DEFRA Test & Trials
Exploring a Delivery and Tools Solution for Landscape Recovery

Introduction

This is a summary of the activities and findings of a DEFRA Test & Trials (T&T) project run as a collaboration between Pilio, River Thame Conservation Trust, and Pasture for Life, with support from Blenheim Estate and Waddesdon Estate.

This T&T has explored the idea of a Delivery Group solution as a mechanism to encourage stakeholders to participate in Landscape Recovery (LR) projects which are part of the new ELMs schemes, creating large-scale collaborative action to restore nature. The proposed functions of this group that have been explored are outlined below.

Farmers & Land managers

Delivery Group:

- Provide advice and guidance on landscape recovery projects
- Matchmake landowners and investors
- Assess and calculate carbon and biodiversity offset opportunities
- Organise and manage the partnerships and contracts
- Monitor and evaluate offset project outcomes

Investors

A key aspect of participation in a LR scheme will be data collection, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting.

We have tested how the Pilio Nature tool could fulfil this role. The Pilio tool captures, organises, and visualises ecological and farm practice data.

Consultations with farmers looking at the Pilio Nature tool to see what functions of a tool would be useful in future schemes, including monitoring change and providing evidence to stakeholders.

Finally, we have answered DEFRA-provided policy questions on three themes:

Land Management Plans	Advice & Guidance	Strategy

These questions will help inform how policy around the LR scheme will be set.

Methodology

This T&T focused on two regions: the Evenlode catchment and the River Thame catchment. It compared the two areas to understand the priorities of both and assess their readiness for Landscape Recovery schemes. Various activities were undertaken, including analysis of available data sets in both catchments. Additionally, three stakeholder groups were consulted in 1-1 interviews, workshops, and focus groups, to understand their viewpoints on the objectives of this T&T project.

Farmers

50 farmers were consulted across the 2 catchments, this included a mix of arable and livestock farmers

Intermediaries

10 intermediaries were consulted, including wildlife trusts, farmer clusters, and envionmental consultancies

Investors

10 investors were consulted, including investors inside the food supply chain, and outside of the food supply chain

Findings

Proposed Delivery Group Solution

- A Facilitation & Delivery Group is needed that can organise a landscape recovery project and bring in the various areas of expertise to make it successful and impactful.
- Our consultations with stakeholders made clear that while there are currently organisations/collectives that could function as Delivery Groups, they have not yet developed crucial details like governance, who would pay for the service, and how they can be maintained long-term (30+ years) for a LR project.
- In the River Thame catchment, farmer clusters are in an exploratory phase of collaboration implementing landscape scale projects coordinated around river and floodplain restoration at a local level, but currently lack resources to design and implement a full Landscape Recovery project.
- The Evenlode catchment is further ahead due to greater longevity of the group, greater available resources, and greater funding, and work to baseline soil carbon across the catchment, with the Evenlode being selected to be one of the Landscape Recovery project pilots looking at water ways restoration.

Tool Use, Pilio Nature, and Data Collection

- Recognition from all stakeholder groups that a tool could be used as an evidence base for organising and identifying opportunities for environmental improvement, and monitoring of change.
- Farmers have limited experience in using tools and there is wariness with the tool marketplace expanding with no standardisation of measurement.
- Receptiveness to tools from farmers would increase with more showcasing, standardisation, and regulation of tools and what data is collected.
- Testing of the Pilio Nature tool made clear that landowners and managers do not have the data to hand to populate the tool, especially for biodiversity data.
- Stakeholders saw the value the Pilio Nature tool could bring in aggregating data sets in one platform such as soil health, habitat, carbon, and species data.
- The ability to see different levels of aggregation of data from parcel to landscape level was seen as beneficial in creating a coordinated landscape scale approach.
- It is important to put the output of a tool into the farm context, connecting the data and the management practices of the farm – giving the user an understanding of what can be done to improve the environment on the land, diversify revenue and access new projects
- There was no visibility and compatibility between data sets collected across stakeholders. For example, investors within the food chain had little to no understanding of farming practices or standardised data on their farmers.
- To make projects successful, there needs to be guidelines on what data is available, what could be collected, and what data would be useful.

Land Management Plans (LMPs)

- LMPs need to be standardised and digitised to ensure farmers can use the plans successfully across various projects, limiting the time needed for paperwork.
- LMPs could give variable levels of access to stakeholders, allowing all involved in a landscape recovery scheme to see what is being done, and what data is being collected – giving confidence to stakeholders.
- Need to bridge the gap between farm management plans and involvement in schemes as currently many farmers see these two things separately.

Collaboration

- Farmers see collaboration as more for knowledge sharing rather than joint action.
- There are mechanisms that help farmers be collaborative such as farmer clusters, but they are most commonly short term due to funding.
- There is no clear framework and protocols for how the long term collaborations and therefore amongst the stakeholders there is concern on how such as scheme could work.
- There are different dynamics for stakeholders, some actors are large and influential such as estates and large companies and whilst all consulted were interested in supporting and collaborating with smaller players, those relationships may be harder to establish.
- The model of collaboration needs to work across varying levels of influence and capacity for action in a joined up landscape scale project.

Advice and Guidance

- Farmer clusters in the two catchments are an important mechanism for accessing information with a local and relevant context, and a trusted opinion.
- Farmers look for advice and guidance to give confidence in data and tools, especially due to the current lack of standardisation in this emerging marketplace.
- Clusters provide crucial continuity and relationships with the advisory sources.
- There is a wiliness to pay for advice if there is a clear route of return on investment, with assurance that new funding will be unlocked and save the farmers time and resources to find out about schemes themselves.
- Sector specific networks are key for advice and guidance eg: Pasture for Life which provides regional support networks, facilitating learning by example.
- Key to recognise that an advice source may not know everything, and therefore having partnerships for specific sources of advice is important, forming a network of advisors.
- Advisors should be independent from all stakeholders involved in a project. Some intermediaries have services to support farmers with knowledge networks, but it is not core to their organisation. They may have a specific project partnership but do not have the capacity to scale this into being a key aspect of their work.
- It became clear that intermediaries and investors also need advice and guidance in improving their awareness of the schemes and the role they could play. How this advice and guidance is distributed to these groups is challenging but should start at its core as published guidance from DEFRA.

Blended Finance

- Amongst stakeholders, there is an understanding of private and public funded projects separately, and a growing experience in fully privately funded projects. However, these are relatively small and rarely overlap with other aspects of the farm such as publicly funded schemes.
- There is a lack of clarity on how to overlap schemes in terms of measurement.
- Farmers are concerned about how the payments will be structured, and how capital good payments will be financed.
- For investors the focus is carbon as this is more widely understood with many having net zero commitments so there is more willingness to support projects with carbon counting.
- Investors in the food supply chain have more understanding of other land impacts but this data is more difficult to measure with a lack of understanding on what they want to achieve in this space. This means many have pilot projects, but the financials and vision for long term projects are not built into the strategy of the company.
- Soil health is seen as a priority but how blended finance can support this is less clear. This is due to investors being wary of committing when there is no governance of measures for soil carbon.
- There is an issue of connecting the financing to what farmers being paid for, with the argument of outcomes vs. actions. Farmers are concerned that payments for outcomes would leave them open to failing to meet targets and therefore not getting paid, with the added complexity from a lack of guidance and standardisation on measurements.