

Farm Facilitators Network

Research Workshop — Summary Report

Farmer Cluster Connections | Propagate

This report captures the key themes and recommended actions emerging from a research workshop held with the Farm Facilitators Network, convened by Propagate as part of the Farmer Cluster Connections programme. The workshop brought together facilitators from across Scotland to share experiences and explore challenges across topic areas.

We also had a deep dive session with Lorna Pate, Research Associate from SRUC, exploring how data can be used to support farmers, crofters and growers and influence practice. The session also looked at what data is missing, and how to work better with researchers.

The Farm Cluster Connections programme is building a coordinated, facilitator-led network of farmer clusters across Scotland, linking regional hubs to accelerate the exchange of knowledge, skills, and innovation in sustainable and regenerative agriculture.

The project aims to support strong local farmer groups by providing practical, skilled facilitation and farmer-led learning that responds to local needs, alongside connecting facilitators across Scotland.

This event brought together facilitators, advisors and others working in this field collectively identified shared issues and concerns – and discussed these in small groups, identifying actions.



Theme 1: Engaging Farmers

Getting farmers through the door — and keeping them engaged over time — requires careful attention to timing, trust, and relevance.

Key principles:

- Follow the agricultural calendar, for example avoid lambing and calving windows (know your audience); spring events best; winter is often better for deeper conversations and webinars
- Go to farmers, don't expect them to come to you – phone calls, farm visits, markets and stalls at shows
- Peer-to-peer and word of mouth remain among the most powerful engagement tools
- Smaller, social gatherings (including pub settings) help build trust and bonding
- Good storytelling that connects to farm legacy, family, land, and values
- Be explicit about relevance: link topics to money saved, policy requirements, or climate resilience
- Avoid duplication. Collaborate with other organisations and check who else is operating in the area
- Name farmers you already work with; credibility through association matters
- Actively engage women farmers, young farmers, and other under-represented voices

Theme 2: Facilitation Skills

Good facilitation is foundational to cluster success, yet there is limited formal training available and significant variation in how skills are developed.

Core skills identified:

- Active listening – finding patience in conversation and building trust through genuine attention
- Framing – knowing how to present the same topic differently to farmers versus funders (e.g. 'inheritance tax event' outperforms 'succession event')
- Creating a safe, open learning environment where quieter voices can contribute
- Balancing the agenda with emergent discussion – knowing when to follow the thread
- Persistence and resilience – facilitation is long-term relationship work, including time just to 'have a blether'
- Neutrality – dropping your own agenda and facilitating genuinely
- Knowing what you cannot do, and when to bring in additional facilitators and experts

Where skills come from:

- Mostly experiential – shadowing, just doing it, learning from others informally
- Formal training less valued; practical, peer-based learning preferred
- Passion for the work is the essential starting point

Theme 3: Funding

Funding was a major source of frustration across the network. Participants described a landscape that is underfunded, overly bureaucratic, and poorly suited to long-term relational work. Two sub-themes of funding were discussed – resourcing of cluster and knowledge sharing groups, and resourcing for farmers to implement changes on farms.

Resourcing cluster groups and networks:

- Short-term, year-to-year funding cycles prevent sustained relationship building and momentum
- Bureaucracy and reporting burdens are disproportionate to funding levels
- Concentration of funding with a small number of large organisations (eg FAS) reduces access and innovation for independents
- Desire for community-governed or bi-regional funding models

Enabling farmers to make changes:

- Funding rates are not keeping pace with real costs — e.g. fencing costs have doubled
- AECS schemes seen as too competitive, with compensation too low and success too uncertain
- Smaller-scale environmental schemes are needed — whole-farm management schemes can deter participation
- More transparency and farmer involvement in funding decision-making is wanted
- Private finance is emerging as an alternative, but facilitators need guidance on how to use it ethically

Theme 4: Metrics of Success

Measuring impact in farmer facilitation is genuinely complex. Participants challenged the dominance of quantitative metrics and advocated for approaches that capture relational, behavioural, and long-term change.

What matters most:

- Behaviour change on the ground – action and uptake, not just attendance
- Social connection and farmer wellbeing, including enjoyment of farming
- Return visits and cluster longevity over time
- Farmers becoming facilitators – upskilling and building peer capacity
- Stories, sound clips, and case studies that capture real-world change

Concerns and cautions:

- Too many feedback forms – farmers are over-surveyed and this damages engagement
- Metrics can become a substitute for impact rather than a measure of it
- Short funding timescales prevent meaningful follow-up measurement
- Risk of chasing numbers at the expense of quality, mindset change, and innovation
- AI tools could help sense-make from discussions, but must be complemented by skilled facilitation

Theme 5: Policy Overwhelm

Farmers and facilitators alike are struggling to navigate a rapidly shifting and poorly joined-up policy landscape.

- The pace of policy change is very difficult to keep up with — confusion and uncertainty are widespread
- Policy is often experienced as 'too much stick, not enough carrot'
- There is a disconnect between food and farming policy and climate/environment goals
- Only around 5% of the agricultural budget is allocated to environmental outcomes
- Facilitators are well-placed to act as a policy filter — translating and prioritising for farmers
- Farmers are often waiting for a definitive 'do this' moment before acting
- Scottish Government plans to establish a facilitators network across Scotland are welcomed — this represents an opportunity for greater coordination
- Policy needs to be genuinely win-win across environmental and social dimensions

Research to Action – how can data drive change on farms?

Participants identified a range of barriers that make getting reliable research into farming practice difficult, alongside approaches that have proven effective on the ground.

Key challenges:

- Misinformation, credibility gaps, and publication bias undermine trust in formal research
- Information overload and complexity — farmers face too much, too fast, and often in inaccessible language
- Long lead times in publishing mean findings reach farmers well after they are useful
- Difficulty identifying what constitutes genuine consensus across multiple papers
- Research is often not relevant to individual farm context or not shown to work in practice

What works:

- Storytelling in plain farmer language, eg podcasts, radio, videos, printed summaries
 - Peer-to-peer sharing and word of mouth from trusted sources
 - On-farm demonstration and beta-testing ('don't tell me, show me')
 - Involving farmers in the research process from the outset
 - Using farmer innovators and early adopters as advocates
 - Repetitive exposure across multiple channels
 - Visual information and case studies tied to local, relatable contexts
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Recommended Actions

The following actions emerged from discussion across all themes and sessions, and are proposed for consideration by facilitators, and wider stakeholders.

Research and knowledge sharing

1. Develop a plain-language hub that aggregates and translates relevant agricultural research for farmers and facilitators
2. Create a brokering function between researchers and facilitators — a two-way exchange so farmers can also inform the research agenda
3. Work with academics to contribute to the Regen Roundup and share working papers before full publication
4. Support on-farm trials to shorten feedback loops between research and practice

Engagement and facilitation

5. Establish a platform for facilitators to connect and learn from each other.
6. Develop facilitation peer learning opportunities: shadowing, informal skill sharing, and community of practice across the network
7. Document and share what good facilitation looks like across different regional and topic contexts
8. Map stakeholders and groups operating in each region to avoid duplication and identify collaboration opportunities

Funding and policy

9. Advocate for multi-year core funding that supports relational, long-term cluster facilitation
10. Produce guidance for facilitators on the range of funding options available and how to access them
11. Engage with Scottish Government's plans for a national facilitators network to ensure the programme has appropriate representation
12. Explore community-governed and private finance models as complements to public funding

Measurement and learning

13. Develop a lightweight, flexible metrics framework that captures stories, behaviour change, and social impact alongside numbers
14. Reduce farmer feedback burden by having facilitators collate and interpret evidence rather than passing forms to farmers directly
15. Explore appropriate use of AI tools for sense-making from cluster discussions, with facilitator oversight

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