

Could advisers of land managers work more effectively across professions?

Advisers provide key services to land managers and have increasingly to develop their understanding of multidisciplinary working in order to address growing challenges.



Photo courtesy of Agricultural Industries Confederation

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The Living With Environmental Change Partnership brings together 22 public sector organisations that fund, carry out and use environmental research and observations. They include the UK research councils, government departments with environmental responsibilities, devolved administrations and government agencies. The private sector is represented by a Business Advisory Board.

Land managers face increasing pressures to deliver a whole range of goods and services from the land. They draw on advice from a range of professionals, such as land agents, veterinarians, ecologists, agronomists, agricultural lawyers, business consultants, renewable energy specialists, architects, planners, buildings design consultants, nutritionists, historic environment advisers, accountants and rights of way officers in order to fulfil these demands. Advisers need to be able to work together, and to marry commercial objectives with the delivery of ecosystem services and sustainable use of resources.

What role do land advisers play and how is that likely to develop?

Advisers play a key role in informing decision making and supporting the development of tens of thousands of farming and land based businesses. Consideration of their own knowledge base is therefore paramount:

- The Foresight Report on The Future of Food and Farming identified the improvement in advisory services for tackling the challenge of food security as a top priority for action.
- Improving the skills of land managers has become imperative for government and industry, with advisers vital to this process.
- The advisory professions have recognised their own needs for knowledge and skills in recent years, and the need for more integrated delivery of advice, with increasing self-reflection.

What is the current situation regarding inter-professional working?

There has been a proliferation of advisers providing support to land managers over the last 20 years, across a wide range of professions:

- In negotiating solutions to problems, dispensing advice and reaching a solution with clients, advisers often come into contact with other professionals and must balance multiple interests and objectives.
- Advisers from different professions are increasingly required to work together and as a result they have become much more reliant on each other.
- Currently very little guidance or advice exists on the processes and mechanics of rural inter-professional working.
- Advisers need to develop their own inter-professional networks but receive little guidance on how to go about this.
- Newly qualified advisers need to be equipped to deal with these challenges.

What current agendas demand inter-professional working?

Inter-professional working is not a new concept; indeed many advisers have been doing this for years, but there are new and emerging issues that have intensified the need for this including:

- Intense land-use and economic pressures.
- A complex policy and regulatory environment.
- Multiple demands on land management linked to ecosystem services and food security.
- Mitigation and adaptation to environmental change.
- Demands for an efficient and more joined up advisory system.

How do advisers organise their inter-professional working?

Inter-professional working means:

- Advisers recognising the limits of their own expertise and when to draw in others to provide the best service to their client so they know how to sell their own expertise but also how to be an astute client for the expertise of others.
- Experienced advisers demonstrating connoisseurship in selecting the experts to fulfil certain roles and who they choose to work with and avoid.
- Advisers finding out how to work with each other in terms of roles and methods and reaching a common understanding.
- In some instances a farmer or land manager may act as project manager him/herself, in others an adviser may orchestrate networks of specialists on their behalf. Other advisers may be brought into inter-professional networks as sub-contractors or through working within multidisciplinary firms.
- Advisers may project manage and dovetail a range of plans including farm business plans, farm environment plans, farm health plans, farm succession plans etc.



One example of how a land manager may be working with several networks of advisers: the ecologist and land agent may be involved in helping them develop agri-environment schemes as well as engaging with more distant networks of advisers; while the vet often forms another important broker of inter-professional working involving feed advisers, nutritionists, housing designers, as does the agronomist, who may liaise with fertiliser representatives, seed merchants and feed advisers etc.

What opportunities arise from inter-professional working?

Inter-professional working can bring benefits to advisers, their businesses and their clients:

- Inter-professional working often involves knowledge exchange between advisers, contributing to their personal development, knowledge and expertise.
- Advisers enjoy this kind of working and derive personal satisfaction from demonstrating added value to their client, particularly if it enables the client to improve land management practice.
- There may be commercial benefits from sharing costs and winning future business on the back of successful inter-professional working.
- Inter-professional working can help to build networks which can be used to access funding schemes which may require collaborative bids.
- Where advisers operate as sole traders there may be an even greater need to build inter-professional networks but even multidisciplinary large practices depend on external networks.

What challenges arise from inter-professional working?

Day to day inter-professional working is found by many advisers to be a challenge:

Locating expertise:

- It may be difficult to locate the right kind of professional who will meet the needs of a client. Within the complex landscape of advisory services, advisers don't always know what each other's professions actually do and how they could contribute to resolving an issue or problem.
- There are difficulties in finding the right individual adviser who has an established track record. Uncertainty around the professional standards and accountability of sub-contractors employed can cause problems and some feel better equipped to work with certain disciplines than others.
- Advisers are often unsure about where to find and how to access specialist advice from research organisations and programmes.

Organising inter-professional working:

- The roles and responsibilities of different advisers may not always be clear and can encroach on one another.
- The different working patterns of professions can create difficulties in accessing professional networks, particularly for those spending significant time in the field.
- Identifying a lead adviser to organise inputs of advisers is not always clear cut.
- There are language barriers between professions and between public, private and third-sector based advisers, different timescales, aims and deadlines that require sensitive negotiation.
- Difficulties may emerge arising from differences in perceived status between professions.

Competition versus collaboration:

- When to compete and when to collaborate with other professionals represents a delicate consideration for advisers.
- There may be a risk of clients being lost to other professionals with whom advisers collaborate.
- For many advisers, their knowledge is their business, which may limit the amount of knowledge exchange taking place between advisers. Company rewards systems can drive a "keep it to yourself" mentality.
- There is a risk of clients viewing an adviser's need to bring in external expertise as a failure of their knowledge.

What are the implications for professional practice and policy?

Advisers need to:

- Adopt strategies to maximise the benefits and minimise the risks of inter-professional working.
- Remember that nurturing trust and confidence are key ingredients for successful inter-professional working; finding the right professional is vital, not just to match to the job but also the client and his/her needs.
- Build up inter-professional networks through recommendations from colleagues and other advisers, including with research scientists and social scientists.
- Understand and acknowledge the limitations of their own professional knowledge.
- Look ahead and nurture relationships in anticipation of future opportunities arising.
- Establish a division of labour in team working – successful inter-professional working needs to have a clear framing of roles.
- Understand each other's different approaches, languages and motives for involvement and take this into account when project planning.
- Acknowledge the strengths of other professionals and establish a relationship of "give and take"; endorsing their expertise in front of clients can bring reciprocal benefits.
- Develop good project management skills, especially for complex cases.
- Hone their skills and approaches to identifying who needs to be involved from the outset and how others might be brought in later, or for specialist tasks.
- Consider appointing an independent facilitator who is able to act as mediator and project manager.

- Value face to face interaction rather than always relying on electronic communications.

Professional and training bodies need to:

- Acknowledge that advisers need to be prepared for understanding other professionals' roles in order to access appropriate expertise, particularly in niche areas.
- Communicate effectively across professional boundaries to highlight their own services and expertise and what they can offer.
- Ensure that advisers, particularly those who are newly qualified, are made aware of the opportunities which inter-professional working offers, the potential challenges and the techniques and strategies to overcome these.
- Promote a positive and ethical culture of cross-professional working which respects different kinds of expertise and encourages trust. This could involve exploring the potential value of developing a Charter or Code of Conduct for Inter-professional Working.

Researchers and research programmes should:

- Design knowledge exchange and communication strategies that involve the range of professions who advise and influence land managers and be aware of their different roles and relationships.
- Create methodologies, tools and frameworks that recognise the interconnected demands of land management advice and decision making.
- Remember that advisers can be a valuable source of expertise for researchers.
- Ensure research agendas respond to new challenges emerging at inter-professional boundaries.

Further information

This note was written by Jeremy Phillipson and Amy Proctor with contributions from the Landbridge Advisory Group. It draws on the Landbridge initiative, an ESRC and LWEC project creating opportunities for inter-professional learning between the land-focused professions and improved links to research.

Useful resources: Phillipson J, Proctor A, Emery S and Lowe P (2013) Professional Development Resources: Inter-professional working – briefing document designed to support the continuing professional development of land advisers
www.relu.ac.uk/landbridge/resources/landbridge-professional-learning.html

Proctor A, Phillipson J, Lowe P, Donaldson A (2011) Field Advisers as Agents of Knowledge Exchange. Rural Economy and Land Use Programme Policy and Practice Note Series No 30.

Klerkx L and Proctor A (2013) Beyond fragmentation and disconnect: networks for knowledge exchange in the English land management advisory system, *Land Use Policy*, 30, 13-24.

Proctor A, Donaldson A, Phillipson J, Lowe P (2012) Field expertise in rural land management, *Environment and Planning A*, 44(7), 1696-1711.

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