

Case study

Shropshire Hills National Landscape

Project title Upper Onny Farmers Group

Overview - *Please summarise your project being clear about what was achieved*

The Upper Onny Farmers Group are farmers who manage land within the Upper Onny valley, in the Shropshire Hills.

In 2018, Upper Onny valley farmers were invited to meet with representatives of Natural England, National Trust, and the Shropshire Hills National Landscape Partnership to discuss the needs of farming and the local environment and how these might be addressed by the Stepping Stones Project.

The project has a long-term vision to work with landowners and their local communities to create a healthy natural environment, to restore the landscape character and increase wildlife that are characteristic of the Shropshire Hills.

Following this inaugural meeting the Upper Onny Farmers Group was established. The Group is supported by Cath Landles from the Shropshire Hills National Landscape Partnership who coordinates activities and meetings. The Group has grown from 9 to 20 farmers mainly due to word of mouth among the local farming community.

The Upper Onny Farmers Group has a common aim to *'share views about the main issues affecting the future of farming and the environment in the upper Onny valley, and to explore ways for improving the environment, the landscape and its wildlife in ways that are integral to profitable farm businesses'*.

What was done - *Please describe your project activities in more detail*

The work with farmers (all private landowners) began by working with partners who had built up strong working relationships with local landowners over 20 years. Together we drew up a list of c 15 farmers who we prioritised as major and influential landowners that we knew well. Each farmer was contacted to arrange a meeting around the farm kitchen table to introduce the Stepping Stones project and to discuss their concerns for farming and the landscape and how a project might be helpful to them.

On the back of these conversations, we invited them to an evening meeting in a local pub (with free drink and food) for a shared discussion with other farmers. Much of the discussion centred on their awareness of the need to make nature and farming work better together and their frustrations and failings of past and current agri-environment schemes. The 9 farmers who attended this meeting (2018) decided to form a group and called themselves the Upper Onny Farmers and we agreed to coordinate/facilitate the meetings through Cath Landles (Shropshire Hills National Landscape Partnership Community Officer), who is well known and trusted.

From the outset we all agreed that this is a farmers group, the farmers would agree its members and, whilst we would suggest activities or events, decisions on what took place would be decided by the farmers. It became clear that the farmers were only prepared to give up their evenings to meet if we could generate an interesting and relevant agenda with a clear purpose. Thus, it was fortunate that the formation of this group coincided with Defra's ELMS Test & Trials programme, as well as Agricultural Transition, and all the uncertainties for farming. As a group, we decided to submit a proposal to run a Test & Trial to test the design, process, and content for land management plans which we referred to as Whole Farm Plans. The rationale agreed by the farmers was that this was an

opportunity to bring their experience of agri-environment schemes to inform and shape the design of the ELMS and put them on the front foot when applying for future funding.

We were successful in our submission to Defra to run 2 phases of Whole Farm Plan development (2019-2021). With funding from the Defra Test & Trial, we employed consultants to provide farm business advice and an environmental advisor to work with the farmer to design and work up the plan with 5 farmers in phase 1 and another 5 farmers in phase 2. We also used the Defra funding to commission Cath Landles to facilitate the Upper Onny Farmers Group.

In 2021 we worked with Historic England to submit a second application to run a Defra Test & Trial to integrate the historic heritage into Whole Farm Plans. This has retrofitted heritage into 5 existing Whole Farm Plans and produced 5 new ones, working with an archaeologist, to better integrate both natural and heritage assets into the plans.

Outputs/Outcomes

Please provide some facts and figures (particularly ones that could be collated with those from other AONBs, e.g., number of schools engaged, number of events delivered, landowners advised, etc.)

With Green Recovery Challenge Fund funding in 2022, we ran several farm demonstrations (hay meadow creation, woodland & wood pasture management, wetland, and river channel restoration) to help farmers understand better how they could implement the recommendations in their Whole Farm Plans.

As with all the Whole Farm Plans, the farmers participation has been voluntary, and it is up to them whether they choose to implement any of the recommendations. Several indicated they are waiting for the details of ELMS before they think about any changes to their farming practices. With our support, some decided to progress with their Whole Farm Plans (listed below).

- One farmer went back into Countryside Stewardship, having left the scheme some years ago.
- Two farmers worked together to secure funding from Severn Trent's Boost for Biodiversity grant scheme for creating hay meadows and wood pasture. They are applying again to do more work in 2023/24.
- Seven farmers have secured Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) funding for a variety of environmental improvement works, such as hedge restoration, orchard creation, fencing out riparian and wetland habitats, planting hedges and others.
- We are working with the Environment Agency and Shropshire Wildlife Trust on a Natural Flood Management scheme on one of the farms. We have secured EA funding and await confirmation of match funding from FiPL.
- Site visit with Environment Agency and Severn Rivers Trust to provide advice, guidance, and potential funding for a wetland project on recently acquired land one of the farmers has bought between Caer Caradoc and The Lawley.
- Several of the Upper Onny Farmers Group are involved with Shropshire CPRE's Hedgerow Project – some had new hedges planted or existing ones gapped, some by volunteers, others have provided sites for the hedgerow training courses and some have attended courses themselves.
- One farmer hosted two farm visits for local primary schools, and ran the session jointly with Cath Landles
- Two farmers hosted farm visits for Harper Adams students and lecturers
- Three Upper Onny Farmers Group members sit on the Shropshire Hills Farming in Protected Landscapes grant awards panel
- Part funded through FiPL, in October 2022 we visited two Cumbrian farmers (James Rebanks and James Robinson) to see the changes they have made on their farms to provide public

goods and benefit their farm businesses. An inspirational trip, resulting in several of the farmers immediately applying to FiPL on their return to implement some of the things they saw on their farms.

- UOFG member now sits on the Nature Friendly Farming Network, representing the West Midlands – this was as a result of the Cumbria trip
- Pollardine Farm hosted FC woodland planning training day
- Several members of the group attended the 2023 [Groundswell Regenerative Agriculture Festival](#)
- 2 UOFG members hosted visits for a meeting between the NFU and NAAONBs (Aug '23)
- Foxall's historic field names maps were used during the historic environment Test & Trial. As a result, an idea was put forward by one of the participating farmers to see if we could produce modern field name maps for each of the UOFG farms. Cath presented the idea to her contacts at Nottingham University and the Institute of English Place Names, and an Upper Onny Field Names Project was designed, and funding secured from NT and Notts Uni. The project is well under way and will be completed in October 2023.
- EOI from several UOFG members for the Pasture for Life FiPL funded project (Aug 2023).
- Sharing best practice - UOFG hosting a visit for NT tenant farmers from the Peak District NP in Sept 2023.
- UOFG (Matt Sankey) presented at local community conference (MMCLT) on benefits of regenerative farming.
- UOFG farmers (Jane and Lizzie Hulton-Harrop) hosted a demonstration to the UOFG of their transition to holistic farming (training funded by FiPL) and regenerative farming practices.
- Early consideration among Upper Onny farmers of forming an UOFG Community Interest Group

Learning

What was key to your project's success?

Overall, the key individual in making this all work is Cath Landles in her role as Upper Onny Farmers Group facilitator/coordinator and who has been central to bringing the Group together and driving the agendas and events. Dave Cragg, Natural England local advisor, is also a regular and important member of the UOFG as he is able to draw on his knowledge of agri-environment schemes and likely future opportunities through ELMS.

Having one point of contact and time to develop relationships, improve understanding and trust between the different parties, and enable change. Making the journey enjoyable and positive, and listening to the farmers, establishing the hooks (e.g., what aspects of their Whole Farm Plans interests them, and they are keen to deliver on), act on this interest and enable action by maximising opportunities and making relevant links to our contacts/partners/potential funders.

Other key learning points are:

- Involving advisors who are credible and respected farmers with experience of livestock farming and running farm businesses; advisors who talk the same language of farmers.
- Having a common objective of working towards sustainable and profitable farm businesses that benefit from their delivery of a healthy natural environment. We are aiming to maintain the Upper Onny as a farmed landscape with more space and greater connectivity for nature; thus, we are careful in ours and others use of the much used but misunderstood term 'Rewilding' when referring to the Upper Onny landscape.
- Use of plain English and regular checking of farmers' understanding of technical terms.
- Bringing farmers together to share views and experiences. Peer-to-peer learning has shown to be most effective in changing attitudes and behaviours.

- Giving farmers an opportunity to influence national support schemes through the Defra Test & Trials.

Quote from Andrew Hearle (Stepping Stones Project Manager):

“What has excited me the most has been the engagement work we undertook with the Upper Onny Farmers Group, and seeing ideas generated and attitudes beginning to change about how they manage their land to make more space for nature as part of their farming system”

Quotes from Upper Onny Farmers:

“We can see ways to make the [Whole Farm Plan] recommendations that were made, benefit our business and complement our style of farming and hopefully our bank balance!”

“We have come a long way through the WFP process and really enjoyed our involvement.”

“At the start, I had no idea what the terms natural assets and public goods really meant. Now, I believe, I have a good grasp of what the government is looking for.”

“Farmers need to see what other farmers are doing to increase margins by reducing costs. We have benefited from visiting farms in other parts of the country e.g the Our Common Cause Project Dartmoor trip in 2019.”

“The whole farm plan brought to light the things that we don’t normally consider as potential benefits”

“I would say the Plan shows how the environment and my farm go hand in hand with each other”

“We need a greater understanding of where we can gain environmental and social benefits whilst focusing on core farm profitability”