



Suckler Beef Climate Change: Advisory support and accreditation

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Andrew Moxey (Pareto Consulting)
with
Steven Thomson (SRUC)

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Key Points

- Advisory services will play a key role in achieving land use policy outcomes
- Farmers and advisors alike will have to adapt to different, more complex market and policy signals
- Advisors need to improve their understanding of why and what change is needed, and how to achieve it
- Accreditation of advisors may help to broaden knowledge and skills, and build trust with farmer clients
- However, accreditation is not costless and may limit capacity to support policy
- Competencies and their assessment need to be agreed, relative to clear and consistent desired policy outcomes
- Alignment with existing accreditation processes within and outwith Scotland may be prudent

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Contents

Key Points.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	i
Contents.....	i
Introduction	1
Background	1
Accreditation.....	2
References cited	4
Further reading	4

Introduction

1. The proposed Beef Suckler Climate Scheme includes a suggestion for the compulsory use of accredited advisors to help farmers plan and implement change. This echoes similar calls, in Scotland but also elsewhere, for advisory services to play a key role in broader land management policy. This short paper reviews some issues around accreditation, but first briefly summarises the background to why it is being considered.

Background

2. Although farm management practices are influenced by economic incentives offered by markets and policies, it is generally accepted that skilled and relevant advice also plays a key role in driving farmers' behavioural change, as well as potentially contributing to the co-design of policy. Consequently, discussions about future land management policies frequently include consideration of advisory support, often now portrayed in the context of an Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System or (AKIS).
3. Within this, it is recognised that advice has to be both supplied (pushed) and demanded (pulled). This means that farmers need to recognise the need for and value of advice, and that providers need to be willing and able to offer relevant advice. However, the changing nature of desired policy outcomes, away from a primary focus on food production towards a broader set of ecosystem services, presents challenges to both demand and supply.
4. For example, the motivations and self-identities of 'good farmers'¹ and (by extension) 'good advisors' need to evolve beyond the traditional production stance to embrace other considerations.² For example, climate change and biodiversity (and not simply compliance with minimum standards). This will require clear and consistent policy signals about what is now expected (and is rewarded) from land management and why win-win options alone may not be sufficient. It may also entail farmers having to use multiple advisors rather than relying upon a single individual. Such transitions may be challenging for farmers and advisors alike.
5. In particular, given the breadth and complexity of ecosystem service delivery across heterogeneous site conditions (e.g. soil health, nutrient planning greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity), advisors will need to expand their 'know-why', 'know-what' and 'know how'.³ That is, their understanding of why an outcome is desired, what R&D evidence says about achieving it, and how it might be achieved under a given set of on-farm circumstances.
6. The first two of these suggest a need for on-going training and institutional coordination/support to ensure advisors' access to and accurate understanding of policy thinking and research findings, whilst 'know how' is likely to also require good inter-personal skills in order to engage with (and

¹ after Burton (2004).

² This may also perhaps extend to a 'good inspector'. For example, the current checklist or control-logic approach to compliance monitoring tends to favour 'defensive auditing' which highlights any detected errors and minimises inspectors' discretion. However, the more holistic perspective required by a whole-farm approach to sustainable land management is invariably less-precise and subject to greater external influences. Consequently, compliance monitoring arguably needs to be more risk-based and subjective, focusing more on farmers' engagement with set tasks, acceptance of responsibilities and willingness to rectify poor performance. Consideration may also need to be given to the desirability of separating advisory and inspection functions, and to the scope for combining multiple inspections.

³ after Lundvall & Johnson (1994), as cited by Ingram, J. & Morris, C. (2007).

challenge) farmers in one-to-one but also group meetings, plus familiarity with increasingly sophisticated advisory tools (e.g. digital data sources, carbon calculators) and possibly working with other advisors.

7. One response to this has been suggestions for formal, competency-based accreditation of advisors as a way of ensuring consistency and updating of knowledge and skills to meet emerging challenges whilst also engendering necessary credibility and trust with farmer clients. Existing examples include the Farm Business Adviser Accreditation Scheme (FBASS) in Scotland, the UK-wide BASIS and FACTS systems and the (more generic) EU-wide Certificate for European Consultants in Rural Areas (CECRA).⁴

Accreditation

8. Accreditation of farm advisors is periodically proposed as a way of professionalising farm advisory services. The main perceived advantage is standardisation and maintenance of (minimum, but evolving) levels of competency, to reassure users that they are receiving a quality service.
9. Other professions have established accreditation routes. For example, Chartered engineers, accountants, law etc. In addition to offering assurance to clients, it also provides clear career development for the individual, is attractive to employers / employees as it incentivises the development of staff, provides salary progression routes, and enhances the overall advisor pool. Accreditation processes usually combine on the job training with assessment, oral and written, over a period of 3-5 years is not uncommon.
10. Currently, although there are various voluntary training⁵ and accreditation opportunities⁶ already open to farm and land management advisors, there are no prescribed requirements for all advisors.
11. This means that requiring farmers to use only accredited advisors in order to enrol in support schemes will either rely upon existing accreditation being relevant to emerging policy goals or will necessitate establishment of an additional accreditation system. It may also limit the number of advisors available to farmers enrolling in specific schemes.⁷
12. Competency for advisors relates to a mix of knowledge, skills and attitude.⁸ However, codifying this into discrete, assessable elements (whether generic or sector-specific) requires consideration of how many elements to include (i.e. too many makes it overly-cumbersome, too few overly-simplistic) as well as their focus.
13. The existing Farm Business Adviser Accreditation Scheme (FBASS) administered by LANTRA perhaps offers a useful starting template, but is limited in terms of current coverage and is relatively light-

⁴ See <https://www.scotland.lantra.co.uk/FBAASS>, <https://www.basis-reg.co.uk/index>, and <https://www.cecra.net/en/home/>

⁵ For example, as noted above but also SRUC's Applied Professional Practice course (similar to Teagasc's Farming Extension Master Course) but also more generic vocational and academic land management courses.

⁶ For example, via the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, the Institute of Agricultural Management and LANTRA, but also the.

⁷ Whilst mandating the use of accredited advisors may stimulate demand-pull, it may reveal a supply-side capacity constraint unless the window for farmers to enrol and/or be visited is sufficiently wide to allow a smaller number of advisors to support all applicants. Requiring more than one farm visit per year, as might be needed to establish a good working relationship, would amplify the capacity problem; allowing non-accredited advisors to work in tandem with accredited ones would relieve it.

⁸ Given the increasing breadth of knowledge and skills required, it may be that individual advisors have to work competently in pairs or teams to convey all of the necessary advice needed by a given farmer.

touch in terms of assessment modes and criteria. Similarly, BASIS and FACTS are seemingly more rigorous, but do not cover all topics whilst CECRA focuses on generic rather than subject-specific competencies.

14. This suggests the need for a Steering Group comprising relevant stakeholders⁹ to review existing accreditation opportunities and, if they are judged to be insufficient, to design a competency framework tailored to emerging policy requirements.
15. Assessment of agreed competences also requires agreement on how performance should be measured, using what evidence. Evidence may take various forms, including formal qualifications, formal tests, testimonials of peers, supervisors and clients, peer-observation, workplace diaries/journals, and examples of reports.
16. For new recruits, greater emphasis is necessarily placed on recent qualifications whilst for advisors already in-post for several years the other forms of evidence play a greater role. Judging equivalence between different forms of evidence needs to give sufficient weight to knowledge and skills already acquired whilst also identifying where gaps exist and some form of continuing professional development (CPD) is required. Again, a stakeholder Steering Group could help to define these.
17. In the longer term, any new accreditation system would need to be overseen by an independent assurance body, either an existing body or a newly created one. This would have responsibility for implementing accreditation, including establishing clear processes relating to, for example, the setting and charging of fees, defining CPD requirements, publishing an up-to-date list of accredited advisors, granting but also withdrawal of (re)accreditation, appeals against assessments, handling of complaints and grievances, and linkages to other accreditation systems.
18. The costs of establishing and maintaining such a system could be significant and possibly too high to be supported from a limited number of advisors in Scotland, suggesting that alignment with existing systems and/or parallel developments elsewhere in the UK might be prudent.
19. Indeed, consideration perhaps needs to be given to how many advisors there currently are in Scotland (100? 500? 1000?), how many clients they can each reasonably serve (10, 50, 100?) given the likely time-input required to support transformational change, and whether a self-funding accreditation body can be sustained from such a population.
20. Similarly, if accredited status confers higher payments to advisors or becomes a necessary cost of being in business, this may helpfully encourage their enrolment into accreditation schemes. Yet if this translates into higher charges to farmers, then it may deter actual uptake of advice. This suggests, again, that effort will be required to convey the value of advice in adapting to change, particularly for harder-to-reach groups.

⁹ Including, for example, representative bodies for farming and environmental interests but also Further and Higher Education providers and advisory bodies.

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