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OBSERVATIONS AND LESSONS FROM THE DEFRA CHALLENGE FUND PILOT SCHEME FOR FARMER SELF-HELP GROUPS ON CROSS COMPLIANCE

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ABSTRACT

The new Single Payment Scheme under the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union was introduced in the United Kingdom as of 1st January 2005. Farmer support is being switched away from a production basis to one which is both decoupled and more closely linked with maintaining the environment. In connection with this the Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) launched a pilot scheme, to be delivered by agricultural colleges and university departments in England, to investigate the use of farmer self-help groups to communicate cross-compliance requirements under the new scheme. Farmers were asked in a questionnaire to assess their reaction to the requirements. This provides an interesting insight into attitudes to cross-compliance at the time the meetings took place (November 2004 to March 2005). But there are also interesting lessons to be learned by Defra and their clients about the nature of the process. The Royal Agricultural College and Harper Adams University College were two out of 25 institutions that took part in the exercise and the authors share their experiences in the paper.

Key words: Cross-compliance, single farm payment, Challenge Fund, group working, team working, Gloucestershire, Shropshire.

INTRODUCTION-THE CHALLENGE FUND

The Challenge Fund is a competitive source of funding within Defra which seeks to get innovative ideas adopted within the department. An annual competition is organised where elements within the department are encouraged to bid for funds to support projects that can be seen to:

- Have the potential to build Defra's capacity to deliver with a significant element that is new;
- Have an element of shared learning within Defra and would not proceed without the funding.

This project was chosen as one of 18 successful projects from 62 initial internal bids for funding within the department with the objective to:

‘benefit farmers by raising awareness, reducing costs and increasing efficiency by sharing knowledge and expertise and accessing good practice.’

The project was to be one that utilised the combined resources of the National Land Based College Network, together with Defra staff, both in the regions as meetings facilitators and at Headquarters, through the application of group learning methods. The structure and sequence

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of meetings was laid down in the project brief (Defra 2004) as follows:

- Meeting one – Background to CAP reform and cross-compliance requirements, what needs to be done and why, farmers to leave the meeting to reflect on the impact on existing practices;
- Meeting two – Outline of support and advice available, share ideas on compliance, farmers to discuss effective actions; teams were given the opportunity to develop working practices such as openness, sharing of concerns, enjoyment, communication and support. The Challenge Fund Project format was very much in line with recommended practice in this respect (Woodcock 1989).
- Meeting three – This was optional and within the hands of each group, potentially to curtail matters with meeting two or to conclude with a third and final meeting.

A meeting ‘lesson plan’ was also laid down in the project brief to centre around a prescribed model whereby each meeting would commence with an input from the group leader, such as the background to the new cross-compliance rules, this would be followed by group discussion whereby farmers would share their experiences and views on best practice, raise problems and concerns and take away actions and matters to consider. Where gaps in knowledge or experience were perceived by the group to exist then the group leader was to be made responsible for specifying these needs and, through whatever channels were thought to be appropriate, requisition the necessary input in time for the next meeting.

GROUP AND TEAM LEARNING METHODOLOGY

A large body of information exists which suggests that group learning can be a much more effective mechanism than individual learning. Research in Devon (Errington and Nolan 1997) reported on the findings from a sampling frame of 4,372 farming businesses which found a substantial involvement in groups that often included informal training activity. It was found that a wide variety of farmer clubs and discussion groups had played an important part in both reducing the isolation for some farmers whilst providing a highly participative basis for professional updating. The activities of these groups were also wide ranging including buying, selling, machinery sharing, technical updating, agricultural shows and political matters.

Adair (1986) outlined the characteristics of work groups, as opposed to other types of groups such as families, as follows:

- A definable membership;
- Have a conscious identification with each other;
- Have a sense of shared purpose with common tasks, goals or interests;
- Are interdependent in that the members need the help of one another to accomplish the purposes for which they joined the group;
- Interact via communication, reaction and influence with each other;
- Have the ability to act as a single organism.

Groups are also seen to have the potential to operate in a far superior way to individuals. Katzenbach and Smith writing in ‘The Wisdom of Teams’ asserted that teams outperformed individuals acting alone or in larger organisational groupings especially when performance required multiple skills, judgements and experiences (Katzenbach and Smith 1998). This advice had to be viewed with caution and the acceptance that not all teams were successful. The ingredients of both successful and unsuccessful teams were set out by Belbin (2004) with the risk of team failure increasing where there was poor morale or poor mental ability throughout



the team. A further property of teams was shown to be the improvement of team effectiveness with these elements of group working:

‘The purpose of this project was to pilot a mechanism for engaging with farmers to enable them to take a greater ownership of sustainable agriculture issues...in a facilitated ‘self-help’ format.’ Defra (2005).

CROSS COMPLIANCE

The cross compliance conditions under the new CAP Single Payment Scheme (SPS) embrace a wider set of conditions than just the ‘environmental’ ones that are normally synonymous with the term (European Environment Agency 2005). Table 1 shows the set of conditions adopted in England. These are split into Statutory Management Requirements (SMRs) and Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAEC). The SMRs include aspects of public and animal health involving traceability, disease and welfare which might not be regarded normally as ‘environmental’. GAEC requirements generally fit within a broad definition of ‘environmental’ although they are in some respects more to do with landscape appearance than with ecosystems. It is hard to see how the requirement to maintain access to public rights of way (GAEC 8) is driven by criteria based on either landscape or habitat needs.

Farmers and landowners organisations have been hostile to certain aspects of the cross compliance regulations (CLA 2004 and Farmers Weekly 2004). In particular the GAEC 14 requirement (Defra/RPA 2005, p21) to place 2 metre buffer strips on field boundaries against water courses, hedgerows and woodland came in for much criticism (Farmers Weekly, 2004). This was largely from the perspective of income loss and the view that it should be an environment prescription paid for under agri-environment schemes and not a cross compliance condition as such. There was some relaxation of the conditions against initial proposals (Harvey 2004). As a result by the time the Challenge Fund meetings took place farmer opinion was moving in the direction of the belief that earlier concerns had been overstated. There was also a growing awareness that most of the conditions were based on existing legal requirements and various forms of codes of practice and therefore did not represent much of an additional burden.

The Shropshire Experience

We attempted initially to involve the local National Farmers’ Union with the project as they had a group that met locally who had expressed interest. Unfortunately, the numbers that attended this group did not meet Defra targets and they met during the day which appeared to be at odds with the wishes of prospective group members who had already started to respond via advertising in the local agricultural press. A letter went to those who expressed an interest in the project on 19 November setting the first meeting date as the evening of 7 December. At this meeting there was a presentation on GAEC’s 1-17 and the SMRs. Farmers were then split into two groups and provided with flip charts to produce a list of the most difficult compliance issues that had arisen through group discussion. These issues were then forwarded to Defra HQ for their consideration.

There was a further meeting on 11 January which dealt with the issues that had been forwarded to Defra from the December meeting together with other concerns such as a lack of detail over soil management plans, terminology, the appeals process and the 10 month occupancy rule. Further issues were raised by the group and forwarded to Defra and the decision had to be taken whether or not to hold a third and final group meeting. Members of the group decided in favour of this and suggested that the third meeting should deal with the compliance

Table 1 A summary of cross compliance requirements under the SPS in England for 2005

Permanent pasture (rules on consent for conversion to arable)	
Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC)	
<i>Soil management and protection</i>	
GAEC 1	General requirements (awareness of soil management guidance)
GAEC 2	Post harvest management of land after combinable crops
GAEC 3	Waterlogged soil
GAEC 4	Burning of crop residues
<i>Maintenance of habitats and landscape features</i>	
GAEC 5	Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs)
GAEC 6	Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)
GAEC 7	Scheduled Monuments
GAEC 8	Public rights of way
GAEC 9	Overgrazing and unsuitable supplementary feeding
GAEC 10	Heather and grass burning
GAEC 11	Control of weeds
GAEC 12	Land which is not in agricultural production
GAEC 13	Stone walls
GAEC 14	Protection of hedgerows and watercourses
GAEC 15	1Hedgerows
GAEC 16	Felling of trees
GAEC 17	Tree Preservation Orders (TPO's)
Statutory Management Requirements (SMRs)	
SMR 1	Wild birds
SMR 2	Groundwater
SMR 3	Sewage sludge
SMR 4	Nitrate Vulnerable Zones (NVZs)
SMR 5	Habitats (Special Areas of Conservation)
SMR 6	Pig/goat/sheep identification and registration
SMR 7/8	Cattle identification
SMR 8a	Sheep and goat identification (after July 2005)

Source: Defra/RPA (2005)

aspects of the new Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) and how this could run in tandem with the cross-compliance requirements for the single farm payment.

The final meeting of the group was held on 8 February when matters arising from the January meeting, that had been referred to Defra for clarification on the burning of crop residues, buffer strips, and other issues, were reported back together with a talk by a Defra official on cross-compliance and the ELS.



Observations and Difficulties

The structure of the meetings with a meal beforehand and with the opportunity for the group members to talk with one another, air views and communicate with policy-makers was popular. By the time of the last meeting the group displayed many of the characteristics of an effective team, being participative, cohesive and with open communication that was purposeful.

When it came to difficulties these were chiefly in the desire of participants to hear of the impact of cross-compliance on much wider aspects of their businesses, such as farm tenancies, and to anticipate further problems in requesting a level of detail that either did not exist or was not yet due.

The Gloucestershire Experience

The approach taken in Gloucestershire was a rather different from that taken in Shropshire. The participants were drawn from a distinct group of farmers rather than making an open invitation to all comers by advertising in the local press and using College contacts. The group were tenant farmers on the Farms Estate of the Gloucestershire County Council. This estate was established in the early 19th Century as a ladder of opportunity for farm labourers to start farming on their own account. In the 21st century its function has now widened but this is still the core purpose. Inevitably therefore the farming businesses are small and have specialised into enterprises where with enough commitment and family labour a business can be built up from a modest start.

The nature of these farms made it difficult for the farmers to find the time to keep up with paperwork generally. Many of them were struggling physically and financially to succeed with their businesses. So it was felt that they would represent a group that were particularly hard to reach on issues such as cross compliance regulations. It was felt however that this might make it all the more necessary to deliver the message to them and to do so in a manner they would be receptive to.

The needs and circumstances of this particular group affected the design of the programme. It was decided that it must be delivered during the day. Most of the tenants were dairy farmers who relied almost exclusively on family labour. Others often do relief milking as a form of off farm employment. So the meetings had to take place after cleaning up from the morning milking and to finish before the afternoon milking started. As a result the meetings had to start after 11 am and finish by about 3.30 pm. They also needed to take place as close to the tenant's farms as possible. It was also felt that in order to present the message in a practical and appealing way that at least one of the meetings should take place on a farm. The aim was to incorporate within a farm walk discussion of the issues surrounding the application of the regulations.

An invitation was issued through the annual tenant's newsletter at the end of September 2004 to a briefing meeting and a farm visit to take place in November. The meeting took place in a hotel near the core of the estate and at a central point within the county. It was felt that the Royal Agricultural College would not be appropriate as a venue being less well placed geographically. The meeting was on 2nd November starting at 11 with a break for lunch and concluding at 3.30. This was followed up by a visit to a farm the following week on 8th November.

The farm was located in the same area as the first meeting. It was quite typical of the estate. A 39 hectare dairy farm rented to the chairman of the GCC estate's association of tenant farmers who runs the holding largely single handed. It was felt to be important to use a farm that matched the situation of the participants rather than necessarily one which had a particularly large number of cross compliance issues. After the farm visit there was a lunch and a discussion

in the skittle alley of a nearby pub about what had been learnt from the visit with points noted on flip charts.

A final meeting took place in March 2005 at the estate office. This was in the same locality as the earlier meetings. A presentation was made on the changes to the requirements that had taken place between the sessions in November and the issue of the regulations in December/January. It also gave a chance to reflect on the process, ask technical questions and get more feedback.

Observations and Difficulties

The initial response to the invitation was slow and disappointing. But in the end the numbers to both the briefing lecture and the farm walk were somewhat above expectations. The farmers were reluctant to commit themselves until they could be sure that they could organise themselves to spare the time. This is probably an inevitable feature of dealing with farmers who rely so heavily on their own labour. Feedback was very positive about the process and the inclusion of the farm walk was critical to this. Some farmers came with their wives, although most came on their own. There was a good cross section from young new entrants to farmers close to retirement. They approached the situation initially with a lot of negative sentiments about the need for new regulations. The sessions may not have turned that around completely but it certainly did seem to improve their perception of the need for them and the extent of practical difficulties involved.

The farm visit was difficult to set up. Cross compliance regulations are a set of practice requirements and it is often not possible to view practical demonstrations of their impact on the ground at a particular point in time. It differs from production related visits that can view particular facilities, livestock, crops, etc. There are farms that have more issues than others if they are of particularly high environmental sensitivity. The farm chosen was not of this type and did not have any designations such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's), Scheduled Monuments, etc. A further difficulty was what would happen if the farm was actually in breach of any of the rules. The visit took place before the regulations were legally binding. So this was not an issue at the time. But it was felt that as a precondition to a farmer offering his or her farm for demonstration once the scheme was up and running there should have some form of indemnity against notification of breaches – a form of 'Chatham House rules'.

The farmers were very concerned about the introduction of the Single Payment Scheme generally. But it was not necessarily the cross compliance aspects that concerned them the most. Persuading them to focus exclusively on cross compliance was a constant difficulty. This was partly an issue of timing. Qualifying for the payment was their first concern. Having done so the focus might naturally turn to the ongoing scheme rules.

The other difficulty, again linked with timing, was knowledge of precisely what the rules were. The process of generation and release of scheme rules was behind schedule as explained earlier. Therefore the November briefings took place based on draft regulations which in fact were still in the process of being modified at the time the meetings took place.

Farmers also wanted to know about the potential overlap between the cross compliance rules and the Stewardship Entry Level Scheme (ELS). This was not launched until 3rd March and in November there was even less clarity on the potential requirements of ELS than there was with the cross compliance rules. So reference was not made to it.



RESULTS

Discussion group members in both Gloucestershire and Shropshire were surveyed to measure their perception of the regulations that they would find the easiest or the most difficult to comply with on a scale of 0 (none) to 4 (difficult). Figure 1 shows the results for the Statutory Management Requirements (SMRs). Perhaps predictably the livestock predominance of the Gloucestershire sample brought about relatively high ratings for regulations having a livestock emphasis whilst the Shropshire sample tended to score highly the regulations affecting arable farming including such matters as the protection of wild birds and groundwater.

Figure 1-Average scores for responses to the impact of Statutory Management Requirement regulations on farmer groups in Gloucestershire and Shropshire:

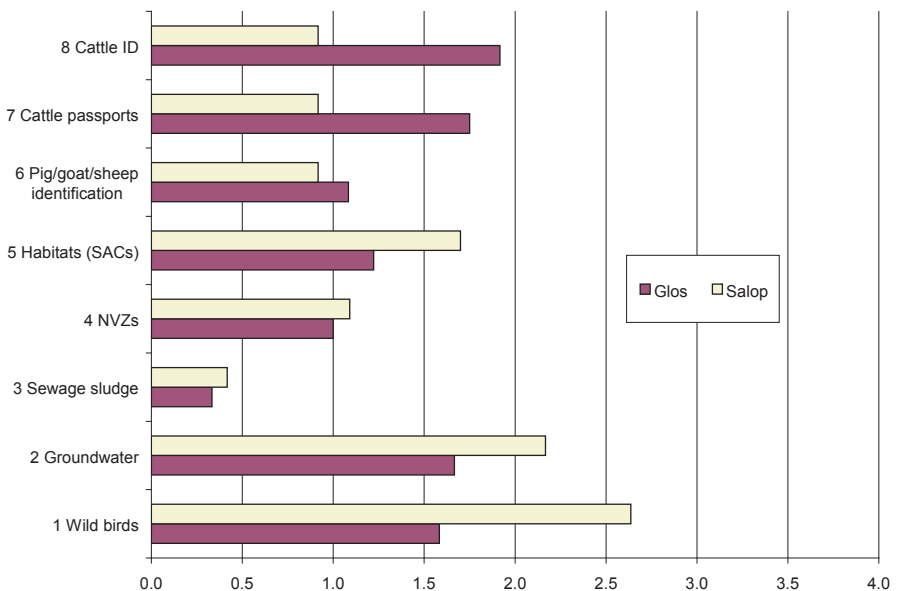


Figure 2 shows the impact of the rules on preserving permanent pastures and the first four rules requiring the preservation of Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC). Again the livestock interest shows through in the Gloucestershire sample with worries over the impact of the permanent pasture rules whilst the Shropshire farmers are more concerned with soil management plans and the rules regarding the treatment of saturated soils. There was no result for soil management plans in Gloucestershire as at the time of the survey in Gloucestershire this was not a requirement in the draft regulations.

The results concerning GAECs 5-17 are shown in Figure 3. The predominance of hedgerows and arable farming in Shropshire shows through in the high level of responses to questions relating to the rules on buffer strips, control of weeds and hedge cutting. The results for Gloucestershire suggest that the new regulations in this section would not be too burdensome to conform with.

CONCLUSIONS

The project was a relatively novel and cost effective way of getting farmers to seek their own solutions to problems with outside help. At the same time sound principles derived from group working methodology were utilised through the employment of participative or active

Figure 2-Average scores for responses to the impact of Permanent Pasture rules and Soil Management Requirement regulations (GAECs 1-4) on farmer groups in Gloucestershire and Shropshire:

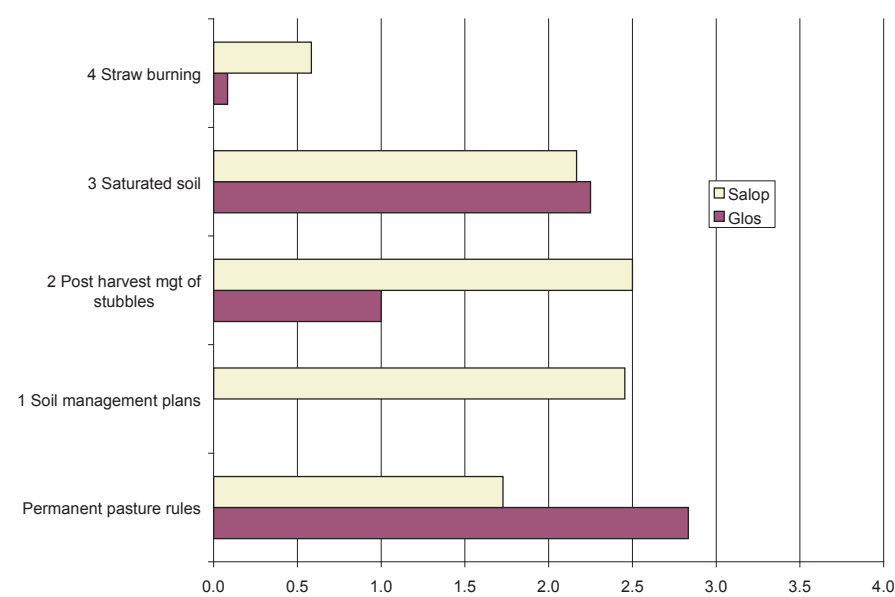
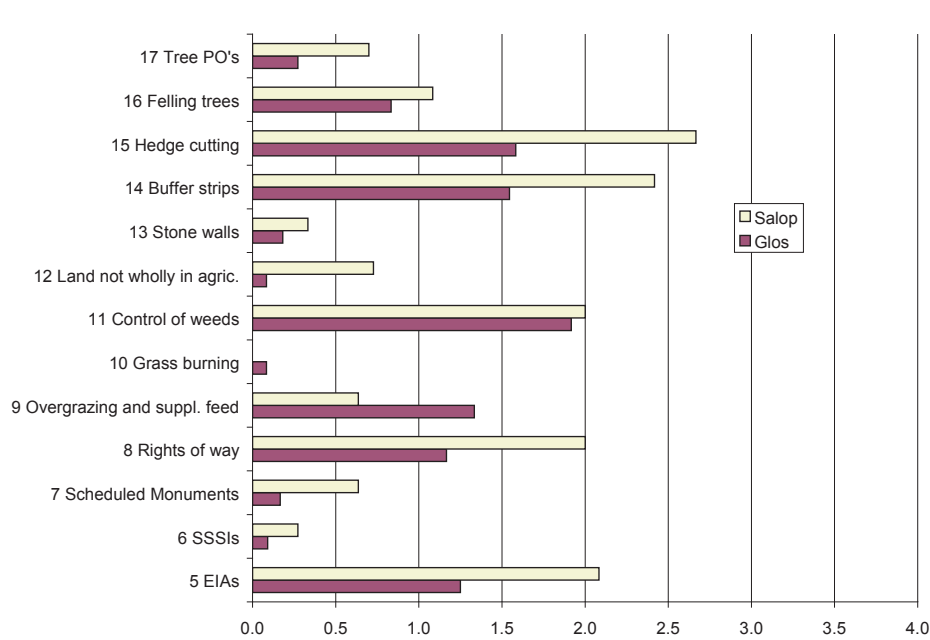


Figure 3-Average scores for responses to the impact of GAECs 5-17 on farmer groups in Gloucestershire and Shropshire:





learning styles. In making the experience both enjoyable and relevant the group leaders were basing the sessions on sound principles of group learning (Adair 1986, Woodcock 1989). As a result the report summarising the project results nationally stated that in spite of certain difficulties the objectives of the project had been realised (Defra 2005). This appeared to be an endorsement of the group learning method which had been adopted by the project.

Key areas of concern highlighted by the group delegates were the requirement for soil management plans (GAEC 1), the rules for the retention of permanent pasture, hedge cutting and cutting date restrictions (GAEC 15) and the implications of waterlogged fields (GAEC 3).

There were areas that tended to have a history on contention but which did not seem to feature strongly in the results with much less concern expressed than might have been expected. These were in the areas of buffer strips (GAEC 14) and rights of way (GAEC 8).

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