

New research shows how to include more farmers in the design of new environmental policies

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Credit: Bobby Mikul/public domain

A paper published in *People and Nature* explores how government policymakers can include a wide range of farmers in the design of new

Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes, using different engagement strategies to work with individuals who may be harder to reach.

The research, led by Dr. Ruth Little from the University of Sheffield's Department of Geography, found there are multiple reasons why farmers might be reluctant to engage with [policymakers](#).

These include negative past experiences, a lack of time and a lack of interest, as well as perceived scheme bureaucracy, age, lack of trust and bad internet access.

Researchers outlined a series of recommendations for how policymakers can improve methods of engagement so that a wide range of farmers can be included in the design of new policies for agriculture and environment.

These include improving rural broadband, working with trusted people, ensuring that engagement benefits farmers, and making sure forms of engagement like written consultations are accessible to those with disabilities and limited free time.

The recommendations apply not only to the UK, but also to other countries planning similar changes to environmental policies on farmland.

Researchers also found that farmers are more likely to support and implement new policies on their farms if policymakers include a wider range of farmers in the design of new environmental policies, concluding that this will help deliver benefits to the environment.

Dr. Ruth Little, Lecturer in Human Geography and member of the Institute for Sustainable Food, said, "This is the biggest change in

agricultural policy in over a generation. ELM could be transformational in terms of paying farmers to produce environmental benefits; but it needs to be well designed to deliver agricultural sustainability in terms of economic, social and environmental gains. Our research provides important insights on making the development of ELM as inclusive as possible, to ensure a sustainable future for both agriculture and the environment."

Dr. David Rose, Associate Professor at the University of Reading, who led the writing of the paper published today, said, "Latest figures suggest that 39% of farmers do not understand Defra [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs]'s future vision, 54% do not have the right information for business planning, and 47% of holdings are not positive about their future in farming. Our research provides tangible actions for Defra on how to help those 'harder to reach' farmers who may be least confident about their future and know the least about how to make a successful transition."

Dr. Paul Hurley, a Senior Research Fellow from the University of Southampton and a lead author of the project reports and manuscript, stated, "The research identified the value of engaging and listening to a broad range of farmers, and the dangers of not doing so. Amidst a landscape of uncertainty—COVID-19, Brexit, a climate emergency and geopolitical tensions—we saw how important it is that policymakers get it right, for current and future generations and for environmental sustainability."

Jessica Lyon, Environmental Policy Consultant at ICF and former Research Associate at the University of Sheffield, and a lead author of the project reports and manuscript, remarked, "A commitment from Defra to engage [farmers](#) in agricultural policy development is laudable, but time and resource is required to ensure that engagement is wide-reaching.

"Online digital platforms are an example of a tool that can increase engagement levels for some but act as a barrier for those with poor [internet](#) connectivity and less confidence with [digital platforms](#). Care here is needed to ensure that some aren't left behind during this agricultural transition period."

More information: Paul Hurley et al, Co-designing the environmental land management scheme in England: The why, who and how of engaging 'harder to reach' stakeholders, *People and Nature* (2022). [DOI: 10.1002/pan3.10313](#)

Provided by University of Sheffield

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