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FARMERS WEEKLY

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

New entrant Transition Farmer sets out plans

TRANSITION

Securing a sustainable future for your farm business

How to become a successful price-maker

Welcome to *Transition* – the quarterly supplement from *Farmers Weekly* to help secure a sustainable future for your farm business.

Our cover story introduces new entrant Lucy Eyre, who has joined our line-up of Transition Farmers. Lucy farms on the Welsh Borders and is establishing a direct-selling venture with meat from her cattle and sheep. Like many farmers, this will see Lucy shift from being a price-taking primary producer to becoming a value-added price-maker. This issue includes tips explaining how you too could grab a bigger slice of the pie.

Any successful change hinges on how well you know your assets – and we examine ways to conduct a back-to-basics farm review. We also look at the importance of good data management.

We then change tack to address a growing problem. Tree planting has increased significantly on farms in recent years, but loss rates are hampering progress and threatening the withdrawal of support scheme payments. The main cause is damage inflicted by the booming deer population. We look at ways farmers can give trees a good start and increase the likelihood of successful establishment.

As always, we'd like to thank our Transition Farmers for sharing their experiences – including the pitfalls to avoid as well as their hard-fought winning strategies and recommended approaches.

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

Johann Tasker, *Transition* editor

MAIN PHOTO: LEMANIEH_ISTOCKPHOTO

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

Losing valuable nutrients and the impact on the environment

Progressive farmers have been improving their crop nutrient management for many years now, but losses to the environment continue to be an issue, as nitrate levels rise in rivers.

The application of nitrate fertilisers to crops in the UK has improved in many ways over time, all linked to improving farm businesses by avoiding the unnecessary use of expensive inputs whilst providing the optimum rate for best returns. Nutrient management planning, soil analysis for SMN, product analysis of organic manures and digestate and detailed field mapping based on multiple data-sets have all become standard practice in drawing up crop input plans.

The accurate placement of that nutrition has also been made possible with GPS, improved headland control on spreaders, variable rate technology, auto shut off and NDVI technology all aiding an approach to just putting fertiliser where it is needed, in whatever form it is used. However, nitrate levels in surface waters continue to rise, increasingly impacting the drinking water treatment process.
Of course, this rising trend can't all be attributed to agriculture, but it is a sector where further reductions in losses to the environment could be possible.

Any reduction in losses can only be good for both the farm and the environment, but more importantly are set in regulations put in place by the previous Government in 2023. The Environment Targets (Water) (England) Regulations2023 set a target for a 40% reduction in N and P entering water by diffuse pollution by 2038 (from 2018 levels).
This obviously means there is some way to go in changing practices regarding nutrient use or in environmental protection on farm. It seems fair to say that this can only be achieved by either using less or retaining more.

Solutions

One consideration is the use of alternative sustainable sources of Nitrogen with reduced risk of loss by either run-off or leaching. A significant increase in the number of AD plants means that more farms are now using digestate (with up to 90% RAN content) as a fertiliser, potentially increasing the risk of losses to both ground and surface waters.

One solution generating interest currently is the developing technology to turn anaerobic digestate into a pelleted product. One example of this is being carried out by CCM Technologies, who are now working with Frontier Agriculture to bring this product to farm at scale.

Field trials have been carried out over 7 years using pelleted digestate and in a recent trial, a crop of milling wheat saw no compromise in results when pelleted product was compared with bagged AN. There was actually a slight increase in the protein level where the pellets were used."

The additional benefits of adding organic matter to a growing crop showed that even when N application rates were reduced by up to 20%, no yield impact was seen. Pelleted product also brings the added advantage of easier handling and storage, under cover, further reducing pollution risk. It can be spread using conventional spreading equipment, and has successfully been spread at over 30m, meaning it can be implemented easily on farm, so this looks like a project which may bring real benefits for both farmers and the water environment.

To find out more

Email catchmentmanagement@anglianwater.co.uk
Visit https://www.anglianwater.co.uk/environment/supporting-our-communities/farming-in-our-communities

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Meet our Transition Farmers

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

Beth Speakman
Essex

Farm size 275ha

Enterprises
Mixed arable, beef and sheep

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

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
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
p27
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
Devon

Farm size 161ha

Enterprises
300-cow dairy herd

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

Lucy Eyre
p14
Welshpool

Farm size 51ha

Enterprises
Cattle and sheep

Transition goals
- Striking the right balance of livestock numbers
- Reduce inputs and maximise the use of grass
- Re-establish direct meat sales

Eddie Andrew
p9
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
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
p18
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
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
p27
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
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
p8
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
p7
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

ADOPT explained: funding to test ideas on your farm

ADOPT (Accelerating Development of Practices and Technologies) is a Defra/UKRI fund helping England's farmers run practical on-farm trials. Here's how to turn an idea into results you can trust.

Across British farming, there's no shortage of ideas to lift productivity, strengthen resilience and cut environmental impact. The harder part is finding the time, money and confidence to test them properly without gambling a season's margin. That's where the ADOPT Fund comes in. It supports farmer-led, on-farm trials that turn "we think this could work" into evidence you can trust, share and use to decide what's worth adopting long term.

ADOPT is aimed at active farming, growing and forestry businesses based in England that want to trial something new or not yet widely used e.g. new crop varieties; precision data collection and analysis tools or advanced animal husbandry technologies. The sweet spot is practical change: a new practice, technology or approach that could improve productivity, resilience or sustainability, and that other farms can learn from. For many mixed and commercial-scale businesses, it's a chance to de-risk decisions you're already considering and measure the impact on improved output quality and yield.

Test before you invest

The best projects are run like proper field trials, not "nice-to-haves". Start by pinning down the business problem in plain terms (what it's costing you now), then set a clear, testable outcome (what success looks like). Establish your baseline first, then design a fair comparison: what stays the same, what changes, and what evidence you'll collect. Keep measurement simple and useful. A handful of reliable figures you'll actually use beats a mountain of data you'll never look at again. Crucially, put the workload where it belongs: your technology provider should do the heavy lifting on data capture, analysis and reporting, while you focus on running the farm and following a manageable trial plan.

Timing matters too. The next deadline for applications is 4th February but keep in mind when the project can actually start to ensure your proposed trial aligns with your seasonal growth cycles.

If the application itself feels like the biggest hurdle, ADOPT also offer a £2,500 Facilitator Support Grant to fund an external Project Facilitator to help turn your idea into a strong, fundable trial. In practice, that means stress-testing the plan, tightening the evidence and trial design, and presenting it clearly for assessment so your project stands up on paper as well as it does in the field. Project Facilitator's are there to support development of quality of applications and make the scheme easier to access. Their involvement in your trial team is an essential requirement to obtain the funding.

Key dates

ADOPT Round 5: application deadline 4th February 2026 - project start 1st June 2026
ADOPT Facilitator Support Round 6: application deadline 25th February 2026 - support grant start 1st April 2026
ADOPT Round 6: application deadline 8th April 2026 - project start 1st August 2026

Kene is a registered Project Facilitator for ADOPT.

To find out more
Call 0207 118 8833
Email info@kene.partners
Visit www.kene.partners

KENE.

How to transition from price-taker to price-maker

Could now be the best time to switch your farming business from being a price-taker to a price-maker? **Jonathan Riley** looks at some of the options

Farm businesses are traditionally small-scale, primary production units that have little individual influence in a market driven by global forces and dominated by corporates. But things are changing. Demand for natural assets and environmental goods is growing, and there is a greater appetite for collaboration both between farm businesses and along the supply chain. Technology has also developed that can better support collaborations, improve market analysis and create platforms for direct sales.

Although confidence is low among farmers and growers, could now represent the biggest opportunity for farm businesses to transition from being price-takers to price-makers?

Experts from the AHDB and Tesco, and three of our Transition Farmers, air their views on steps that could help make the shift and deliver a fairer share of the retail price.

Why farmers are price-takers

Farm output is largely in the form of commodities, whether cereals, meat or liquid milk. These are sold into a bulk trading system where prices are influenced by global factors and large companies, says AHDB head of economics Sarah Baker. Individual farms are Davids among Goliaths and do not have the negotiating power to command higher prices.

Strategies to become price-makers

However, there are options for farmers and growers to become price-makers, including:

- Farmer collaboration
- Adding value
- Closer supply chain links
- Better use of market intelligence.

Farmer collaboration

Collaboration allows farmers to capture more value in the supply chain through strategies such as product pooling, joint processing and collective marketing.

This larger scale makes the co-operative more attractive to buyers who can cut administration and transport costs and secure consistent quality and quantities by dealing with a single seller.

The scale therefore gives farmers more leverage in negotiating contracts and increases the likelihood of securing better prices across the group. Improving economies of scale also allows strategic investments to improve efficiency. For example, co-ops can more easily invest in processing equipment and machinery to bypass middlemen, add value and take more of the supply chain profits.

Essentially, by uniting, farmers create a bigger, stronger entity with shared resources, allowing them to dictate terms rather than passively accepting whatever price buyers offer. "It used to be that a farmer neighbour was a business's >

TRANSITION FARMER MATTHEW WILLIAMS, SHROPSHIRE

Taking the basic price for grain is not an option for first-generation arable grower Matthew Williams, who has built up a portfolio of more than 1,250ha of farmed land in less than a decade.

Matthew Williams

Matthew contract farms much of the area for clients and owns a small hectarage. All of this has been achieved without receiving farm support payments, a factor that has put prices into sharp focus.

Key to this is using market intelligence to command better grain prices. Matthew studies data from traders and independent analysts as often as five times a day to identify price shifts and then acts swiftly when the price is right.

Playing the market with this intense focus has improved returns by tens of thousands of pounds a year compared with being a passive price-taker, Matthew says.

Another venture to gain a bigger share of the grain price has been to collaborate with low-input grain trader Wildfarmed. Growers for Wildfarmed receive a significant premium, which in 2023-24 exceeded the average milling wheat price by more than £100/t. It then markets its low input approach by connecting farmers, millers and bakers with consumers.

"We are gaining a better understanding of what customers want, but we are also able to discuss the important issues we face, like prices, and we are all moving forward together."

PHOTOGRAPHY: CRAIG BROWN STOCK/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO, RICHARD STANTON, RAYLIPSCOMBE/ISTOCKPHOTO, OUR COW MOLLY, TIM SCRIVENER

< closest competitor," says Sarah. But now there is a growing recognition that farms are stronger together, and cluster group numbers are rising. "Clusters can share resources and are able to spread marketing costs. They can also command better prices in burgeoning markets like sales of natural assets," she says.

Companies looking for carbon or nutrient offsetting opportunities are more likely to want to deal with a single entity offering larger capacities, so a cluster will have more clout when negotiating prices.

Adding value

While co-operation can make adding value simpler via shared processing equipment, it is also a primary strategy for smaller, individual farm businesses wanting to become price-makers.

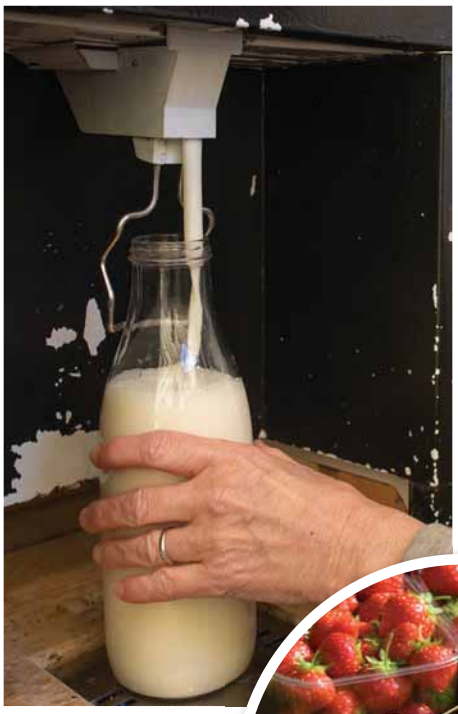
A co-operative venture will help market the product differentiator, opening potential new outlets for produce. For the smaller businesses, taking on roles typically held by middlemen, processors and retailers via direct selling is a key strategy to keep more profit on the farm.

Key to the process is differentiation between a commodity and a product with a unique selling point, says Sarah. That selling point may be traceability, organic certification, or higher level environmental or animal welfare work that contributes to the production process.

It may also be a switch to a livestock breed or crop variety with perceived quality benefits. Selling products direct to consumers through farmers' markets, online stores, vending machines or farm shops cuts out intermediaries and builds a relationship with the buyer.

Digital selling platforms and social media are relatively recent developments that make the process of promoting products easier than it has ever been, adds Sarah.

Whatever the strategy and scale of the business, having a brand is fundamental. A brand will help promote and explain the benefits and the value of the changes, attracting customers and acting as a foundation on which to build their trust.



Closer supply chain links

Traditionally, there has been a gulf between farmers and the big retailers at the end of the supply chain. But pressures from environmental legislation and changing customer requirements in recent years mean primary producers and buyers are now more closely aligned, with many shared goals.

For example, extreme weather events are more common and represent a financial threat to the entire supply chain while shifts in consumer demand towards sustainable environmental and animal welfare practices are recognised as issues that the farmers themselves have direct control over.

It adds up to an increased demand for those farmers and growers who can demonstrate good practice and a higher level of business resilience. This represents a marketing opportunity to work more closely with buyers and secure better returns.

Transition Project partner Tesco is one retailer that already pays a premium to producers who are helping to meet their shared objectives.

It recently published a report on UK agriculture which marked a further strengthening of ties with farmers across all sectors. Tesco's *Greenprint for UK Farming* report, developed with Harper Adams University, was published in 2025 and outlined recommendations for sustainable UK agriculture. The report voiced concern over uncertainty caused by government policy and called for a clear political strategy, new incentive schemes, innovation and practical solutions for the industry. It cited changes to agri-environment schemes, high investment costs and increased exposure to risk for blocking uptake of actions that would make farms more sustainable.

During research for the Greenprint report, farmers were asked for feedback on what would help them during the transition period, and this information was used to develop Tesco's policy and farmer incentive systems, says the supermarket's head of sustainable agriculture, Natalie Smith.

Natalie explains that the policy is to help Tesco's supplier farmers transition to net-zero farming by sharing knowledge, trialling new tech and providing incentives through its long-standing sustainable farming groups. The groups cover pork, lamb, potatoes, beef and dairy and deliver better returns as producers commit to shared goals.

Each group's approach is formed around member feedback, but members of the lamb group, for example, are working together to monitor and reduce emissions from their pro-

TRANSITION FARMER ED SHULDHAM, WILTSHIRE

Collaboration with other farms is providing landscape scale to generate revenue streams and create a louder voice to influence UK policy, according to JM Stratton's business development manager Ed Shuldham.

East Farm is part of two collaborative initiatives with neighbouring producers. One is a farm cluster, Wylye Valley Farmers, which acts as a not-for-profit, social and community exercise to demonstrate ideas on environmental issues and sustainable farming.

The second initiative is the Environmental Farmers Group. Set up with local farms to trade natural capital assets at a landscape scale, it has 585 members covering more than 340,000ha, and this scale offers farmers more clout when trading natural capital services.


Ed Shuldham

"Private purchasers want to see the biggest benefits achieved for their input and this means working at landscape scale," says Ed. "We work together as a professional team to negotiate with buyers and set a price for our assets that accurately reflects their worth."

The aim is to become a trusted supplier of quality natural assets for public and private bodies such as the UK's water companies, developers and corporate organisations.

duction systems. The farmer members are then paid a premium for their produce when they meet mutually agreed environmental and welfare standards.

"The dairy group was launched amid milk price volatility back in 2007 and bases prices on production costs to ensure participating farmers remain financially sustainable," says Natalie.

Members of the dairy group will earn up to an extra 2.5p/litre if key targets on emissions reduction, animal health, feed conversion efficiency and genetic improvements are achieved.

Sustainable Pig Group farmers earn incentive payments for reducing emissions and improving welfare, biodiversity and soil health – a similar approach to the beef group. "Tesco has launched further support through its baselining initiative to establish targets for soil, water and biodiversity improvements," says Natalie.

Organised in conjunction with Soil Association Exchange, the baselining project will pump in an additional £750,000, on top of previously announced £800,000, for dairy farmers to carry out baselining, bringing total spend in this area so far to more than £1.5m.

This investment into the sustainable farm groups, to gain accurate data on soil health, water quality and biodiversity, will guide further targeted investments for group members.

Better use of market intelligence

Market intelligence significantly empowers farmers to become price-makers, says Sarah. "If farmers and growers accept whatever is offered for their livestock or crops they are potentially missing out on opportunities to make more money," she insists.

With online platforms and a huge bank of information available through the AHDB, it is possible to make informed decisions based on real-time and historical data. "This can identify demand and supply levels, suggest price trends and indicate when and where to sell produce to make the biggest margin," Sarah explains.

In the short term that might allow a producer to jump on a price spike. AHDB data can also aid medium-term strategies by highlighting trends that point to future price peaks and troughs. This enables growers to plan planting regimes and manage storage to better meet periods of high demand and make better prices. In the long term, analysis can highlight consumer demand for specific product traits such as higher-value goods that command higher prices. ■

● **See p5 for more information on all of our Transition Farmers**

TRANSITION FARMER EDDIE ANDREW, SOUTH YORKSHIRE

Farmers can become price-makers but it needs a totally different mindset, says Eddie Andrew.

"The key is to stop thinking like a commodity producer – because commodity producers are always going to be price-takers," he says.

There are a number of options like branding your product and attaching a backstory or adding value – for example, by processing your own raw materials.

Cliffe House Farm has its own Our Cow Molly milk brand, which is supplied through doorstep deliveries to individual customers and wholesale to coffee shops and larger-scale outlets such as Sheffield University.

The brand is promoted through social media, a useful tool in becoming a price-maker because provenance and traceability benefits can easily be explained, increasing demand.

The farm pasteurises its own milk, increasingly using renewable solar energy which adds appeal to environment-conscious customers. It also produces ice cream and other dairy products, sold direct without losing returns to a middleman.

One product line that is gaining popularity is raw milk, and Eddie believes this is an area where more farmers could set a higher price. "If dairy farmers are looking to add value then the raw milk market could be worth getting into because it doesn't require the investment in pasteurisation equipment," he points out.

At Cliffe House Farm, a two-litre bottle of raw milk sells for £3 – which is more than the farm's pasteurised equivalent. There are extra rules on hygiene, but Eddie says they are not prohibitive and the Food Standards Agency will provide advice.

Another venture that has allowed Eddie to set prices is the installation of two vending machines. The machines returned more than £95,000 to the business last year with low installation and running costs.

Machines include a system to take payments and monitor stock and, unlike a farm shop, there are no extra staff requirements.

One machine sells ice cream, the other offers milk, butter, honey, bacon and eggs – some of which are supplied by neighbouring farms.

Vending machines are an excellent price-making opportunity for you and your neighbours, says Eddie.


Eddie Andrew

MAPPING OPPORTUNITIES

A second report on the state of farming published last year was Lloyds Bank's *Farming with Nature: Mapping the Growth Opportunity for UK Agriculture*. Working closely with clients, the report pinpoints how farmers can maximise prices from climate change and biodiversity ventures.

Researchers used geospatial data, on-farm assessments and new economic insight to establish how farmland interacts with nature. In total 5.1m hectares were assessed, making it the largest mapping exercise of its kind. Of that, 1.2m hectares was identified as having the highest potential for farm incomes from habitat creation, carbon stores and boosting beneficial species.

It also identified 600,000ha of land prime for tree and hedge planting. Crucially, the report combines detailed national and regional opportunities, identifying where specific practices will deliver the greatest impacts for rural businesses.

Andrew Walton, chief sustainability officer at Lloyds Banking Group, says: "Our latest insight shows how targeted support can strengthen farming businesses and help restore ecosystems. As the UK's largest agricultural finance provider, we're committed to supporting individual farming businesses that sit at the heart of the UK's rural economy."

The bank has launched an Agricultural Transition Finance loan designed to help ease cashflow pressures and support farmers as they make critical investments in long-term sustainable farming ventures.

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How a business review can set future direction

A back-to-basics review can help reset the business and prepare it for the future. **Louise Impey** asks experts for tips on taking a structured approach

Conducting a business review should take place in most farms offices as 2026 unfolds, following a roller coaster 18 months for the industry that has delivered even more change and less certainty.

In England, without the safety net of the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) and following the sudden closure of the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), cashflow pressures are rising as most commodity markets remain unexciting.

For these farm businesses, a review is an opportunity to assess past performance, consider the current status and develop a future strategy – with the aim of identifying opportunities, setting a direction and creating an action plan.

Elsewhere, farmers in Scotland and Wales also need to make longer-term strategic decisions. Despite disparities in farm support, involvement in environmental and greening measures is becoming a key requirement for them to keep receiving financial backing.

In this scenario, a business review will be important for all these reasons, as well as to identify the costs of additional planning and implementation as new schemes are introduced.

What is a business review?

A business review is a comprehensive analysis of a farm's financial health and operational efficiency. It allows farmers to understand the true business performance, make informed decisions and, where necessary, secure funding.

Put another way, it's a strategic health check that provides clarity and a route for developing a more successful farming operation. Even businesses that are performing well will benefit from the process.

Lewis Butlin, rural business consultant with Agrovista, describes a business review as a "non-blinkered look" at whether the current situation is working. "You have to be honest," he stresses. "It quickly becomes apparent when the figures are in front of you if things aren't right. Then you can consider what needs to be corrected and work out ways to do it."

Why carry out a business review?

Every farm business is unique and will want different outcomes, but there are some common reasons for undertaking a review:

- To prepare for policy changes
- To make informed, data-based decisions
- To improve business resilience and long-term sustainability
- To facilitate discussions with family, stakeholders and financial partners.

Another reason for conducting a business review is that it builds confidence and puts the business owner in control, creating the right environment for continuous improvement. "There are occasions when the bank manager will have stepped in and instigated the process," says Lewis. "So it's also a good opportunity to restructure any loans and overdrafts and secure funding for a new project or diversification."

Where to start

Often seen as a daunting task, completing a business review takes time. As well as being a look back at what's been achieved and how the business has performed, it also identifies its strengths and what the next steps should be.

As Paul Dennison, farm business consultant with Strutt & Parker explains, a business review will shape the strategy of how to move forward – something that many may have shied away from because of uncertainty but important as a way of regaining control and addressing challenges with greater confidence.

"We are operating within a very different policy framework and with changed commodity markets," he says. "Those who can adapt and change the quickest will survive, which is why every farm will benefit from doing a review."

Paul acknowledges that a lot of information needs to be pulled together before the review process can start, but stresses that it's an important stage of the task. "Start with the numbers," he advises.

By that, he means tax accounts, management >

PHOTOGRAPHY: WAYNE HUTCHINSON/SHUTTERSTOCK, TIM SCRIVENER, FOTOGRAFIXX/ISTOCKPHOTO, NICK SPURLING/FLPA/IMAGEBROKER/SHUTTERSTOCK, FLPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

THE BANK'S PERSPECTIVE: BUDGET OR BUSINESS REVIEW?

According to Richard Thomas, head of landed estates and agriculture strategy at Barclays, there are differences between conducting a business review and preparing a budget.

"A business review is a broader conversation than a budget," he says. "While a budget is mainly focused on the numbers and future projections, a business review looks at how the business has been performing and where it is heading.

"It brings together past performance, future plans, cashflow, borrowing needs, capital investment and the wider sector issues that could affect the farm."

In practice, a budget often feeds into a review, he explains. "Where they differ is that a review goes beyond the numbers to focus on the overall direction of the business. So although it is a look back to see how the business has been performing, the main focus is forward-looking."

Measure progress

Up-to-date financial accounts are the key requirement for a business review, with records from previous years needed to show how the business has fared over time, he adds. "It is also useful to have a picture of the value on farm, including machinery and equipment, any hire purchase or loan agreements, livestock or produce and land holdings. This means the discussion can be as productive as possible."

Richard views a business review as an ongoing conversation rather than a one-off exercise, but says that the frequency of discussions will depend on what is happening at the time. "Some of our customers have a lot going on, so need regular contact, while others are content with less frequent reviews. Either way, our focus is to agree a level of contact that supports the business."

Benchmarking can be helpful to inform the discussion, acknowledges Richard, but shouldn't be used as the sole measure of success as no two farms are the same.

"A business that looks strong on paper may still have significant commitments, while one that is weaker on benchmarks may be more resilient due to diversified income. That's why the focus is always on the individual farm," he says.

Set targets

He notes that most farm businesses work with a number of advisers, making it easier to have the right advice available when making important decisions.

"Start by thinking about what the business wants to achieve, so that the conversation is focused and useful," he says.

Like other advisers, banks are there to work with farmers and help them achieve their ambitions in a responsible way. Given current uncertainty with farm policy and future funding, forecasts should be based on what is known and within the farmer's control, continues Richard.

"If additional commitments are being considered, it's good practice to understand how the business would perform if income streams change. A business review should remain flexible. It can be updated as information becomes available."

Where opportunity in the form of expansion or diversification is on the table, the first question to ask is whether it suits the existing farm and the people running it.

"Experience, capacity and time are just as important as the financial case," advises Richard. "Some projects integrate quite easily, others need significant involvement.

"Researching the opportunity, understanding the operational demands and being realistic about what can be managed are important steps before committing to a new project.

"This is where farm advisers and consultants can be invaluable – they will have seen other farm businesses go through similar processes and set up new ventures, so they are familiar with any pitfalls."

Are all staff and family aligned on the business's direction?

< accounts, sales contracts, bank statements, yield data and environmental scheme details, as well as an assessment of current infrastructure and staffing. "This shows what resources a farm has got available – such as machinery, soils, grain storage, livestock housing, labour and working capital – so that it's clear where any investment or change in direction is needed.

"By doing this, it's easier to identify any big things that need changing or if it's just little tweaks to ensure that the business remains compliant and fit for the future."

The use of farm business software makes the information gathering phase much easier, adds Paul, as so much information is held by the programmes and extracting it is straightforward. He also recommends using five-year averages to level out any extremes or anomalies and explains there are key areas for investigation:

- Enterprise gross margins
- Fixed costs (per hectare or livestock unit)
- Machinery and labour costs
- Borrowing levels and interest payments
- Cashflow position
- Profit requirements.

What analysis should be done?

Financial, operational and risk analysis all have a place in a business review. Benchmarking is useful, believes Paul, as it allows a farm's financial and physical performance to be compared to similar businesses or industry standards, to identify strengths and weaknesses. "It helps you to ask the right questions," he suggests. "That should lead to some good discussions and, ultimately, better decision-making."

Lewis agrees that benchmarking is good for understanding more about how the business is

A review might point to a switch to contract services

Key questions include 'can the business survive unforeseen events'

performing but stresses they must be like-for-like comparisons. "We've seen some good progress with input costs, fuel consumption and maintenance costs, where knowledge exchange through benchmarking groups has worked. If costs are creeping up or productivity is slipping, it really helps to identify some actions."

Farm business reviews must also consider risk, he advises, as this helps to stress test the business. Price volatility and extreme weather have become commonplace, while reliance on support payments is another concern. Knowing what impact a £30/t drop in the grain price or fertiliser price rise of 20% would have on the business is important, as is the ability of the current set-up to service debt and pay suppliers on time.

"On some farms, we are now starting to look at life after the SFI," he says. "Those who are currently in a scheme need to be aware of which actions are working, agronomically and financially, and which are unlikely to remain if funding is withdrawn."

Having grass leys in the rotation, for example, may be supporting a new sheep enterprise and adding income, while including legume fallows may be providing a yield benefit to the following wheat crop. "These figures really need investigating. In eighteen months, a legume fallow without any income attached to it really has to be doing its bit to keep its place."

Budgets have a central role, notes Paul, who recommends establishing a baseline budget, before any changes are made, to see what it looks like and whether it meets the business needs. "Then you can introduce changes and look at their effect on the baseline. That helps to set a plan and timeframe of how to move the business forward."

Producing detailed budgets and plans, along with a monthly cashflow, identifies any pinch points. "Review your budget and cashflow at the half-year point and start to budget for the next financial year. Put in sensitivities and see what the impact will be."

Paul's final point is that simple answers are hard to come by. "It goes without saying that every farm is different, especially when it comes to how the dynamics work. We tend to come back to the farm business with three or four scenarios and then cost them out. Of course, diversification projects and new income streams don't always appeal, while some will even be considering downsizing."

TOUGH QUESTIONS

- Is this enterprise profitable without support payments?
- Is management time being rewarded?
- Could the same land and buildings be used more effectively?
- Would contracting options be more cost effective?
- Could a machinery sharing arrangement work on this farm?
- What should we stop doing?
- Are all partners/family members aligned on the future direction of the business?
- Can the business survive a major unforeseen event?

Turning analysis into action

A business review should end with a small number of clear, achievable objectives. Traditionally, a review might have had a lifespan of five years, but that has changed as the transition has progressed and schemes have become short-term. "Looking ahead for five years is very difficult at the moment," admits Lewis.

Instead, he suggests that the review becomes the farm policy and is actively managed, being re-visited every 12 months. Paul agrees. "Treat it as a live document. Update it and review it as necessary – be prepared to put the time into it and to be critical."

Bringing in other experts is often advised. The bank manager, accountant, agronomist, nutritionist or vet all hold specialist knowledge about the farm and can be used as trusted advisers, especially where the next generation is taking a more active role.

"If the action plan includes establishing a new poultry unit, for example, it will need at least three years of budgets and a breakdown of the finance costs. The bank manager has to be involved in this type of project," says Paul. ■

Opportunity focus for new member of Transition team

Juggling the demands of farmer and vet requires stamina and sleep sacrifice, but nature-friendly farming methods lighten the load. **Debbie James** reports

Wern Holding, near Welshpool, has provided a vital foothold for a farming career

After a hard-fought route into agriculture and now farming a 51ha council-owned holding on the Welsh border, new entrant Lucy Eyre sees only opportunity in the system she is developing. Some of this she attributes to farming according to regenerative principles, avoiding pushing land and stock to the limit of their possibilities.

"When I first started farming I was driven by the ethos that to be profitable you need the stock numbers, which does work well for a lot of farmers, but to facilitate that you are reliant on a lot of external inputs like fertiliser and wormers. Pushing the boundaries of how the land can perform often doesn't help profitability – I am learning that it is better to pull back on stocking density and let the ground do more of the work for me," she says.

As is frequently the case for new entrants, Lucy's path into farming didn't follow a straight line; as she puts it, it resulted from "happy accidents and a series of unfortunate events". Despite having no family connection to agriculture, as a child she was fixated on becoming a farmer. Veterinary medicine offered an alternative means of working with livestock so that's what she did, getting a job at a "James Herriott-style" practice in rural Yorkshire after graduating before relocating to Scotland.

The farmhouse Lucy rented had a small parcel of land so she acquired a handful of pet lambs to bottle rear, growing her flock of pedigree Lleyns each time more land became available, adding dairy bull calves to her burgeoning enterprise and buying 13 acres with an agricultural shed in situ. "At one point I had nearly 20 landlords, some with an acre or two here and there," she says.

Over four years, Lucy built up ewe numbers to 500 while continuing to work full-time as a vet, to generate cashflow to grow her fledgling business. When she unexpectedly and abruptly lost a big chunk of that land it was time to put into action her plan to apply for a farm tenancy.

Wales presented that opportunity, specifically Wern Holding, a 51ha Powys County Council-owned former dairy farm at Wern, near Welshpool. That was 2020, and Lucy has since upped beef numbers and downsized the flock, running 33 British White and Hereford-cross cattle and 90 ewes, while shaping a system that puts the soil and other natural assets front, and centre. "Essentially, I am trying to manage the soil and allowing that to manage everything else," she explains.

Mob-grazing benefits

Cattle are mob-grazed with daily moves and, after recently taking delivery of a new set of electric fencing, it's an approach that will be rolled out for sheep in 2026. "The difference it has made to the soil is unreal," Lucy reports.

This was particularly apparent during 2025's prolonged dry period. "When we were all staring down the barrel of pretty dry weather, I made the decision to let the grass in a couple of fields grow as long as I could before grazing, and just by testing it with my hands I could see how moist the soil was in those, there were no cracks. On that very basic metric, the difference was huge in the areas I let grow long."

Hedgerows are similarly managed with a shift

A move away from annual hedgerow flailing is benefiting wildlife, and soil health

PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD STANTON

Lucy Eyre farms beef, sheep and pigs on a 51ha council holding

FARM FACTS

Wern Holding, near Welshpool, Powys

- Farm size: 51ha
- Livestock: Lleyn sheep, British White cross Hereford cattle, pigs
- Soil: Clay/clay loam
- Rainfall: 1,600mm

away from annual flailing. "I am letting them grow a bit, laying some and replanting where ancient hedges once grew. It is about changing the narrative and the perspective, looking at the farm as a landscape and then working out how I can farm it to its most beneficial and how it can benefit the livestock as well – all the natural capital is there, I just have to work out how best to use it."

Lucy, who is a member of the Nature Friendly Farming Network, firmly believes that farming this way also has a mental health advantage, as it allows her to focus on things that are within her control, and on which she can have an effect.

"Farmers can spend a lot of their time feeling that they are controlled by external pressures like fertiliser prices, market prices, what the government are doing next. But when you are farming regeneratively and sustainably managing your business, you are instead concentrating on how you can make your soil and farm better, how you can improve your hedgerows. You can then set goals and that helps with the feeling of achievement and not having that sense of helplessness while at the mercy of external pressures."

Taking a harsh approach to culling in the 10 years since she acquired her first Lleyns has resulted in a high-performing flock. "It's a pretty robust flock. They are good mothers, nice and milky with a decent frame, but not huge. I want sheep that work for me. I only pulled one lamb last year – as soon as I need to do that, the ewe gets a red mark on her back.

"That has paid serious dividends because I now have great granddaughters and onwards – sheep that work really well in my system." Performance recording generates data to inform decisions on the best animals to retain.

Direct selling

During those early years of farming in Scotland, Lucy sold directly to customers, using local abattoirs and establishing a boxed meat business, but the move to Wales brought this to an abrupt end. What had been a relatively simple system in Scotland with supportive environmental health officers and a network of local abattoirs has not been replicated for her in Wales.

"The abattoirs are really over-stretched. I've spent four or five hours waiting to offload, and when that abattoir is already an hour and 20-minute drive away from the farm, you are spending the best part of a day dropping off animals, and you then have to return to pick up the meat in a week's time and distribute to customers. Direct selling isn't an option she has completely shelved though. "It's something I really want to get back into doing, I'm re-evaluating it and have a couple of ideas in the background."

As Lucy reflects on her decade in farming, she admits she is her own worst critic. "It's a constant learning curve. If I was to go back five years there are so many things, on reflection, that I would change. For me, it can be a job to get away from that feeling that I need to be doing the right thing all of the time. I have had to learn to be kinder to myself, to not expect everything to be in place. Mentally, it is a really good way of getting around all those rabbit holes I find myself getting stuck in." ■

● See p5 for more on our Transition Farmers

TRANSITION GOALS

- Strike the right balance of livestock numbers for the farm
- Reduce inputs and maximise the use of grass to farm in harmony with nature
- Re-establish direct meat sales to customers

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How to get the most out of your farm data

Agri-tech is fast gaining traction, but many farmers are not seeing the benefit of the huge amount of data produced. **Debbie James** takes some expert advice

Farmers can now access data on an unprecedented scale, enabled by robotic milkers, soil sensors, GPS-guided tractors, precision sprayers, drones and automated irrigation systems to name just a few of the technologies they are investing in.

These generate vast streams of data, often swamping farmers with information overload that leads to them diverting too much time in their busy working days to managing unnecessary detail. Conversely, the data produced can be underutilised, stored on USB sticks and hard disks that are stashed away in an office drawer, never to be used. There is therefore work to be done to ensure farmers manage data at an appropriate level.

As Robert Morrison, the UK Agri-Tech Centre's head of farms, points out, data only makes a difference if a farmer turns it into practical, real-world decisions, and uses it to make a positive change to what they do. He likens data to conserving forage. "Data is like silage, it's only useful if you store it properly and feed it out at the right time."

One of the biggest criticisms Chris Hoskins, of crop protection and supply company Hutchinsons, hears of farm data is that it can be very difficult to look for and interpret, a view shared by the AHDB's data programmes associate director, Adam Short. "There are some people, perhaps operating in the most commercial software spaces and in the supply chain, who will say fairly confidently that the data exists but farmers just aren't using it," says Adam.

Yield map data can be hugely useful in crop management

Data sources

Farms produce data from multiple sources:

- Robotic milkers record individual yields, milking frequency and health problems
- Electronic tags and weigh crates track growth and health
- Tractors, sprayers and combines produce operational data and harvest GPS information
- Drones, satellites and Light Detection and Ranging (Lidar) produce crop, soil and land data
- Automated irrigation systems and soil sensors monitor water use and soil conditions.

Even a simple weather station generates rainfall and temperature data, says Robert. Data supports compliance, fine-tunes management, and improves profitability across all systems, he adds – for instance, simplifying audits for schemes such as Red Tractor or crop assurance programmes through accurate recording.

Data helps to detect problems early and enables interventions, such as adjusting inputs when drone imagery shows deficiencies or irrigation according to soil moisture readings, or a cow being treating before a case of mastitis escalates. It also reduces unnecessary machinery passes, inputs, or feed with benefits to cost of production and the environment.

Managing data

Robert sees no difference between data and fuel, feed or any other core farm input. He advises farmers to focus on the decisions data helps them to facilitate rather than on technology dashboards. "Think of data like your tractor dashboard: you don't need every number, just the ones that prevent breakdowns and save fuel."

Start small and keep it tidy, he says, and invest where the insight data clearly changes actions and margins. "Trying to use everything at once is like learning to drive a car and fly a plane on the same day," he warns. "Pick one area that costs you the most money or time, such as crop nutrition, irrigation efficiency, or livestock health, and use one tool well before adding another," says Robert. "Begin with what you already have, such as spray logs, yield maps, milk records, or weighbridge tickets."

Capturing data can be as simple as doing so with a pencil and paper before graduating to spreadsheets or apps. Add sensors gradually, starting with soil probes or livestock tags, and maybe then expand to drones or automated >

FIVE TIPS FOR MANAGING DATA

- Start with one question
- Collect relevant data
- Use the right tools
- Act on the results
- Review and repeat

PHOTOGRAPHY: JOHN ECCLES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO, MAG/JUDITH TOOTH, TIM SCRIVENER, BAYER, LELY, JASON BYE, PHIL WEEDON, BROTHERS91/ISTOCKPHOTO

systems. Data itself costs money to produce, but its value is only unlocked when it changes actions on the farm.

With data to hand, Robert's recommendation to farmers is to set themselves one clear goal a year, such as reducing fertiliser waste in year one, and improving herd health in year two. Don't drown in numbers – look for trends rather than single figures. "Artificial intelligence tools can summarise raw data into alerts such as 'field 7 needs nitrogen,' 'irrigation required in Zone C', or 'cow 123 likely in heat'," Robert explains.

"A simple rule is to ask: 'What decision does this data help me make today?' If it doesn't answer that, ignore it."

Data integration and sharing

Robert thinks it is best to choose a technology that integrates well as this will avoid "data silos", isolated collections of data that prevent sharing between different systems. This sharing is enabled by software management programs that act as a farmer's central point for making use of data.

Data captured on spreadsheets or in a database is effectively useless if it isn't channeled through a software program, Adam reasons. "Farm management software is the farmer's portal for utilising some of their data," he says. But interoperability and portability are often lacking. "If farmers could get hold of data and use it elsewhere I think it would drive a bit more innovation in that space," says Adam.

"It all comes down to allowing all these bits of software to communicate with each other to enable the farmer to share data between platforms. That is what is lacking and holding agriculture back at this point in time."

In some countries, governments are key enablers in this space, offering incentives in all sectors for the adoption of farm management software. Poland is a case in point and this government intervention has had the desired outcome of driving uptake.

Good examples do exist where interoperability is a key feature of a system though. AgriRouter, a free-to-use system run by the German not-for-profit joint industry venture DKE-Data, has users in the UK, including Dyson Farming.

The system enables farmers to exchange telemetric data between farm equipment, farm management software, and third parties, and to have control over data sharing between any of these elements. Trust, transparency and control are regarded as the "north stars" in terms of data-sharing initiatives and AgriRouter has been built with those in mind. Adam has been leading a project at the AHDB, Farm Data Exchange, which aims to prove some of the principles around a trusted portal for farmers to control how, where and when their data is shared.

"This system could enable the sort of data sharing from one system to another, which will really add value to farmers," he says. He doesn't believe it is realistic to expect all farmers to use an artificial intelligence tool to analyse a lot of different datasets across various databases and software programs. "There might be a handful that do, but I don't think it is realistic given all the other pressures farmers are under. "It therefore comes down to that central hub of information, that piece of farm management software."

For many farmers, sharing data with a trusted third party that is part of a farming operation is also useful. Where the functionality is available, there is no reason why a farmer can't set their software to send their vet a monthly summary of data gathered on digital tools, says Adam.

That might be incidence of lameness over that course of the previous month. The vet can then

TRANSITION FARMER
DUNCAN BLYTH, NORFOLK

Albanwise Farming, which farms the Barton Bendish estate in Norfolk, switched to a new software management programme five months ago and that small change has transformed the way it now farms.

Farm manager Duncan Blyth says it enables fields and areas within fields to be farmed much more accurately. "That level of accuracy and detail makes a huge difference, especially as we have SFI [Sustainable Farming Incentive] |and Countryside Stewardship schemes to consider."

Managing data accounts for an increasingly greater proportion of Duncan's time, and he acknowledges that is only a useful exercise if it delivers a financial benefit. "We have to be careful that we are not just managing data for data's sake. It has to lead to some concrete improvements."

● See p5 for more on our Transition Farmers

VALUING DATA

Farmers often question the perceived value of the data they harvest, and its monetary value. But the AHDB's Adam Short thinks the value to farmers is not in receiving sums of hard cash in return for sharing it in a commercial space but in the value they can extract from the supply chain, unlocking more from contracts, and the value data has to their own farming operations.

Carbon is a case in point. All supply chain contracts now have a key focus on sustainability therefore anything that farm businesses can do to improve efficiency will reduce their carbon footprint, while also saving them money.

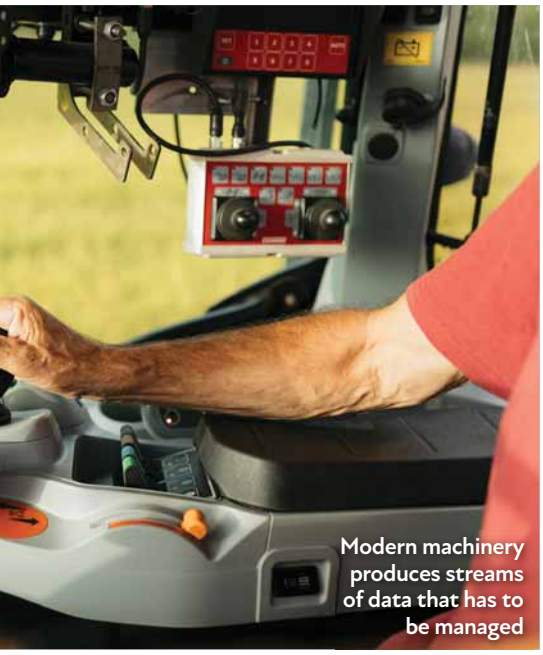
"All this insight is going to come from data. It's the only place it can come from really as all the gains from farmers' instincts have mostly been exhausted," says Adam.

"The conversation needs to move away from the payment of cash for data. Value is the evidence it gives farmers to enable them to supply their product – I don't think many have realised that it is a powerful bargaining tool."

This is evident in the conversations taking place within major retailers, with businesses questioning why they shouldn't buy lamb from New Zealand if it comes with sustainability evidence when UK lamb might not. "As soon as a farmer clocks that and uses it effectively, that is a big bargaining chip they can use," says Adam.

High street banks offer preferential loan rates and incentives to business customers who can show evidence of their environmental sustainability and impact. This is because the Partnership for Carbon Accounting Financials methodology classification score put banks under pressure to reduce the carbon liability on their loan book. In this instance, data is a key bargaining chip that could have a big financial impact for farm businesses.

Electronic data supplied with stock can help with marketing



Modern machinery produces streams of data that has to be managed

compare it with the herd health plan and establish whether or not the lameness rate is on target.

"There is also a compliance element to this, reporting on responsible antibiotics usage, for example, and this can be made easier with the right choice of software," says Adam.

Using artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence is useful when datasets become complex, but Robert reckons it only helps if farmers choose meaningful metrics and act on deviations. Many big tech companies such as Google and Microsoft offer free online tools for storing data and analysing it with artificial intelligence outside the sphere of commercial farm packages.

Google Sheets integrates artificial intelligence through Gemini, and Microsoft Excel includes Copilot for trend analysis and charting. These tools can help farmers visualise data and spot patterns without the need for paying expensive subscriptions. But Robert warns farmers to be aware that data entered into public cloud services may be used to train artificial intelligence models.

His advice is to avoid uploading highly sensitive information and to keep critical records in trusted, private systems. ■

CASE STUDY: DENNINGTON HALL FARMS, SUFFOLK

Utilising data harvested from the farming operation is helping a family-run arable and beef farm to improve management and optimise production.

Dennington Hall Farms near Framlingham, Suffolk, grows combinable crops across 1,600ha and recently transitioned to a regenerative system on the majority of that land. A digital farming platform allows farm manager Ryan McCormack and the farm team to record everything. All 310 fields and 160km of hedgerows are mapped and stored in Omnia, together with cropping information for the diverse 12-year rotation, yield maps, and financial data.

As the system is cloud-based, it can be easily accessed from anywhere via a mobile, tablet, or computer. Ryan, winner of the 2025 *Farmers Weekly* Farm Manager of the Year award, says a key benefit of having digital records and mapping is for compliance with farm assurance, environmental, and other schemes.

Simplified record-keeping

Dennington Hall Farms has a Mid Tier Countryside Stewardship scheme and four Sustainable Farming Incentive schemes. These can be complex to manage, but the software simplifies record-keeping, including the evidence needed for compliance. The same applies to visual crop assessments and input recommendations that the farm's agronomists can upload from the field. Variable-rate prescription functionality is used for variable seed, and nitrogen plans. Nitrogen rates are varied according to previous yield maps, soil testing, and Normalised Difference Vegetation Index imagery.

"Early in the season, we look to increase nitrogen rates on poorer areas to try and boost yield potential. Whereas later in the season, once that potential is set, we will typically cut back on poorer areas and feed the better parts so they can fulfil their yield potential," Ryan explains. "At the moment, we're only doing variable-rate solid and liquid nitrogen, but we could expand this to include other nutrients in the future."

Stock level management

Another important time-saving feature of the software is stock level management, which automatically updates the amount of fertiliser, seed, and other crop inputs held in stores, according to when and where deliveries are made, and when stocks are taken out to be applied. Once invoices are entered into the system, they automatically feed into the cost of production analysis.

"The inventory system is all linked together so if, for example, we create a crop recommendation to apply a certain amount of a product but there isn't enough in stock, it will alert us at the time," Ryan notes.

Likewise, the system also recognises all chemical Ministerially Approved Pesticide Product numbers, so when crop recommendations are being put together, it can flag up any potential warnings of what can or cannot be applied and when. Additional map layers show drainage systems and features such as water pipes.

Given the farm's strong focus on protecting and improving soil health, Ryan has also set up a map layer for use at harvest, showing trailer drivers where to park for certain blocks of land, limiting traffic to certain areas. Another layer has been set up for winter pest control, showing the location of gas bangers in fields. This means they can be easily and quickly located and recovered when no longer required.

Ryan McCormack

FARM FACTS

Dennington Hall Farms, Framlingham, Suffolk

- 1,600ha, of which 1,200ha is regenerative arable. Mainly owned, 100ha arable on farm business tenancy, 200ha contract farming agreement on additional land
- 12-year rotation, 12 crop blocks
- Red Poll sucklers
- Staff: Ryan, assistant manager, two full-time operators, two part-time work experience students
- Countryside Stewardship Mid Tier agreement, four SFI agreements
- Carbon sequestration and biodiversity net gain projects
- Turtle dove conservation and restoration project

How to cut losses in newly planted farmland trees

The number of farmland trees being planted is up, but loss rates also remain high. **Jonathan Riley** asks for tip on managing young trees

A record 20,660ha of woodland were created in 2023-24, with more than 20m new trees planted across the UK. But significant tree losses during the early growing phase are slowing progress. While the average tree survival rate is put at 90%, losses on farms can be significant. Reported loss rates of 50% or more have been recorded on some farms, with causes including poor species selection, planting issues and soil factors.

The biggest losses, however, are through damage caused by rabbits and deer. Of these, deer pose by far the most significant challenge, and with the UK herd expanding at record rates, there is a growing battle to protect trees.

Here, the Woodland Trust's Jack Starbuck and Forestry Commission deer officer David Hooton set out the key factors threatening tree survival, with a strong and wider emphasis on tackling deer.

Site factors

Soil

Tree species have evolved to thrive within particular soil types – for example, acid, calcareous, free-draining or heavy moist soils. Species such as alder and willow grow well in wet soils; others succumb more readily to rot. Beech and lime do well in chalky landscapes while birch and pine have adapted to sandy, free-draining soils, says Jack.

Inappropriate soil conditions can lead to significant tree losses. On former arable land, plough pans or other compacted areas can be an issue for saplings because roots may not be able to penetrate far enough to access soil moisture. In these situations, dig a pit ahead of planting to assess the soil structure. If there is a pan, it would be worth subsoiling first, Jack advises. Obviously, soil disturbance releases carbon, but it may be necessary to ensure the trees survive.

Once the trees are in the ground, they should be checked regularly. Wilting occurs in very dry years, with stunted growth an indication of drought stress.

Exposure

Exposure to raking wind may be another issue, and plantation design should take this into account. The design itself will vary according to the objective – whether the site is for nature recovery or fast-growing timber plantations.

For nature recovery, the taller native trees such as oak could be planted in clusters at the centre of the plantation with densities of 15-25 trees spaced 2m apart. Outside the central zone, species such as birch can be planted in dense clusters to mimic how they occur naturally, but other secondary species may be planted in looser clusters or drifts.

Faster growing species can be grown on the windward side to nurse the slower growing, more ecologically valuable trees in the centre. Further wind protection can be added around the outside with shrubby, fruiting species that also encourage pollinators.

Sourcing stock

It's a well-worn phrase, but the right tree in the right place for the right reason is still the most valid approach to take when considering planting trees, says Jack. Biosecurity should be added to this set of priorities, and the UK and Ireland Sourced and Grown (UKISG) accreditation scheme guarantees we are not importing any new tree pests or diseases, he adds.

The Woodland Trust recommends selecting tree stocks that originate from, and are grown in, the same area where they are to be planted. The benefit of matching tree stocks like this, Jack says, is that they will already be adapted to the local growing conditions.

To aid this process, the UK is split into numbered provenance zones, making it possible to identify more precisely the area where a tree stock is from. This information is available in a handbook produced by the trust.

Bare root or cell-grown stock

Trees are supplied as bare root or cell grown with plugs of soil attached. Both have benefits and drawbacks. Timing is more critical with bare root stock, which is prone to drying out, and this can be a major cause of tree loss.

It is really key to make sure the roots don't dry out before planting, says Jack. Bare roots should be kept in bags until the last moment and planted within seven days of delivery or tree survival will be compromised. If this is not possible, bare root trees should be "heeled in" to a trench with a soil cover.

Cell-grown plants will retain moisture, but there is a higher cost and the extra weight makes transport more difficult, adding further to the financial outlay. Where timing or labour are issues, the cell-grown stock will provide a longer planting window of several weeks.

Climate change has added further pressure on the planting window, which typically starts in November and ends in February or March. UK springs are increasingly dry and the lack of moisture puts pressure on growth in later planted stock, adds Jack. The key is to order stock early to ensure the right trees are still available, he says.

Deer damage

Deer numbers are increasing. Although it is difficult to make an accurate assessment, it is likely the head count for the UK herd has risen above 2m. Muntjac populations are moving up the country from the south of England, Chinese water deer are spreading through East Anglia, and roe numbers have increased markedly in the past 10 years, reports David. High estimated deer numbers are backed up by drone counts, which point to densities of 100 head/sq km in some areas.

Population jumps are due in part to milder weather, which has increased fawn and calf survival rates. Changes to farming systems have also aided deer survival. Increased use of winter cover crops and wildlife crops such as nectar and wild bird mixes have added food sources.

The resulting deer pressure is causing high levels of damage to trees and understoreys of vegetation, says David. Even a moderate-sized fallow deer will consume 5kg of vegetation a day, and that mounts up on a herd scale over time, he adds. The period in which young trees are vulnerable to deer damage is extensive.

A small deer such as a muntjac browses the top of a young tree at about 75cm to 1m. The largest species, the red deer, will browse at heights of 1.8m – which means the tree needs protecting for about five years after planting. The length of time varies, though, according to >

CASE STUDY: JOE AND EMMA GRAY, JE TABOR FARMS

Great Priory Farm and Bovingdon Farm, near Braintree in Essex, are managed by Joe and Emma Gray of JE Tabor Farms. Of the 600ha managed area, crops make up 450ha, with the remainder comprising woodland and some permanent pasture.

The farms are also part of the North Essex Farm Cluster, a farmer-led community interest company that Emma manages for part of the working week. Formed in 2023, the cluster encompasses 80 farms and local businesses and covers 25,000ha of land around the Pant and Blackwater river catchments. The aim is to deliver landscape-scale benefits for water, soil, wildlife and food.

According to Emma, one of the biggest challenges to those objectives is the increasing pressure from deer species which threaten woodland and hedgerow restoration projects. The woodland includes ancient sites and some designated as sites of scientific interest, which have to be protected from growing populations of deer. The deer cause extensive damage by grazing crops, damaging coppiced areas, flattening standing crops and destroying newly planted hedgerows and trees.

But collaboration through the cluster is providing a footing to regain control. Bovingdon and Great Priory have joined other farms in the cluster to take part in a pilot deer management project supported by the Forestry Commission and Woodland Trust. The project began with a drone survey to estimate numbers and identify denser pockets of deer, explains Emma.

The data matched information provided by local deer stalkers, who are the central figures in culling programmes.

Stalkers traditionally operate on designated patches by agreement with the farm manager and fellow stalkers. This creates boundaries from one farm, or a stalker's patch, to another. This meant stalkers could not act if deer crossed to a neighbouring unit.

Now, however, the collaborating farms are operating across boundaries and bringing the groups of stalkers together. The culling programme is also more co-ordinated and intensive.

A decision was taken to introduce 10-day quiet periods, with no culling taking place over a wide area, to let herds settle. These periods are then followed by designated culling weekend,s which have proven more efficient and effective for the time being spent.

Previously, this would have created a problem with more venison than the stalkers could find a market for. This is an ongoing challenge, but Joe and Emma have invested in equipment to help solve the issue. A chiller unit has been purchased to store the carcasses in accordance with food hygiene and traceability requirements. The chiller capacity means more deer can be culled at any one time.

Joe and Emma have a woodland management plan in place and are currently applying for a Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier agreement. They are also applying for the PA7 standalone species management grant to help tackle species such as squirrel and deer, she adds.

< the location. Trees tend to establish more quickly in southern England due to the milder climate compared with further north.

Protecting trees

When most people consider planting trees, they think of tree guards as the main protection measure. But while that is a vital step, it is the last line of defence. In fact, protecting planted woodland needs a carefully prepared and wide-based strategy that should begin months or even years before planting, advises David.

The starting point is to find out how big a challenge deer present by assessing the level and type of damage. This can be backed up with drone surveys and expert insight on the ground to quantify the local population density.

The next part of the strategy is to reduce deer pressure through a programme of targeted culling before trees are planted. This will be carried out by a stalker who needs to work on objectives agreed by the farmer and with expert advice available from the Woodland Trust and Forestry Commission. The stalker then needs time to carry out the cull. If the stalker is full-time, finding that time will be easier. But many are volunteers who operate outside work hours and the timespan for reducing deer to an appropriate level will inevitably need to be longer, explains David.

Infrastructure

Alongside the cull there has to be planned infrastructure to allow access to woodland and the safe and hygienic removal of culled deer. Deer carcasses must be handled in accordance with food standards regulations. There should be traceability measures in place and the carcass must be kept clean and any storage required ahead of collection should be in appropriate chiller units.

Physical protection such as tree shelters and deer fencing may also be used, says David, although the use of physical protection does not remove the need to maintain lower numbers of browsing mammals.

Fencing is the most effective approach for blocks of planted trees. The height will typically be at least 1.8m to deter larger species such as red, fallow and sika deer. But expert advice may suggest a minimum of 1.5m where only smaller deer such as muntjac, Chinese water deer and roe are identified in surveys. Deer fencing is likely to include rabbit mesh for further protection and possibly strands of electric wire.

Where smaller plantations are created or individual trees are planted to augment existing woodland habitats, it may be possible to use multi-strand electric fencing. This should be clearly visible to the deer and maintained to prevent shorting, for example where foliage can grow and come into contact with the wires.

Tree guards

To protect individual trees there is a range of tubes and stakes available that are fixed at planting. Tree shelters and guards need to be at a height that prevents the deer from browsing the tops off as they emerge.

However, the protection from wind and cold provided by the guards can also speed up growth and harbour weeds. This can lead to leggy, weaker stemmed trees developing, often with reduced root establishment. ■

FINDING SOURCES

England

Countryside Stewardship (CS) scheme

CWS1: Deer Control and Management (stalking). This is a supplement available under the Higher Tier of the CS scheme, offering a revenue payment of £105/ha a year for 10 years.

To qualify, you must:

- Submit a deer management plan agreed with the Forestry Commission
- Install monitoring exclosures and provide photographic evidence
- Record and report all culling activities.

Capital grants

The CS scheme also offers capital grants for specific items:

- **PA7** species control plan – £204.79/type of species/approved plan to a maximum of £1,023.95
- **FY1** Deer high seat – £265/unit
- **FY8** Deer high seat legs (in conjunction with FY1) – £180
- **FG9** Deer fencing to protect newly established trees – £10.27/m
- **FG10** Temporary deer fencing – £8.09/m
- **FG11** Deer exclosure monitoring plots of about 16sq m – £212.56/unit
- **SM1** Deer management training – up to 100% of costs
- **SM6** Monitoring equipment such as camera traps – up to 100% of costs
- **Farming Equipment and Technology Fund** grants of up to 50% for specific equipment, such as chiller units.

Scotland

- Funding is available through the Forestry Grant Scheme administered by Scottish Forestry
- **Woodland Improvement Grant – Planning** (Deer Management Plan). This provides a grant to help landowners create a robust deer management plan based on population surveys and damage assessments (£12/ha for the first 500ha)
- **Sustainable Management of Forests – Reducing Deer Impact** An annual grant of £6/ha for up to five years to support the costs of labour for culling and monitoring.

Wales

- The Welsh government offers funding primarily through the Woodland Creation Grant and the Small Grants Environment Scheme.
- Woodland Creation Grant covers the costs of establishing new woodlands, including capital costs for deer fencing (about £11.93/m) and maintenance payments.

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Better mental health can bring business bonuses

Mental health is a key factor in farm resilience, affecting many elements of the business, according to wellbeing experts. **Jonathan Riley** finds out more

Anyone who is suffering, or suspects a staff member or colleague is struggling this winter should act early and use the wide range of dedicated agricultural support groups.

Here, experts from two such groups, Farming Community Network (FCN) head of operations and communications Alex Phillimore, and Farm Safety Foundation (FSF) manager Stephanie Berkeley, offer tips on improving mental resilience to help people stay fit and limit the potential impact of poor mental health on their businesses.

Staying positive can be tougher during the darker months, but in the current political, environmental and trading climate it's arguably harder than ever this winter.

How widespread is the problem?

According to annual research carried out for FSF in autumn 2025, mental wellbeing among farmers and farmworkers in all age brackets has now declined below the UK average.

"A measure called the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale shows wellbeing has dropped to its lowest point in four years. The sharpest decline recorded is among those aged 61 and over," Stephanie says. "Over the past 12 months there has been a dramatic and deeply concerning collapse in mental health among some of the most experienced members of our farming community."

It's a profound shift and the effect on farm business resilience could be significant. The important messages to bear in mind are:

- You are not alone – support is readily available
- Mental wellbeing is as real and important as physical health
- Tackle mental health issues early
- It's not just you – mental health issues are common.

Impacts on business

Poor mental health in agriculture significantly affects business resilience by:

- Increasing the risk of accidents
- Reducing productivity and efficiency
- Hindering decision-making.

Increasing safety risks

Based on data from the past three years, there is a clear relationship between mental wellbeing and accidents. Farmers with lower levels of mental wellbeing are more likely to take risks, overlook dangers and skip essential safety steps such as wearing protective equipment and conducting hazard assessments. "That may be because people with poor mental health suffer low esteem and often stop caring about themselves, believing they no longer matter," says Stephanie.

It can also be that during times of stress people are less focused. Brain fog is a common symptom of elevated stress levels, while exhaustion through sleep deprivation also severely reduces the capacity to concentrate on a task.

This is dangerous on farms where jobs involve heavy machinery or with livestock. Injury risks are increased when tiredness and poor concentration reduce work rates and cause tasks to build up. "Inevitably there is pressure to cut corners in a bid to catch up, and that is an extremely risky approach," Stephanie warns.

The impact of an accident is profound on farm business. If you or a staff member are injured, the loss of work days incurs significant costs and puts pressure on the wider team, she says.

Coping strategies

The most important message is put safety first, do not cut corners on health and safety. Safety procedures must be followed and protocols reinforced across the team. Key is to have a safe working culture led by senior staff that extends throughout the workforce. Staff should be encouraged to reinforce the safety message so that they look out for each other as well as their own safety, says Stephanie.

Reduced productivity

Mental health and stress directly affect our energy levels and this is compounded by associated disturbed sleep patterns. "It means we could feel less like tackling a task and end up putting it off or leaving it altogether," Alex says.

Timeliness is key to efficient farming and windows of opportunity to treat livestock or crops can be missed so productivity falls. Putting off tasks also means they stack up and there is less time available to spend on each one. The resulting mountain of work adds further to the mental challenge.

Coping strategies

"When you or staff are feeling overwhelmed by work, be selective and focus on things within your control," says Alex

List tasks Identify and list the things where you can effect change. Rank them and tackle the most urgent thing first.

Group tasks Improve efficiency by scheduling the most important tasks for times when you will have the most energy.

Set smaller targets Set smaller, achievable targets to make step-by-step progression – don't do too much at once.

Impaired decision-making

During mental lows, fears and concerns colour our judgment and tend to lead to more reactive, less positive and less well thought-out decisions. "With a less positive outlook the long-term strategy can be overlooked at the expense of making the business more resilient and sustainable," says Alex.

Coping strategies

It is difficult to recognise symptoms of your own poor mental health. An issue can develop gradually. It may be someone else that notices a change in your behaviour. If someone points out

PHOTOGRAPHY: GEORGI JEVIC, SOLSTOCK/ISTOCKPHOTO

One-to-one chats with staff members will provide an insight into their mental wellbeing

that your behaviour has changed it's important not to ignore or dismiss it. "Take a step back and think about your behaviour and whether it has changed, and check it against a list of potential symptoms," he says.

Potential symptoms

- A more pessimistic, gloomy or negative approach than usual
- Feeling stressed more quickly
- Surprisingly small things might make you react negatively
- Unusually tired or demotivated
- Lacking the drive to socialise
- More irritable/shorter temper.

Building mental resilience

Whether or not you are suffering now, there are actions to build your mental resilience to help you cope better with the turbulent situation in farming, says Alex.

Coping strategies

- Don't be hard on yourself – celebrate wins
- Don't dwell too much on things you cannot control – avoid social media threads that wind you up
- Improve sleep patterns – write down your concerns before you go to bed and try to make a plan for tomorrow
- Develop a non-farming interest
- Talk about issues that concern you – someone else may offer a helpful perspective.

Staffing retention issues

The UK is in a recruitment crisis with the former labour supply from eastern Europe severely restricted since Brexit and the start of the Ukraine conflict.

It is now incredibly difficult and costly to replace staff, so losses associated with mental wellbeing issues can hit businesses hard. As well as days lost through staff needing to rest and recover, low esteem can disrupt the work environment and affect team spirit. Some team members may have to step up to cover for a colleague. For some, mental ill health is less easy to understand than a physical injury, so one worker may feel another is not pulling their weight. This can lead to conflict among teams.

Coping strategies

The starting point is to create a culture in the business that treats mental ill health as a serious condition and normalises it as a conversation topic. Acknowledge the challenging times and ensure the team knows it's OK to not be OK.

"We have to bring mental wellbeing out into the open and this must come from the top because when the boss takes the issue seriously the team will do the same," Alex says.

When a team member is struggling, make sure the team works to support them. To keep the message live, use printed resources with charity contact details and post them on noticeboards, offices and in toilets. Regular conversations with every staff member are a sound idea because these will help reveal any behavioural changes.

Spotting poor mental health

"This is difficult. It may not be the quiet, gloomy person in the team that is suffering," Alex says. "It may be the joker or the bullish one that has an issue." A key sign is a change in a person's character suggesting something is not OK. Outward signs of poor mental health include:

- Irritability
- Mood swings
- Drop-off in performance
- Forgetfulness
- Appearing distracted
- Poor concentration.

When an issue with a member of staff does arise or you suspect that someone may be suffering, don't avoid the awkward conversation. "Make yourself available to talk and immediately provide reassurance – be compassionate and show you understand," advises Alex. ■

WHERE TO FIND HELP AND SUPPORT

The message from support charities is the same – don't struggle on your own; the support is there, so make use of it. Even if you don't know who to call, just call someone, they will help you get the right support. Here are some of the contacts and services available:

FARMING COMMUNITY NETWORK

Web fcn.org.uk
Phone 03000 111 999
Email help@fcn.org.uk
Calls are answered from 7am to 11pm every day by volunteers who understand farming, who can listen, support and help with any issues or concerns, whether personal or business-related.

YANA

Web yanahelp.org
Phone 0300 323 0400
Email helpline@yanahelp.org
Yana offers a confidential helpline and counselling in East Anglia. The service is manned Monday to Friday 10am-1pm. A callback service is available at other times.

SAMARITANS

Web samaritans.org
Phone 116 123
Email jo@samaritans.org
Offers help and support at critical times.

HAWKSTONE

Text HAWKSTONE to 85258
Farmers can text the word 'Hawkstone' to 85258 at any time of day or night to start a conversation with a trained volunteer with mental health charity Shout.

STAYING SAFE

Web Stayingsafe.net
A website for people at risk of suicide and those supporting them.

THE DPJ FOUNDATION

Phone 07984169652, 0800 587 4262
Text 07860 048799
Offers a 24/7 confidential counselling referral service and mental health awareness training.

RABI (ENGLAND AND WALES)

Web rabi.org.uk
Phone 0800 188 4444
Email help@rabi.org.uk

RSABI (SCOTLAND)

Web rsabi.org.uk
Phone 0808 1234 555
Email rsabi@rsabi.org.uk
The institutions provide emotional, practical and financial support from in-person counselling and mental wellbeing training to grants for upskilling.

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The biodiversity experts

Water issues dominate farmer review of 2025

Our *Farmers Weekly* Transition farmers are striving to secure a better future for their businesses. **Debbie James** reports from Fife and County Durham

FARM FACTS
Hillhead Farm, Kingsbarns, Fife
- Farm size: 138ha
- Annual rainfall: 710mm
- Soil type: Loam

Alan Steven

Improving water supply resilience has helped Alan Steven maximise returns from vegetable and cereal crops even after the drought-like conditions of early 2025. The watercourse that Alan has historically abstracted water from dried up after weeks without rain. With barley at a critical stage of establishment in May and high-value vegetables threatened, he tested for an underground water supply and hit the jackpot second time.

A borehole pump was acquired second-hand, a 25,000-litre reservoir created, and additional irrigation infrastructure laid for an outlay of about £50,000. "We hired an 8t excavator to create a hole on waste ground, lined it with polythene and installed a float switch to control the supply of water from the borehole," Alan explains.

Although the reservoir is small, access to a water source made the difference between him selling the majority of his spring barley into the malting market instead of as lower value livestock feed. "It kept the barley alive when the weather was in doubt, it paid dividends because it kept the screenings to the level required for malting," says Alan. "It also paid to irrigate, which often isn't the case with cereals, because it only took an extra litre of fuel an hour to run two irrigators instead of one – one for the vegetables and the other for the barley – and that helped the engine perform better."

The borehole pump is currently powered by a hired generator as it is in a location remote from an electricity supply. "We will look at how much more we need to invest in the irrigation system and whether it makes better financial sense to buy a generator," says Alan.

He has also invested in a seeder for a cultivator purchased two years ago and used this to establish all his cover crops. While the winter cereals mostly went into the ground in good conditions, the later sown wheats took a hit from very heavy rain later in the autumn. "We are very much in the hands of the weather gods, as the two extremes we have seen in 2025 showed, but having the extra irrigation in the spring certainly made life so much easier," Alan reflects.

TRANSITION CHALLENGES
- Reducing cultivations
- Mild coastal climate
- Distance to market

● See p5 for more on our Transition Farmers

Philip Vickers

If there was a year designed to test the Raby Estate's Transition goals, it was 2025. Just 0.6mm of rain fell during the critical spring growth period, exceptional for County Durham, and compounded by the Durham estate's position in a rain shadow, sheltered by the moors.

Farm manager Philip Vickers expects extreme events like this to become more common and a reason for improving the moisture retention capacity of soils, building up organic matter, and reducing compaction to improve performance in drought and deluge.

Performance in direct-drilled crops matched those conventionally sown, but were cheaper to establish and with minimal soil disturbance. "Both systems had good and bad yields, it was all about drilling conditions and date," says Philip.

TRANSITION GOALS
- Maintain margins while changing approach
- Improve soil health and resilience
- Enhance the natural environment

Early prospects for the cereals were good, but tillers were lost in the dry period and that checked yield. "We had a less-than-ideal year in 2025 but so did most people. A positive that helped us financially was that by direct-drilling we didn't incur the cost of heavy autumn cultivations. And although the very dry weather was unwelcome, it self-structured the soil – lots of cracks meant simple autumn establishment with two direct drills running easily through the soil."

Overall, Philip says 2025 fell short on budgeted yield and prices, but a proportion of the cereals have forward sold "reasonably well". "We are not through the selling period and hoping it will continue to pick up." Another change of approach has seen bicrops of oats and peas and barley and peas grown – yields were in line with other spring-sown crops but produced a "ready-made" feed for the 600-head sheep flock while sale of the straw generated additional revenue.

Sheep were turned onto the autumn-established wheat fields in the first week of November to graze allocated parcels for up to five days. This approach has become a feature of the system on the estate after a trial there found that managed grazing improved wheat yield by 0.8t/ha. With many livestock farmers short of forage this year, sale of fodder beet will help with sales figures as the crop bucked the general trend by performing well. "Although the established plant stand was compromised with the dry spring, rain in June helped and the root yield has been reasonable," Philip reports.

FARM FACTS
Raby Estate, County Durham
- Farm size: 1,250ha
- Annual rainfall: 650mm
- Soil type: Loam, high magnesium content

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANGUS FINDLAY, DAVE CHARNLEY

Partnership approach brings dividends for farmers

Longer-term collaboration in the supply chain partnerships was a hot topic at the 2026 Transition Network annual dinner. **Johann Tasker** reports

Stronger partnerships across the supply chain are vital to securing a better future for farming, delegates heard at the *Farmers Weekly* Transition Network annual dinner, held this month in Oxford.

Discussion at the dinner focused on the need to look "beyond the farm gate" – urging a shift from transactional supply-chain relationships to longer-term collaboration in which risk and reward are shared more evenly.

Positive mood

Farmers started 2026 in a more positive mood than a year ago – ongoing anxiety over government policy and unpredictable weather, according to *FW*'s annual sentiment survey.

Nearly one in four respondents described the past year as "good" or "great", up from just 13% three years ago – although only one in five said they felt genuinely optimistic about the future.

One in three still rated the year as "bad" or "terrible", broadly unchanged from 2024. Government policy was cited as the greatest challenge by one-third of farmers, matched by the impact of extreme weather.

With basic payments largely withdrawn and England's Sustainable Farming Incentive closed to new applicants, business confidence has weakened, with investment levels falling by almost 10%.

The after-dinner speech was delivered by Natural England head of agriculture Peter Craven, who called for closer co-operation between farmers, policymakers and environmental groups to deliver both food production and nature recovery. ■

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

1. Transition Project editor Johann Tasker explains the initiative's aims

2. A relaxed atmosphere gave guests an opportunity to network

3. Project Partner Tesco head of sustainable agriculture Natalie Smith listens to the key messages

4. Project partner Linking Environment and Farming Helen Ferrier makes a point during dinner

5. After-dinner speaker Natural England head of agriculture Peter Craven called for a joined-up approach to food production and nature recovery

PHOTOGRAPHY: TELLING PHOTOGRAPHY

PARTNER PERSPECTIVE

Shaping the future of agriculture

With the area of UK farmland shrinking and food output falling, gene editing and AI offer a decisive chance to boost resilience, accelerate innovation and secure our future harvests says Niab CEO Mario Caccamo.

Breeding new crop varieties remains a slow and laborious process. It can take years, sometimes decades, from the first cross to the commercial release of a new variety. Climate shocks, conflict, and shifting policy outpace genetic progress, leaving yields stagnating in key crops such as wheat.

At the same time, the UK faces the steady erosion of its agricultural base. Over the last 25 years we have seen a reduction of farmland, and a decrease in domestic food production which at 65% is the lowest level in half a century. Against this backdrop, the question is unavoidable: can faster adoption of new technologies help us accelerate solutions? Can we realistically aspire to strengthen domestic food production and reduce our dependence on imports while promoting the development of more sustainable agriculture?

Gene editing, a powerful precision breeding tool, can help address these pressing challenges. At Niab, we are not only investing in biotechnology, but also supporting efforts to modernise the regulatory frameworks that govern its use.

With proportionate, science based regulation, precision breeding technologies such as gene editing can transform our ability to feed more people, more sustainably. They will be crucial to enabling farmers to raise yields while using fewer inputs, supporting both profitability and environmental goals.

Encouragingly, positive stories of gene editing research now emerge almost daily. Scientists are developing higher yielding crops with greater climate resilience, more durable pest and disease resistance, improved nutritional quality, and reduced environmental impact. The combination of precision breeding with digital tools such as artificial intelligence promises to accelerate progress further by fast-tracking the identification of genes linked to key agricultural traits. With tens of thousands of genes within each crop genome, the opportunities for innovation are immense.

Niab's first precision breeding field experiment; a Crispr/Cas9 edited spring barley with deletions in GSK1, a gene involved in regulating the brassinosteroid pathway. It is expected that the lack of functional GSK1 will lead to maintained grain yield under lower nitrogen input regimes.

Momentum is also building in the commercial sector, including Fresh Del Monte field testing disease-resistant gene-edited banana lines, and Mars partnering with gene editing firm Pairwise to protect the cacao crop from mounting threats posed by disease and climate variability.

The scale of global research is equally compelling. According to the EU Sage database, more than 1,000 peer-reviewed studies on gene editing in crops have now been published. These span 76 species and 58 countries: this is a truly global phenomenon. The application of AI to unlock novel gene combinations will only accelerate this transformation.

Britain's scientists are at the forefront of this revolution. Through the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act, that came into effect in November 2025, we have established one of the most progressive regulatory systems in the world designed to move breakthroughs from lab to field more quickly. At Niab, we are proud to pioneer the use of science and innovation to enhance productivity, with precision breeding as a prime example.

Niab is also actively involved in ensuring that the current process for registering and evaluating new varieties developed through precision breeding is fit for purpose. This is an example that underscores the value of our expertise in supporting and de-risking the adoption of new technologies. Growing populations and rising pressure on farmland mean that the only way to strengthen food security is to use our land as wisely and productively as possible. That requires farming policies and regulations that are fit for purpose, grounded in evidence, and enabling of innovation, not restrictive of it.

The challenge is urgent. The tools are available. Now we must ensure the will and the policies are in place to seize this opportunity.

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Where to find project articles

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

Business resilience

- How to make rotations more resilient – Summer 2021 (p15)
- How to stress-test your farm business – Summer 2022 (p10)
- Tips for planning ahead to reduce business risks – Autumn 2023 (p7)
- Why better planning can reduce machinery costs – Winter 2023-24 (p30)
- How to protect your business from a crisis – Summer 2024 (p23)
- Five ways to build resilience on arable farms – Winter 2024-25 (p24)
- Raby Estate embraces change to secure future – Summer 2025 (p17)
- How family charters could strengthen farm businesses – Autumn 2025 (p23)

Supply chain

- How supply chain is helping farmers work with nature – Summer 2022 (p15)
- How TCFD will hit farming – Spring 2024 (p36)
- Supply chain funding – what's on offer for regen farming – Spring 2025 (p18)
- How looking beyond the farm gate can secure a better future – Summer 2025 (p7)

Carbon management

- Measuring and managing carbon: What to consider – Autumn 2021 (p11)
- Four popular carbon calculators compared – Autumn 2022 (p7)
- The carbon trading conundrum: Risk or revenue generator? – Autumn 2022 (p23)
- Trading carbon and natural capital – a lawyer's eye view – Autumn 2022 (p29)
- How to get a carbon-based income from woodland – Autumn 2022 (p31)
- Is there money to be made from carbon farming? – Autumn 2022 (p41)

Collaboration

- How collaboration cuts costs and increases efficiency – Winter 2021-22 (p47)
- Local farmers unite to clean up polluted river – Winter 2022-23 (p45)
- How collaboration delivers landscape-scale change – Summer 2023 (p19)

Data and tools

- Six livestock apps to lift business performance – Summer 2022 (p17)
- How data helped transform beef herd efficiency – Autumn 2022 (p10)
- How to take a data-led approach to sub-field costs Spring 2025 (p7)
- AHDB baselining project – Summer 2025 (p12)

Diversification

- The benefits of Paulownia trees for net-zero targets – Spring 2022 (p47)
- Expert advice for making trees work on your farm – Autumn 2023 (p32)
- How trees can enhance and support your business – Summer 2025 (p28)

Emissions management

- How livestock farmers can cut greenhouse gas emissions – Autumn 2021 (p19)
- What arable farmers can do to reduce emissions – Autumn 2022 (p12)
- The vital role of soil in emissions reduction – Spring 2023 (p27)
- How pig producers can strive towards net zero – Spring 2023 (p29)
- How fenland farmers cutting GHGs from peat – Summer 2023 (p11)
- Project shows how farming can hit – or better – net zero – Autumn 2023 (p17)
- Tips to tame emissions from housed systems – Winter 2023-24 (p22)

Inputs

- How to get the most from nitrogen fertiliser – Spring 2023 (p11)
- How science is adding value to livestock manure – Spring 2023 (p17)
- What to consider when replacing farm machinery – Summer 2023 (p24)
- Zero subsidies puts focus on cost control – Summer 2023 (p16)
- Zero grazing switch helps reduce dairy feed costs – Summer 2023 (p22)
- Grassland dairy adopts low input system – Autumn 2024 (p28)

Natural capital

- Hedgerows can boost farm income – Autumn 2021 (p26)
- A guide to unlocking value from natural capital – Spring 2022 (p39)
- How farmers can benefit from biodiversity net gain – Spring 2022 (p44)
- Opportunities for livestock farmers from natural capital – Spring 2022 (p51)
- Green capital will fuel future – Autumn 2022 (p17)
- How 'mega-cluster' project benefits farming and nature – Winter 2023-24 (p16)
- How to prepare your business for private funding – Summer 2024 (p31)
- Generating income from the environment – Autumn 2024 (p18)

Productivity

- Can an all-forage diet be practical and profitable – Summer 2021 (p19)
- Why better productivity is all about the right balance – Winter 2021-22 (p41)
- Five ways to increase farm output and maintain margins – Spring 2022 (p64)
- Six challenges on your Transition journey – Spring 2024 (p18)
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