

Advice to farmers and land managers in the Culm grassland area

Matt Lobley and Allan Butler

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Acknowledgments

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and are not necessarily shared by other members of the University or by the University as a whole.

1. Introduction/background

This work has been undertaken as part of the annual contract between the Centre for Rural Policy Research (CRPR) and Devon County Council. The original objectives for this specific piece of work were quite wide ranging and beyond the resources of the existing contract. It was hoped to supplement these resources with in-kind contributions from other colleagues and organisations although this did not occur to the extent envisaged¹. That said, through discussions with advisors and farmers, by drawing on other similar work recently carried out by the CRPR and with reference to the wider body of literature on the provision of advice to farmers, we have been able to develop a comprehensive picture of what works well in terms of advice provision and have begun to identify gaps in provision. In conducting this work we have focused on the following objectives:

- a) Investigate the needs of the farming and landowning community with regards to advisory provision.
- b) Identify gaps in service provision and develop/recommend delivery mechanisms as appropriate.
- c) Explore the potential of farm business mentors.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows: Section 2 reports on a meeting held with advisors at the South West Forest offices in Cookworthy. Section 3 explores what it is farmers are looking for in terms of advice provision and draws on the results of a meeting held with farmers as well as other relevant work conducted for Devon Wildlife Trust and Exmoor National Park. Section 4 presents a mini case study of the Countryside Clinics operated by the SWF between March 2003 to December 2004. Finally, Section 5 suggests some future actions to improve the provision of advice in the Culm area.

¹ In addition, it should be noted that the last 12 months or so have not been a good time to arrange meetings with farmers to discuss advice provision. They have been much more focused on coming to terms with the new CAP regime and securing their Single Payment. One meeting planned with the assistance of SW Forest staff had to be cancelled as by the day of the meeting no one had agreed to attend.

2.1 What the advisors say

In order to explore the perceptions of advisors regarding what works well and what works less well in the existing provision of advisory services, and to begin to identify gaps in current provision, a meeting with a range of advisors was convened at the Cookworthy Forest Centre in January 2006². In total 17 advisors attended the meeting and together they had in excess of 110 years experience in the provision of advice and support to the farming population³. The advisors reflected a good cross-section of providers including government agencies, NGOs, education providers and the private sector. The meeting took the form of a wide ranging discussion structured around a number of key questions in order to prompt debate. A number of themes emerged from the discussions and these are reported below.

2.2 “It’s a confusing shop window for farmers”

A key concern for several years now among the professional advisor sector has been the issue of the one-stop-shop approach. This is based on a perception that farmers are confused by the plethora of advisors/schemes and/or that they do not have sufficient time to identify the ‘correct’ person to contact. For instance, a National Trust briefing paper on the delivery of integrated advice states that “it is not clear to farmers where or who they should go to for advice ...” (National Trust 2001). Similarly, an advisor at the Cookworthy meeting remarked, *“I’ve talked to a number of farmers who go from phone number to phone number and name on to name”*. Consequently, it was suggested that there is a need for a centralised advice gateway. Indeed, it was thought (by some) that the South West Regional Enterprise Gateway (SWREG) is starting to do this (although see below for further discussion about SWREG). Others quickly counted the notion of the need for a one-stop-shop, arguing that organisations such as the *“... NFU do a*

² We are grateful to Kate Harris for recruiting advisors for this meeting and to Jim White of the SW Forest for hosting the meeting.

³ Interestingly, some participants were farmers as well as advisors and were consequently able to talk from both perspectives.

tremendous job in providing information and FCN do a fairly busy job” and that “... a one-stop shop full of experts is in danger of reinventing the wheel.” Moreover, it was suggested that farmers *could* access appropriate information if they were so inclined:

“I’m going to be a bit controversial now. We’ve heard a lot around the table about the farmer doesn’t have time. I don’t buy that one. I’m a farmer and yet I still keep up with everything. The problem we have got is that farmers tend to worry about the things they can’t control rather than the things they can control. They don’t like change. We need to bear this in mind too.”

This comment, from a well respected and highly experienced advisor suggests that the case for a one stop shop is far from self evident. That said, there was a greater consensus about the need for effective signposting services. This then lead to discussions about whether a single signposting service in the Culm could ever be effective, as well as broader issues about how much advisors know about what each other can provide and what farmers are looking for in an advisor. One participant argued that, *“we are all out there talking to farmers so we are the signposts”*. Although none voiced disagreement in principle to that statement, it was nevertheless clear that the situation on the ground is more complex. One advisor stated that: *“It is beholden to all of us to know what is going on so when you find what the issue is and you can’t support it you know who can.”* Another agreed, arguing that:

“There are lots of people out there providing advice and pointing people in the right direction but this doesn’t mean that we can’t have a low level, broad understanding of what each other can provide in terms of advice and pointing them in the right direction. We need to look for a basic low level understanding of each organisation. I think some organisations do it but I don’t think it is true to say everyone does it.”

In addition to knowing who to signpost to, it was argued that *“it is about having confidence on who you hand it on to”*. This sentiment was echoed by another advisor:

“It is about individuals in organisations that I have trust in knowing that if I pass something on something will get done. But if I take it to perhaps some others, will it be passed on to someone else then passed on to somebody else again? I think that’s an issue I would find ...”

This suggests that there is a need for greater and more regular contact between the community of advisors, both to exchange knowledge and information and to build trust and relationships in order to facilitate confidence in signposting and handing clients on to colleagues from different organisations. Some argued that Devon Rural Network (DRN) already played this role while others suggested that:

“... quite a lot of the organisations that are represented there [i.e. DRN] are not represented by the people on the ground who are delivering the advice,... I think we need more grassroots than the Rural Network, that tends to get bogged down in policies and chasing grants and that sort of thing, working at a higher level.”

“.... having seen the Devon Rural Network ..., I wouldn’t recommend it as the mechanism for delivering this kind farmer advice coordination. I’m wondering whether there is a network that is needed for advisors that they can tap into.”

The advisors were in general agreement that some form of network/regular meeting would be useful but there were unresolved issues regarding the appropriate geographical scale, with a suggestion that the focus should be sub-county: *“I think you’d have to break it down into a sub-county basis*

because even then the county is just too big.” Using the Culm as a geographical focus would seem appropriate for a pilot advisor forum.

It was also suggested that if the advisor forum was to really work in terms of informing each other of what was going on on the ground then its members should be drawn from a wide constituency:

“I think that would be useful, but the critical thing is that group is wide enough to be outside the sector that you normally deliver in. Because from the environment sector, I tend to know who does what, but from the support sector I wasn’t aware of any you before today’s meeting so that has to be a positive point.”

In terms of convening meetings that are not solely made up of the ‘usual suspects’, a further concern was raised regarding how to get private sector advisors involved, given that the opportunity cost of attending was the loss of fee income. Although this is not an issue that is easily resolved, the advisors present, nevertheless supported the idea of some kind of forum/network.

In terms of existing signposting services, the topic of SWREG provoked an extended discussion: *“While I agree that SWREG is the vehicle that should work (signposting where people want to go) to be honest, it doesn’t”*.

Similarly, another speaker suggested that:

“Although SWREG on the face of it appears to be an answer; it is not. It doesn’t function in that way. It is not sensitive enough to pick up all the complexities of people around the table and that is not surprising as I don’t think any one gateway would do that. And I think it is wrong to assume a gateway would pick up all the complexity. It is little more than a telephone directory really.”

Others felt that SWREG had the potential to signpost more effectively but for various reasons was not currently performing as well as it could:

“There is no reason why it [SWREG] couldn’t if it didn’t have these other pressures behind it in terms of output, it could work. But because it has these pressures, you look after number one.”

“Its (SWREG’s) limitation is that it is groups and if you are an individual farmer you are left out in the cold and rain.”

“.. the bit that really works well is the information that comes out of the University of Plymouth and this works brilliantly It is not a total failure but this whole bit of referring farmers to the right place isn’t working and we are all guilty of it because of our own efforts.”

In contrast to some of these comments, the EKOS evaluation of SWREG states that REG staff “were praised for their ability to signpost and provide usable information”. The EKOS report goes on to argue that the exchange of knowledge between staff can be limited and that there is a need for a shared knowledge base and “a time and place for Project Officers to learn about specialist topics and share knowledge”. If a Culm advisor forum is convened, SWREG should be invited to attend.

2.3 “Farmers need to start listening to something they can trust in”

While there was debate about existing signposting services, there was complete agreement that if advice is to be effective that there must be trust between the farmer and advisor (see also Buller and Loblely 2004). In turn, this was closely linked to issues around continuity of staff and funding streams.

The issue of trust was raised specifically in terms of the farmer-advisor relationship but also more generally in terms of farmers' relationship with government:

“For too long there has been farm business advice telling farmers to put down on paper what they already knew but in a more professional plan but then left them at the cliff edge without giving them any real options to where to go forward in the future. They need to be given clear opportunities. They have no faith in the Government to lead them.”

“There are opportunities, such as energy crops, but you need a certain amount of input from certain bodies to get the impetus behind that and Government could be more supportive. Without that support it is difficult to get a clear idea. Farmers need to be able to trust in something.”

Thus, there was a sense that, as the relationship between farmers and government changed, the farming community is in need of a trusted source of advice to help steer and guide decision making:

“The solution, for me, is to get someone to come on your farm to do an advisory service that is truly independent from any of their own bias and is one that farmers have to have this trust in. And I know the likes of XXX are doing an independent service but there are many people that have a bias that come on your farm and lead you one way.”

Trust, clearly, needs to be built up over time. As one participant stated:

“I think the key word is trust. Once you trust other people in the group, they you open up and share, and that takes time. There is a theory that if you have 20 meetings with a group it will never disband because you've built up that relationship.”

This emphasis on the importance of trust has a number of implications: 'Quick wins' may be hard to achieve due to the time needed to build trust; short term funding streams work against the "long-termism" needed to develop trust based relationships; failure to achieve staff continuity can potentially lead to the erosion of trust or can be associated with delays in achieving outcomes:

"XX did a superb job in winning the trust of a range of different land owners and those in the hospitality sector of XX and suddenly of course, X's gone, and it's not just the networks that she had, because someone else has got to come in and build up the trust again and trust that their initiative is worth investing time in for those individuals because it might just 18 months down the road grind to a halt again."

"It is not just with organisations like XX, it happens with statutory organisations as well. I've been involved with management of XX and XX for 10 years now and I'm in the third, fourth different job.There is no consistency out there. It is difficult to win the confidence of people when you are constantly changing your name and your outputs are changing."

"I think what farmers really need is extension advice and not short term bureaucratic funding streams and perhaps there is a responsibility there for the financial stake holders being the RDS and the RDA and so forth to start saying, well these short-term three year projects that have suddenly established a flurry of activity, that employs staff for two and a half-years and six months before the project ends they need a new job and they all leave. The suddenly all the networks have gone and then a whole new range come in and start it again. So some more sustainable programmes are needed to be put in place."

“Isn’t it a matter for the Devon Rural Network to try to influence policy of the RDA and RDS and say it isn’t sustainable, these three years programmes? So effectively you are there only doing the job for two years – six months learning the job and six months looking for a new jobs so they are only effective for two years in the role.”

Clearly, these comments raise issues that are beyond the direct influence of DCC. Nevertheless, they point to the importance of supporting the development of a career structure for advisors (which may help with staff retention) and the need to at least lobby for longer term funding streams based on the recognition that quick wins are not always possible in a context where trust needs to be earned.

2.4 Looking to the future

Looking forward, the advisors identified some gaps in advice provision that need to be addressed and also made some suggestions about improving knowledge and working practices. In terms of gaps, the main need identified by the advisors was, ironically, guidance to farmers on how to improve their agricultural business profitability:

“those that diversify and take advantage of environmental schemes are relatively well provided for compared to those who just want to know how to make their business profitable from agriculture”

This gap in provision, it was argued, is linked to the requirements of different funding streams and the perceived down-grading of farming for food production as a valuable and valued activity in its own right:

“One of the things that we’ve experienced over the past few years is the inability to secure funding to support farmers’ business advice. If you brand the advice that you are giving as training or education or diversification or even wildlife advice, it is easier to find hooks into the money. But if you go to funders and say ‘we want to give business

advice so they can carry on farming and help them through the difficult times, securing funding to do that is almost impossible and yet that is one of the cornerstones of government policy that they should be market lead and business driven. There is a huge chunk of the agricultural industry that is supposed to business its way out of problems.”

The other delivery gap identified relates to delivery methods and the perceived current emphasis on group based approaches:

“there are a number of farmers that will work in a group situation but many farmers we deal with, you cannot integrate them into group situations. ... A lot of funding has gone into group work, thinking that is the way forward but we are still missing a vast proportion of the farming community by not allowing that one to one approach”.

Similarly, another advisor commented that:

“there is a lot of hype about groups at the moment but groups are not the way forward for everybody. They work for certain situations but it’s all about personalities. It’s certainly not the be all and end all”.

3.1 What the farmers say

In many ways there is a consensus between what advisors think farmers need in terms of advice provision and delivery and what farmers themselves told us. For instance, although they use a different vocabulary, farmers felt that there was a need for a signposting service as the following quotes illustrate:

“I do think there should be a central place where people can go to access information”

“you need a central melting pot in Devon County Council’s offices where you can go”

“yes that’s what you need, somebody who knows who can point you in the right direction”

However, this is not necessarily the same as a one-stop-shop. A similar point was made by Buller and Lobley (2004) who argued that “...there is a sense that a more viable mix of generalist and specialist advisors is needed, providing a 'first stop' facility rather than a catch-all 'one stop' shop., the specialists having enough knowledge of other objectives to spot when someone else needs to be called in. The generalists could then act as a "first-stop shop" as opposed to "one-stop".” The farmers we spoke to for this project also expressed a desire for a mix of general and specialist/specific advice:

“you want a mix of general advice and specific advice depending on particular circumstances. You need access to both sorts. You have the general advice to start with and move to the particular, that’s what most people probably require because until you’ve had some general advice you don’t know what you need”.

Whilst this seems to suggest support for a first stop signposting service, much more work would be necessary to establish the extent of demand as evidence from a survey of Exmoor farmers (Lobley et al 2005) indicates that a single point of contact was one of the least important factors when seeking and receiving advice. The most important factors identified was that advice includes information on sources of grant aid, is clear, independent and unbiased and is provided by an individual with a good professional reputation (see Table 1).

Table 1: Important factors when seeking/receiving advice (ranked in order of importance)

	% of respondents indicating an importance of factors in seeking or receiving advice
Information on sources of grant aid	74
Clarity of advice	69
Independent, unbiased advice	66
Professional reputation of advisor	61
Tailored to needs of the farm	59
Consistency of advice from different sources	59
Specialist advisor	54
Information on other sources of advice	53
On-farm discussion	50
A single point of first contact (such as a 'first-stop-shop')	28
Other	21

Source: Lobley et al 2005

The importance of being able to access a trusted source of advice was acknowledged by the farmers with examples given including Mole Valley Farmers, the weekly NFU Farmer Fax, the CLA and (even) Defra. That said, for the membership based organisations, annual fees were seen as a barrier for some small farmers. The internet was identified as another barrier to accessing certain forms of advice and information. For instance, when asked about their use of SWREG a typical response was: "No, I don't have a computer". One participant in the farmer discussion group made extensive use of SWREG via the internet and went on to say that:

Farmer 1: "Some of my neighbours that don't have the internet ... I often say I saw so and so on the Enterprise Gateway or I saw such and such, and they'll say that's good, can I go and have a look? So they come in and have a look at it. So he'll now say can you look up so and so for me? A lot of people haven't got it so how are you going to find out?"

Farmer 2: "And a lot of people are of an age who are not computer literate and don't want to be."

Farmer 1: "Why should they be?"

In a similar vein, the SWEG evaluation study indicated that although “‘active’ members of the farming community have heard of the project, and those who are interested can find out”, that there were also “hard to reach” (potential) clients who were less aware and who required a different approach.

3.2 Gaps in advice provision

The gaps in terms of advice provision that the farmers identified reflect two important changes in British farming. The first relates to the loss of ADAS and the demise of the ‘farmers friend’:

“We had ADAS and various names of that Ministry, and you could go to the local Ministry chap, in South Molton. You see, they were our friend and they were more our friend because they were dishing out the grants. Now we are in a vacuum....”

“... We still need something like ADAS for new farmers, young farmers”

The “vacuum” referred to above is arguably more perceived than real given the large number of professional advisors⁴ (both public and private sector), although the loss of the Ministry of Agriculture and the privatisation of ADAS is a symptom of the wider changes in the role of agriculture in contemporary society and this, in turn, means many farmers do feel adrift without a firm government steer. This echoes comments made by the advisor group that farmers need advice from someone/an organisation that they feel they can trust and who is unambiguously on their side. Similarly, LUC have argued that a key aspect of good practice in the provision of integrated advice is “a locally known and respected project Officer” (LUC, 2002).

⁴ For instance, the Culm Local Land Management Framework identifies 134 contacts offering advice and/or site visits for LMAs.

The second gap in advisory services identified by the farmer group reflects an even more recent change; the growing number of new entrants to the occupancy and management of rural land. In many cases such new entrants occupy very small areas of land and require little advice other than how to maintain the amenity value of the land. For others however, who are trying to develop a business, or indeed, who wish to pursue environmental management on a larger scale, there is a feeling that they are not well served:

“We were new entrants to farming four years ago. We had never farmed before..... There is nowhere for the complete ignorant to go and get fundamental, basic requirements. Everyone you talk to assumes you know the other half of the story. So if you want information about tagging and livestock, Trading Standards will tell you some of it, but not the other half of the story.....”

This suggests that if such basic advice is indeed available that it is not particularly well targeted or, more likely, that there is a potentially important gap in current provision. New entrants have been targeted elsewhere in Devon (for example, through the DWT Landscape Heritage Scheme which offered basic environmental advice and grant aid but not basic farming advice. See Morris and Lobley 2005).

The final potential gap explored with the farmer group was the availability of a mentoring service. There was little engagement with the idea other than a comment that it would be important to pay the mentors an appropriate sum. Evidence from elsewhere in the region points to a mixed response to mentoring initiatives. The Fresh Start (FS) programme in Cornwall includes mentoring as part of the package of services it provides to new entrants. FS is currently being evaluated by the Countryside and Community Research Unit at the University of Gloucestershire. Although the evaluation has not yet been published, it points to some confusion and competition between existing providers of business support and FS mentors. In part, it seems that this

reflects some blurring of boundaries between what a mentor does and what a business advisor does. It seems that some of the issues have been resolved by clarifying the role of mentor as being involved in personal development rather than business planning. The need to carefully match mentor and farmer has also been identified. It is hoped that the success, or otherwise, of this aspect of FS will become clearer by the time of the final evaluation report (due at end of 2007). **It is recommended that DCC liaise with the Fresh Start team and consider the findings of the final evaluation report before taking further steps regarding mentoring for farmers in the Culm.**

4.1 The SWF Countryside Clinic initiative⁵

The Countryside Clinic initiative was developed by SWF in conjunction with (what was then) Defra's Rural Development Service (RDS) and ran from March 2003 to December 2004. Initially the 'clinics' were held at Cookworthy Forest Centre on the first Thursday of each month from 10.00 to 13.00 hrs. The clinics allowed free advice to be offered to landowners and managers on a wide range of countryside management issues. In addition to advisers from South West Forest and the RDS, a wide range of other advice providers were available including the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, The Ruby Country Initiative and West Country Rivers Trust, Agribip, Environment Agency and The Forestry Commission.

Following a promising start it soon became clear that without a specific invitation from the attending advisors few clients used the clinic on a "drop in" basis. In an attempt to improve attendance, SWF moved the clinic to the first Wednesday of the month at Holsworthy market. Over time additional clinics were offered in South Molton, Oakhampton and Cornwall.

Although the Countryside Clinic model worked well for a number of land owners, managers and professional advisors, due to the effort of required to

⁵ This section is based on personal correspondence with Jim White and extracts from the SWF archive of Countryside Clinic meetings.

sustain the service, which outweighed the number of beneficiaries, it was reluctantly decided to stop the clinics at the end of 2004. SWF staff have identified a number of key lessons from operating the clinics. In the light of our discussions with both farmers and advisors a number of these findings are of particular interest:

1. There was value to the advisors meeting at the clinics to share information and to help network and signpost existing clients as necessary.
2. The clinics were valued by those that used them but were not so successful in drawing the more traditional and possibly more isolated farmers to seek out advice.
3. A combination of wider geographical coverage and less frequent clinics (e.g. quarterly clinics rather than monthly) may have attracted more participants and consequently made the clinics less costly in terms of advisor's time.
4. There is scope for the Ruby Country Project to reinstate some kind of countryside clinic for its stakeholders and the target area.
5. The name may need a rethink. Clinic implies that something is wrong and needs to be put right which may put some people off from attending.
6. Finally, the context within which farmers operate has changed significantly since 2004: The impact of the single payment scheme is being (and will be) felt more keenly as the historic element of the payment is progressively replaced by the flat rate element; the nature of the landowner community continues to change as new land / farm owners enter from non-farming backgrounds (for whom the Countryside Clinics would really provide an invaluable one stop shop /service); farmers and land managers are still trying to adapt to changes to institutional arrangements including ERDP (England Rural Development Plan) schemes and the new RDPE (Rural Development Plan for England).

5.1 Conclusions and recommendations

Although once referred to as ‘the forgotten quarter’ that appellation is hard to justify today with some 30 strategies relevant to the management of the Culm area. Together, these include over 700 objectives and 1300 actions (Roger Tym & Partners, 2006). Of this myriad of strategies and objectives, there are 49 objectives that relate directly to the Land Between the Moors objective of “access to consistent, comprehensive and integrated business, marketing, environmental, silvicultural and access advice and training”. As mentioned earlier, the Culm LLMF has identified 134 contacts offering advice and/or site visits for LMAs. Perhaps not surprisingly therefore, throughout this work there has not been any indication that the Culm area is lacking in terms of advisory services in a general sense. That said, we have identified some specific gaps in terms of advice delivery and the need to differentiate between different kinds of client group with differing advice needs and different preferences in terms of delivery. These issues are considered below. We have also identified a number of more generic principles of good advice provision which should be taken into account.

Both the farmers and advisors stressed the importance of trust between farmers and advisors. Frequently, the development of such trust is aided by an advisor having some form farming background or at least the ability to demonstrate an “understanding” of farming, farmers and their families. Gaining the trust and respect of the farming community is not something that happens quickly, therefore it must be recognised that a longer term approach may be necessary and that this can pose challenges in terms of securing funding and being seen to meet short term targets.

Trust also needs to exist between the community of advisors. This is particularly important for effective signposting and to allow advisors to hand on clients in the knowledge that their needs will be met. In turn, effective signposting requires an good knowledge of what others are doing. To this end **it is recommend that a Culm advisor network/forum is created to**

improve knowledge transfer between advisors, improve signposting and to increase confidence in handing on clients. Further work would be necessary to established just how the forum should operate but one option would be for a county-wide e-forum backed up annual meetings at a sub-county level. It is possible that **the Culm Core Group could help facilitate the creation of a Culm advisor network/forum, although the level of facilitation required may demand more resources than the CCG currently has at its disposal.**

Another concern raised by the advisors (but not farmers) was that the current perceived emphasis on group work is potentially alienating to those who prefer one-to-one advice. **It is recommended that steps are taken to ensure that one-to-one advice remains available** and that it is widely advertised and where feasible, targeted at those known to be less receptive to group situations.

Another group with different advice needs are the growing number of new entrants. Their needs may vary from understanding how to acquire a holding number and livestock tagging requirements through to grassland management and hedgerow restoration. The genuine new entrant with no previous experience will frequently require very basic information that is not considered necessary for established farmers and land managers. **Recommendation: an advisory and signposting service should be developed and targeted at new entrants. Alongside this, DCC should consider the possibility of facilitating a new entrant mentoring scheme, utilizing the skills and experience of older farmers and land based entrepreneurs.**

It was argued by the advisor group that there is a dearth of advice and information on 'farming for profit' within environmental limits. In part, this was thought to be linked to available funding streams which were more likely to be associated with aiding diversification, for example. Given that the 2005 CAP reforms were, in part, concerned with giving farmers the 'freedom to farm' and

that for various reasons developing alternative income sources is not feasible for all farmers, **it is important that advice is available for those wishing to pursue profitable farming within environmental limits.**

Finally, in the light of the findings and recommendations reported here, and the comments on the SWF Countryside Clinic Service, **consideration should be given to redeveloping and re-launching the service as a *first-stop-shop*. This could offer a pre-site visit service, allowing clients to collect relevant information to guide their thinking before arranging for detailed site visits with consultants. The Culm LLMF should have a role here, offering decision making aid and a signposting service. The service could be developed so that it appealed to both existing and new land owners/managers and so that it also acted as a networking opportunity for advisors.**

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Centre for Rural Policy Research
Department of Politics
Amory Building
Rennes Drive
Exeter EX4 4RJ

Telephone: +44(0)1392 263836

www.exeter.ac.uk/crpr