



Learning and Change Through Monitor Farms

Summary report



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This research evaluates learning and change by farmers based on two Monitor Farms located in the Lothians and Morayshire regions of Scotland. Findings are based on observations and interviews conducted across the three-year Monitor Farm programme period (2017-2020) and a virtual workshop conducted one year after the programme concluded (April 2021). **Our study contributes in-depth qualitative insights into key features of successful on-farm demonstration found to underpin community engagement and support capacity building among farmers**, including acquisition of knowledge, approaches to decision-making, and challenging norms towards achieving individual and community legacy.



Key findings and recommendations

Our findings suggest lessons that may underpin future programmes and other demonstration events, interventions, or facilitated interactions. These lessons are founded in **the importance and definition of key roles** in terms of characteristics that underpin success and **implementing approaches that challenge and support farmers** to become active participants in community-based demonstration programmes or events.

Demonstrating and developing leadership

- **Effective leadership** shown by host farmers, mediation and support provided by facilitators, and engagement by community members are essential for on-farm demonstration to **build capacity, challenge norms, and support change** in the farming sector through peer-to-peer learning.
- Our findings indicate that **hosts' willingness to share information, practices, and experiences** (including successes and failures) is vital and we recommend that these characteristics should form the basis of demonstration host selection.
- We propose that **facilitation skills are more important than detailed subject knowledge** in the recruitment of facilitators for future demonstration programmes and events.
- We recommend demonstration organisers supply **clear description of the facilitators' role**, supported by **training and mentoring** where necessary, to ensure that expectations are understood, and new capacity is built to support the farming sector.
- We recommend priority investment in the **formation and nurturing of farmer 'management groups'** in future programmes to provide a clear connection between the farming community and event organisers.
- We recommend a **review of support measures and funding for groups and networks** seeded during demonstration programmes, to safeguard and enhance social and community capital in the in the period after demonstration programmes end.



Demonstrating and developing engagement

- A key role for facilitators is to ensure that **farmers are participants and not just spectators** at demonstration events.
- We recommend an approach to demonstration that places **dialogue and interaction at the forefront of the process**.
- We recommend that time be strategically built into event programmes, including **transitions and refreshment breaks between sessions** to prioritise and enable knowledge exchange and support deeper learning.
- Our findings indicate that the value of conversations over tools should be acknowledged in the context of business benchmarking groups, and we recommend **improved engagement with farmers to support alternative solutions** in situations where technical problems arise.
- The **value of engagement and interaction in on-farm demonstrations**, including dialogue with peers and hands-on and practical demonstrations, is something that **cannot be replicated through virtual means**, and we recommend that on-farm demonstration and learning re-commence post-Covid 19 alongside virtual means familiarised during 'lockdown' and social distancing interventions.

Demonstrating and developing new practices

- Our research confirms that **hands-on and practical demonstrations were the most memorable and impactful** delivery means for participants, and we recommend that these are given precedence in future programmes.
- We recommend that the **collaborative approach adopted in the Lothians be replicated** in different regions and scenarios in future demonstration projects. We also recommend future programmes initiate and support **increased cross-site visits and/or virtual networking** to encourage cross-fertilisation of ideas and sharing experiences across the national network.
- We recommend a **review of programme length and format** to support interaction with trials initiated in the context of programmes at a stage results can be assessed.

Demonstrating and developing virtual interaction

- **Extended access to learning and trial results** can be achieved using virtual demonstrations, including live streaming, recorded material, or virtual tours.
- **An online virtual farm tour is being developed collaboratively with farmers** from both community groups to facilitate ongoing learning, illustrate the impact and legacy of the Monitor Farm programme, and act as a hub for knowledge exchange.
- **The tour will show trial results** from the two Monitor Farm projects along with other **changes attributable to the Monitor Farm programme**.



Further information

We encourage community members from Lothians and Morayshire Monitor Farms to work with us to develop the virtual tour. If you would like to contribute material or discuss ideas for content, please contact Claire Hardy (claire.hardy@hutton.ac.uk).

The full report for this project can be accessed at:
<https://www.hutton.ac.uk/research/projects/learning-and-change-through-monitor-farms>



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