

# The future of farming policy in the UK: giving farmers a voice in development and delivery

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In a range of UK and international projects, the University of Bristol has been exploring how facilitated farmer-led approaches can tackle societal challenges, husbandry issues and market opportunities.

## About the research

In the UK, spreading best practice and encouraging farmers to respond to agriculture policy challenges has often depended upon education and other top-down knowledge transfer approaches.

However, UK farming is becoming more complex with significant diversity in production systems and marketing strategies.

Access to information is easier but also possibly more confusing due to conflicting sources. There is an increasing aversion to accepting expert or best practice advice automatically. Traditional top-down knowledge transfer approaches are becoming less effective.

In other contexts, involving farmers from the outset through practice-led participatory approaches has been shown to be effective.

Since the 1980s, a participatory [farmer-first](#) philosophy has been widely adopted in resource-poor agriculture in developing countries.

This approach has proven more suitable for complex and diverse farming systems than solutions developed for standardised high-input high-output agriculture systems.

## Policy implications

Facilitated farmer-led initiatives are an important tool and should be part of UK agriculture policy.

Evidenced benefits include:

- Decreased antimicrobial use on farms
- Improved farm animal welfare
- Better/more environmental stewardship
- Increased consumer trust in the UK food chain

Unleashing this opportunity requires the following key steps:

- Working in partnership, government and industry policymakers should trial the use of facilitated initiatives to address societal challenges.
- Easy-to-access funding mechanisms to cover facilitator time and support should be included within future UK agriculture policy.
- An agricultural facilitator training and certification programme should be established by relevant academic institution(s) to maximise the effectiveness of facilitated initiatives.
- Organisations, such as AHDB, SAC Consulting, ADAS and veterinary practices should provide facilitation services to the farming industry.





Further research into the cost-effectiveness of facilitated farmer-led initiatives to deal with specific policy challenges, such as improved animal welfare, should be undertaken.

Image credit: Ribble Rivers Trust



# Research summaries

Working with laying hen, dairy and sheep farmers across the UK and other European countries, the University of Bristol has been exploring the potential of facilitated farmer-led approaches.

Project summaries	Key findings
Participatory policy discussions: antimicrobial stewardship policy <sup>1</sup> Funding : Waitrose Supply Chain (Coombe Farm and Waitrose Dairy Farmers)  	
<p>The milk supply chain for a major UK retailer developed an antimicrobial stewardship policy that reduces unnecessary antimicrobial use.</p> <p>Rather than imposing a top-down protocol, all dairy farmers in the supply chain, over 100, attended a series of facilitated workshops to define the content of the policy.</p>	<p>The farmers engaged proactively in the policy development process, which resulted in new detailed and practical requirements, such as benchmarking antimicrobial use and medicine protocols in the language of the relief workers.</p> <p>As with other supply chain policies, every farmer in the supply chain then agreed to adhere to the new policy.</p>
Farmer action groups: reducing antimicrobial use <sup>2</sup> Funding : AHDB Dairy and Langford Trust  	
<p>Inspired by a peer-to-peer learning approach developed in Denmark, an Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) facilitator-supported groups of thirty dairy farmers in the South West of England to develop farm-specific action plans to reduce antimicrobial use.</p>	<p>Participating farmers were highly engaged and the majority of meetings were fully attended despite the significant time commitment.</p> <p>On average, each action plan included 10 specific practical actions such as modifying housing and changing antimicrobial type.</p> <p>By the second meeting, farmers reported having completed, on average, 57% of the actions likely to reduce antimicrobial use.</p>

## Examples of other practice-led initiatives to solve complex problems

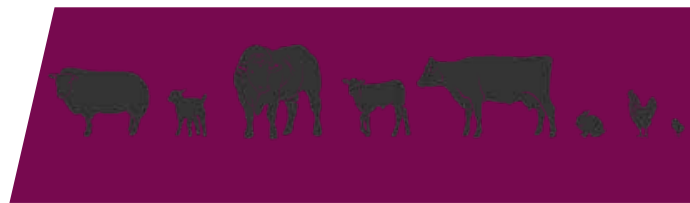
Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund: A facilitator is funded to work with farmers and land managers to improve the local environment and flood defences. [bit.ly/2nlf6iV](https://bit.ly/2nlf6iV)



The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust: As part of England's Rural Development Programme, a facilitator is funded to support the 'Farmer Cluster' initiative which helps farmers/land managers to improve local habitats. [bit.ly/2nJge5K](https://bit.ly/2nJge5K)

Healthy Feet programme: An AHDB Dairy-managed programme to reduce lameness in UK dairy cattle includes a list of approved "mentors" that have been trained in relevant technical and communication skills. [bit.ly/2iHoYE2](https://bit.ly/2iHoYE2)

Innovative Farmers: As part of the Duchy Future Farming programme, the network brings together groups of farmers with researchers in practical "field labs". [bit.ly/2kayD6o](https://bit.ly/2kayD6o)

Stable Schools in Denmark: Before administering certain medicines, organic dairy farmers are required by law to have either sought direct advice from a veterinarian or participated in the peer learning groups that have been shown to reduce antimicrobial use. [bit.ly/2kD33IG](https://bit.ly/2kD33IG)



Project summaries	Key findings
<p>Farmer-led innovation networks: Hennovation<sup>3</sup> Funding : EU H2020</p> <p>Nineteen groups of laying hen farmers and processors operating in five countries (the UK, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden) worked together following a structured innovation process, including relevant experimental trials, to tackle challenges identified by each network.</p> <p>Depending upon the group's needs, facilitators also arranged input from scientists, veterinarians and supply chain representatives.</p>	 <p>This project is funded by the European Union</p> <p>Network members were often enthusiastic, committing significant time to the group's activities.</p> <p>These included developing and testing complex novel solutions to issues such as poultry red mite infection or marketing strategy, using relevant technology.</p> <p>Successful networks depended upon active participation, professional facilitation, moderate resource support and access to relevant expertise.</p>
<p>Farmer focus groups developing market-relevant policy: positive welfare assessment of dairy cattle and sheep<sup>4</sup> Funding : Scottish Government</p> <p>In collaboration with SRUC, the practicalities of assessing positive welfare (pleasure, enjoyment), as opposed to negative welfare (pain, suffering), were explored based on a review of existing scientific literature and the outcomes of four facilitated focus groups which involved 22 dairy and sheep farmers.</p>	 <p>The Scottish Government Responsible for the future</p> <p>Farmers involved in the project valued positive welfare, proposed practical approaches to assessment and expressed interest in using positive welfare concepts within marketing campaigns and future UK agriculture policy.</p> <p>Farmers were keen to share their experience of providing good life opportunities with other farmers and consumers.</p>

**Benefits of participatory policy discussions:**

“made me think about antibiotic use more”

“knowing the opinions of my fellow producers”

“helped develop policies to advantage all parties”

“helped make policy that works for the farmer”



Image credit: Hennovation project. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 652638

## Key findings

- Facilitated farmer-led initiatives can be a major stimulus for promoting innovation and spreading best practice between farms, especially when linked to retailer priorities.
- Farmer groups are a valuable space for innovation, on-farm trials, discussions and taking action on difficult and complex farm challenges.
- In all the projects, skilled facilitators were heavily involved in both practical and technical activities, such as meeting logistics or bridging the gap between science and practice.
- Farmers involved in the projects valued highly the participatory nature of the work as it recognised their expertise and ability to solve complex problems, providing a holistic, systems-based approach.



Image credit: Lisa van Dijk



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As the UK moves towards leaving the EU there is an unique opportunity to look at how agriculture policy is developed and translated more effectively into action on the farm.

No one knows the practical farm-level challenges better than farmers.

## Further information

1 van Dijk, L., Hayton, A., Main, D.C.J., Booth, A., King, A., Barrett, D.C., Buller, H. J. & Reyher, K.K. (2017), Participatory Policy Making by Dairy Producers to Reduce Anti-Microbial use on Farms. *Zoonoses Public Health*, 64: 476–484. [doi.org/10.1111/zph.12329](https://doi.org/10.1111/zph.12329)

2 Can dairy farmers lead the way in the UK for antibiotic reduction? Why of course, it is already happening!

Lisa Morgans, *Farm Antibiotics*, June 2017 <http://www.farmantibiotics.org/news-updates/blogspot/>

3 Practice-led innovation supported by science and market-driven actors in the laying hen and other livestock sectors [www.hennovation.eu](http://www.hennovation.eu)

4 Stokes, J.E., Main, D.C.J., Mullan, S., Haskell, M.J., Wemelsfelder, F. & Dwyer C.M. (2017) Collaborative Development of Positive Welfare Indicators With Dairy Cattle And Sheep Farmers, *Proceeding of UFAW International Symposium 27th-29th June 2017 Royal Holloway, University of London, Surrey, UK*. Page 133 <http://bit.ly/2t1QdGQ>

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