there must also be a collaborative effort to change external perceptions of farming and boost morale throughout the industry.

As part of the same Tesco report, 88% of farmers said they were worried about negative public perception of farming and its environmental impact, due to a lack of understanding of what it takes to run a farm or an under appreciation of the effort it takes to ensure that their land and livestock are looked after for future generations.

This is making it hard for the industry to recruit the talent it desperately needs to drive transformation and develop the skills required to implement new technologies and processes.

Tesco recognises this and is working with the Harper Adams University's School of Sustainable Food and Farming to help the industry attract talent by creating attractive career paths, as well as championing farmers and equipping them with the skills they need for success.

The Tesco Future Farmer Programme takes up to 75 young farmers each year and provides a nine-month training schedule that covers three main areas – sustainability, leadership and profitability. The programme helps candidates with their personal development as well as their business plans and challenges them to thrive in a changing farming landscape.

With programmes such as this helping to get the right people in place, the industry will be better placed able to drive forward innovation and look to solve other issues plaguing farmers - such as standardising the use of data and implementing sustainable farming practices.

Retailers, such as Tesco, can play another important role here, helping to pioneer new approaches, take on some of the investment risk and share learnings across its supply chain.

To this end, 2025 will see Tesco launch two low carbon concept farms which will act as a test bed for innovation to help farmers and suppliers reduce emissions and scale innovative approaches. The farms – one in partnership with potato supplier Branston and the other with livestock processor ABP – will demonstrate a route to net zero.

"By sharing the outcomes from these sites, farmers can make informed decisions about the future direction of their businesses," says Tesco's Head of Sustainable Agriculture and Fisheries Natalie Smith.

"Our low carbon concept sites are standard farms that other farmers can relate to," she adds. "By establishing a baseline and then monitoring, measuring and managing any changes introduced, they will show the art of the possible."

Combining this collaborative approach with long-term thinking and a clear vision and framework from government will help ensure the future of British farming looks a lot brighter.

Apply now for the 2025/26 Tesco Future Farmer Programme, run by Harper Adams University's School of Sustainable Food and Farming: **Harper.ac.uk/FFP**

TESCO

How to take a data-led approach to sub-field costs

Farmers could improve gross margins by adopting sub-field cost management based on a data gathering. **Jonathan Riley** asks the experts how it is done

Farm support is being cut back and the replacement environmental schemes require significant management costs to maintain. It means that even a field-by-field approach to cost management may not ensure financial margins can be sustained in the long-term. Instead, farmers and growers are being urged to look at cost and output figures in greater detail from areas within individual fields to make more informed decisions. This so-called sub-field approach means collecting and interpreting more data.

Here, Hutchinsons farm business consultant Will Foyle, GSC Grays director Robert Sullivan and Agrovista consultant Lewis Butlin, and precision farming manager Graeme Barrett provide tips and advice on collecting and interpreting sub-field data. "I am a firm believer that the easiest way to make more money on a farm is to identify where it's being lost," says Will. "We don't have to save a lot in our individual sub-field costs for them to multiply up and become a significant profit boost for the farm business."

Farm Business Survey results suggest that farms with a carefully managed approach to cost control have better financial performance figures, says Will. Farms in the top 25% of survey results recorded 19% higher returns per hectare and 20% lower fixed costs than average. They were, however, spending 7% more on variable costs than average. But the better output made this a worthwhile investment and suggests careful input targeting to improve margins. "This is an important reminder that when we take a more detailed approach to managing production factors, we are not necessarily cutting costs," says Lewis. "Instead, we are using the data to pinpoint where the optimum use of an input can improve margins."

Data-led approach

In the past, when farmers and growers have wanted to estimate production, they have used published averages for inputs and likely outputs. "But this is not sufficiently accurate – there is an infinite number of variables and two apparently identical farms can produce two completely different profit levels," Graeme says.

There are always fields that have productive areas and those with patches – possibly caused by shade, soil type or moisture levels – where yields are lower, he says. So we now need to investigate these by collecting data to see what role they are playing in the overall gross margin and whether we can improve or, perhaps, even need to remove them from production. Although sub-field costs might be a step-change in farm management, it is not difficult to monitor costs – there are tools that make the job much simpler and the time invested can be worthwhile.

How to start a data-led approach

With a broad range of available tools, it's important you choose the right ones for the farm business and proceed with a data level you can handle, says Robert Sullivan. Ordering and interpreting results can take a lot of time, so it's important that you don't dive into data collection without first establishing what you are trying to achieve and how much you can manage, he says.

Robert stresses that a step-by-step approach is the most sensible way to start data collection and sub-field cost management. Soil sampling and analysis for N, P and K, make a good starting point. The tools involved don't require much investment and show whether there is a nutrient surplus or deficiency. "You can quickly build up a valuable nutrient profile for field areas that can help shape a tailored and more cost-effective management programme," he says.

From that starting point, yield monitoring, either with the combine or forage harvester, will identify the productive and less productive >

PHOTOGRAPHY: GNP, WAYNE HUITCHINSON/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO, DEYANGEORGIEV/ISTOCKPHOTO, RICHARD STANTON

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

There is a plethora of kit available to monitor and interpret farm data. The UK Agritech Centre's team and head of farms, Rob Morrison, have provided a breakdown of data collection techniques, equipment and software.

Satellite and aerial imaging (remote sensing)

- Satellite and drone images can show differences in crop health, soil moisture, and plant growth, across a field.
- Common satellite sources include Sentinel-2 and Landsat.
- Drones can take higher-resolution images and are good for smaller areas. Images can help identify problem areas, saving time and money.
- **Challenges** Satellites may not work well in cloudy weather, and drones need a competent operator.

Soil conductivity and EM scanning

- Equipment measures how well soil conducts electricity. These measurements help farmers understand soil texture, water retention, and nutrient levels.
- **Challenges** Scans need to be backed up with soil samples to confirm accuracy.

Weather stations and Internet of Things (IoT) sensors

- Small weather stations placed in fields can collect real-time data on temperature, rainfall, humidity, and wind speed. Some systems also have soil moisture probes to measure water levels in the soil. This data helps with deciding when to irrigate, spray pesticides, or apply fertiliser.
- **Challenges** Sensors need regular maintenance and some require internet connections.

Soil sampling and laboratory testing

- Soil is taken from different field areas and sent for laboratory testing. The lab checks for nutrients (nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium), pH (acidity), and organic matter to guide fertiliser, manure and lime applications.
- **Challenges** Sampling can be time-consuming, and some lab tests may take time to process.

Soil moisture probes and tensiometers

- Equipment is buried in soil to measure water availability to plants. The data guides irrigation decisions to more precisely meet plant needs, potentially saving water and costs.
- **Challenges** Needs multiple sensors for accuracy across large fields.

On-the-Go soil sensors (real-time monitoring)

- These devices are attached to tractors or sprayers and scan soil while working in the field to measure nutrient levels, moisture and compacted areas in real time. They can guide fertiliser rates instantly instead of waiting for lab results.
- **Challenges** Sensors can be expensive and must be calibrated correctly.

Yield mapping (combine and harvester sensors)

- Harvesters with built-in GPS and sensors measure how much grain, silage or grass is collected from different parts of the field. This creates a digital map showing high- and low-yield areas to adjust seed rates, fertiliser applications and irrigation plans.
- **Challenges** Machinery needs to be properly calibrated to get accurate results.

Biomass and vegetation index monitoring

- Satellite or drone images estimate how much plant material (biomass) is in a field.
- A common tool is a Normalised Difference Vegetation Index, which measures crop or grass colour to allow farmers to estimate yields before harvest and spot areas that need more attention.
- **Challenges** Does not consider soil problems or diseases unless combined with other data.

Machinery telematics and GPS tracking

- Tractors and sprayers fitted with GPS and sensors that track fuel use, work time, and application rates. This equipment can reduce fuel costs by optimising routes and ensuring fertilisers are applied only where needed.
- **Challenges** Requires an investment in smart machinery or aftermarket GPS systems.

Farm management software and ERP systems

- Digital platforms such as Gatekeeper, AgLeader, Omnia or Trimble collect all farm data into one place to track costs of seed, fertiliser, pesticide, machinery and labour use. Cost comparisons can then be made within fields to identify areas where savings can be made.
- **Challenges** Requires training to use effectively, and data entry must be accurate.

< areas. For older machines without yield monitors, it is possible to retrofit equipment and it is a worthwhile investment. Seed drill sensors will also monitor rates at points across the field, and this is another simple step into data-led production, Robert recommends.

In combination, soil analysis, seed and yield monitoring provide a useful way of building a picture of input use that can be set against output across areas of a field. You can very quickly start to gather sub-field data and compare nutrients, yield and seed inputs, Roberts says. Then you can overlay more financial input data, but these should include fixed costs such as labour and equipment as well as nutrient applications, fuel, contractor costs, pest and disease control, he says.

Interpreting data

Collected data can be plugged into software packages – either on farm or through consultancies – that will overlay data and produce detailed analyses of sub-field margins. "Clients who have begun soil sampling and provided us with the data often don't believe the recommendations that we can make on the back of the results," says Lewis. "Some have seen fertiliser applications cut by two-thirds in year one."

Hutchinsons consultants apply data through the Omnia software package. The tool can import existing data such as previous yield maps, soil scans, and stored figures on Normalised Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI), a measurement of the quantity and health of standing vegetation. It can then combine this with new field data, cost and return statistics and overlays the information on a map. The result is a visual representation with a profit and loss level mapped across the sub-field areas. Modern forage harvesters have yield monitors so silage


Data from sensors and probes can be combined with satellite imagery to map results

or maize fields can be approached in exactly the same way, suggests Graeme. Data can be useful to identify areas suitable for third cuts and those which are better suited for aftermath grazing.

For arable farms, software packages can look at how the various crops in a rotation perform in a particular part of a field. What does each area yield, how does input use compare and what do they contribute to the margins from that field – do they add or detract, says Lewis. Some areas may be costing money year-in, year-out, others may contribute a positive margin depending on the crop, he adds. For example, heavy soils and shaded areas on headlands may still provide a margin for a wheat crop in a particular field. Traditionally, a following bean crop will most likely have been drilled over the same area. But, more detailed yield and cost data can show that the beans might not yield a margin on those trickier areas and an alternative strategy could be put in place for that part of the field, suggests Will.

Perhaps, an option under a stewardship scheme that will yield a payment from a lower input cost could be used. With the background data pointing to variability in nutrient or yield levels, investing in machinery that can meet those differing demands could be worthwhile. Variable-rate seed drills, fertiliser and slurry spreaders can be used in conjunction with data to match soil variability, points out Robert. Drills can be set for optimal plant density, leading to better yields and potentially reduced seed use, he says. Likewise, fertiliser spinners can be set up to provide precise applications of nutrient levels to meet changing deficits and surpluses across the field. "It is possible to save virtually half the cost of P and K, from a variable-rate fertiliser spreader that can be bought for as little as £1,500," Graeme reckons.

In some cases, the data may point to an underlying physical issue that could be addressed. A poorly yielding area within a field may point to something rectifiable such as a blocked drain. Restoring the yield potential may be as simple as taking a spade to unblock a culvert, says Lewis. Other results may lead to more wide-scale strategic changes in land use. The long-term strategy for most farm businesses is to expand. But this may not be the most sustainable approach.

Data may highlight areas where land is too poor to warrant continual, costly input to address deficiencies. In these cases, the data might suggest it is better to stop wasting inputs, remove the area from production altogether and enter a long-term scheme or access private funding for a natural asset. With the capital freed up by the cessation of activity on a farmed area, it might be possible to purchase a block of higher quality land elsewhere that could generate better margins, Robert suggests. Alternatively, removing land might facilitate a downscaling of costly farm machinery and equipment levels. Money raised could be invested in another venture with a potentially higher return. ■

DATA COLLECTION SERVICES

Data collection and analysis can also be carried out without investing in kit by companies and consultancies. For example, crop nutrition specialist Omex Agriculture collects data, provides nutrient analysis and offers advice.

The days of applying nutrients in the same ratios and at the same rate as an annual operation must soon be consigned to history, says Omex Agriculture's national agronomy manager Scott Baker. The increased risks of pollution through leaching and to the environment from emissions via volatilisation, are too great. Aside from this, it is a waste of money to overapply nutrients.

To establish what the growing crop requires, the company requests farmers collect data from locations using GPS plotting. This ensures that subsequent tests can be taken from the same spot to provide comparable data. Testing is then either through a tissue test or a rapid-response, plant sap testing technique.

The tissue test samples the entire plant to provide an overview of how the plant has grown through the season, while a sap testing process provides a snapshot. This test draws sap from leaf samples that are analysed in a lab to provide a nutrient profile of the growing crop. The sap test results are fed back to the grower within 72 hours along with an advice sheet on any actions needed. By measuring the data it reduces over- or under-application of nutrients allowing optimal growth and improved gross margins while cutting emissions and pollution risks.

TRANSITION FARMER: ANDY BASON

Hampshire-based Transition Farmer Andy Bason and his team collect data from across the 800ha arable unit to help maximise margins. Key among the data-capturing equipment is a new Claas combine. The yield monitor on the Claas combine is a vital piece of equipment that feeds back valuable information on productivity, says Andy.

This is backed up by satellite imagery providing Normalised Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) data to provide a measure of crop density and health. The team at Newhouse Farm also have an NDVI sensor on the sprayer that produces results to cross-reference with the satellite imagery. From there, a detailed map is produced to support decisions on fertiliser applications.

Soil testing is another key operation that underpins the decision-making process. As experienced farmers, the team know how the soil types change across the fields, but the detailed testing results are an important aid. Test results are fed into the variable-rate seed drill to control plant densities that meet the soil type and field characteristics. Other data are added, including areas that are prone to slug damage, weed burdens and rabbit damage to help fine-tune seed rates.

Since the start of this year, the farm business has signed up to use the Omnia software platform. It's early days with the software package but the map-based visual representations are helping to plan N applications and Fibrophos spreading to supply the P and K fractions based on the soil maps, Andy says. The variable and fixed costs can then be fed into the software and an algorithm generates figures to arrive at a gross margin per hectare figure. Variable costs are relatively simple to collate and apply to the system. However, fixed costs are more difficult to break down, says Andy. "We benchmark with other farmers who similarly find it trickier to get a good grip on fixed costs. It's a process we are determined to get on top of though, so that we can plug in more data and come to an even more accurate result."

FARM FACTS

Newhouse Farm, Alresford, Hampshire

- **Farm size: 800ha main farm**
- **Annual rainfall: 770mm**
- **Soil type: Loam**

● See p5 for more on our Transition Farmers

Come to Transition Live

Meet industry experts at our flagship event to help you secure a profitable and sustainable future for your farm business

Don't miss your chance to visit *Farmers Weekly's* Transition Live event on 8 May in Yorkshire. The event, at the University of Leeds' mixed arable and pig farm, is part of our Transition initiative, which aims to explain the complex production, policy and environmental issues facing British farmers.

The day will start with a keynote address, followed by talks and panel discussions. Speakers will include farmers, researchers, policymakers and industry specialists, who will cover three key areas:

- **Food production**
- **Environment**
- **Business.**

There will be opportunities to put questions to the industry experts, compare notes with other farmers, share ideas and talk to Leeds researchers about their work.

HOST FARM

Central to the event is the chance to take part in informative farm walks around Spen Farm. The research work is embedded in a 317ha commercial farm that is run under a regenerative agriculture policy.

The regen research compares conventional management including ploughing and inorganic fertiliser applications, with different combinations of min-till, mixed crop varieties, planting understoreys/living mulches and rotations including herbal leys.

Spen then captures data using cutting-edge technology such as soil moisture sensors, imaging techniques and a network of carbon dioxide monitoring flux towers. The towers are continuously measuring emissions and the data tracks when the carbon dioxide is taken up or released. The results are combined with weather statistics and input and offtake data from the farm's outdoor pig unit, arable land and permanent pasture to establish what factors alter carbon balances.

Prof Pippa Chapman of the University of Leeds explains that Transition Live visitors will be able to see the regenerative agricultural trial for themselves on one of two scheduled farm walks.

The second walk will cover the farm's biomass trial, a joint initiative between Leeds and York universities run by Niab which evaluates renewable crop management, including willow, poplar, eucalyptus and miscanthus.

Pippa says the trial is aimed at potential growers, so is all about the practical elements of growing biomass.

SPEAKER INSIGHTS

FOOD PRODUCTION

Sustainable livestock systems

Ellie Lovell, Farmers Weekly 2024 Young Farmer of the Year and finance director for Tack Farm, Worcestershire

Ellie oversees the 486ha arable, beef and 800-head dairy farm's 15 full-time staff. Above all farms must be profitable – if they are not profitable they cannot begin to be sustainable, says Ellie. To be profitable they need government support and for it to understand that without that backing, its environmental aims will be unachievable, she says.

We must do our bit too. We need to concentrate on the efficiency factors that cut emissions and lead to profitability – good cow health and welfare, well-planned feeding regimes and breeding programmes that exploit genetics to maximise returns.

ENVIRONMENT

Trees and livestock do mix - making silvopasture work

Andy Gray, Elston Farm, Copplestone, Devon

Devon farmer Andy Gray will explain the multiple benefits of silvopasture – integrating trees and grazing livestock. Andy's 65ha Elston Farm runs sustainable farming research projects investigating silvopasture, animal health and welfare, net zero, soil health and soil carbon.

Andy will set the scene for the panel discussion by explaining the successes of the silvopasture enterprises at Elston Farm, where using trees has improved production, particularly with the beef herd.

BUSINESS

Innovative forms of farm finance

Phil Jarvis, land and estates director, Albanwise Farming

Albanwise Farming produces cereals, pulses, oilseed rape and sugar beet from its farmed land in Norfolk and Yorkshire. Its natural capital assets are managed through a separate division called Albanwise Environment, which aims to maximise the potential of the estate's environmental features.

The estate was an early adopter of stewardship schemes including Sustainable Farming Incentive options, explains Phil. He plans to open the discussion session by urging farmers and policymakers to work together to understand how funding schemes can better support the environment and food production.

INNOVATION HUB

In partnership with UK Agri-Tech Centre, the Innovation Hub will draw together farmers, specialists and researchers to discuss innovative ideas and look at how they could be turned into real-life solutions.

The Hub is a meeting space where you can grab a coffee and croissant at the start of the day and meet field experts. The experts will be there throughout the event to offer practical advice and key skills on the latest ideas and technological research. It will also showcase the latest innovations and Agri-tech resources that are shaping the future of agriculture for your farm business.

PHOTOGRAPHY: PHIL WEEDON, LEEDS UNIVERSITY

AGENDA

The event opens at 9am with an opening address from *Farmers Weekly* Transition project editor Johann Tasker.
A staff member from the University of Leeds will welcome visitors and give a brief overview of the farm.

TALKS AND PANEL DISCUSSIONS

Food production	Environment	Business
How to add value to what you already produce **Headline speaker** Maria Benjamin, The Soap Dairy, Lake District	**Trees and livestock do mix – making silvopasture work** **Headline speaker** Andy Gray, Devon farmer and silvopasture practitioner	**Exploring new on-farm revenue streams** **Speaker** Helen Davies, Canopy and Stars Glamping
Innovative approaches to food production **Headline speaker** Anna Pearce, Northumberland farmer	**Climate resilience** **Headline speaker** Richard Bramley, York farmer and NFU Environment Forum	**Marketing strategies for your farm enterprise** **Headline speaker** Ged Futter, retail consultant, The Retail Mind
Upland farming **Headline speaker** Nic Renison, NFFN farmer, Cumbria	**Making a return from renewable energy** **Speaker** Jonathan Scurlock, NFU chief adviser on renewables and climate change	**Innovative forms of farm finance** **Headline speaker** Phil Jarvis, Albanwise Farming, Yorkshire
Sustainable livestock system **Headline speaker** Ellie Lovell, dairy farmer, Worcestershire	**Innovative ways of driving value from data** **Speaker** Oliver Wood, Omnia	**How to succeed at succession** **Headline speaker** Sally Jackson, The Pink Pig, Lincolnshire

EXPERT PANELLIST INSIGHT

The event also boasts a hugely experienced set of panellists who will add to the speaker's outlook and answer questions from the audiences.

Renewables

Jonathan Scurlock, NFU chief adviser on renewables and climate change

Jonathan is keen to explain there is good reason to be upbeat about on-farm renewable energy.

The biomethane sector is getting a big wake-up call because gas networks are increasingly interested in investing in it. Previously, an influential renewable energy taskforce favoured hydrogen but the safety issues with the gas mean methane is now of greater interest to the supply sector.

Methane is the same gas as used in mains systems now, but in a low-carbon form, so there is no need for expensive network upgrades. Meanwhile aviation is also looking in farming's direction for biofuel because there is a finite supply of cooking oil – the currently favoured base for renewable supplies.

Some optimism could be directed towards wind power, with the government suggesting changes may be made to planning laws, possibly through permitted development rights. A change could enable farms to site bigger turbines without planning wrangles.

Succession

Richard Taylor, Strutt & Parker director, north of England

Richard will offer advice on the possible forms of business structure to be considered when deciding on how succession plans are drawn up, and the potential pitfalls.

In most cases succession has related to the timing and degree of responsibility given to, or required from, the next generation in the management of the business, says Richard.

With the government's proposed alteration to business property relief and agricultural property relief, the focus is not just on the perceived capability of the next generation who will take over the running of the farm.

Instead the focus is more on how soon an equity share should be considered if inheritance tax costs are to be reduced on the death of older members of the business, he explains.

DATE AND VENUE

- Time: 9am to 4.30pm
- Date: 8 May 2025
- Venue: University of Leeds Research Farm, Paradise Way, Tadcaster, LS24 9GF

TICKETS

For more information and to book tickets, visit the Transition Live 2025 hub. Scan the QR code. If you have any questions, email transitionlive@markallengroup.com

BASIS CPD POINTS

Transition Live is a Basis-registered event and attendees can qualify for 6 points. You will need your Basis account number and to complete a form showing your attendance at the designated point on the day.

EXPERT PANEL

- **Kate Balchin** Wold Top Brewery
- **David Brass** The Lakes Free Range Egg Company
- **Helen Chesshire** Woodland Trust
- **Emma Hosker** White Rose Forestry
- **Martin Lines** Nature Friendly Farming Network
- **Helen Davies** Canopy And Stars Glamping
- **Thomas Gent** Agreena
- **Rachael Madeley-Davies** AHDB
- **Charles Chantler** Natural England
- **Chris Hewis** Anglian Water
- **Helen Brass** The Lakes Free Range Egg Company
- **Ioan Humphreys** Livestock farmer and Instagram influencer
- **Julia Aglionby** Cumbria University
- **Peter Gittins** University of Leeds
- **Ali Gray** GSC Grays
- **Jonathan Scurlock** NFU
- **Peter Dilks** Shakespeare Martineau
- **Declan Keiley** LightSource BP
- **Joseph Gridley** Soil Association
- **Nick Evans** Oxbury Bank
- **Tom Allen-Stevens** British On-Farm Innovation Network (Bofin)
- **Christopher Price** Rare Breeds Survival Trust
- **Anna Sutcliffe** ABAgri KW Feeds
- **Michael Lee** School of Sustainable Food and Farming
- **Richard Taylor** Strutt & Parker
- **Jennie Wheildon** Shakespeare Martineau

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NI Sustainable Agriculture Programme – all you need to know

Northern Ireland's Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has unveiled changes to its agricultural support scheme. **Debbie James** reports

Farmers in all four UK countries are under pressure from their respective governments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but livestock producers in Northern Ireland (NI) are perhaps shouldering the greatest weight of that ambition.

The economy in NI is underpinned by agriculture – the dairy sector alone processes 2.4bn litres of milk a year. As such, agriculture makes up a bigger proportion of the Province's gross domestic product than the industry does to the economies of England, Wales and Scotland. Agriculture accounts for a similarly larger proportion of the total greenhouse gases emitted in the country, so while farming is hugely important in financial terms, it is its relative scale which puts it in the firing line for the NI Executive's environmental aspirations.

Critics suggest the Province lags behind in reducing carbon emissions and that work needs to continue at pace if it is to hit climate change targets. There is also the matter of Lough Neagh, the UK's largest lake, with agriculture said to account for 62% of the phosphorus polluting the water, and campaigners demanding less intensive farming around the lough, suggesting that the crisis will take decades to overcome. The stakes for the new farm support scheme are arguably higher therefore than elsewhere in the UK.

Sustainable

The rebranding of the Sustainable Agriculture Programme (SAP) from the Farm Support and Development Programme was announced in January 2025, a name-change which NI minister for agriculture, environment and rural affairs, Andrew Muir, of the Alliance Party, suggested better reflected the scheme's "importance in supporting change for a sustainable future".

While policies in some European countries have been tailored around cuts to livestock numbers as a solution to achieving environmental targets, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (Daera) insists farm output won't be cut under the SAP, rather that it will be maintained through initiatives to increase productivity and environmental sustainability.

The Ulster Farmers Union (UFU), which represents farmers and growers in NI, largely agrees with that sentiment, broadly favouring some of the schemes already rolled out or being finalised, including the Beef Carbon Reduction and Suckler Cow Schemes. The Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme, opened in 2024, pays farmers to reduce the slaughter ages of their cattle, with the aim to bring that age down to 26 months over four years.

However, some farmers question if achieving the slaughter age target could create its own set of environmental issues. Northern Ireland-based Transition Farmer Fergal Watson's beef suckler farm on the Ards Peninsula in County Down, >

"To achieve those targets farmers will have to feed more meal – meal that is high in phosphates and will therefore be present in cattle manure. That won't help with environmental goals, but actually make the situation worse."

Fergal Watson, NI-based Transition Farmer

< will come under the new support regime. "To achieve those targets farmers will have to feed more meal – meal that is high in phosphates and will therefore be present in cattle manure," says Fergal. "That won't help with environmental goals but actually make the situation worse," he reckons.

But UFU's deputy president John McLenaghan, whose farm enterprises include beef and poultry, suggests the overall aim for beef farmers to be as efficient as possible will ultimately add to their bottom line.

Another scheme in the Beef Sustainability Package, the Suckler Cow Scheme, opened in April 2025 and provides financial incentives to farmers to reduce the age of first calving and the calving interval of suckler cows. "Encouraging farmers to be more efficient in their business invariably and naturally leads to a lower carbon footprint which ties in with the sustainable aspect of the SAP and the challenges we face nationally and globally around our climate change targets," says John. "Being more efficient with the calving interval and bringing down an animal's first calving date are things that have long been recognised as bottom line improvements to a farming business."

He recognises that the measures in the Beef Sustainability Package present a greater challenge for beef producers with native breeds. "It will be more difficult for them to achieve, but it is about putting in place a framework that gives agriculture a sustainable future," he adds.

At the end of February 2025, the Farm Sustainability (Transitional Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 was passed, providing Daera with the legal powers to introduce the Farm Sustainability Transition Payment (FSTP) this year and more general provisions intended to support the roll out of SAP.

A few days later the FSTP opened for applications, capped at £60,000. This new area payment is designed to provide a "safety net" for farmers and currently accounts for the majority of the support budget, but the payment will reduce as other policies come into play. The FSTP replaces the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) and provides a transition to the Farm Sustainability Payment in 2026. What has changed under the FSTP is the minimum area for making a claim – under the BPS it was 3ha now it is 5ha. –The regulations agreed in February also provide the legal framework needed to roll out the Farming with Nature and Knowledge Transfer Schemes.

Compromises

The UFU is one of the organisations involved in the co-design of SAP and John suggests that the schemes worked through so far with bodies representing other interests, including the environment and wildlife, have largely had harmonious outcomes, albeit with some compromises. "We are positive at this stage and the direction that the SAP is taking our industry," he says. There are things UFU would have done differently but he points out that it has been "co-designed, not UFU-designed".

"We joke with our members that the good bits, the bits that they like are the bits that we did, and the bits they don't like, someone else or Daera did. There has to be an element of compromise, of moving forward together with environmental organisations, that's a good blueprint and that's what we have been asked to do by society."

Another organisation involved in the co-design is the Nature Friendly Farming Network (NFFN). Cormac Dolan, manager for NI, says NFFN welcomed the minister's ambitious language. "We are excited to see what support will be given to farmers on the ground to transition to nature-based farming methods and are waiting to see what budget has been allocated to that. We would be the first to say that we can have more resilient farms as a result of practices that are friendlier to nature, but it takes risk to go through the transition and farmers need to be financially supported with that, they need the resource to match the scale of ambition."

NFFN would like to see results-based payments that reward farmers for their knowledge and experience in delivering improvements to air and water quality and soil health, rather than a "prescriptive approach which can get in the way of things on the ground", says Cormac.

Farmers should also be trusted to "mark their own homework" on improvements achieved, he reckons. "We are trusted to do our own tax returns so why not this?" he says.

"A bit of faith in farmers can go a long way. In fact when checks were made on a random sample of farmers in pilots on results-based payments elsewhere, many were actually under-scoring themselves, not overscoring.

"With the right system, the right app and geo-location products our own scheme would be much cheaper and easier to administer."

There are options in England's Sustainable Farming Incentive that he would like to see in NI, including payments for planting mixed swards. "This isn't available in NI, it should be," he says. ■

NI SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE PROGRAMME

- Aims to support production levels while improving environmental sustainability
- 2025 Farm Sustainability Transition Payment capped area-based payment (£60,000)
- 2026 Farm Sustainability Payment will replace Basic Payment Scheme
- Minimum eligibility raised to 5ha
- Legislation laid for Farming with Nature and Knowledge Transfer Schemes
- Beef Sustainability Package introduced includes:
  - Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme cuts target slaughter age to 26 months
  - Suckler Cow Scheme incentives to cut calving interval and age at first calving.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CAZIMB/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO, ADOBE STOCK, STEFFAN HILL


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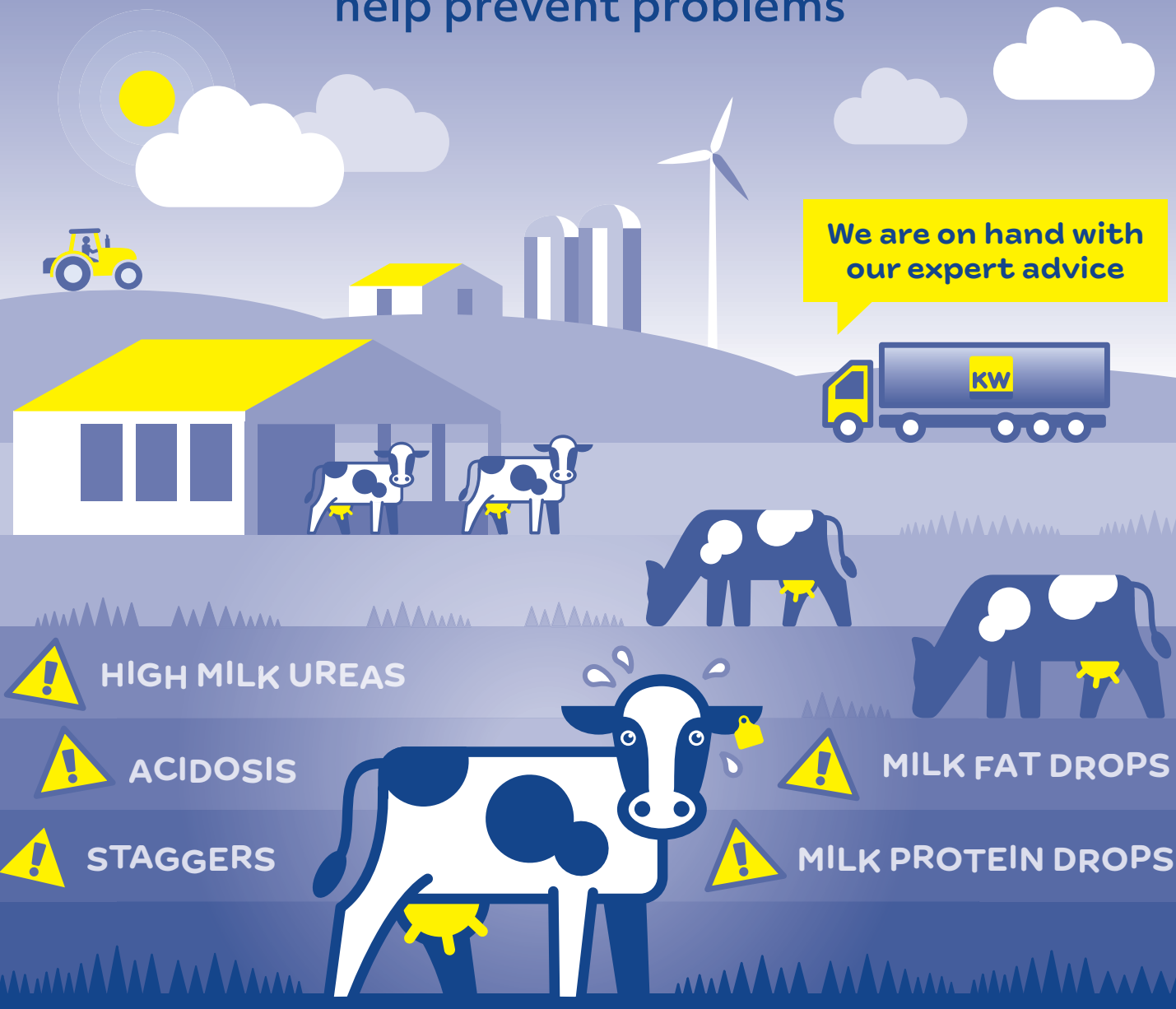

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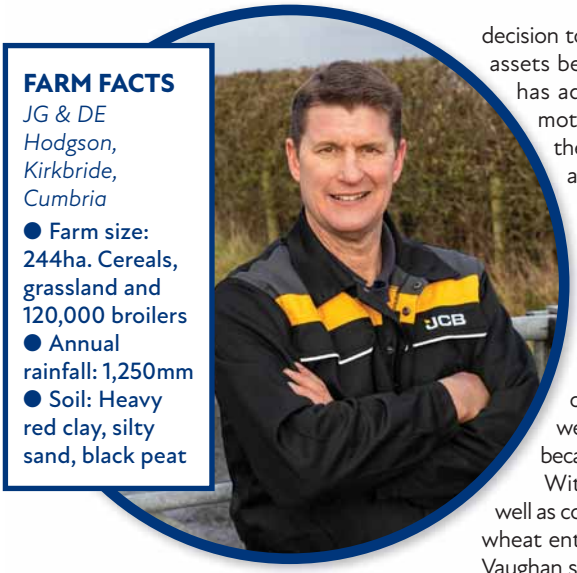
Succession concern and investment on hold

Transition is following a group of farmers on their journey to adapt and meet the challenges of farming. **Debbie James** reports on the progress of two farms



FARM FACTS

JG & DE Hodgson, Kirkbride, Cumbria

- Farm size: 244ha. Cereals, grassland and 120,000 broilers
- Annual rainfall: 1,250mm
- Soil: Heavy red clay, silty sand, black peat

Vaughan Hodgson

Succession planning is being accelerated on Vaughan Hodgson's farm to de-risk it against the loss of inheritance tax (IHT) exemptions.

Handing over assets to the next generation was always on the horizon, but the government's decision to charge farm businesses 20% IHT on assets beyond the first £1m from April 2026 has added greater urgency. Vaughan, his mother Dorothy, and wife Sandra are in the process of updating the partnership agreement."

Transfer from one generation to the next has to happen, and once you get into your 60s you must have made significant inroads into that," says Vaughan, who is 55. "We are having discussions with our accountant to mitigate the IHT changes – it would be complete folly to be in a position where we have to give the government more tax because they just waste it."

With arable and poultry operations, as well as construction and fabrication and caustic wheat enterprises, the business is complex, so Vaughan sees the value in getting the best possible advice to increase the share owned by his sons, Karl and Ryan. "I could die tomorrow, and if we got landed with an IHT bill for £2m it makes everything we have done in other areas of the business to make ourselves more efficient and profitable, pale into insignificance."

TRANSITION GOAL PROGRESS

Approximate percentage of progress towards completion:

- Support the next generation: 50%
- Cope with Basic Payment Scheme loss: 50%
- Reduce risks from weather changes: 50%

Mitigation is needed against the financial impact of Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) cuts. The business lost £56,000 from its 2024 payment and will see its 2025 payment capped at £7,200.

Although he accuses the government of "doing everything it can to punish farmers", he has a steely resolve to ensure the business remains strong. "We knew the loss of the BPS was coming and, if we want to survive, we have to plough our own furrow. As a business we have to navigate away from government payments by expanding or reducing costs by investing in things that make us more efficient."

See p5 for more on our Transition Farmers

TRANSITION GOAL PROGRESS

Approximate percentage of progress towards completion:

- Recruiting and retaining farm staff: 66%
- Restructuring suckler herd: 66%
- Improving business resilience: 66%

Fergal Watson

At a time when many suckler beef farmers are scaling down herd size, Fergal Watson is bucking the trend by increasing cow numbers. This spring, he will calve down 200 cows and heifers after retaining 30 Stabiliser-cross replacements. His cashflow did take a knock in the 2024-25 financial year – he calculates he would have made about £50,000 by selling those heifers as breeding stock. But Fergal says he "can't think it can be a bad thing to build up numbers".

It isn't a long-term position, though, with the next generation eyeing up a future in farming. Fergal's 16-year-old daughter, Éabha-Marie, is ambitious to farm, and he worries about the safety and labour commitment of running a suckler herd. The family are already considering alternatives, including a robot dairy enterprise. "I think it offers a better lifestyle, the monthly milk cheque is better for cashflow and there would still be stock on the farm," he says.

One reason for not making the switch now is high interest rates and the financial pressure already on the business, servicing a loan taken out some years ago to buy land. "Another reason is that planning permission for livestock sheds, tanks and silo pits is prohibited in Northern Ireland, and Labour's proposed changes to IHT will devastate our family farm. It is not the right time to go down the route of significant investment, we are pressing the pause button for now," says Fergal.

Robot milking would help solve another succession goal around staff recruitment and retention. "It would offer a more attractive workplace with set hours and routine work," he reckons. Fergal's full-time worker is 67, and his wife, Lucy, has taken a career break to work on the farm.

After 2023's terrible weather hit the 350-acre arable enterprise, when commodity prices were low, 2024 offered a "wee pick-me-up". "Beef prices have held up, and the late-drilled spring crops yielded better than expected. Yields were down because of the cold, wet and late spring, but harvest weather was a dream," says Fergal.

It is the third year the farm has operated a strip-tillage system and there is a notable improvement in soil health and structure.

FARM FACTS

Watson Farms, Ards Peninsula, County Down

- Farm size: 285ha split across three units
- Annual rainfall: 810mm
- Soil type: Sandy to medium loam

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANGUS FINDLAY, STEFAN HILL.

Supply chain funding: What's on offer for regen farming

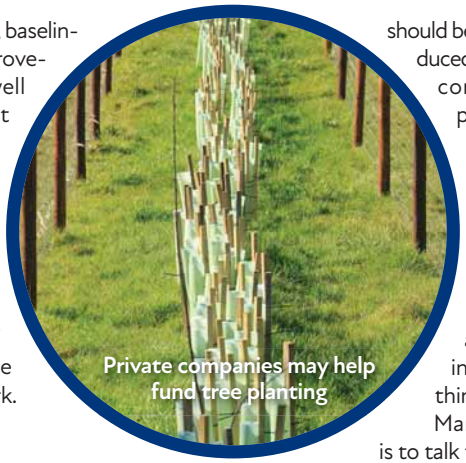
Private funding for sustainable practices can reward farmers and growers for reducing carbon emissions and helping nature recovery. **Louise Impey** reports

While private and public funding have been available, the pausing of the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) and capital grants by the government is putting the onus on supply chain partners and private companies to step up.

Some private schemes have only been available on a restricted geographical basis until now, although the trend is for more uniformity across programmes as increasing numbers get involved.

As a result, alternative pricing models related to regenerative practices, baselining and continuous improvement are on offer, as well as training and support for changing farm management and meeting specific objectives.

There is plenty of activity in arable and dairy supply chains for sustainable production, says Martin Lines, chief executive of the Nature Friendly Farming Network.


Private companies may help fund tree planting

Unknowns

Martin explains that the participating companies and processors all need data to understand what's going on at the farm level.

"We have some national numbers on the carbon footprint for a tonne of wheat produced," he says. "But the unknowns are how accurate they are, whether they are based on results from a Cambridgeshire farm or whether they are more applicable to sites in Yorkshire or Somerset, for example.

"Another unknown is whether the figures should be the same for wheat produced in a regenerative system, compared to one where ploughing takes place."

So it's not surprising food manufacturers and others are paying farmers for certain actions and collecting the data, he adds, as the market needs to be aware of what's happening before it looks at how things could be changed.

Martin's advice to farmers is to talk to supply chain partners and ask about the schemes that they have to offer, as there's quite a choice available. "Get involved. All supply chains are moving in this direction, so be proactive and market yourself. Communicate the way you're farming and get rewarded for your actions and your time."

Sustainability programmes

At Frontier Agriculture, there are already a number of sustainability programmes up and running, with two main different types for the

LOOKING AHEAD

The shift to environmental and public outcomes means that farmers can expect the following developments from supply chains as they gather pace, says Frontier Agriculture's Jim Knightbraid:

- Easier, simpler procedures with a reduced administrative burden
- More uniformity across programmes
- More partners joining schemes and offering rewards
- Whole farm programmes with consistent support for practices.

Improving soil health is among the practices that can attract funding

harvest 2025 crop, reports Jim Knightbraid, commercial lead for sustainable programmes.

These are split between sustainability data collection contracts, where growers are paid premiums as part of a grain contract to supply crop production data, and sustainable supply chain programmes where growers receive payments a hectare for certain farming practices.

"With the former, the data is anonymised and aggregated, before being reported to supply chain partners to help them understand the environmental footprint of products entering their supply chain. With the latter, the practices that growers are being asked to do are linked to reducing emissions, improving soil health and supporting biodiversity," explains Jim.

To date, some 800 growers have signed up for these programmes, which cover winter wheat, winter oilseed rape and spring barley. Already 65,000ha and 400,000t of grain are committed, he says.

"For farmers, the key is to make sure that you understand what you have to do and what information you have to provide, before you sign up," he advises. "The supply chain needs evidence for its own reporting commitments, so you do need to be prepared for audits. The data on how crops are grown has a value and making sure that you know why any partner needs it is important."

It is an evolving space, he acknowledges, with rewards for farm recording coming in a range of forms – including value for data, access to >

CASE STUDY: TOM CHANNING, LEYFIELDS LTD, KNEESALL, NEWARK

Public and private funding opportunities have been researched by a Nottinghamshire farming business as it looked for ways to become more sustainable without affecting yield or financial returns.

Given the government's recent funding announcements and lack of a clear vision for the farming sector, a willingness to consider all the options when it comes to income streams has turned out to be the right approach.

Tom Channing

The family-run farm first became involved with supply chain funding in 2009, when it became a member of the Molson Coors grower group and committed its spring barley crop to the brewer. "In return, we do a sustainability survey for them," says Tom Channing, who runs the farm with his uncle, Peter White. "Over the years, it has worked well for us."

Government schemes

The 1,000ha arable business has also been quick to enter government schemes as they have materialised. Today, there is an extensive Countryside Stewardship Mid Tier agreement in place, which finishes later this year, as well as an SFI 2023 agreement with two years left to run.

Capital grants, when they were still on offer, were taken advantage of, too, with a new 6m drill being secured so that cover crops could be established successfully.

Some of this money came through a successful application to Landscape Enterprise Networks (Lens), a regional initiative which has multiple supply chain partners and an aggregated fund for nature-based solutions, distributed to farmers in key locations. In addition, finance through Severn Trent Water's programme Steps has been used since 2018 for various projects – including putting a bund around fertiliser storage facilities and installing rainwater harvesting.

"That was done on a 50:50 basis," recalls Tom. "It has also helped with the costs of hedge planting, woodland management, and pond restoration, some of it done with the Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust.

"These all help make the farm more resilient, deliver public goods and make sound business sense, but would have been difficult to justify without the funding."

Through Graham Brown and Anna Ramsey, Frontier Agriculture's senior farm trader and environmental crops adviser, Tom and Peter were made aware of other opportunities for the farm as they were launched, so they could discuss whether they were appropriate for their system.

As a result, some 70ha of this year's oilseed rape crop is eligible for £110/ha, comprising payments for the use of no-till, companion crops, nutrient management/integrated pest management plans and biodiversity strips.

That's a total of £7,700, helping to de-risk the crop and keep its place in the rotation, after a very difficult time with it last year.

Other practices, which also offered a financial incentive, were dismissed as being inappropriate for the farm at this stage.

"A summer cover or catch crop is a good example of that," says Tom. "At a very busy time of year, it just wouldn't be a priority for us and is unlikely to work well. If we were further south, it would be a different story."

With Frontier's guidance, Lens funding will continue. In 2024, as well as getting £10,000 towards the costs of a new mounted grain/fertiliser drill to be used across 350ha, the farm also received support for using fertiliser inhibitors, with a payment of £28/ha made across 673ha.

"That payment of £18,851 covered the additional cost of using inhibited urea through the whole season and prevented ammonia losses. It has improved our nitrogen use efficiency and is the right thing to do from an air quality perspective."

Tom points out that participation in Lens means he has to take part in a three-hour audit conducted by Adas to get a baseline. As the farm already takes a regenerative approach with some crops, it is now on the platform's Regenerative Pathway.

Direct-drilling trial

"That puts us in line for resilience payments in wheat, which will encourage us to continue with this approach. We have applied for these and are waiting to hear."

In the same application, Tom has also applied for funding for a direct-drilling trial in winter wheat, which will reward him for changing the way that the crop is grown and for bringing down fuel and artificial input use.

"We are planning to try direct-drilling the crop after oilseed rape, just in one field," he says. "That will allow us to compare it to our standard practice on the farm, without adding to our risk or incurring extra expense.

"We have to strike a balance between optimising production and returns with care for the environment. The outcomes that they want are usually in line with the direction of travel that we are taking."

Tom admits that he is spending more time meeting the administrative requirements of the various programmes than he did previously. "The monitoring and recording involved is more of a burden, but it's an integral part of these programmes."

There is plenty of support for regen farming in the dairy sector

< lucrative contracts or premiums. "When you consider the environmental targets that the government has signed up to, there's no alternative for supply chains. If they aren't sustainable, they won't be part of the picture."

Supply chain partners

Frontier's supply chain partners all recognise the high standards and professional approach that UK farming has to offer, stresses Jim. "This is about domestic production and the need for farming to be viable, not just about security of supply. There is a real commitment to the British farming industry."

For this reason, there is flexibility within the programmes. "Our partners appreciate that farmers have the knowledge and experience to make practices work on a local level. Only they know what's possible on their farms in typical conditions, or why something won't work."

Frontier is also a supply aggregator for Landscape Enterprise Networks (Lens) and works with the Lens Operator on behalf of its strategic partners Diageo, Nestlé and PepsiCo, to collate a proposal from a group of farmers and then submit it on their behalf.

Lens is competitive but, if successful, farmers receive funding for practices that reduce emissions or increase biodiversity, helping them to purchase equipment or adopt different ways of farming, as well as payments to encourage them to maintain more sustainable farming systems.

A platform for aggregated funding, Lens is being much clearer on the outcomes that it wants from farms this year, says Jim. "It isn't buying carbon credits, rather it's an investment in measurable outcomes that supports greater biodiversity benefits and mitigation against climate change."

He adds that Lens is one of the more detailed schemes in terms of monitoring and verification, with a comprehensive auditing and baselining requirement. "We always stress to farmers that they must check what they are getting into. There is a range of options out there, so they should review them all to find the right one." ■

SUSTAINABILITY PROGRAMME LAUNCHES FOR FARMERS IN EAST OF ENGLAND

Routes to Regen is a farm pilot scheme, managed by the Royal Countryside Fund and sponsored by members of the Sustainable Markets Initiative, to demonstrate that regenerative farming can be a practical and rewarding proposition for farmers.

Launching this month (April 2025) and taking place in the East of England throughout the year, it brings together leading food and finance businesses to support farmers in adopting more sustainable practices.

Farmers will have access to resources and opportunities provided by businesses including McCain's, McDonald's, Waitrose, Aon, Tokio Marine Kiln, Lloyds Banking Group, NatWest and Barclays.

Managed by the Royal Countryside Fund the options for participating farmers will include:

- Routes to premiums available for sustainably grown crops
- Discounts on cover crops, pollinator species and specialist crops
- Opportunities to integrate livestock and organic matter into rotations
- Demonstration days and knowledge sharing events
- Support to begin collecting environmental data

By taking a whole farm approach, the programme aims to reduce the risks and complexity for farmers and make regenerative agriculture more achievable.

Other companies supporting the work include ADM, British Sugar, Burgess Farms, Cranswick plc, Farm Carbon Toolkit, Frontier Agriculture, Landscape Enterprise Networks, Muntons, North Farm Livestock, Soil Association Exchange, Sustainable Food Trust and Wildfarmed.

NAVIGATING FUTURE FUNDING: EIGHT STEPS

Frontier Agriculture suggests that farmers use the following eight-step approach to help make the best decision for their farming businesses:

1. What have you got on your farm and what are you already doing?
Existing on-farm environmental features or specific opportunities in your area

2. What is your strategic direction for the farm?
Appetite for risk, attitude to trials and innovation, future plans, infrastructure requirements and specific skills

3. Do you have the data to understand how your farm is performing?
Benchmarking figures, biomass and yield data, land use restrictions

4. How will funding fit within your farm?
Additional equipment, rotational changes, new farming practices or techniques

5. What are you going to be committing to?
Contract terms, data requirements and delivering environmental outcomes

6. Do the finances stack up?
Implementation costs, tax implications, other funding, gross margin analysis

7. How will it support future compliance requirements?
Help to comply with legislation and assurance implications

8. Who can provide help and support?
Types of support and advice available for various opportunities

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLAYDON, TIM SCRIVENER, ADOBE STOCK, LOUISE IMPEY

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Solar is becoming an increasingly popular option for farmers and landowners across the UK – it's weather-proof, comes with decades of guaranteed income and has the added benefit of having significant positive impacts for the land, the local community and the environment. Every solar project generates green, renewable electricity for businesses, utilities and communities, and contributes towards meeting vital government targets aimed at combatting both the energy and climate crises.

Leasing your land for solar doesn't mean abandoning traditional farming practices, either. Solar farms are the perfect place to graze sheep, so you will find that by renting your land for solar you're able to make the acres work twice as hard – income from the panels, and income from your flock. Solar panels provide shade and shelter for sheep, while the secure fencing offers protection from predation and harassment. Research across the world suggests that solar grazing is a win for your sheep, and your bottom line.

As well as financial benefits, a solar lease can be a bonus for land quality and local biodiversity. Properly managed, solar farms can be havens for local wildlife, and there is even evidence to suggest that projects planted with pollinators in mind can have a positive impact on food production. The disruption to the land from the solar panels is minimal, and land is returned to its original state or better when the lifespan of the project is up. There is also research which infers that the quality of soil under solar panels improves during the duration of the project.

Lightsource bp is a leader in UK solar and to date have developed around 20% of the operational large-scale solar in the country. We've got a superb local track record, making us the ideal partner for any landowner looking to make the most of their land, secure long-term income and contribute to the fight against climate change.

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We've been working with farmers in the UK on solar since 2010, across over 200 projects.

lightsourcebp bp

Farmers 'disengaged' by net zero – but still want to reduce emissions

A citizens' jury says policymakers must better understand the challenges of farming. **Johann Tasker** reports

Farmers want to play their part in reducing greenhouse gas emissions – but net zero is disengaging them, says a report. The finding is just one conclusion reached by a "citizens' jury" of 16 farmers and land managers who explored the role they and their peers could and should play in addressing climate change.

Food producers face growing government pressure to reduce emissions through a range of prescriptive activities. Yet many farmers question the way the impact of agriculture is measured – and the practicality and validity of proposed interventions.

The two-day farmers' jury was convened by the AgriFood for Net Zero Network+ (AFN Network+). The 16 participants from across the UK heard evidence from more than 20 experts on government policy, climate science, technology and land use.

Better understanding

The two-day evidence session in London sought to gain a better understanding of the demands placed on farmers by government policy and why – and then decide what could be done better to address the issues at play.

In a unanimous verdict, the jury found UK farmers and land managers should play their part in meeting climate change and nature recovery ambitions because delivery on the ground would be critical to overall success.

But the jury also found that climate change targets should change. It found that "net zero" as a term was disengaging growers and livestock producers because it was virtually impossible for the sector to achieve. Juror Trevor Bosomworth, a farmer and grower from Thirsk in North Yorkshire, said the group was clear that UK farmers should play a role – but they believed that role should be balanced land management rather than focusing on emissions reduction.

Balance needed

"This means playing an integral part in enhancing the environment while ensuring that viable food production remains at the heart of any changes," he explained.

The jury felt there was also a disproportionate focus on agriculture as a source of greenhouse gas emissions. Farmers were being expected to do more than other sectors to mitigate climate change, it concluded. Herefordshire sheep farmer Penny Chantler said: "As farmers, growers and custodians of the landscape, I feel the government is putting a greater pressure on agriculture than it is on others to solve the climate crisis."

The jury accepted that farmers should also take some responsibility for the ongoing impasse over reducing emissions. But it found that changes to mindset and language were needed from both farmers and the government to move the debate forward.

'Ground-truthing'

Behavioural change champion Amy Jackson, who convened the farmers' jury on behalf of the AFN Network+, said jurors identified a lack of "ground-truthing" in government policy – and suggested farmers themselves could be partly to blame for this.

"Relationships with the government are currently quite political and tend to be largely managed through the farming unions," said Ms Jackson. Policymakers should have better access to grassroots farmers, she added. Lobbying had its place, but liaising with discussions groups or Monitor Farm networks would help ensure civil servants had a safe space to ask questions and try out new ideas, Ms Jackson explained.

The jury also found that farmers should have a "seat at the table" if and when policies on land use, health, nature and food start to converge. Such co-design is already evident in Scotland and Wales, but less so in England.

Help and advice

Ian Powell, a mixed farmer with a retail business near Abergavenny, said: "The way in which Wales' environmental farm management scheme changed in response to feedback

WHAT IS A CITIZENS' JURY?

A citizens' jury typically consists of 12-24 ordinary people, randomly selected as a representative panel to carefully examine an issue of public significance. Developed in the 1970s, many organisations have since adapted the concept to their needs.

In this case, more than 400 UK farmers were asked a range of questions about their perceptions of the climate-change debate. Some 16 jurors were then chosen, representing a range of farm sizes and enterprises from across the UK.

Jurors gathered in London for two days in February as part of a three-year AFN Network+ initiative aimed at shaping research to support and drive the agri-food sector's progress towards net zero.

The jury heard evidence from more than 20 specialists – including policymakers, climate scientists and land use experts – before reaching an agreed position on ways farmers should help meet UK goals on climate change and nature recovery.

The aim of this approach is to move beyond stalemates, fostering solutions that are practical, collaborative, and effective in achieving a wide range of shared goals.

PHOTOGRAPHY: AMY JACKSON, IAN FRANCIS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

illustrates the importance of thorough stakeholder consultation."

Finally, the jury said farmer engagement with government policy would improve if some important "bottlenecks" were tackled around smarter funding, regulation and the provision of independent advice. These specifically included changing the way methane was accounted for, standardising carbon accounting methods, regulating nature markets, and widening funding for technology – for example, covering second-hand equipment.

The next steps following the gathering will see the report promoted to governments across the UK's four home nations – as well as to stakeholder organisations. To read the full document covering all the proposed changes, go to agrifood4netzero.net. ■

JURY FINDINGS

- UK farmers and land managers should play a part in meeting UK climate-change goals – but net zero is the wrong target
- Net zero is unachievable, demotivating, ill-suited to farming, and forces foreseen and undesirable trade-offs
- Goals must focus on outcomes, not prescriptive actions
- Farmers are best positioned to deliver integrated land management solutions that balance food security, water, nature, health, innovation, and climate
- Collaboration is essential, requiring shifts in mindset, language, and communication between farmers, the government and the food supply chain
- While lobbying is important, relationships between the government and farmers have become politicised, preventing policy "ground-truthing"
- A reimagined, independent food chain forum that encompasses relevant government departments should give grassroots farmers more voice in shaping new goals
- A four-nation "cluster group" network could improve government-farmer dialogue, encouraging new ideas, better consultation and information sharing
- Engagement barriers must be addressed, including methane accounting disputes, inconsistent measurement methods, limited technology funding, and unregulated carbon markets
- Farmers must be more proactive in driving change – they stand to gain the most, although benefits also extend to consumers and the government

FARMER VERDICTS

Penny Chantler

Sheep farmer, Hay-on-Wye

It's frightening how much is expected of agriculture. All of us as individuals – regardless of what we do – have a part to play. It's all very well making livestock farmers reduce their stocking rates, but Joe Public have to do their bit too.

People have to eat more sensibly. They have to waste less food. And we've got serious health issues within the population that need to be addressed. It all needs to be sorted out, and it shouldn't just be on farmers' shoulders.

Tom Johnson

Mixed farmer, Cumbria

It's been an interesting experience – and an intriguing process. We've heard from some high-profile speakers and that's important. Farmers need to have a voice when it comes to government policy and we've heard it from the horse's mouth. But there are lots of bones of contention.

The assumptions behind some of the government's policy proposals are problematic. Some policymakers seem to think farmers are a problem, and that risks policies being made somewhat in the wrong direction.

Peter McAllister

Beef and sheep farmer, County Antrim

I have a smallholding back home – a small sheep flock and a herd of beef cows. I rear beef calves for the store market. I'm integrating environmental measures, incorporating agroforestry and planting new hedgerows – trying to be nature positive.

We can all contribute in a small way, and that will hopefully mean a big improvement collectively. No one person is going to change the world. We all need to do what is right on our own little bit of turf. I'm hopeful of steering the politicians in the right direction in terms of doing what we can do best. Then we can replicate that across the world.

Sustainable Farming Incentive: Where next?

With a new Sustainable Farming Incentive arrangement due to be unveiled this summer, **Louise Impey** asks experts for their views on how the scheme might look

The sudden closure of the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) to new applications has left the farming industry in England wondering what the future holds for agri-environment schemes. Defra's decision, which came into immediate effect on the evening of 11 March, has been widely criticised, with most pointing out it was in breach of the six-week notice period promised to potential applicants before any changes were made.

The shock move means that farmers who had not completed and submitted an SFI application, for any reason, will no longer be able to access the scheme in its most recent form. Existing agreements will be paid in full, Defra confirms, while eligible applications submitted before 11 March will also be processed. The reason given for its abrupt halting was that the funding had been exhausted.

Despite the SFI being intended for wide uptake to support nature-friendly farming, with a target of getting 70% of farmers in England signed up, the budget had been spent.

Current situation

At the time of closing, there were 37,000 live SFI agreements in place. In Defra speak, that means 800,000ha of arable land are now farmed without insecticides, 75,000km of hedgerows are being actively managed, and 280,000ha of low-input grassland are being managed more sustainably.

Without the Defra "spin", this translates differently – about 60% of Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) claimants haven't yet applied successfully and will be without the means to do so for at least 18 months. Looking ahead, there is promise of a reformed SFI scheme, with the budget to be confirmed in the Spending Review this summer.

Defra reports it will direct future funding where there is greatest potential to do more for nature and where there's least ability for farmers to access decent returns. At this stage, all that it will say is that details of the revised scheme will be announced in summer 2025, but applications won't be accepted until 2026.

Budget management

Environmental schemes that everyone has the right to apply to need to come with budget management, both at the national level and the individual farm level, points out Geoff Sansome, former head of agriculture at Natural England. "A fundamental mistake was made with the SFI and it was pointed out many times the money would run out if it was left uncapped," he says.

Those who changed their farming system to embrace a direction of travel that was required of them are angry, he acknowledges, with the long-term nature of farming having been disregarded by the way the closure was implemented. "It's an appalling situation to be in and there's little doubt that yet another knock to farmer confidence in government schemes will be the result."

Geoff adds that there was considerable political pressure to get the SFI up and running quickly, as well as kickback against the loss of BPS, so unwise decisions were made to be able to show progress with farmer uptake. "The introduction of the management fee is a good example of that, with farmers receiving up to £1,000/year to cover the administrative costs of entering the scheme."

Despite its stop-start history, he believes that the SFI has some well-developed actions, and with the right delivery model it could still work well and meet important environmental objectives.

Individual farm limits

Getting an uptake level of 70% of farmland with a restricted budget means there will be winners and losers, as it would involve the introduction

Winter bird feed options have been popular and successful

Farmers need reliable backing to support long-term environmental aims and business decisions

of limits at the individual farm level. "The starting point has to be agreeing the budget," says Geoff. "Then they can do some modelling and work out if a limit of £100/ha across all the land entered is achievable, or if it needs to be a bit higher or a bit lower."

Done this way, farmers would then have the choice and flexibility around the options they put in place to reach those limits, he explains. As there are existing SFI agreements that are already over this threshold, those agreement holders would be losers if the decision was taken to amend schemes on their anniversary, rather than when they end, to come within a financial limit. "Amending existing agreements and reducing payments is a contentious proposal and is only being floated as a way of moving forward," agrees Geoff. "But it means that more farmers would be able to access the SFI, at a time when they need it most."

Interim scheme

The Nature Friendly Farming Network has a different proposal. It is calling on the government to introduce an interim scheme to assist farmers that aren't enrolled in the SFI and stabilise their financial position.

A streamlined version of the SFI would help those who can't afford to wait until the next round of government support materialises, outlines chief executive Martin Lines, who accepts that it wouldn't be a fully-fledged solution. "This terrible situation should have been foreseen," he says. "Leaving farmers high and dry is unacceptable, especially as some were prevented from accessing the SFI and there have been considerable delays in responding to applications and queries."

Any new scheme must deliver on the government's key targets, he stresses, rather than allowing too much of the budget to go on unambitious actions that do little to enhance the environment or improve the farm. "Farmers are ready and willing to deliver on key priorities, but they need certainty to make plans for managing their land," adds Martin. "An interim scheme would only be necessary until a more comprehensive solution is available." ■

TRANSITION FARMER: ED SHULDHAM

The Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) is a contract to deliver a service, not a subsidy, so putting caps or limits on it would affect the farming industry's ability to do that, points out Transition Farmer Ed Shuldham.

"Unlike BPS, there are costs and work attached to SFI actions," he says. "The government's 30 by 30 target – a commitment to protect 30% of land for nature by 2030 – will be very difficult to achieve without this type of scheme operating well."

In terms of the SFI, the Wiltshire-based business has been along for the whole ride – starting with the SFI Pilot before taking up the soils standards in SFI22. When that turned out to be a false start, the farm secured an SFI23 agreement, followed by another one when the expanded SFI24 offer was available. "We've entered into every round," reveals Ed. "Our philosophy is to take the opportunities as they arise, rather than wait for the perfect scheme or timing."

That approach extends to grant funding too, with successful applications for Farming in Protected Landscapes and Farming Equipment and Technology Fund support, as well as a Landscape Recovery project through their involvement in a cluster group.

Teaming up with a charity to protect rare chalk downland habitat has also resulted in funding from the Species Recovery grant. "Again, we haven't waited or sat on our hands. These opportunities have to be jumped on while they're there."

The farm's latest expanded SFI24 agreement only started in December 2024, so Ed is hoping that income is guaranteed for three years. "When the revised SFI eventually comes along in 2026, we will take a look to see what it offers. Our 2023 agreement will be coming to an end then."

An existing Higher Tier stewardship scheme and the SFI work well together on the farm, with minimal land taken out of production by the latter. Every arable field has an environmental feature, with some having stewardship margins on all four sides. The SFI actions are all based on the growing in-crop area, complementing the farm's diverse cropping. Insecticide-free crops and companion planting are now part of the farming system, as are summer cover crops.

FARM FACTS

JM Stratton & Co

- **Farm size: 1,800ha**
- **Annual rainfall: 900mm**
- **Soil type: Light to medium chalk with clay cap patches**

Hearing that the government has run out of money for the SFI doesn't make sense, Ed continues. "It is supposed to be funding nature recovery work. If you limit the money that's on offer, either geographically by imposing individual farm limits, you hamper our ability to provide the service we have a contract for."

Private markets are not operating effectively in this space yet, he adds. "If the government does introduce limits, it needs to support the private markets to get up to speed. Funding nature is essential."

● **See p5 for more on our Transition Farmers**

PHOTOGRAPHY: WAYNE HUTCHINSON/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO, TIM SCRIVENER, KATHY HORNIBLOW

Talk to us about strengthening your business and the local environment

This year Natural England and our Catchment Sensitive Farming advisers will be on the ground at many events and shows to answer your questions and offer in-person advice

Drop by at any of these events for an informal, no obligation chat with our trusted advisers:

- **Farmers Weekly Transition Live**, 8th May 2025, Leeds,
- **NSA North Sheep**, 4th June 2025, Cumbria
- **Cereals**, 11-12th June 2025, Lincolnshire
- **Groundswell**, 2-3rd July 2025, Hertfordshire,
- **UK Dairy Day***, 10th September 2025, Shropshire
- **The Agroforestry Show**, 10-11th September 2025, Hertfordshire
- **The Dairy Show***, 1st October 2025, Somerset
- **LAMMA**, January 14-15th 2026, Birmingham,
- **Dairy-Tech UK***, February 26th 2026, Coventry
- **Beef Expo***, April 26th 2026, Cumbria.

Natural England – our role in farm and land management advice

Natural England advises farmers and land managers on schemes and practices that benefit the environment, bolster sustainable food production, and drive economic growth.

By participating in Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes, farmers have access to the support and resources needed to thrive in an evolving agricultural sector that values both productivity and environmental stewardship.

Our advisers will be on hand at the above agricultural shows to answer your questions, discuss how different elements of the ELM schemes can support your farm business and help protect your local countryside for future generations.

Throughout 2025, Natural England is offering:

- Pre-application support for farmers with expiring **Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier** (CS HT) agreements. CS HT offers payments for targeted actions that protect and improve the environment, such as creating wildlife habitats and maintaining traditional landscape features. CS HT is due to open for applications, in pilot form, this summer.
- Support and guidance to farmers, land managers and other organisations enrolled in **Landscape Recovery** schemes. Landscape Recovery funds large-scale, long-term projects aimed at restoring landscapes and enhancing biodiversity. It supports collaborative efforts among landowners to restore nature.
- Advice on maximising biodiversity across your land, choice of woody plant species, connecting woody habitats at a landscape scale and using natural processes to increase tree canopy cover. Speak to our **Tree Action Plan Delivery** (TAP-D) advisers at The Agroforestry Show (10-11th September).

Catchment Sensitive Farming

Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF) offers advice and training to help farmers produce food in a way that protects their local water, air and soil. All our advice is impartial, confidential and free for farmers.

CSF also hosts local events for farmers across the country. With workshops, demonstrations, and farm walks on:

- Nutrient, slurry and manure management,
- Soil health,
- Pesticide handling
- Natural flood management
- Reducing ammonia emissions
- Sustainable water use
- Guidance on farming schemes and regulations.

Scan the QR codes or visit: **csfengland.org/events** and **gov.uk/natural-england** to find out more.

*Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF) is led by Natural England in partnership with Defra, the Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission.

NATURAL ENGLAND

Catchment Sensitive Farming
Working together for a healthy environment

Buildings upgrade and new dairy farm tenancy

Transition is following a group of farmers on their journey to adapt and meet the challenges of farming. **Debbie James** reports on the progress of two more farms

Kate and Vicky Morgan

Purpose-built housing has given pig farmers Vicky and Kate Morgan greater control over their cost of production, but an outbreak of porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome (PRRS) has been a setback. Investing in two new sheds with capacity for 4,000 pigs has removed the need for reliance on third-party "bed-and-breakfast" providers for the Morgans' business.

When the first occupants arrived in October 2024, there was an expectation of excellent pig health because new facilities meant no residual infection pressure and biosecurity protocols are good. But after arrival, the pigs displayed symptoms of PRRS and that resulted in mortalities and poor growth rates. Tests revealed it to be the "wild" strain of the virus, which the sisters say could have blown in on the wind or been present on lorry tyres. It was not a great start for the newly commissioned shed, but as the pigs have built up immunity from the disease, performance has recovered.

Each shed has 20 straw-bedded pens with 100 pigs in every enclosure, central scrape passages, gale breakers and fans. Making the transition from renting facilities off-farm to building their own was a challenging process due to big delays in getting the work done. We had allowed a two-week freeboard but it wasn't enough, so we concentrated on getting one of the sheds finished.

FARM FACTS

DP Morgan, Pockthorpe, East Yorkshire

- **Farm size: 1,700 breeding sows**
- **Weaning 1,000 pigs a week – finished on-site**
- **140ha rented out**

TRANSITION GOAL PROGRESS

Approximate percentage of progress towards completion:

- Facilitate structural change in supply chain: 0%
- Take greater control of their business's future: 66%
- Diversifying: 66%

The previous year, building work had concentrated on converting a former pumphouse into holiday accommodation. As they near the end of the first full season of renting it out, Vicky and Kate report high occupancy rates in the pumphouse unit and also in the family's six holiday lodges.

They are, however, disappointed to have made no progress on their main objective of facilitating structural change in the supply chain. They want direct contact with their end customer (retailer), instead of the processor acting as the intermediary. "We hope the review of the pig supply chain will address this issue and others," says Vicky.

See p5 for more on our Transition Farmers

FARM FACTS

Woodrow Barton, Brampford Speke, Devon

- **Farm size: 161ha**
- **Annual rainfall: 865mm**
- **Soil type: Clay loam over river gravel**

Richard and Rachel Risdon

Unexpected costs can rack up when taking on a new farm as milk producers Richard and Rachel Risdon have discovered since becoming tenants of a second holding. "You always expect hidden costs, so you build a 10% contingency into the budget, but when a speaker at this year's Positive Farmers Conference suggested that a figure of 20% was more realistic, he was probably right," says Rachel.

The Risdons took on the 253ha farm in north Devon in April 2024, aiming to produce milk from a 350-cow milking herd of spring-calving New Zealand Friesians and crossbreds. A big percentage have already been sourced from Ireland and Leicestershire and although the last of these arrived just three days before mating in May 2024, a six-week in-calf rate of 75% was achieved.

The scale of investment in infrastructure has been much higher than anticipated – from correcting design faults with in-parlour feeding and cubicle housing, to overcoming costly engineering challenges establishing a silage clamp.

There has been an intensive programme of reseeding on the 132ha milking platform, with a full reseed on 70ha and overseeding with legumes on 52ha. Reseeding and overseeding has also been carried out at their principal holding at Woodrow Barton, near Exeter, joining the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) and using the SAM3 option. Further applications were planned for the new tenancy but these must now wait until the government's revised plans for the SFI are announced. Gaining a better understanding of Environmental Land Management is a goal, but the Risdons resorted to paying an agent to handle the application. "Defra says it wants the new schemes to be straightforward enough so farmers don't need an agent, but I don't think that is the case," says Rachel.

Reducing their carbon footprint is another goal, and they have joined the Leaf-Co-op Net Zero project. Their labour aspiration came to fruition last year, when two new employees were recruited.

Overall, the Risdons feel they have achieved two-thirds of their Transition goals.

TRANSITION GOAL PROGRESS

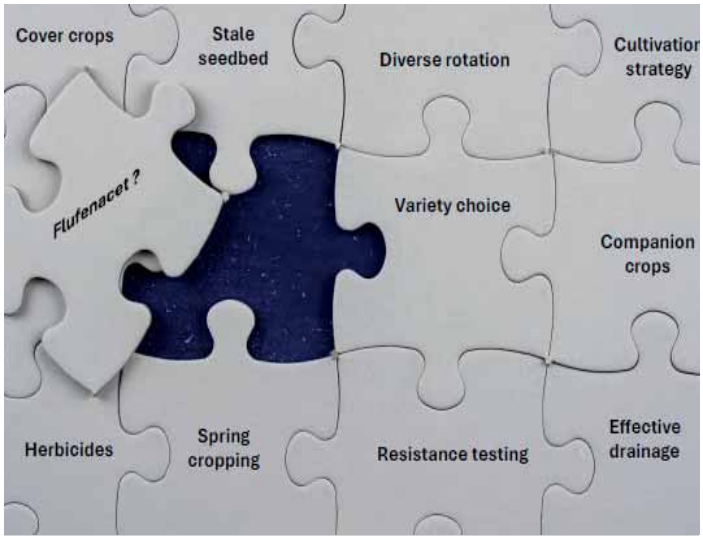
Approximate percentage of progress towards completion:

- Securing adequate labour: 66%
- Better understanding of Environmental Land Management: 66%
- Reducing carbon footprint: 66%

PHOTOGRAPHY: WAYNE HUTCHINSON, EMILY FLEUR

Why IPM Matters!

Blackgrass herbicides continue to be the most commonly detected crop protection products in raw water sources.



The UK's National Action Plan for Pesticides guides farmers towards sustainable pest, weed and disease management through integrated pest management (IPM). By combining techniques like crop rotation, variety choice, increased biodiversity, and selective pesticide use, IPM strengthens farm resilience , helps nature thrive, and protects natural resources.

There's also the added financial incentive for those with a SFI agreement where £1129 is paid annually for considering their IPM strategies and compiling a plan. Blackgrass continues to be one of the most damaging and economically significant weeds in UK arable farming. Its prolific seed production, staggered, almost year-round germination, and increasing resistance to herbicides make it particularly challenging to control.

Herbicide-only approaches are no longer sufficient, with integrated strategies proving more effective in controlling and reducing blackgrass populations. To mitigate the spread and impact of blackgrass, a multi-faceted, evidence-based approach is essential. No one management practice is a silver bullet for blackgrass control, so practicing IPM principles reduces your reliance on each aspect, building resilience if any option is lost.

The more tools you have in the toolbox, the less pressure on any single one. Taking a risk assessment approach to weed management, it's worth considering every aspect of your current practices and say "What if?" in order to draw up a strategy. For example, what if it's too wet or too dry for my usual cultivations?

Is there a plan B? Can I still get a crop in and control weeds? What if demand for my crops diminishes? Should I be trying new techniques or novel crops. Should I be having blackgrass seed resistance tested because I might be using products which are never going to work? Perhaps the biggest concern for the majority of growers is the loss of actives from the herbicide armoury.

Glyphoste is an integral part of a cover crops and direct drilling system for many but it feels like it's a perennial discussion about either a ban or re-registration, and just recently had an extension of it's authorisation only until 15th December 2026. So how do you plan for potentially losing it?

For the past 20 years or so flufenacet has been one of the foundations of stacked active regimes and has been the go-to option to be included in pre-emergence plans. There have been questions around it's continued existence for some time and it's approval will expire across EU Member states on June 15th, casting even more doubt on it's future here.

Considering all herbicides, they can only be active on weed populations when they are in the field, in the rooting zone or on the leaves depending on the mode of action. It is widely accepted that the health status of a soil and especially it's organic matter content can have a significant impact on it's ability to retain water, nutrients and pesticides.

Following IPM principles, improving soil health, and reduced and responsible use of expensive chemistry is a win-win for both the farm business and the environment.

- **Key action:** Implement diverse crop rotations with spring drilling and select competitive varieties.
- **Key action**: Utilise delayed drilling, shallow tillage, and cover crops where possible.
- **Key action:** Use herbicide resistance testing and IPM strategies, to maintain herbicide efficacy and reduce resistance development.

To find out more
Email catchmentmanagement@anglianwater.co.uk
Visit https://www.anglianwater.co.uk

anglianwater

Farm walk visitors visited Rothamsted's archive and oilseed rape trials

Better genetics needed to boost farm output

Rothamsted Research provided an insight into its vital trials work during a Transition Project farm walk. **Jonathan Riley** was there

Further genetic improvements are needed to meet the challenges of modern agriculture, according to scientists hosting a Transition Project farm walk.

The walk attracted dozens of farmers, growers and Transition Project partners to hear how Rothamsted Research's site in Harpenden, Hertfordshire, plays a vital role in UK agriculture's future.

Prof Freddie Theodoulou, director of plant sciences for the bioeconomy strategic area, explained that climate change, insect pests, disease and fungal challenges are adding to difficulties faced by arable growers. But she said conventional crossbreeding had considerable time constraints. Typically, developments take eight to 10 years to produce a desired trait, such as better yield, or resistance to disease or drought.

The conventional crossbreeding process may also transfer unwanted traits that might hamper growth characteristics, she pointed out. In contrast, precision breeding and gene-editing processes overcome these constraints and offer unprecedented opportunities for crop and forage improvement.

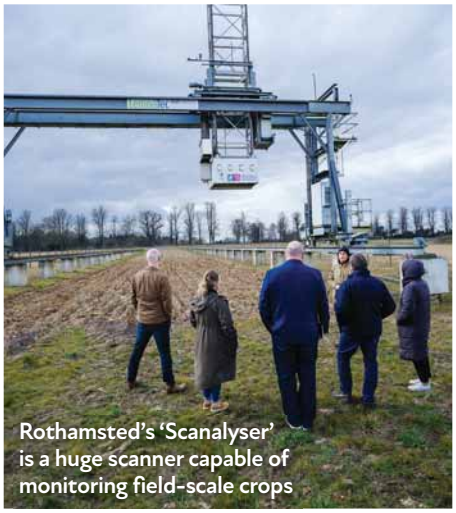
Visitors heard that genome editing is an operation where DNA is inserted, deleted, modified or replaced in a living organism's genome. Importantly, gene editing is less controversial than genetic modification (GM). That is because gene editing focuses on making precise changes within the existing DNA, whereas GM introduces foreign DNA from other organisms – a process that sparked opposition among campaign groups.

Rothamsted successes

Speakers outlined some of the key successes brought about by gene editing at Rothamsted. One of the key successes is the development of high lipid forage by Prof Peter Eastmond's team. He explained that an increased lipid proportion in forage produces a higher metabolisable energy (ME) content in the plant. A higher ME boosts production efficiency, improves meat and milk quality and cuts greenhouse gas emissions by reducing methane output.

In crops, a Rothamsted Research team – led by Prof Nigel Halford – has successfully used gene editing to produce wheat that is low in asparagine – an amino acid found at different levels in wheat varieties. Under high-temperature cooking or processing, asparagine produces a chemical called acrylamide – which has been linked with increased cancer risk. Many foods already breach intake guidelines, but maximum limits may become even stricter in the near future, according to Prof Halford.

That underlines the importance of the work carried out by Prof Halford's team, which has used the CRISPR gene-editing technique to cut asparagine levels by 50%. Successful field trials reproduced the same result indicating that the edited plant could be grown commercially.


Rothamsted's 'Scanalyser' is a huge scanner capable of monitoring field-scale crops

Field-scale trial network

The importance of field-scale trials was underlined by another speaker at the farm walk, Tom Allen-Stevens, managing director of the British On-farm Innovation Network (Bofin).

Mr Allen-Stevens explained that Bofin connects researchers with a network of commercial growers who carry out trials at field-scale. Example trials include a Platform to Rate Organisms Bred for Improved Trait and Yield – a three-year, £2.2m multi-partner project. The project trials three precision-bred cereal varieties.

Farm walk visitors also heard about Bofin's Nitrogen Efficient Plants for Climate Smart Arable Cropping Systems – a farmer-led research programme involving 17 industry and research partners and more than 200 farmers. The aim is to increase pulse and legume cropping in UK arable rotations from 5-20%, and then to help replace up to 50% of imported soya meal used in livestock feed rations. This would bring about a reduction of 1.5m tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent a year or 54% of the industry's maximum potential.

A further Bofin trial project outlined was Thriving Roots Underpinning Total Soil Health, a three-year, £1m research programme aiming to deliver a farmer-led platform comprising on-farm soil/root health testing tools and an in-field soil health sensor, which provides more than 10 soil health indicators.

Mr Allen-Stevens invited any farmers wanting to be involved to get in touch through the website at bofin.org.uk/workwithus. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY: MAG/ COLIN MILLER

Renewable energy: Key points to consider

Renewable energy experts offer advice on the options and challenges for farms aiming to reduce their fossil fuel use

Renewable energy can displace fossil fuel use, cutting input costs and reducing greenhouse gas emissions, according to a *Farmers Weekly* Transition project webinar panel.

But with a number of renewables systems and set-up hurdles requiring expert help, how do you start the process?

Where to start

The NFU's chief adviser on renewables, Jonathan Scurlock, said the first step in any renewables project was to monitor the farm's energy use to identify areas where efficiencies could be made. This was important because investments in energy efficiency measures were likely to have the shortest payback time – one to two years, Jonathan said.

Potential savings and income

The next decision is whether energy generation is for on-site use only or for export to other users.

Conrad Energy's Tim foster said even when planning to export energy it was still better to use as much of the output as possible to offset input costs. By generating energy you are offsetting costs from an energy supplier of 20p/kWh. Exported electricity will be worth about 10p/kWh. As an example of the output from a 200kW solar array, Tim suggested about 200MWh of electricity a year. Jonathan estimated that represented a 10-20% return on investment.

Yorkshire-based Transition Farmer Eddie Andrew is targeting zero fossil fuel use within five years for his dairy farm, on-site ice cream parlour and doorstep delivery enterprises. A 15kW solar array provides energy for the business, but high equipment costs are an issue. "We have three pickups for the deliveries but can't find a suitable electric alternative," said Eddie. "While I could find a diesel version for sub-£10,000, I can't get anywhere near that with an electric van."

Exporting electricity

Grid connection is a limiting factor for anyone looking to export energy and should be factored in at the first stage of planning, the expert panel advised. Connections to the grid can be limited and there is often a queue of applications.

Solicitor Isaac Murdy at Shakespeare Martineau said it was worth quizzing authorities on available capacity. Sometimes projects get stuck in the queue and take up allocated capacity. Some authorities are clearing out these so-called zombie projects, so it's worth asking whether there could be capacity re-entering the system.

Exporting energy

Farms will need to obtain a power purchase agreement from a supplier to sell the electricity produced. Alternatively, it is possible to sell energy to the local community which may yield better returns. But renewable energy is an intermittent power source, Isaac said, so if you sell to a neighbour there will need to be a degree of flexibility in the contract, and any contract must cover any issues that might arise.

He added that excavation contractors and cable layers must be qualified. Depending on the voltage, you may need an independent distributor's licence and to ensure contractors are qualified independent connection provider. This a complex area and you would need legal assistance from a firm such as Shakespeare Martineau.

Which renewables type

Solar is probably the simplest option to consider for farm businesses, but generation during winter can be limited. For now, on Eddie's farm, supply troughs are evened out with power from the National Grid.

Wind power could cover the less sunny months, Jonathan said, with a 30m tall, 50kW turbine being a viable threshold for farms. Fluctuating power sources can also be moderated using battery storage. Eddie is also considering wind power and had a survey conducted to identify a suitable site. To comply with legal distances from other properties there was only one small area on the farm where a turbine could be positioned, he said. He pointed out that an often overlooked difficulty with turbines is transport to the site. Turbines are so tall that good access is vital.

Anaerobic digestion (AD) systems are capable of generating consistent power. But plant management requires staff input, which should be considered. Jonathan said payback times on small-scale AD plants were also challenging, because the outlay was proportionally bigger compared with the energy produced. ■

EXPERT PANEL

Transition project editor and webinar host Johann Tasker was joined by four experts to discuss: How to decide which renewable energy option was the best for your farm.

- **Eddie Andrew** Dairy farmer and *FW* Transition Farmer
- **Tim Foster** Conrad Energy head of energy
- **Isaac Murdy** Solicitor, Shakespeare Martineau
- **Jonathan Scurlock** NFU chief adviser on renewable energy

WATCH THE WEBINAR

Watch the discussion in full at **fwi.co.uk/transition**, where you'll also find the other webinars in the Transition series

PHOTOGRAPHY: OUR COW MOLLY, GNP

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The Transition initiative offers a vast bank of practical articles, which can be downloaded for free

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- Advice on building climate resilience into business plans Winter 2023-24 (p7)
- How to stress-test your farm business – Summer 2022 (p10)
- How to build resilience into a livestock system – Spring 2023 (p36)
- Tips for planning ahead to reduce business risks – Autumn 2023 (p7)
- Why better planning can reduce machinery costs – Winter 2023-24 (p30)
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Transition is a quarterly supplement in *Farmers Weekly*, published every Friday by MA Agriculture, 1st Floor Chancery House, St Nicholas Way, Sutton SM1 1JB