



**Engaging land managers for nature conservation and renewal:
A Practical guide for environmental groups**



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Context

The UK is in a climate emergency and ecological crisis. Key to addressing environmental problems, such as improving water quality and renewing biodiversity, involves tackling the way land is managed. But effective environmental land management depends on much more than scientific knowledge. It rests on an appropriate translation of the science by environmental groups and its effective implementation by land managers themselves. To achieve the latter, land managers must also be given ample opportunities to communicate their knowledge and expertise of the land. As such, it is essential for environmental groups to understand how best to engage with those key actors.

The guidance provided in this report aims to support those groups in their engagement with land managers in such a way as to empower them to move towards more sustainable and regenerative land management practices. It comprises clear and concise guidance on effective engagement. This guidance draws heavily from the wealth of experience of Cornwall Wildlife Trust staff involved in the Upstream Thinking catchment management scheme funded by South West Water. The aim of this scheme is to improve water quality, increase biodiversity, and maintain viable farm businesses. Staff working on this scheme have developed immensely valuable engagement skills as part of their work with farmers in catchment systems over the past ten years.

The document is organized into two sections: 'engagement principles' and 'engagement steps.' The former lists some key behavioural qualities for effective engagement with land managers. The latter lists the different steps and actions involved in building an effective engagement over time. The guidance applies to all types of environmental management plans involving a land manager and land adviser, including but not limited to those designed as part of existing agri-environment schemes (AES).

Engagement principles

Be respectful

It is vital when engaging that you approach land managers openly and without judgement, to foster their trust and confidence in the environmental sector. This is key to a constructive exchange and will increase the potential of more positive work and even greater results in the future.

Be approachable

It is important that land managers feel that they can express their views and feel comfortable to seek advice. Taking time to listen to their concerns, challenges and aspirations is key here. The land adviser needs to ensure that land managers know how and when to contact them.

Be supportive

The role of an adviser or representative of an environmental group is not to criticise land managers but to provide support to maximise the success of their environmental land management. If some land managers struggle to meet a particular objective, it is imperative to adapt, advise and provide guidance accordingly.

Learn and share

Land managers know their land like no other. Some may have a strong interest in, and knowledge of, nature too. Any advice or guidance provided to them must therefore recognise this expertise and celebrate their successes. More concretely, this means ensuring they are given plenty of time to communicate what they know about their land and nature during the conversation.

Be empathetic

Each land manager is different: unique heritage, farming system, land, knowledge, interest in nature etc. They also often work long hours under difficult conditions and may be facing sources of stress that are not immediately obvious. Finally, many of the land management practices they engage with have a traditional character and are part and parcel of the way they define themselves. Effective

guidance on environmental land management depends on understanding how land managers are likely to perceive the guidance in question and being sensitive to their wider circumstances. Some work must therefore be invested in finding out what is likely to work for them and why.

The above engagement principles underpin the following engagement steps.

Engagement steps

Step 1: Relationship building

Effective engagement in environmental land management depends on whether land managers trust the person providing the guidance and the guidance itself. This trust, however, depends on ensuring the right person with the right expertise is chosen. Each of the above principles will be key to building the relationship in question. Particularly important for this step is to adopt a positive, interested, and open-minded attitude and find out about the land manager's aspirations, challenges, and concerns. To achieve the above you could ask questions such as:

- the history of the farm;
- the land manager's view on what good land management looks like;
- environmental land management actions that have worked well or failed in the past;
- some of the challenges they face when engaging with nature conservation;
- their vision for the farm's/land's future.

Step 2: Co-design

Once a relationship has been established, the land adviser can start working with the land manager on ideas and plans. The land adviser is there to facilitate the development of a plan with the land manager. When developing land management plans, it is vital that any business associated with that land is at the heart of it, if an income is made from the land. It is

important at this stage to build on the information shared about the land, what has been done before, what has not worked in the past and what the aspirations are for the land. This can then build the base for a management plan, ensuring a viable business and the land managers plans are outlined, then building in environmental options. The land adviser's role lies in presenting the different environmental options available for consideration by the land manager. These environmental options can either support food production practices, e.g. low input grassland for beef cattle, supplement them, e.g. paid to install a buffer strip on an arable field, or help provide income on unproductive land e.g. tree planting or scrub management for wildlife. Here are some examples of questions that could be asked in order to achieve the above:

- Are there areas of your farm that are currently not performing for your business?
- Is there a part of your land that you think is most appropriate for nature conservation?
- Are you aware of actions that have not worked on your land in the past?
- Is there a particular bird species or type of vegetation you would like to include in the plan?

Step 3: Continuity and time

Land managers are often frustrated when they are asked to adopt a particular practice but nobody either checks in to find out how they are getting on or is available to discuss the challenges they face in adopting it. Following the co-design of the plan, ensuring the same team continues to make itself available to the same land manager is crucial for maintaining engagement. This allows the staff involved to have a detailed understanding of the preferences and expertise of the land manager, as well as the actions taken on the land and the challenges they face in adopting them. This engagement can span years, but investing time with land managers ensures increased environmental impact and uptake of actions. Ultimately, this is an essential step for

ensuring effective and long-term implementation of the plan and adjusting wherever necessary. Examples of actions include:

- regular check-ins for monitoring progress and feedback opportunities – over the phone or in person;
- praising positive actions and celebrating success wherever it is achieved;
- suggesting alternative actions/plan adjustments wherever challenges or barriers arise;

- designing training sessions in different formats: face-to-face and online;
- peer-to-peer training sessions between land managers who are implementing environmental actions, to discuss the challenges and benefits of those actions;
- regularly informing land managers of those sessions;
- arranging feedback sessions in which land managers are encouraged to share their experience of the plan's implementation with environmental organisations.

Step 4: Learning and adapting

The plan implementation process ought to be treated as a learning journey. On one hand, land managers must be given regular opportunities to develop their environmental land management and other relevant skills (e.g. digital; planning and implementation of AES; assistance with external financial support). Environmental organisations must achieve this through the delivery of activities such as one-to-one guidance, workshops and webinars, as well as facilitating peer learning through (for example) farm walks. On the other hand, environmental organisations must recognise and embrace the fact that they, too, have much to learn from the land managers they engage with. The learning journey must therefore be treated as reciprocal. To achieve this, concrete actions include:

This publication has been developed by Upstream Thinking/Cornwall Wildlife Trust and members of the RENEW project team.

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