

Summary of farmer interviews for Sustaining the Gwent Levels Project

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Introduction

The face-to-face interviews were undertaken with 10 farmers split between those who are deemed by the Sustaining the Gwent Levels (SGL) project to be participating farmers (5 interviews) and those not participating (5 interviews). The interviews were undertaken in early March 2020 on the farmers' holding. The questionnaire was developed in consultation with the project Steering Group and other members of RSPB and project partners. A pilot interview was conducted to test the clarity of questions and the structure of the survey. A copy of the survey is contained in the Appendix, together with the supporting letter and email.

The key aim of the survey was to understand the views and thoughts of those farmers from their perspectives in terms of how the scheme has operated, their own understanding of what it is meant to achieve and if this is feasible. The survey also covered how, in the view of the farmers, the scheme might be improved. The interview took about 45 minutes to complete and had six sections, covering: the farm business; an overview of the farming system; a review of the recent changes and future challenges; experience with agri-environment schemes; the RSPB project and its objectives; and the possible challenges to the future direction of the project.

Methodology

The questionnaire was semi-structured, with a mix of open and closed questions. The aim was to collect some core information in the early sections before opening up the discussion so that the narrative of each farm holding could be developed. The intention was to offer an opportunity to the farmers to talk openly about their farm, the challenges they face and how they connect, or don't connect, with the project based on their own experiences of SGL. The farmers were selected from a long list provided by the SGL officers of both participating and non-participating farmers. The SGL officers do not know which farmers were contacted by the interviewer in order to retain confidentiality. The survey was approved by the University of Gloucestershire Research Ethics Committee and complies with Data Protection legislation.

Background information on farms and farm enterprises

The completed interviews were undertaken towards the end of February and in early March 2020. Eight of the interviewees farmed in the Eastern Newport and Caldicot section of the project area and two in the Western part (Wentlooge) closer to Cardiff. See the figure below.

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Figure 1 Location of Sustaining the Gwent Levels project area.

The participant farms ranged from just under 30 ha to just under 150 ha, with three under 100 ha. The non-participating farms tended to be a little smaller with the smallest just over 10 ha and four under 100 ha, although the largest farm (250 ha) is in this group. All of the holdings are either wholly owned (five) or a mix of wholly owned and rented (five). All of the farms have some permanent pasture, and four (three of the participants and one non-participant) had some cultivations for arable crops or temporary leys. Some of the arable land is away from the Gwent levels. All but one graze livestock; the one without livestock rents the land out for grazing sheep and cattle. As a result, eight of the holdings are registered as lowland beef and sheep in terms of their farm type, with one dairy herd and the other diversified into another agricultural sector.

The youngest interviewee was 35 and the eldest 80. Of the participant farmers, two were aged over 65 and two were under 50. For the non-participants two were over 65 and one was under 50. Both groups included members of a range of agricultural groups such as Farming Connect (5), NFU (10), as well as the Internal Drainage Board, Community Council and Farm Assured Welsh Livestock (FAWL) scheme. Among the participating farms, for two 'most' of the household income came from the farm, one 'about half' and two 'less than half'. Among the non-participants, for two 'most of it' came from the farm, one 'less than half' and two 'none' as they are small hobby farms. Overall it is worth noting that few of the farmers interviewed are solely dependent on farming as their only source of income. Other sources of income included some on-farm non-agricultural activity (e.g. horse livery), off-farm agricultural related activity (e.g. contracting or consultancy), off-farm non-agricultural income (e.g. other employment) or other forms of income (e.g. pension).

Farming systems in Gwent Levels

The main distinction between the farms considered was whether they to be intensive (applying fertiliser, higher stocking rates, growing maize and reseeded pastures regularly) or extensive (little or no fertiliser, mainly permanent pasture and lower stocking rates). Only two of the farmers described their farms as intensive. One was a livestock unit and the other split the farm into two, with the arable intensive (and mostly away from the Gwent levels), and grassland which is much more extensively managed. The key point is that for both participating and non-participating farms the land on the Gwent levels is mostly not intensively managed, although this does not necessarily mean that livestock production is economically sustainable. All recognised that the land grew good grass but the grazing season (April-October) was short due to the wet heavy clay ground. This

extends the period that livestock need to be housed for increasing the need for fodder as well as the space need to store farm-yard manure. Those with a more intensive approach are able to take three cuts of silage or hay. Many of the farmers, participant and non-participant, were keen to mention that they were aware of the waterways, either not spreading fertiliser within 30 metres of the ditches or fencing livestock away from these areas.

A number of the farms have diversified in recent years. This includes poultry production, equine, solar panels, and the letting of spare land to neighbouring farmers. Some of the holdings use arable crops to create a break for the soil, planting wheat, barley, oilseed rape or cover crops. Two farmers (one participating and the other non-participating) grew maize. In both cases this was for livestock fodder. Other farmers said they used to but have not in recent years. One mentioned that he found it as cost effective to contract growing maize close to Cardiff and to transport it to the farm.

Three farmers said there was no change to their farming system in the past 20 years. In two of these cases the decision to reduce farming activity happened more than 20 years ago. In both of these cases the farm is little more than a hobby. Two of the farms have increased in size and management intensity (more buildings to house more livestock and improving land to reduce rush infestation). Others have taken different livestock to broaden the income base from the farm. For the remainder (about a third of the farmers interviewed) the farming systems had changed from what the farmers perceived to be 'intensive' to a more 'extensive' system in the past five years. Dairy farmers had moved to beef and sheep, and others have reduced the number of livestock quite dramatically.

The key reasons underpinning these changes across both groups were farmers getting older, associated health reasons, and changes in family circumstances. In two cases there was a concern about bovine tuberculosis (bTB) that meant a switch away from cattle to sheep. On two other farms, skills outside of agriculture were utilised as they decided that there was no future in farming, with low returns in livestock and arable markets struggling.

Overall the picture is one of change away from intensive farming in both groups. The low returns from livestock at the current time were a cause for concern to all farmers and all of the businesses were attempting to reduce costs by being more extensively managed, mostly by reducing feed inputs. Many of the farmers mentioned how their farming system was in tune with the Gwent Levels, by which they meant that their farming system took account of the particular circumstances on the Levels, such as water levels and late grass season.

Advice, succession and future plans

All of the participants were asked a series of question about advice and support in a number of areas. The aim was to see if those involved in running the farm business were familiar with receiving advice and support from a number of different sources. The areas discussed in the interview covered financial, production, marketing and environmental advice.

Only two of the interviewees, one in each group, received financial advice. All interviewees used an accountant, although one had these skills within the household. Only one farm business has had a Business Plan prepared by Farming Connect. On the production side, two interviewees with arable enterprises used agronomists but no other interviewees took production advice. It is a similar picture for marketing, with only one interviewee having specific marketing advice on arable crops. The remainder sell their produce via the local abattoir (livestock) reducing the need for marketing advice or sell direct to the public. One sells some livestock to Tesco and also has an indirect link to a Waitrose contract via a larger livestock producer who uses smaller farms to ensure a consistent supply. On the environmental side only one interviewee stated that they were in Glastir and

received advice with this and feels that they receive advice as part of the agreement, possibly from the Glastir officer. Other environmental advice on two farms was received from the agronomist or the SGL project itself, interestingly on a non-participating farm. Most of the farmers, participants and non-participants felt Glastir was not appropriate to them and as a result environmental advice was not a fruitful area of discussion.

All interviewees were asked how likely it would be for someone from the farm household to take over the farm business in the future. For the participating farms there were two 'definitely not', two 'definitely' and one 'possible'. For non-participating respondents, there were also two 'definitely not' and two 'unlikely' and one 'don't know'. Overall the picture is one of balance between definitely 'yes', and definitely 'no'. The concerns regarding succession were about future financial viability. Some interviewees mentioned urban spread and this might be a good reason not to sell in order to maximise the value of potential future land values. In some cases, the family members showed no interest in farming at the moment and some had stated that they did not want to continue with the agricultural side of the business. Even those who were 'definite' about taking on the farm had concerns about the business being sustainable.

The final question in this section asked the farmers about their future plans, offering them six mutually exclusive options. The options were presented as mutually exclusive in order to determine the most likely direction of change (see Table 1); however, such decisions are not straightforward.

Table 1 Current plans for the farm in next 5 years by participation in Gwent Levels project

	Participant	Non-participant
I plan to sell off the business		
I plan to reduce the size/intensity of the business	1	
I intend to maintain my business without major changes	1	3
I plan to grow/intensify the business	2	
I plan to diversify the business		2
I intend to change the business but direction of change uncertain at current time	1	

The table shows that the responses are spread across five of the categories, with none of those interviewed planning to sell off their businesses. However, the non participants are split between those who intend to maintain the business as it is and those who plan to diversify. In one case this was another farming enterprise and in the other it was a possible move to become more specialist by rearing pedigree livestock. The response among participants was more divided. Those who wished to grow the business needed more land to do so and the other wanted to move into non-agricultural enterprises. Of those who said they wished to maintain the business, three had already reduced the intensity of the business (one participant and two non-participants). As other responses

indicated, there evidence here is of range of responses to the current circumstances with each farm business planning its own path through the next five years or so.

Experience of agri-environment schemes

All of the participants were asked if they currently had an agri-environment scheme (AES) on their farm. Only two farmers were in Glastir (one participant and one non-participant) and another had previously been in Tir Cynnal. None of the others had AES experience, although two were in management agreements regarding Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's) on their land. These were mainly ditch management and they received payments for certain measures. Other said they had considered this but it would need involvement of Natural Resource Wales and the further level of scrutiny is not something the farmers appeared to be keen on. Therefore, while a wider area is covered by the SSSI, it makes little difference to the way they farm and they receive no payments for this. This is deemed preferable compared to receiving payments and requiring to fulfil further management activities under the supervision of NRW.

Several respondents from both groups said they had looked at Glastir but it was not viable and did not have the right options for farms in this area. Even one of the farmers in Glastir described the conditions as restrictive: *'you can't plough or reseed anything ... you can't move before July 15th'*. The changes to management activity on the holdings appears minor and those in Glastir indicated this was reflected in the payments, although this was welcome. Interviewees were aware of the Single Farm Payment and the conditions associated with this. There also appeared to be little discussion with advisers and other farmers on these issues.

Overall, the farmers were neutral about their views on AES. One farmer commented that there was *'not a great take up in Wales for Glastir and that everyone is waiting for this new one to come out'*. Others felt Glastir was not suitable to that area but comments that they wanted to support the landscape and environment. All but one of the interviewees said that their land was designated as a SSSI. The one whose land was not said they were not technically a SSSI, but managed the land as if it was. The presence of the SSSI designation had little impact on the farms and the interviewees were accustomed to the management required. One farmer called it *'farming as you did a while back'*. Some thought the designation was just on the ditches and reens, maintaining a clear ditch bank. A few of the farms had had visits by Natural Resources Wales staff, but only recently.

The level of engagement with AES was low and the SSSI designation was not seen as a management opportunity or a hindrance but they accepted the presence of a designation and appear to work with or around. This is unusual given the presence of AES for over 20 years but does offer an opportunity for the development of a scheme specific to the Gwent Levels area.

Knowledge of and involvement with the Sustaining the Gwent Level project

Obviously key to the survey is the section about the participants' and non-participants' knowledge of the SGL project. There were a series of questions in this section assessing their knowledge and connection to the project. The first question asked all interviewees 'what they knew about the SGL'.

What is clear is that the participant farmers had a better knowledge of the SGL project than the non-participant. For example, the participant farmers have been to a number of talks and meetings, receive visits from the project officer, and directly received assistance from SGL. They offered a summary of the project:

"Idea is to improve the Gwent levels and hopefully improve your income."

"If we can improve the waterways and get a better flow of water... I'm all for it. As long as we can work together... and get to the same goal... I'm all for it"

"Regenerating the smaller reens networks that feed into the bigger reens on the levels."

"What we know is the 100% funding of some management activities, it appealed as it was something we wanted to do but couldn't fund."

The non-participant farmers admitted to 'knowing little' but they often referred to another member of the household who had been to a meeting or knew more about the project. Some mentioned the SGL project as being about

"How we are going to make a living from the moors in the future"

"You get money for doing nothing"

"Couldn't tell you what they do ... about sustainability of biodiversity or species I think. "

In this sense the knowledge is much more general, although some knew it was about regenerating the waterways and even thought that they could see more wildlife now. The 'money for doing nothing' was stated by a respondent who felt disappointed that an aspect of the project he wanted to be involved in had not materialised. He held a perception that others were receiving payments for standing still and not moving forward as a business.

Follow-on question then asked them to describe the SGL project. Participant farmers were aware of the opportunities that SGL offers saying things like:

"Farmer [positive about SGL] would advise farmers to get involved as gets reens cleared out and say 'you need to grab onto this, it's almost a win-win situation for everybody'"

"Benefit for all of us. Make sure all the water courses clear. We don't want stagnant ditches we want them flowing."

"Habitat creation. Land is not so important but the waterways are. Maintenance of the waterways to encourage water voles."

Two of the non-participant farmers did not know enough to describe the project. The others agreed with the principles and were supportive, saying it is a 'breath of fresh air' and is about 'stopping us becoming like Somerset'. Another was aware that not everyone is going to like it:

"We're doing everything proper, next door they're pushing slurry out now... so we're doing it with a SSSI and then they're just bollocking the slurry on... straight in the ditch like".

In terms of how the message about SGL has come across, the participant farmers were divided. Some thought the message had come across clearly and the meetings were good and interesting. There was strong support for the local officer, described as 'enthusiastic, knowledgeable and approachable'. Other feel that the message is 'limited and quite narrow' by focusing on waterways and not land management (in their view). One farmer was aware that not all farmers are supportive of SGL, meaning that there is peer pressure about getting involved, however they struggled to understand the perceived objections as in their view 'everyone benefits from opening up the waterways'.

The non-participant farmers who had attended events, two out of five, found them interesting and positive. And again, there was support from at least one for the local officer describing him as 'good

as gold' and 'gradually getting SGL back on track'. Another thought they were outside the area, and this is why they had not heard much about the project, suggesting that boundary confusion is a common issue with geographical or habitat focused projects.

The last question in this set asked all the farmers to choose 'the main objectives of the SGL project'. They were offered a list taken from the website and could choose as many as they wished. Table 2 below shows the response of both groups with the order of the response as it appeared in the questionnaire.

Table 2 SGL project objectives by farmer groups.

Participant farmers	Non-participant farmers
Soil management (1)	Soil management (4)
Water Quality (4)	<i>Water quality</i> (5)
<i>Biodiversity- plants</i> (5)	Biodiversity – plants (3)
Biodiversity – pollinators (1)	Biodiversity- pollinators (3)
Biodiversity – bats (1)	Biodiversity – bats (1)
<i>Ditch management</i> (5)	<i>Ditch management</i> (5)
<i>Pollarded willows</i> (5)	Pollarded willows (3)
Orchard management (3)	Orchard management (2)
Nutrient management (3)	Nutrient management (2)
Reduced pollution (1)	Reduced pollution (3)

The responses are interesting, as it appears that the participant farmers all recognised a smaller range of objectives but were more selective about those that they mentioned. Possibly this is based on their experiences, rather than what they thought the project might cover. In this respect, the first possible objective, Soil management, was only mentioned by one participating farm. However, water quality, plants, pollarding willows and ditch management were mentioned by all or four of the participating farmers. Orchard and nutrient management were mentioned by three farmers, with the other four objectives only received single mentions.

There were some comments attached to the response. One farmer noted that the project tries to pollard willows that have not been pollarded in the past, and in their view, this doesn't work – best to cut them down and start again. They went on to say that orchard management was more restoration rather than establishing new orchards, which they would support and be interested in. The non-participating farmers all listed Water quality and Ditch management and four mentioned soil management. Their responses were more evenly distributed and only one objective, concerning bats, received a single nomination. The difference in soil management scores suggests that the participating farmers have not seen any evidence of this in terms of activities, but it might be something that is of interest to farmers.

The reasons for getting involved in the project varied. One of the participating farmers had a very clear motive, that of accessing funding for capital works which they wanted to do but could not otherwise fund. This was for the removal of hedges next to ditches to enable the better management of the ditch and improvement of the habitat. Another participant farm reseeded a field with SGL selecting a particular seed mix, which was much more expensive. Another farmer was keen to manage the ditches and with SGL came to an agreement to manage 700 m of ditches and reens in a particular way. Others had really only attended meetings or received soil testing. Both were considered to be beneficial. One of the non-participating farmers was interested in something similar and aiming for a meeting in the future.

Among the non-participants, one was clear they needed to know what the impact of Brexit was before committing to a local project. Another was very supportive but had not been so keen initially but these first impressions were wearing off. Both of the remaining non-participants recognised that they had ditches that needed managing and so a link with SGL would be logical, but had not happened yet. Overall the impression of the project was good in both groups. The contact for SGL is now recognised as being Lewis Stallard, SGL project officer, and all those commenting felt he was doing a really good job and developing a positive relationship with the farmers, both participating and non-participating.

For any project like SGL, an important consideration is 'how the project supports local farmers?'. This was asked of all the farmers in both groups. For participating farmers two things were clear. First, the project helped to pay for things, such as more expensive seed mixes that would provide a benefit, removal of hedges next to water courses, or soil testing. Second, it provides payment for the type of management that benefits wildlife but is maybe more than the farmer would expect to undertake, and for this they welcome a degree of flexibility. In this sense the farmers were open to the idea of working with SGL, provided the payments were right and took account of the impact on the business. The issue of flexibility relates to other schemes, where the regulations seem to take precedence rather than the outcomes of the scheme and the impact on other parts of the business. Some of those who have been involved welcomed the opportunity to do the work themselves and feel as if they are contributing to the project, rather than feeling like an outsider.

Amongst the non-participating farmers, there was some caution given the current uncertainties around Brexit (and now Coronavirus). There was support for the project and a few of them expected to be involved in the future so long as things 'work for the farmer as well as the project'.

This section has shown that the farmers in both groups had a good awareness of the project and are broadly positive of its aims. Those participating seemed to be more informed about the objectives and the areas of activity – but the non-participating farmers were supportive and might be involved in the future. The role of the project officer is key and he is known in the farming community and respected.

Views of current feasibility of SGL and future opportunities

This final section looks at the feasibility of the project in its aspirations from the farmers perspective and what they might change. For the participating farmers, they felt that the project is important and the aspirations are mostly feasible – but might need some adjustment. The issue of predation on breeding wader species was mentioned; for example, buzzards nesting in nearby trees and in this sense, they felt that the character of the levels now might not be suitable habitat for breeding waders as it was a decade or more ago. Another example was the lack of orchard planting; while not suiting everyone, some did like this aspect and were disappointed it had not happened. Another respondent wanted the project to give more time to test innovative things, such as soil management. They noted that increasing the capacity of the levels to hold more water and protect biodiversity might be an attractive offer in a period of great uncertainty regarding the viability of farm businesses. One of the farmers mentioned that with two large housing developments on the edge of Newport there was a need for action to reduce flood risk and this might be an opportunity for the project. Most of this group also felt able to, or had actually stated, their views on the project to the project officer or other SGL staff.

Amongst the non-participating farmers there was less specific knowledge but they were supportive of the project and felt it was doing good things. They would like more agricultural information, such as different grass leys for land that is inundated with water over the winter. Both groups noted the

need to increase the knowledge base of farm workers and contractors, as these are the people who do the actual land management work.

When asked what they would change about the SGL project, the participating farms did not mention anything specific but they did suggest that the message should be simple and straightforward to farmers. Aiming for less livestock that receive higher prices in the market place would be a positive move for at least one. A general recognition that these are farm businesses and as such need to operate as a business before environmental questions can be considered. For the non-participating farmers there was a hint that stability would be welcome during a time of uncertainty and change. The key message underpinning these suggestions was that there is substantial change in farming at the moment and with so much instability, working with them on this would be a welcome area of activity.

Future on-farm changes proposed by SGL will need to have a strong business case or supported by attractive incentives. All respondents, participant and non-participant at some point highlight uncertainty in policy or markets. For example, the livestock is volatile and some farmers noted that they were losing money on these enterprises. Linking food production to environmentally sympathetic land management is possible in the view of respondents, both participating and non-participating, but needs careful framing and a clear dialogue with farmers at the outset. Farmers are concerned about continuity of schemes and initiatives. Working with farmers to undertake works, rather than rely on outside contractors would help increase knowledge and awareness of what is trying to be achieved.

The last two questions asked were about the natural challenges on the farm and the innovations the farmers would like to introduce on their farm. Farmers in both groups agreed that the key issue in the Gwent Levels was water and the management of land through drainage. The wet conditions meant livestock had to be housed and the actual *grazing* season was shorter as a result. However, farmers noted that the *growing* season was longer than in other areas. As one farmer put it:

"We're usually a month behind the hills boys because we can't turn out but we get a bonus then with the quality of the ground, it's stronger. More natural."

Another natural factor mentioned was the clay-based soil also noted as being challenging. Climate change and weather were also mentioned as something that will have an increasing impact on this area. Other non-natural factors were pollution from industry, air quality from traffic, and fly tipping.

In terms of innovations, two mentioned energy production as a possible source of future income, along with tourism and camping and 'glamping'. Another participating farmer wanted to find a way for sustainable livestock production. Among the non-participating farmers only two suggested changes, with others looking to go on as they are, while respecting the environment. One suggestion was for more pedigree animals and the other for non-agricultural activity such as energy or tourism.

Final comments from the interviewees were supportive of the project and hoped it could link to more sustainable management and income for farming. They were also concerned about larger changes such as Brexit and new legislation. There was some concern that SGL was not a large enough project to impact the Welsh Government and future schemes they might be developing. The effective management of the ditches and reens is seen as critical but it is a costly activity to do properly and this needs to be recognised.

Conclusions and Next steps

Overall the farmers experience of the SGL project is positive and they are aware of the associated objectives in some detail, whether they participate in the project or not. The more involved they are, the more detailed their understanding. However, there is room for improvement regarding the communication of the project to the local farming community.

From an agricultural perspective all the farmers interviewed had some uncertainties regarding the future and this will impact how the land on the Gwent levels is managed in the next 3-5 years. This was leading to some cautious decision making in future plans, with those who have reduced activities looking to maintain the business as it is while others are seeking to expand if they can acquire more land or diversify into other agricultural or non-agricultural enterprises. The pressure of local development were noted and the maintaining of reduced farming activity can impact in two ways, it can both protect land from development but also provide opportunities for development itself as it provides an attractive alternative if permission looks possible.

The findings point to some important conclusions for the SGL project.

1. The role of the Project Officer is critical. The current Project Officer (Lewis) is well respected among the farmers and this offers a good foundation to build on in the future. However, it is worth:
 - Reflecting on how the SGL project is communicated to the farmers in the SGL project area both in terms of events and meetings but also media and press;
 - The findings suggest that there is a lack of other contacts and networks within the farming community provides an opportunity for SGL;
 - The interviews suggest a high membership for the NFU who could be a potential partner but most had not seen any local representation for this area;
 - Given the level of uncertainty in the current farming climate it seems particularly important to needs for climate change and nature recovery with new potential funding streams for farmers and land managers.

2. The SGL project, with its focus on innovative land management activities, is in an excellent position to develop and shaping discussions on areas of high interest and concern amongst farmers. The interviews suggest that the following areas are worth investigating further:
 - A number of farmers mentioned that they face challenges regarding improving soil functionality and effective pasture/grassland management. This includes issues such as introducing herbal leys and testing the benefits of soil aeration;
 - The management of water levels across Gwent Levels as a whole is of central interest to SGL but it is also of interest to individual farms. Farmers would be interested to understand better the impact of water levels on biodiversity and their own farming system;
 - Linked to this there was an awareness of how certain activities affect water quality and enhancing practices regarding the management of ditches and reens.

As a result, we suggest the following next steps for SGL to consider:

Local innovations to share and co-develop with farmers

- The economics of farming is under strain so farmers are considering diversification and maximising the effective implementation of policy opportunities. SGL would be

wise to assess these options closely in order to consider how subsequent changes align with project objectives.

- Develop some options and guidance that meet the concerns regarding water quality, water level management, soil functionality and pasture management.
- Selecting a broad range of ideas and presenting them as in the early development phase will help initiate discussions with farmers. Examples might include:
 - new approaches to funding agri-environmental work through the payment for outcomes rather than the use of prescriptions
 - the blending of public schemes with private finance, e.g. biodiversity net gain or carbon credits;
- initiatives linking soil management and improved biodiversity;
- grassland management (e.g. herbal leys) with multiple benefits for water quality, water flow, biodiversity, animal health.

Develop an engagement strategy with farmers in the Gwent levels

- The positive view of SGL provides an opportunity to develop local network with SGL as the facilitator, including some farmers so it has a farmer-led perspective and can co-design some activities which SGL will support and seek funding for;
- It might be worth considering SGL re-framing itself as the 'Farmer's friend', in order to raise awareness of new policy announcements and funding opportunities for farmers as well as concerning compliance with basic environmental regulations.
- Provide forum for working through the future changes in support as a result of Brexit/COVID. Site visits would be an excellent options for talking through these issues.
- Possible models for this engagement could build on the experience of Farming Connect in Wales or the farmer discussion groups formed under the LEADER programme in Mentor Mon. Here the co-development of farmer to farmer discussion groups was a key factor in effective knowledge sharing;
- The evaluations of both approaches found that the co-development aspects helped build the knowledge exchange capacity amongst local farmers;