

# Creating the ultimate... Farmer Cluster

**F**armer Clusters are a buzzword among those involved with conservation of wildlife and protection of resources on farmland. The idea of farmers working together has been embraced by those living and working in the countryside. Farmer Clusters can benefit not only the natural environment, but farm businesses too, and trigger widespread engagement with communities.

To proclaim the idea, together with Natural England (NE) we hosted a sell-out Farmer Cluster conference in October. The gathering was described by attendees as 'inspirational' and its key messages were reported widely.

The conference was opened by Andrew Sells, chairman of Natural England, before a welcome message and royal endorsement by HRH Prince of Wales. Sir John Lawton gave the keynote address, as it was his *Making Space for Nature* report in 2010 that triggered the first farmer-led conservation project in the Marlborough Downs. He believes Farmer Clusters can achieve 'bigger, better and more joined up' conservation efforts than anything before.

Rob Shepherd, chairman of the Allenford Farmer Cluster in Hampshire, gave a farmer's-eye-view, explaining how clusters allowed farmers "ownership

## Benefits of a... Farmer Cluster

Farmers suggest new ideas and try them out with neighbours eg. home-made nest boxes or bird-food hoppers

Bulk ordering of seed, or equipment sharing



Farming or wildlife workshops, based on needs/requests.

Quarterly pub meetings to generate ideas and feed back progress.



Open farm walks and visits for local people.

of their conservation destiny." His group focuses on conserving farmland birds, in addition to other species such as bumblebees, arable flowers and hedgehogs. Allenford's goals are also shared by two neighbouring clusters, which together cover an area three-quarters the size of the Isle of Wight.

Monitoring species and habitats in a Farmer Cluster is extremely important as we may see agri-environment competing for money with other Government departments, so if every cluster monitors one or two things over time, we can prove to Whitehall that this idea works.

Teresa Dent, GWCT chief executive, summed up by reiterating the essential bottom-up values: "What wildlife do I want on my farm?" and "What issues does my farm have, that I cannot address alone?"

As we steam towards the Becher's Brook that is Brexit, the best way for farmers to land on their feet is to step up and show they are part of a proactive solution for our wildlife and natural resources. Although environmental and financial sustainability have often been seen as opposite goals, those who treat them as one and the same have got a head start in the game, and clusters may be a winning formula.

## How to form a Farmer Cluster

- An enthusiastic, well connected lead farmer/chairman invites his neighbours to talk about what they might like to achieve.
- They choose the issues they wish to address such as reversing the decline in corn buntlings, or improving watercourses.
- They choose a facilitator, such as a farm conservation advisor, who can offer co-ordination, advice and training.
- They cover the cost of running a cluster by applying to NE's Facilitation Fund, or seek private funding (eg. water company, charitable trust, or put their own money in).

### Farmer Clusters in numbers

- 77 Farmer Clusters.
- 12 flood alleviation groups.
- 1,460 farmers taking part.
- 346,400 hectares covered.



Jess Brooks is our farmland biodiversity advisor for southern England and has in-depth knowledge of terrestrial and freshwater habitats.

## Coming soon

- A Farmer Cluster website is under development and will contain useful information for those already in clusters or looking to join/form one.
- Watch out for the 2018 Farmer Cluster conference.

## SPRING ACTION PLAN

### Count your partridges

Take part in the GWCT Partridge Count Scheme and count your spring grey partridges. Every record matters.



### Action for curlew



Conduct a wader count on your land. Submit curlew nest details to the GWCT's

Action for Curlew project.

### Check for nests

Check silage fields for wildlife and use the mapping app on a smartphone to drop a location pin and mark the nests. Mow the field from the centre outwards to allow chicks and leverets to escape.



### Extraordinary mixes



Enhance wild bird seed mixes with flowering species to provide valuable pollen

and nectar for pollinators and consider sowing a two-year mix.

### Benefiting farm wildlife

If your ELS has expired consider applying for one of the new Countryside Stewardship Offers for Wildlife Mid-Tier packages. Options are designed to benefit farm wildlife and entry is guaranteed.



## Specialist advice

For tailored advice please contact your local advisor on 01425 651013 or go to [www.gwct.org.uk/advisory](http://www.gwct.org.uk/advisory).