

# ***Farming and nature through a changing landscape***

*Insights from the experiences of farmers and land  
managers in eastern Cumbria*

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## Purpose and scope

This report is a small part of a broader ongoing research project which aims to understand the views, values, goals and identities of farming communities involved in and impacted by landscape restoration in Cumbria. This is a baseline summary report for [Cumbria Connect](#) project (beginning 2023) and will be the basis for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of this landscape restoration initiative funded by the [Endangered Landscapes & Seascapes Programme](#).

In this report we share early preliminary insights on farming and nature from interviews conducted with farmers and land managers in Eastern Cumbria. From sharing farmers experiences we draw together learnings and recommendations for restoration practice, to address a disconnect, lack of trust and understanding between farming and conservation communities.

Twenty-five farmers, land managers and members of the farming community in and around Eastern Cumbria were interviewed as part of this study between January 2023 and July 2025. This included farmers and land managers who are owner-occupiers, tenants, farm contractors, and former farming tenants.

The interview scripts were analysed qualitatively using the data management software NVivo. Interviews with farmers and land managers included discussing their goals for land management on their farm, specific farming and land management activities being carried out, their relationship to the land, their value towards farming, nature and heritage and their own personal accounts of the changes experienced in this landscape.

We express our thanks to all the farmers and land managers who gave their time to participant in this study.

**For further details of this report, or the associated on-going monitoring and research project, or if you would like to take part in on-going interviews with farmers, please contact:**

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## Background

There are a growing number of major large-scale nature recovery initiatives across the U.K., several of which are here within Cumbria, reflecting the increasing prominence of scale in conservation practice (Sandom et al., 2018). In our uplands, actions for nature recovery include changing land use; with primarily agriculture, forestry, sporting, tourism and recreation sectors now seeing more emphasis placed on biodiversity and ecosystem service outcomes (Davies, 2010; Reed et al, 2009). With increasing funding for environmental outcomes, alongside drivers of climate change and biodiversity loss, there is growing focus placed on the large-scale restoration of landscapes.

Land use change in the uplands is highly contested, particularly in Cumbria given the context of culturally embedded farming communities. A key barrier to delivering positive outcomes for both people and nature through landscape restoration is a lack of trust and understanding between farming and conservation sectors. Furthermore, the local context is shaped by legacies of land ownership and land use tensions. Many farmers currently feel their voice and experiences are unheard, compounded further by multiple social, financial, livelihood and environmental pressures on farming and communities.

To be able to re-build trust and support positive outcomes for both people and nature, a greater understanding is needed by stakeholders of the values, goals and identities held by farming communities connected to these places. By doing so landscape restoration can be developed with a better awareness of both the opportunities and challenges they bring and improve how different stakeholders can work collaboratively together for shared outcomes.

This report focuses on preliminary baseline findings for [Cumbria Connect](#) project (beginning 2023) and will be the basis for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of this landscape restoration initiative funded by the [Endangered Landscapes & Seascapes Programme](#).

Beginning in 2023, [Cumbria Connect](#) is one of the UK's largest nature recovery programmes stretching across 42,000 hectares or 420 square kilometres in the eastern Lake District and Yorkshire Dales National Parks, funded through the [Endangered Landscapes & Seascapes Programme](#). Furthermore, '[Penrith2Kendal Arc](#)' (currently in development phase as of 2025), is also one of the largest Landscape Recovery Projects in the country overlapping geographically with Cumbria Connect and extending to more than 16,000 hectares and involving more than 30 farmers and landowners. Landscape Recovery is the top tier of the UK government's farming support and nature recovery scheme, focused on England. It is designed to restore nature at scale by bringing multiple farmers and landowners together across a landscape, pump-priming a 20-year income stream to fund land management that improves the natural environment for wildlife and people.

# Farming in Cumbria

This study includes interviews primarily with upland hill farms, but also several farms from lowland areas within the landscape including larger dairy farms, mixed farming and some areas of mixed arable.

In this report 'Farmers and land managers' refers to all twenty-five of those interviewed in this study, acknowledging that this is made up of a wide range of farming and land management practices, identities and communities. It is beyond the scope of this report to draw conclusions by direct comparison between systems, however key differences have been highlighted where appropriate to the context.

## How do farmers see their role in the landscape?

Twenty-one of the twenty-five farmers and land managers interviewed were asked to reflect on the contribution of their farm or land (% area) towards each of the following outcomes: 'food and farming only', 'nature only' or 'both' (Figure 1). This forms a self-assessment of how they see the contributions from the land. For this purpose, 'both' is considered as the same parcel simultaneously providing for nature and food production.

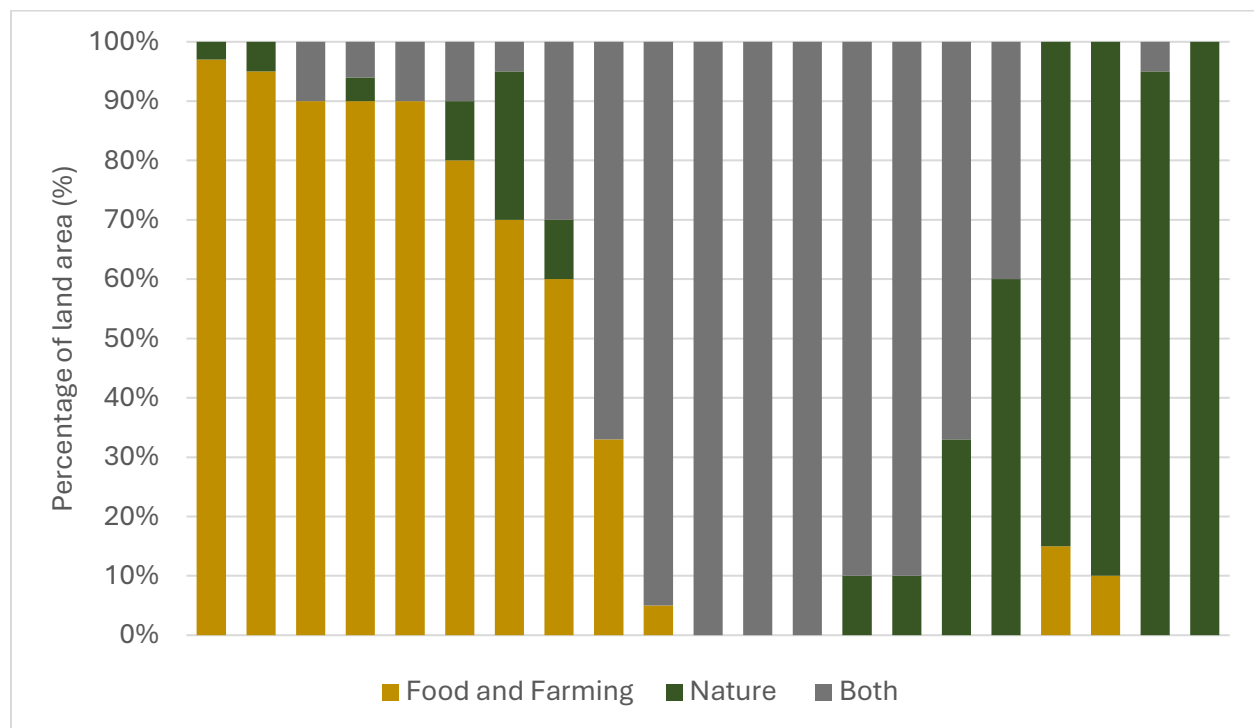


Figure 1: Farmers and land managers self-assessment of percentage (%) contribution of land area to outcomes: 'Food and Farming', 'Nature' or 'Both'.

For some farmers and land managers we interviewed, food production is the primary outcome from the land (Figure 1), however all still described some areas on their land which were directly benefiting nature, the scale of which varied substantially; *“And obviously we’ve gotta try and look after things but yeah, producing food that is the main thing.”* Therefore, whilst many farmers see themselves as food producers, this is not entirely exclusive to outcomes for nature.

Many farmers described their role as food producers as the responsibility to provide food to society, forming a core component of their identity; *“Obviously as farmers we’re producing food primarily, aren’t we? And long may that continue I mean a lot of farmers will say that people have taken their eye off the ball you know as that, so our primary role is to feed the country and that’s true isn’t it?”*

However, as we will unpack further in this report, managing livestock and producing food from the land does not always mean farmers identify as food producers. Three farmers who stated the majority outcome of their land was for food production, instead described their farm as first and foremost a business and did not feel a wider societal duty to produce food. Several we spoke to who felt they were delivering for both food and nature across their farms, described that showcasing their livestock and the high nutritional quality of their produce was very important, more so than total production; *“I like producing really good food off the back of it. I think it’s a massive responsibility ‘cause your feeding people. Most farmers haven’t got a clue what it is they’re producing.”*

Several farmers described how they felt their land provided for both nature and food production outcomes simultaneously; *“It’s very easy to polarise farming as being opposite to nature but for us it’s absolutely not, it’s intrinsically linked and with healthier nature we can have healthier farming and with healthier farming and better practice we can have better space for nature. I don’t see it as opposite at all they’re all linked in my head.”* Some referenced learning from new holistic and regenerative farming communities, whilst others felt their understanding had been learnt generationally across hill farming practices.

Five farmers and land managers stated that their land’s majority outcome was for nature only; *“All of my motivations are about nature recovery and doing what we can to fight climate change, so you know everything follows that.”* However, two of which described a clear division between land area for nature and remaining area for food production. One of which stated this area for nature was not in their direct control or aligned with their goal for the land.

## **What relationship do farmers have with nature?**

*All types of farm systems are shown to have different ways in which they relate to nature. Here we set out four key areas in which farmers and land managers relate to nature; reducing impact, personal connections, benefit to farming, and for nature’s sake.*

### *Reducing environmental impacts:*

Farmers who focused on food production outcomes, felt it was important to mitigate or reduce the impact of any farming activities on the environment. For example, reducing fertiliser use was motivated by both financial and environmental reasons; *“You don’t want to, from an environmental point of view, you don’t want to ruin the environment.”*

Farmers on more productive systems on lowland farms, primarily dairy, were particularly conscious of improving slurry management in line with changing regulation for 2027.

Some farmers described the challenges of finding the right balance between environmental and farming outcomes; *“I’ve got one hand within the environment. And on the other hand, being a progressive farmer still, and I’d like to balance this as much as I can.”*

### *Personal connection to nature:*

Many farmers also described experiencing a personal connection to nature for example enjoyment from seeing certain species, childhood memories and special places on their farm such as nature-rich becks and meadows. This connection was not found to be exclusive to

those carrying out activities to improve nature, although it was often an associated motivating factor in those cases. Many farmers prioritising food production from their farm also shared this connection to nature. For example, describing the sadness they felt in the changes they had observed to nature since their childhood, notably referencing the loss of birds such as Curlew.

#### *Nature benefits to farming:*

Farmers who saw farming and nature outcomes being delivered together on their farm ('both') described how changes to adopt nature-friendly farming actions were directly benefiting their farming business. Those who did were increasing tree cover, had low density livestock, and were using regenerative grazing systems; *"Well I spent the last three years doubling the number of field parcels on the farm, so we've put a lot of fences and hedges in and created a network of wildlife corridors but also more fields so we can graze more effectively."*

Many upland hills farmers, mirrored a similar sentiment of the interdependencies between nature and farming, referencing back to hill farming practices; *"Me dad always said, he said 'if you've got healthy wildlife, you've got a healthy farm.'"*

#### *Nature for nature's sake:*

Several of the farmers interviewed shared details of land management activities which they described as directly for the benefit of nature, either at scale across their whole farm or on 'marginal areas' separate to productive fields. Often these activities were met with feelings of satisfaction, pride and enjoyment. Examples ranged in scale from transformative river restoration projects to smaller scale fencing off rivers and woody-margins, to laying hedges and managing hay meadows. These types of activities typically did not compromise overall farm production and were typically occurring on what they considered 'marginal' or 'unproductive' areas; *"Those are our productive fields. And then we have environmental areas, less productive that are planted up or wetlands and things like that. So it was working, making the environment and farming work together"*

Many farmers felt a collective duty of care towards the land, both owner-occupied and tenanted farms, however while for some this was about being custodians of nature and the environment, for others this was described as maintaining land in good quality for farming. A care for heritage features and maintaining farming legacies were often synonymous across those who expressed stewardship values towards either nature or farmland.

### **Farmers activities and Nature-friendly farming**

*To understand farmers and land managers values and relationships with nature translate to their farming activities we looked at the specific actions being taken and the outcomes they contribute towards.*

Direct actions to support the environment on lowland farming systems (typically dairy) included improved slurry management, reducing fertiliser use, reducing number of silage cuts, adding pollinator strips, leaving uncut margins and maintaining hedgerows.

Grazing management was a key tool in improving nature outcomes across different farm systems, with various examples given including rotational grazing, mixed species grazing (cattle and fell ponies) and use of native breeds.

In upland hill farms, Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) and mid-tier Countryside Stewardship (CS) agri-environment schemes (AES) options offered flexibility to some farmers in designing whole farm management plans including options for woody and scrub habitats, wood pasture, grassland, meadow and wetland creation. HLS options on the fells and common land included stock reduction, off-wintering, switching to cattle or complete stock removal. For some, these changes worked well for their lifestyle choices or were taken specifically for nature-based motivations. Others described the difficulty in managing these changes particularly around lack of land available for off-wintered sheep or loss of enjoyment and the emotional impacts of reducing stock.

In some instances, positive actions for nature were being taken outside of AES if it was deemed to be working well for their farm system; for example reducing fertiliser and inputs, over-sowing grasses with clover (which were felt easier to manage with better outcomes than herbal ley systems) and tree-planting and hedge creation for grazing system management.

### **Mechanism for nature-friendly farming**

The majority of actions for nature-friendly farming (NFF) were being utilised through AES, including CS, sustainable farm incentive (SFI) and HLS schemes, but with large variation shown in the overall contribution of AES to on-farm income. AES were described by some farmers as a positive opportunity to generate income and increase their ambitions for nature, whilst others saw them as the only way to compensate for the loss of the former basic payment schemes (BPS). Seven farms reported receiving SFI payments (through the test and trials), primarily for herbal ley, low input grassland, minimum tillage or soil management options. Some farmers were sceptical in how well some SFI options were suited to their systems or delivered on nature outcomes. Other mechanisms include short-term capital grants or one-off schemes (such as Farming in Protected Landscape Fund), which offered greater flexibility for bespoke design but lacked in scale of ambition offered.

### **Diversified farm-business income**

We found that a small proportion of farmers and land managers are diversifying their businesses, with the most common examples from this study currently being small-scale holiday rentals. However, this study found tourism-related activities made only a minor contribution to overall income and typically didn't generate feelings of fulfilment or enjoyment for those farmers.

A few farmers we interviewed have found means to add-value to products by tapping into or creating local markets for high environmental value produce or through additional processing of produce for direct sale from the farm (leading to increased employment on-farm). These farms are typically the minority given the administrative and regulatory burden of doing so, with most selling livestock directly as store cattle/sheep.

Most farm-businesses in this study typically supported the livelihoods of one to three family members, with some cases of part-time or ad-hoc labour in addition.

One farmer described using hill farming skills and knowledge of the land to develop alternate non-food products as an additional income source for them, as well as enabling further job creation. One had developed facilities for hosting educational visits and trips.

Agri-environment payments were making an increasing contribution to farm-business income, particularly in light of reduced BPS. Contribution of AES to farm business varied considerably from one describing HLS as salary by which production becomes the bonus, to others feeling support from AES was overall a negligible compensation to income lost from reduced production.

Four of those interviewed stated that the land was not the main contributor to their household income, with primary income generated from other professional careers. Of which, two were prioritising nature recovery outcomes. In one case the landowner did not permanently live on their land and employed a farm manager.

## Farming identity

*Our assessment of how farmers and land managers view the contributions of their land to nature, food and farming demonstrates the different roles farmers and land managers can identify as. Whilst some see themselves across both elements of nature and farming, tensions remain between nature and farming identities both at a personal level and within the wider community. However, what makes up these identities is much more complex and less binary than assumed.*

*To understand farmers identity and role in the landscape on a deeper level, we asked farmers and land managers about their relationship with the land. This combined questions on; **‘what does it mean to you to farm well?’**, **‘what are, if anything, do you feel farmers are responsible for?’**, **‘describe your relationship with the land’**, and **‘what are your goals for managing your farm?’**. Whilst we describe various types of identities below, what makes up individual and collective identities is complex, and farmers will relate to multiple elements across the various aspects we describe.*

### *Running a business:*

A few farmers described themselves as business-owners, they felt responsibility for their staff and running a profitable business from the land. This often came with challenges in managing various roles and aspects of a business.

*“You’re a farmer, but you’re a businessman. But you’re a businessman in multiple different things from keeping everybody happy to juggling.”*

Many farmers described the importance of supporting livelihoods and took pride in their farming. However, fewer upland hill farmers identified with this business-like mindset towards the land. Whilst some were still diversifying their farming business, this came from needing to find additional income to survive and stay on the land, finding these demands challenging and not fulfilling within their identity. A minority of those we interviewed were instead attracted by the variety of tasks and potential for entrepreneurship of a farming business:

*“Farming involves so many different things. So, like this afternoon we going to have a meeting with marketing and branding people so it’s very much kind of running your own business and understanding every part of the business, yeah it’s just the variety of it is a nice thing.”*

### *A way of life:*

Many farmers described farming as not just a job or business but as something much deeper, a ‘way of life’. This was described as an ethos of working hard and being part of something bigger than yourself. Many farmers said they couldn’t imagine doing anything else. Although supporting their livelihood was important, many emphasised that their connections to the land run much deeper than making a living;

*“I think you work hard you know, seven days a week, and quietly losing money! I think if you wasn't losing money I'd feel funny, you know.”*

Some farmers we spoke to had moved into farming in the last 5 to 10 years, after careers in other professions, attracted by the lifestyle and connection to place it could offer. One described initially feeling of less value by society as a farmer but now had immense pride in their role;

*“I'm very proud to fly the flag as a farmer, especially a female farmer and the skills and experiences I have accomplished.”*

#### *Custodians of the land:*

Farmers feel a responsibility towards maintaining 'good' productive land (typically described as fertile soils and well-draining fields) and maintaining it in a 'farmable' condition for future generations. For other farmers this custodianship was instead directed towards the environment and nature. Both attitudes were linked by those farmers and land managers to the sustainability of future farming. Many farmers expressed feeling a 'two-way' relationship with the land, maintaining a balance and in return the land will provide for them. This relationship was built from learning to read the land;

*“Well, the land's behind everything we do, isn't it? So it's in our interest to farm it as best we can to look after it as best we can and to learn more about how we can look after it.”*

This in turn was shown to create a sense of responsibility from farmers that the land requires management. Some felt this was not being recognised in restoration activities which take a more 'hands-off' approach. Farmers felt undervalued by other land management sectors in recognising their knowledge of the land;

*“I were no good at writing and arithmetic, but I knew every bloody blade of grass.”*

#### *Relationship to livestock:*

The majority of farmers expressed a connection to land was often felt through working with their livestock and working dogs. Quality of stock is considered a strong indicator of good farming and a significant contributing factor to their own enjoyment;

*“They're looking really well (the lambs), wading around and loads of grass, lying there, chewing the cud and that makes me happy just doing that.”*

Managing livestock was a key component of how farmers described what it meant to be a farmer, and was often where their enjoyment and fulfilment came from;

*“Always improving the wildlife but sustaining the farm, you know, I want to be a farmer, I don't want to be here and not farm – whether that's my sheep or my ponies.”*

Some described specifically the importance and satisfaction from working with native breeds referencing their sense of belonging to this landscape.

#### *Home:*

For many farmers, the land is their home, with strong family and emotional connections, both directly to their farm and to the surrounding landscape. Special places of importance on the farm

were often linked to aspects of nature such as individual trees, glades, becks or viewpoints. Family connections could span multiple generations, but a sense of home could also be quickly forged by new entrants and tenants;

*“I couldn’t imagine farming anywhere else if that makes sense? A lot of people actually have said to us ‘would you take on land elsewhere?’ And I actually think no because it’s, you know, this is the area that we farm; this is the area that we want to manage.”*

Tenant farmers also expressed this deeper connection to the land across both short-term agreements and multi-generational tenancies and raised their concerns over what it would mean to lose that tenancy:

*‘I treat it like my own. You know what I mean? I’m a tenant but we look after it. We must have 200 gates on the farm, every one swings. It’s been our home, hasn’t it, for 80 years.’*

#### *Culture and heritage:*

Farmers recounted deep connections to the culture and heritage of the farming landscape, be that aesthetically, in the lands character, through lifestyles or entwined in the history of farming locally. Some farmers we spoke to who had begun farming in the last 5 to 10 years, including nature-friendly practices, also sought out a deeper connection to the heritage of this landscape;

*“I really love being part of a story that’s gone on for thousands of years. When I took on [Farm Name] we did our first gather and it felt like I was really part of history – this has been happening since the Vikings were here and I am now a shepherd in a long line of shepherds that have cared for these sheep, the same sheep, the same bloodlines on the same land with the same grass and the same trees or generations beneath them. I love that. It felt much bigger than oneself.”*

Connections with local heritage were felt by farmers through the relationship with their livestock, drawing upon the histories of native breeds. However, as the use of quad bikes has increased, this had led some farmers to feel more disconnected from the land, in particular describing sadnesses in no longer being able to hear the soundscape of the fells.

#### *Providing public goods:*

Many farmers felt their role and sense of responsibility is to provide food to society, forming a core component of their identity for those farmers. A minority described an emerging identity of farmers and land managers for other public benefits. In these cases, livestock may instead become a mechanism for delivering climate, nature, and environmental outcomes rather than focusing on food production. Despite some upland farmers changing their management in line with these policy shifts, many described the main motivations for doing so in needing to utilise this funding as their only option for survival on their farm. Whilst many of the farmers we spoke to emphasised the value of their farm to wider society (both for food and environmental outcomes), this did not translate across to the policy language of public goods which was largely associated with pressures from external actors rather than a positive internal identity.

## What's important to farmers' decision making?

With twenty of the farmers and land managers interviewed in this study we conducted an additional activity exploring which goals are important to them when making decisions about how they manage their land (Figure 2). Four types of overarching goals were presented to them;

*Gain: (contribution to livelihood)*

*Hedonic: (fulfillment enjoyment and satisfaction)*

*Normative-Nature: (moral duty to nature)*

*Normative-Food: (moral duty to produce food for society)*

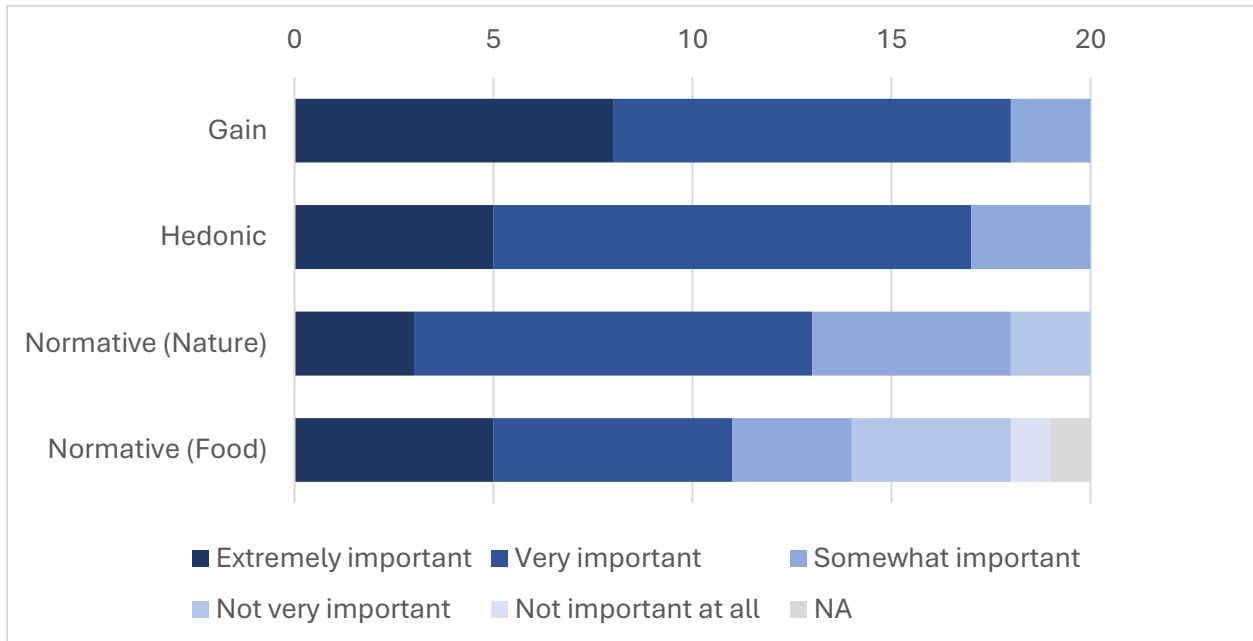


Figure 2: Goal statements showing farmer/land managers responses to the importance of each goal type: Gain, Hedonic, Normative (Nature) and Normative (Food)

Contribution to livelihoods was very important to farmers when making decisions about their land management. Other goals (such as for nature or enjoyment) were also considered important for many farmers. Some farmers could feel a responsibility to nature as well as food production for society. The relative importance of nature could however vary between farmers from nature being equally or, more important, or considered secondary to supporting their livelihoods. Those who reported a majority of their land contributing towards nature outcomes typically did not see themselves as food producers, however some did still emphasise the importance of local produce and food produced in an environmentally positive way.

Many farmers described the pressure and challenges farming is under to survive in the current uncertain political and economic climate. Under these challenges they felt strongly that farming businesses should be able to support a decent standard of living for a family by properly valuing farmers' contributions to society.

A few farmers described the need to have an entrepreneurial and business mindset towards farming, with only a small number of those we interviewed having been able to take on additional staff either directly on-farm or in associated hospitality businesses. Those farmers described the close relationships and loyalties formed with their staff; *"I would rather not take*

*money out of the business than not pay my staff. We have a responsibility to them, their families and everything else.”*

Most farmers recognised the need for sustainability in how they managed the land, to ensure long-term financial viability, particularly in regard to rising input costs. This often drove decisions to shift towards low input systems, improving soil health and changes to grazing management; *“Well the price of it’s making you cut down as well as well as the environmental carry-on.”*

Farmers expressed the importance of enjoyment and satisfaction in their work, in particular this came from working outdoors, taking pride in building their business and working with livestock (including cattle, native breeds, fell ponies and lambing). Many farmers gained satisfaction from their role as custodians and stewards of the landscape, including activities which linked to heritage features, maintaining the land in good farming condition, and/or taking care of nature; *“We know that we’re not going to make a lot of money from the farm but I want to and I would like to think that I can – there’s a lot of history gone here before me, you know I do see myself as, you know, I want to look after the farm – although you do feel like a custodian and obviously you’ve got no control over what happens in the future but you can only do your bit in maintaining and you know sort of improving the farm.”*

Some farmers chose activities to reduce pressure and improve their work-life balance, such as robotic milking system or reducing stock numbers. On the other hand, other farmers would describe the fulfilment they get from hard work and physical labour, describing this as the farming lifestyle which was integral to their identity; *“I mean our life is hectic and busy but we also enjoy it, as much as they want us to have a better work/life balance. If the enjoyment is taken away that it means us being unhappy, because we still want to do this and that’s who we are and this is our life, not just where we live, this is our home too.”*

## **Farming in the bigger picture**

*Land management activities were influenced by the bigger picture of local, national and global contexts, which created both barriers to and opportunities for different types of land management objectives and activities. We identified 17 situational factors across economic, environmental, policy and social themes (Appendix: Table 1).*

Farmers are having to adapt to multiple pressures and drivers across local, national and global scales. The scale of uncertainty of what the future holds, not helped by changing government policy (often at short notice) and the speed at which change can happen, has contributed to a growing fear amongst farmers, their families and wider rural communities. In the U.K., agricultural policy continues to change, in turn shaping farming and agricultural practice over time. Former yield and headage subsidies based on the number of heads of livestock encouraged production boosts. From the 1990s the introduction of agri-environment schemes (AES) shifted the focus to reducing environmental issues, changing further with Post-Brexit introduction of the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMs) based on the delivery of public goods such as carbon storage and sequestration, water quality and biodiversity. (Defra, 2023).

Certain factors emerged which supported farmers to carry out nature-positive activities on their farm. Regenerative grazing systems and reduced chemical fertiliser application are increasingly favoured under rising input costs, reducing impact of external global market drivers on costs. Some farmers recognised the need to adapt to a changing and unpredictable climate by

creating more shelter for livestock with trees and hedgerows and improving soil health. Whilst AES were enabling some to be more ambitious for nature on their farm, others felt the schemes on offer were too restrictive and prescriptive. Some farmers had created or tapped into local markets with a consumer base seeking local and nature-positive produce, but described the challenges of accessing this. Others referred to significant life events which changed their views and values on how they wanted to farm and their connection to nature.

Several constraints and barriers emerged towards nature-friendly farming; for tenant farmers, high cost and increasing rent associated with improving natural capital was a major blocker. One farmer in a farm partnership agreement described conflicts in objectives with the landowner, who they felt had not supported or understood the reasons for reducing total production from the farm because of shifting to a nature-friendly farming system. Dependence on market-led prices and supermarket monopoly limited the potential of farms to shift practice, compounded by political uncertainty and lack of confidence in government support to farmers.

## A changing landscape

*Whilst conducting this research, it became important to capture and record the wider changes happening in this area and the experiences of farmers and land managers affected or influenced by it. In this section we describe the main changes farmers are experiencing in the landscape associated with landscape-scale restoration.*

### Loss of farmers and farming communities

Farmers we interviewed described a long history of a close farming community. Stories were shared of farmers helping their neighbours;

*“We work with a couple of farms, if they need a hand doing stuff, we’ll go and help them, they’ll come and help us. No money changes hands.”*

However, these types of relationship were described as becoming increasingly rare as the number of farms reduces and associated local agricultural services and industries struggle to remain viable.

Farmers reported experiencing an increasing loss and breakdown of the farming community, with multiple drivers including selling of farmhouses, financial pressures, rise in second home ownership, an ageing farming demographic with barriers to young farmers entering, shifting land patterns with increasing farm size, land use competition and fewer farming tenancies as land is taken back in house by landlords;

*“There’s nobody to talk about things, there’s hardly anybody there now, especially when you go up to the valley up there, it’s just like it’s been cleaned out.”*

Some farmers were also encouraging their children not to pursue farming careers given the current financial and political instability of farming. They described how they could not see a future for farming in this area, which was deeply upsetting to them. This was seen to have wider implication in the loss of rural farming skills and trades.

With the recent shift in agri-environmental policy to delivery of public goods, many farmers felt food production was not a government priority and did not feel supported by current government

policy. However, other farmers described how utilising AES had brought the means for them to reassess how they farmed as well as the financial mechanism to be able to maintain their relationship with the land.

Farmers described how recent changes in agri-environment payments through ELMs had become an economic incentive for some landlords to return farm tenancies in-house or raise rents, in-particular referencing conversion to wood pasture:

*“The way that that scheme has been put, it means that there's more value for the landowner to go into a scheme. That's really bad conservation. Right? Because what you're doing is you're losing families, you're losing that whole identity of an area.”*

Both current farmers and former tenants described the significant impact felt by these tenure changes, having a deep emotional impact on both those former tenants and across the wider farming community. One former tenant described the experience of losing their home and the death of a family member occurring at the same time;

*“I had to watch both my family and family home all slip out of my hands. Nothing I could do about it.”*

Whilst some former tenants were approaching retirement, others have struggled to find land locally to continue farming. Those affected felt there was little alternative or support available to them. Circumstances surrounding the ending of farm tenancies were described as highly stressful, with feelings of powerlessness to changes which were happening, with some describing the approaches taken towards ending tenancies as aggressive;

*“And now they're getting odd farms, that either have to go in partnership with them, or they're getting virtually chased off or sickened out.”*

One former tenant also described feeling a lack of compassion from landlords over the loss they were experiencing. They described this process as having a significant impact on their mental health and wellbeing. One person recalled the circumstance surrounding a neighbouring farm who had lost their tenancy and the impact it had on that farmer;

*“He tried to commit suicide about it twice. He did have mental health problems and this tipped him over the edge.”*

Some former tenanted farms have been taken in-house to be managed by landowners for nature recovery. Those former tenants as well as other members of the local farming community described the former tenanted land now managed in-house as looking uncared for and abandoned with farm buildings and drystone walls damaged and not maintained. Other former tenanted farms are now managed under share-farming arrangements (under this agreement common gross output from farming is divided between landowner and farm operator on an agreed basis, with the farm operator undertaking farming activities). Farmhouse properties may be separated from the land itself with farm operators typically not living on site. Farmhouses have either been sold separately to the land or rented to residential tenants, felt by many farmers to be contributing to the growing disconnect between people and the land. Some farmhouses and cottages can end up being left empty for long periods. A farmer described the ensuing disconnection between farmers, the land and community;

*“These people, they don't live here, they don't live on the land, someone comes up every now and again to check the animals but they live way over there. You know the walls are falling down, it feels unloved, it feels uncared for. Yes, the trees are growing and yes a policy point has been ticked but it's been at quite a cost.”*

Another described driving past their former home after the ending of a multi-generational tenancy as ‘heartbreaking’ since the land has been managed more intensively as part of a larger farming operation and the farmhouse left empty and unsold. They described the land and farm buildings as looking uncared for and abandoned;

*“People don't take pride in what they were doing and it's an absolute disgrace, it's heart breaking to go past it now.”*

## **Changing rural communities**

Historically rural villages and farms have been connected through rural farming economies, families and a local sense of community. Several farmers still described these connections between farmers and villages, such as local groups volunteering on farms for hedge planting, farmers helping out to maintain local church graveyards and instances of farmers having roles in the parish council and local schools;

*“I think that farming is very important to villages, real communities, because like for example, the Christmas Tree, the farmer has to come with their telehandler to help put the village Christmas tree up.”*

However, all the farmers we spoke to describe experiencing a growing disconnect in their relationship with their local rural community. This was said by many to be linked to a growing disconnect between wider society and local food systems. Multiple drivers of this disconnect were reported; changing village demographics, rise of social media, eroding rural economies, societal disconnect from farming, second home ownership and holiday rentals, less agricultural-based jobs, expanding commuter villages and fewer social spaces;

*“I see people driving past I'm like: ‘who are these people?’ You know I don't seem to know many people now, whereas I think I used to know more of them.”*

Some reported disempowerment and lack of ownership by local communities over the changes happening in the landscape and a lack of resource, investment and prioritisation towards supporting vibrant rural communities;

*“It feels like the role of nature rewilding or nature empowerment has shifted as the dominant interest over sustainability and community because without community and without many people involved you lose that...you lose that sense of connection with the land.”*

## **Changing approaches to land management**

The previous agricultural policy based on headage payment (subsidies based on the number of heads of livestock) encouraged farmers to take hedges out, make fields bigger, and increase stocking numbers. More recent agri-environment policy based on ‘public money for public goods’ is now shifting the policy drivers of land management practice once again;

*“I think people are becoming more aware of the importance of nature and looking after our landscape; farmers have been told since the war that we needed to be producing, producing,*

*producing and we were incentivised to do so and we did and it feels like it's swung the other way and being incentivised to find a better balance."*

Some farms are making changes to land management by utilising opportunities through AES and referenced the role of farm advisors in accessing these opportunities. Navigating AES opportunities can be challenging with farmers having limited time to engage with and keep up to date on ongoing updates and paper-work burdens.

Some farmers felt unsupported by the government to continue farming their land considering such policy shifts to focus on environmental outcomes. They felt nature conservation had now become a competition for land use. They also linked this to associated demographic shifts in farm-ownership and employment as changing mechanisms of land management bring in new people from a non-farming background and fuel tensions within communities;

*"I'm sure a lot of the people I meet would rather there wasn't a farmer on the land. They want us off if they're honest."*

For those farmers and land managers who were making changes to how they managed their land (both in AES and diversifying into other non-food industries), some described how this had come at a social cost. They described feeling outcast by other farmers within their community who considered them to have either 'sold out' or moved away from 'proper farming'. On the other hand, others described how they had managed to find a sense of community elsewhere in like-minded nature-friendly farmers and land managers;

*"Personally I am part of the tide to try and change how other people can see how this is being farmed and see how it can be done as well."*

A major focus of concerns over land management change across the landscape is the increasing number of trees, via wood pasture creation on in-bye land and scrub expansion across fells. Farmers often described the importance of trees and hedgerows on farms as both shelter for livestock and habitats for wildlife, so long as grass productivity was not compromised. However, the concerns raised focused more on the scale and suitability of landscape change, primarily where land described by farmers a 'good quality farmland' had been taken out of food production altogether;

*"This is on good land and good farms not on poorer quality where it wouldn't have mattered if they'd planted it, or as much matter like. It's bad, it's bad."*

Rapid restoration change can conflict with place identity and connection to the land. This was reflected in concerns over the suitability and scale of some changes happening across the landscape when this was felt to not be in-keeping with the landscapes character.

*"We're supposed to be in a World Heritage site for the way it looks and the way heritage has made it. Then suddenly it's all change. This valley in 10 years' time will not..., will look nothing like it does now. How, how can that be right?"*

Several farmers had entered HLS schemes on the fells and commons, for stock reduction or removal, and/or alternative grazing (sheep to cattle) and/or planting areas for trees and scrub. Primary contributions of income from HLS were stated by farmers as a replacement of loss in income from outgoing BPS or to enable a shift in their lifestyle, retirement and/or work-life balance. Overall, the legacy of former headage payment as a driver for previous overstocking was recognised by farmers. Instead, it was the perception the increasing scale of stock removal across the uplands which caused most concern by farmers and the wider farming community,

including those farmers already taking stock reductions through HLS. This was felt personally as a threat to farming as well as raising potential risks of under-grazing; for example, wildfire risk and impact on the carrying capacity of future flocks. Some farmers interviewed commented that they felt they had no option but to agree to HLS schemes feeling pressures either financially or from landowners. One farmer described the personal impact of the removal of stock from the fell and spoke of the shepherding memories associated with the fell which were held by their family;

*“My younger brother, he was up doing something the other day and he just said ‘I can’t go up there because there’s so much history and then it’s just gone’. And it is, it’s hard. It’s hard. Nobody understands. Unless it’s a part of you, you don’t understand it.”*

## **Decision making, distributive justice and power**

Farmers felt they had little power or influence over the changes happening in the landscape, particularly regarding the lack of ownership over landscape restoration initiatives, ad-hoc engagement opportunities and lack of valuing of farmers knowledge. This can lead to miscommunication, lack of transparency and break down of trust over the restoration activities that are happening. Farmers asked for more transparency through open communication to understand the changes that are taking pace in the landscape. Farmers felt this would also improve the monitoring and evaluation, and hence accountability of landowners’ actions;

*“I mean they’ve planted the trees in silly areas, half of them have died. A lot of money has been given to [X] but who’s keeping tab on it? There is no accountability. Whereas little people like us who don’t seem to have any say.”*

The farmers we interviewed felt there was a disproportionate ability for larger landowners and organisations to access nature recovery payments which they felt they did not have the support, means or agency to benefit from in the same way. Issues were also raised over the impact of natural capital gains on future rent reviews and the challenges of negotiating benefit sharing of agri-environment payments between landlord and tenant. For some, land agents acted as an important go-between, between tenant and landowner, during negotiations, with farmers feeling it necessary to invest in their own independent legal advice. The majority of upland farming tenants we spoke to felt less secure in their tenancy in light of shifting landowner priorities towards nature recovery. However some more productive lowland farms were more optimistic that negotiations could be made to benefit all parties.

Some farmers described a positive relationship with their landlords, where farmers felt they were taking care of the land and aligning with their landlords objectives. Conversely, whilst some farmers described feeling supported and valued as small family farms by landlords in the past, they now felt their landlord’s objectives, motivations and means of engaging with tenants had changed. It was felt by those interviewed here, that large landowners had significant influence and power over land management decision-making (particularly on fells and commons). Some farmers described the pressure from landlords and large landowners to agree to HLS schemes. They also discussed the difficulties in reaching agreement between commoners. Several described feeling a lack of willingness by parties to compromise.

Some farmers we spoke to were optimistic that landscape recovery schemes could prove a good opportunity for their farm and livelihoods, provided that the delivery of such schemes were farmer-led. They emphasised the need to balance the outcomes of farming and nature to retain the identity of the farming landscape.

# Recommendations to restoration practice

## Interim project recommendations

*From the preliminary findings of this report, we set out key recommendations for the Cumbria Connect programme to take forward.*

### **RE-BUILD TRUST AND UNDERSTANDING:**

- Provide greater transparency, open-communication and accountability of activities.
- Actively listen and create space for deliberative discussion to understand the nuances at the root of issues, identify opportunities for common ground.
- Integrate local farmers knowledge of the landscape to help improve restoration activities as well as perception of changes, particularly where some actions by restoration programmes are felt to be causing further damage to nature.
- Recognise the pressure and risks facing farmers and acknowledge the role of system drivers which have and continue to shape farming practice.
- Facilitate negotiations with independent mediators and legal advisers to support negotiations for future agri-environment schemes between farmers and landowners surrounding tenancy and commons agreements.

### **SUPPORT FARMING AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS:**

- Acknowledge the positive role farmers are playing for nature and the environment already. Farmers value, enjoy and feel stewardship towards nature and the land.
- Adopt an integrated approach for the combined benefit of food and nature. Food production is core to many farmers identity but doesn't exclude the outcomes for nature. Support farm to farm learning, especially regarding nature friendly practice and business sustainability.
- Account for the other values and goals held by farmers. For many farmers, taking a purely business-based approach to changing practice without recognising other values won't resonate and lacks the acknowledgement of their roles, history, fulfilment and emotional experiences
- Acknowledge that farmers and rural communities have diverse values and identities, that are not necessarily fixed but continue to be shaped by situational contexts and social interactions.
- Focus on activities which bring social benefits by re-connecting people with each other, nature and the land, i.e. increasing the awareness and education of farming, supporting opportunities for young people and identify routes to local food markets.

## Lessons applicable across wider restoration practice

- **Invest in long-term relationships to develop farmer-led initiatives from the outset.**  
Positive actions for nature will not be sustained if farmers and land managers do not identify positively in that role or feel they have been forced by external pressures, whether by other stakeholders or wider political and economic contextual factors.
- **Principles of co-design and shared decision making must be integrated from the start.**  
Retrofitting participation without full commitment to shared power and representation of key stakeholders risks the further breakdown of trust.
- **Advocate for policy clarity, assurance, scheme flexibility and capacity for tailored approaches.**  
Policy systems are required to create more equitable opportunities to land management. Farmers need assurance from the government in its long-term investment to change practices.
- **Utilise the strong relationship between farmers, communities and the land to enrich and re-define this connection within nature, climate and public good outcomes.**  
Nature recovery must be a positive force for both people and nature, rather than breakdown relationships between people and the land.
- **Adopt a wider food and farming systems approach to building landscape restoration programme.**  
Advocate for and mobilise resource to targets key systemic barriers to nature friendly farming by creating routes for supply of local produce, connecting consumers to the land, a fair price for produce and the accessibility of environmentally positive food.

## Find out more

This report captures just a snap-shot of a broader ongoing research project which will provide more in-depth evaluation of farming values, goals and identity in a landscape undergoing rapid change. This preliminary report highlights that farming and rural communities in Eastern Cumbria are complex, diverse, and weaved deeply into the cultural fabric of the landscape and its people, all of which need to be considered in landscape restoration projects. We hope that this report will enable continued learning within Cumbria Connect and wider landscape restoration, thereby improving outcomes for all in landscape restoration projects going forward.

For further details of this report, or the associated on-going monitoring and research project, or if you are a farmer or land manager in the local area who would like to be involved, please contact.

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## Appendix

Table 1: Situational factors influencing farmers land management decision making

<b>Economic</b>	Capital costs	<i>High overhead running costs and rising inflation, rent and tax are escalating further due to global events, cost of living and policy change. High upfront capital costs are a barrier to new entrants.</i>
	market-led prices (local to global)	<i>Market-led prices are driving down the value of food, compounded by cheap imports.</i>
	Tenancy agreements	<i>Inflation, rent increases, low security to invest. Multi-generational tenancies may allow for longer term planning. For some, farm partnership agreements reduce some of the financial risk associated with farming.</i>
<b>Environmental</b>	Climate and weather conditions	<i>Local weather conditions direct activities, in particular seasonal rain patterns influence arable farming and grazing regimes. Several farmers recognize or are actively changing activities because of climate change.</i>

	<p><i>Biophysical properties</i></p>	<p><i>Land management activities can be physically limited by the infrastructure of the farm, particularly for small family farms. Upland hill farmers report limited options to change management due to the environmental conditions dictating breed-choice and farm system types. Upland farmers consider their farms less environmentally damaging as they cannot support intensive systems. Several upland farmers reported limited availability of lowland in-bye land and high cost of replacement grazing restricting their ability to off-winter stock from the fell. Suitable land availability is further reduced by increasing AES on lowland pasture adding grazing restrictions.</i></p>
<p><b>Policy</b></p>	<p><i>Disease</i></p>	<p><i>Environmental and livestock disease outbreaks can cause major shifts in land management decisions, for example the impact of 2002 Foot and Mouth outbreak. In the long term, requirements for TB testing are adding complexity to managing cattle. Ash dieback and Dutch elms disease influences decisions for on-farm tree planting activities.</i></p>
	<p><i>Agri-environmental policy (schemes)</i></p>	<p><i>AES were reported as the catalyst for creating opportunities for farmers to do more for nature, encourage greater ambition, and providing thinking space to re-assess how you are farming. However, AES are also reported to be restrictive and limit options for farmers (for example favouring cattle over sheep, strict stocking levels and limited support for natural regeneration over tree planting).</i></p>
	<p><i>Political uncertainty</i></p>	<p><i>Feeling a lack of support from government, increasing uncertainty in AES and changing goal posts increases risks to changing practice.</i></p>
	<p><i>Legacy of past agricultural policy</i></p>	<p><i>The legacy impact of previous headage payments (based on number of livestock) is still felt today in how farmers make decisions. Payments were linked to post World War II agricultural intensification, creating a mentality of maximising production. More recent BPS (payments based on landholding area) are believed by some farmers to have encouraged bad farming practices by creating dependencies of BPS payments. However, for many upland farmers, the loss of BPS incurs significant uncertainty to their future sustainability.</i></p>
	<p><i>Regulatory</i></p>	<p><i>Challenges relation to the process, prescriptiveness of activities and AES options, lack of flexibility and legislation.</i></p>

<b>Social</b>	Consumer behaviour	<i>Consumers are accustomed to cheap and accessible food, with farmers feeling undervalued by society. Some farmers have found opportunities in direct and/or local sales of produce to health and environmentally conscious consumers.</i>
	Personal circumstance	<i>Changes to personal circumstances (i.e. divorce, retirement, ill health) can result in major shifts in land management and core values.</i>
	Farmer attitudes	<i>Farmers attitudes are influenced both generationally and by the education received at agricultural colleges. Reports of growing support networks for farm and land management, for sharing advice and learnings across nature-friendly farming communities.</i>
	Landownership patterns	<i>Changing landownership patterns, land price increase and land-use changes result in local land-use conflicts and limited availability of land.</i>
	Intersocial relationships	<i>Social dynamics drive activities. These facilitate (characters, relationships) or impede (power of veto, characters, politics) to farmers working together.</i>
	Local agricultural systems	<i>Limited ability to get farming staff, reliance on contractors, loss of local facilities (abattoirs and machinery).</i>
	IT literacy	<i>Computer literacy and paperwork burden limit some farmers capacity to engage in administrative requirements of AES.</i>