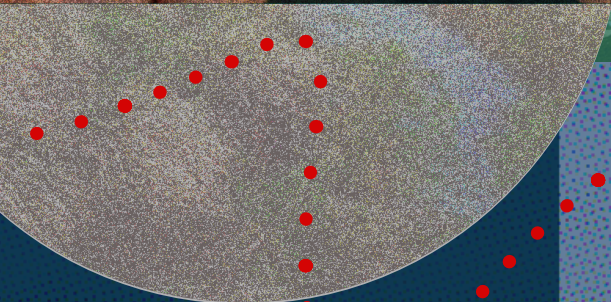




Collaboration at Landscape Scale

With thanks to the following individuals & organisations for their valuable research contributions & advice:



Plantlife

Lockett
AGRI-ENVIRONMENTAL

Trees for Life



Brendan O'Hanrahan

Bridget England

Catriona Mallows

Fred Swift

Gillian McKnight

Katy Malone (Bumblebee Conservation Trust)

Lewis Pate (Cairngorms National Park Authority)

Richard Lockett and Hannah Humphreys (Lockett Agri-Environmental)

Ross Macleod (the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust)

Trees for Life

Vic and Jason Ballantyne (Clynesh Farm)

West Loch Ness Cluster

Yvonne Stephen (Royal Society Protection of Birds).

John Fyall (Highland Rural)

This project has been made possible by funding from Sustain via the Food for the Planet campaign. It has been facilitated by the Highland Good Food Partnership (HGFP), which is funded by Sustainable Food Places, Scotland Food and Drink and the Pebble Trust. HGFP is a registered charity (SC051354).

CONTENTS

1. Executive Summary	1
2. Introduction	2
2.1 Background	2
2.2 Project Objectives	2
2.3 Methodology	3
2.4 Definitions	4
3. Importance of Collaborative Working	6
3.1 Crofting Collaboration Today	9
4. Beyond Scotland: Farmer Clusters Examples and Support	10
4.1 England	10
4.2 Ireland	11
4.3 Mainland Europe	11
4.4 Africa: Maasai Mara	11
5. Existing Farmer Clusters in Scotland	13
6. Synthesis of Case Studies and Other Evidence	14
6.1 Ingredients of a successful cluster	15
6.2 Potential for Clusters in Scotland	16
6.3 Examples of potential new clusters	16
8. Recommendations	18
8.1 Facilitation	19
8.2 Building local capacity	19
8.3 Peer-to-peer learning and support	19
8.4 Collaborative activity recognised in policymaking and practice	20
8.5 Crofting-specific recommendations	20
9. Conclusions	22
References	24
Appendix	25



1. Executive Summary

This report considers the prospects for farmer clusters and the support they require. It looks specifically at the Highlands of Scotland, but draws on experiences from other areas of Scotland, the United Kingdom (UK) and further afield. Farmer clusters are grassroots entities created when farmers, crofters and/or land managers work together at a landscape or local scale, often for the benefit of wildlife, biodiversity and the climate. Cluster activity can also be centred around food production, sharing resources or other forms of collaborative land management. Above all, cluster activity is led by its on the ground 'members' and operates on the principle of collaboration.

Although a relatively new term in Scotland, there are many farmer clusters across the United Kingdom, Europe and the global south. These clusters have already made significant and demonstrable impacts, including, but not limited to, the reintroduction of species, local food production, the improvement of wetlands and other habitats, long-term working relationships between local stakeholders, collaborations with academic and third sector institutions, and local job creation. As

proponents of farmer clusters, we consider them to be a vital solution not only to some challenges facing farmers, crofters and/or land managers and rural communities in Scotland but to global challenges including climate change, biodiversity decline and rural community resilience.

This report considers the strong support for farmer clusters at local and national levels and details how they may be better supported in a Scottish context, with a particular focus on the Highlands of Scotland. Essentially, it finds that there are critical elements of successful clusters which include: choosing the right scale; having focused priorities; establishing local buy-in from members; ensuring good facilitation, and having seed funding in place. When these elements are aligned, and there is tailored support from policymakers, farmer clusters have the potential to create much-needed positive change in rural and island places.

This research highlights that specific intervention is needed which includes, but is not limited to, funding, specifically for facilitators to work with interested members and coordinate mapping and surveying, more support for peer to peer learning, and better integrated land management in policy making.



This report uses the term 'farmer cluster' rather than 'farm cluster' in line with terminology used by Farmer Clusters for Realising Agrobiodiversity Management across Ecosystems (FRAMEwork) and the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT). This report also considers particular cases of crofter collaborations.



2. Introduction

2.1 BACKGROUND

The Highland Good Food Partnership (HGFP) was founded in 2021 after a conference where over one hundred producers, businesses and members of the community discussed the changes needed to strengthen the Highland food system. The Partnership facilitates a network between local businesses, the local authority, agro-ecological producers and communities across the Highlands. It aims to improve food education and access to good, healthy, affordable food, whilst supporting businesses and producers in their efforts to produce local, healthy food in a way that supports the natural environment. It is funded by Sustainable Food Places, the regional food group grants funding through Scotland Food and Drink and the Pebble Trust.

There were various motivations from the organisation to look at farmer clusters in the Highlands and further afield. Collaborative working is an integral part of the history of agriculture in the Highlands, and in current times there is arguably a greater potential to deliver environmental gain and contribute to joining up local food systems by working together on a landscape scale. This, together with the growing number of clusters in England and palpable interest in Scotland, prompted this report. It would not, however, be possible to discuss collaborative working in the Highlands without discussing crofting and historical and current examples of collaborative working, of which there are many; the report considers this throughout.

2.2 PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The project sought to systematically research and communicate the potential for formalised collaboration in the form of ‘farmer clusters’. It also aimed to identify new potential farmer clusters and areas of collaborative focus, including environmental improvement, or other avenues such as joint marketing, specialised growing, animal or crop health and production.

2.3 METHODOLOGY

This project was conducted through a combination of desk-based research, interviews and site visits. It covered the following:

- An initial literature review of farmer clusters across Scotland and the rest of the UK;
- Interview research to learn about existing clusters in the Highlands and investigate potential for future clusters;
- Site visits across Scotland to existing and potential farmer clusters;
- Interviews with a range of different crofters;
- Additional desk-based assessment to examine activity outwith Scotland for reference and best practice.

The working group then coordinated meetings with key stakeholders, including the West Loch Ness Farm Cluster, the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT), interested farmers, crofters and/or land managers across the region, and other organisations and agencies with a keen interest in clusters.

An important element of the project's methodology was to incorporate socio-cultural and historical perspectives of collaboration in the Highlands, recognising the cultural specificities of collaborative activity. Accordingly, the working group commissioned a policy professional to research collaboration in a crofting context.

The working group then summarised case studies, details of which are below, drawing out operational information and motivations as to why parties started farmer clusters, their key learnings, policy frameworks supporting their activity and barriers to their development, such as funding. Finally, the team analysed and evaluated key recommendations to co-produce this report.



2.4 DEFINITIONS

.....

KEY TERM

DEFINITION

Bottom-up

Impetus comes from, and is maintained by, farmers, crofters and/or land managers.

Collaborative

Farmers, crofters and/or land managers meet, work together and maintain a dialogue. They engage with each other for the project to deliver its desired outcomes.

Common Grazings committees

Common grazings are areas of land used by a number of crofters and others who hold a right to graze livestock on that land. Committees are the bodies designated to administer these areas under the Crofting Acts.

Co-ordinated

Farmers, crofters and/or land managers working independently towards the same landscape scale objective for the benefit of wildlife, biodiversity and the climate.

Evolved

Activities start independently, in an ad hoc manner, but are brought together into a collaborative venture by an adviser.

Farmer cluster

Farmers, crofters and/or land managers working towards the same objective but in isolation. Joint working between participants is not necessary for the project to deliver its desired outcomes. External facilitation is a common feature of this approach.

Facilitation

Facilitation in the context of farmer clusters describes the servicing and support of a farmer cluster project. Facilitation is generally conducted by a facilitator who is involved with or closely related to the farmer cluster. Strong and supportive facilitation can be an invaluable aspect of farmer cluster projects.

Integrated land management

Integrated land management involves long-term collaboration among different groups of land managers and stakeholders to achieve their multiple objectives and expectations within the landscape.

Top-down

Initiated, led or directed by a Government Agency, NGO or by a government-funded adviser to deliver public policy aims that are specific to the organisation.



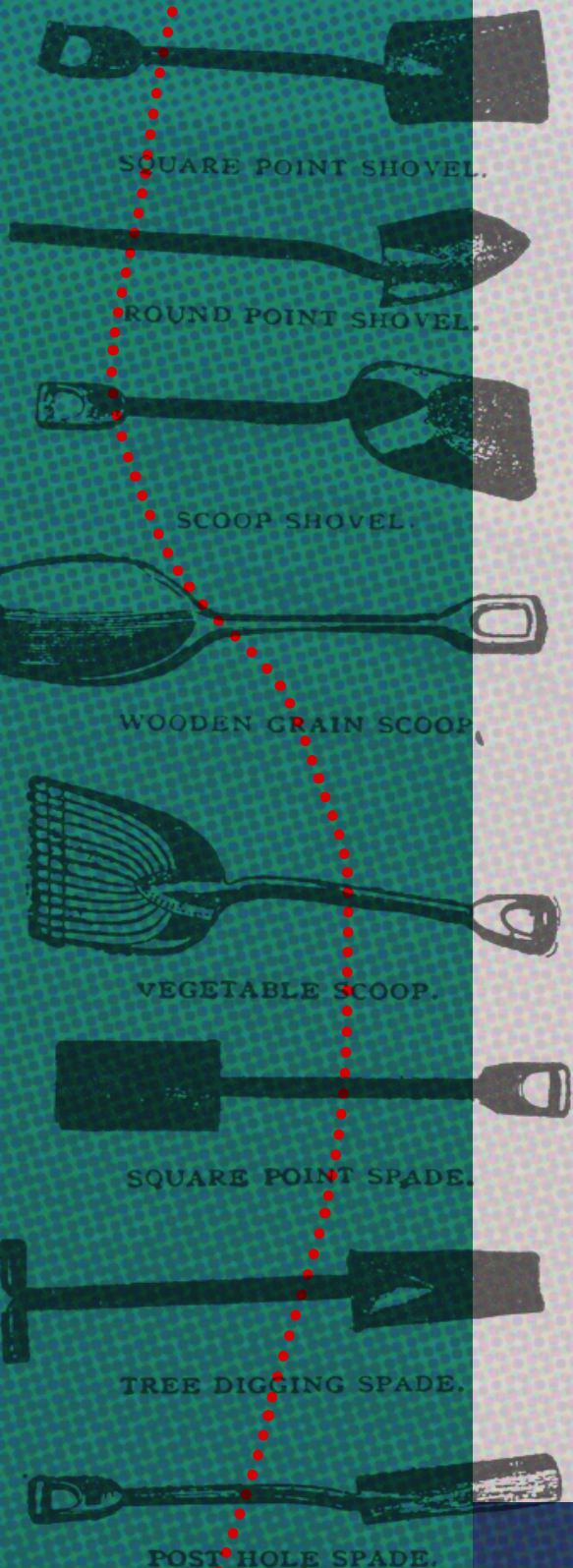
3. Importance of Collaborative Working

The importance of landscape-scale management in delivering public benefits is widely acknowledged at a policy level; biodiversity enhancements and nature restoration are best delivered across coherent geographic areas that extend beyond the traditional boundaries of farming businesses and land holdings.

The 'Making Space for Nature' report (2010) highlighted the critical importance of a suite of high quality sites which collectively contain the range and area of habitats that species require and ensure that ecological connections exist to allow species to move between them. The report identified the need for ecological networks of core sites connected by buffer zones, wildlife corridors and smaller, but still wildlife-rich, sites that make a landscape less fragmented and increase the permeability of the landscape to species (Lawton et al., 2010).

Furthermore, collaborative working can also have a significant impact on water quality and the reduction in flood risk. The Eddleston Water study in the Scottish Borders assessed the effectiveness of Natural Flood Management (NFM) to reduce flood risk and improve riparian habitats at a catchment scale. By taking an integrated approach to flood risk and habitat improvement, and through the use of a wide range of NFM measures in locations across the whole catchment, the Eddleston Water project has been able to restore habitats and river function at a landscape scale. In response to a mix of NFM measures across the catchment, flood peak magnitudes are estimated to reduce by 5% at the catchment outlet (Spray et al., 2021).

An analysis of the Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) network in Scotland gives some indication of the importance of collaborative management to Scotland's protected areas: most (85%) of SSSIs in Scotland have more than one owner/occupier and 45% of sites have five or more owner/occupiers. Therefore collaborative/coordinated management is highly important to the condition of these sites (Boulton et al., 2012), albeit the form of collaboration



which occurs in this context is very much directed by government agencies and a specific legal and regulatory framework. 35% of designated sites are currently in unfavourable condition (NatureScot, 2022). The three most significant pressures on designated features are invasive species, over grazing and water management; issues that generally cover more than one land holding and could benefit from collaborative effort to resolve.

Environmental benefits have traditionally been the focus of collaborative management. However, there are also a range of other benefits to land managers, rural communities and government agencies (Prager, 2015). These include:

- Cost effectiveness of collaborative management as costs are shared and minimised
- Collective contracts reduce transaction costs for both government and individual farmers/crofters/land managers
- Potential for farmer-led, bottom-up initiatives to reduce monitoring and enforcement costs, thus making them more cost-effective than approaches that follow legislative requirements
- Collaborative management can allow flexible, locally relevant responses and build capacity to cope with future changes
- There is also evidence that collaborative groups contribute to the social-ecological resilience of the landscape

This activity is not only currently significant, but collaboration has been a historical characteristic in rural and island communities in Scotland, knitting the social fabric of

places and people together. This has been particularly relevant among farmers, crofters and/or land managers, where access to land and the management of common resources has been pivotal to the community, landscapes, biodiversity, food systems and culture of that place (Hunter, 1976) for detailed coverage of the crofting aspect of this story.

There are further examples where collaborative working has benefited other aspects of land management: for example Highland Grain, which is owned by its 89 members; numerous examples of food production co-operatives across Europe; or deer management groups in Scotland, where collective decisions are made across land holdings. There are examples of collaboration particularly in areas of the world where landholdings are small and/or farmers are comparatively capital-poor, and these can take a range of forms which are influenced both by the cultural, social and political backgrounds and histories of the places where they are found as well as the nature of the agricultural activities in these areas. Wine-making, olive-growing and horticulture have particularly strong traditions of local collaboration and organisation in much of southern Europe, as well as Ireland. The idea of smaller groups of farmers or other producers collaborating to achieve economies of scale in either or both raw material buying or production techniques and marketing may still have much to offer in the Highlands, where smaller-scale producers, especially crofters, numerically overwhelmingly dominate.

Further examples of current or recent food production, marketing or processing collaborative groups in the Highlands or similar parts of Scotland include Skye Food Ltd, the Green Bowl in Elphin, Mull Slaughterhouse Ltd, Argyll Hill Lamb and the North Coast Abattoir Group. While these are all focused on food, they have all been designed to support extensive livestock farming, often using hardier native breeds, and such land management is generally associated with lower, less carbon-intensive inputs and more conservation-oriented use of land.



3.1 CROFTING COLLABORATION TODAY

Collaboration is woven into the ancestral DNA of crofting. The formalised collaboration inherent in the form of grazing committees is central to crofting collaboration, but is not necessarily the most important locus of collaboration in every township. Many smaller or less active townships lack grazing committees altogether and in some other places, collaboration has evolved to exist at a smaller scale than the entire township, involving small 'clusters' of like-minded crofters gathering together, clipping together, dipping together, and dosing together. Sometimes, these informal 'clusters' may cross township boundaries, such as in Pairc in Lewis and at the south end of North Uist.

Nonetheless, much of the collaboration that still happens across the crofting counties today does happen at a township level, and is generally helped and even strengthened where there are still functioning grazing committees. These tend to be the kinds of activities that need, or at least benefit from, the infrastructure of the 'township fank': clipping, sorting, dipping, dosing, scanning. However, there are examples of crofting collaboration which are wider than the township level: for example, many crofters organise livestock transport to marts and work on collaborative health planning. Furthermore, there is a notable example of collaboration with the Skye Corncrake and Crofting Partnership. In sum, collaboration is central to crofting across the Highlands and Islands and has a very long history. There are specific interventions which may further support this collaboration, details of which are outlined in section 8.5.



4. Beyond Scotland: Farmer Clusters Examples and Support



There are many examples of farmer clusters outside Scotland. Several farmer cluster examples are given in the Appendix section of this report, and they include a full breakdown of the area covered, the cluster's focus, the number of members, and some of their key learnings and objectives.

4.1 ENGLAND

.....

Notably, through funding from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), and facilitation support through the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT), England has a large number of farmer clusters. In 1968, the GWCT's forerunner, The Game Conservancy Trust, established the 'Sussex Study' upon noticing decline in grey partridge numbers in the decades after the end of the Second World War. This study is now claimed to be one of the longest-running monitoring projects of its kind in the world, measuring the impact of changes in farming on the fauna and flora of arable land. This study paved the way for a further vital component in managing grey partridge recovery; applying learnings from the landscape-scale and land manager-led features of this work, GWCT worked with Natural England to set up the first group of 'farmer clusters' in 2013.

Ten years on, there are now over 100 farmer clusters covering 450,000 hectares across England. In most cases, these are supported by facilitation funding from DEFRA. The 'facilitator role' typically includes: organising meetings and training events, coordinating conservation efforts, undertaking wildlife surveys, providing advice on species management, managing volunteers and seeking funding (e.g. via agri-environment schemes). This role has been essential to the success of many farmer clusters, many of which have been funded by Natural England through the 'Facilitation Fund'.

4.2 IRELAND

There are not exact analogues of the farmer cluster concept in Ireland as there are in England and Scotland, but there are some of the same principles and frameworks, particularly among those who have participated in the 'Locally-Led' European Innovation Partnership (EIP) projects such as Blackstairs Farming Futures (Appendix 2), Burren Project in Co. Clare, SUAS in Co. Wicklow and the Cooley Mountains farmers' group (Appendix 3) that put together the bid for EIP funding: the Sléibhte Chuailgne. These groups are explicitly farmer-led, and they all feature a combination of delivering local land management or rural development goals alongside working to meet national and EU-level biodiversity targets. These projects vary in size, with the Burren group being the biggest, with over 300 farmers involved, while the Blackstairs Farming Futures and the Cooley Mountains farmers group have somewhere between 40 and 60 farmers participating. The groups make further use of outside expertise in the form of advisory groups or boards.

These projects have grown organically, and have sought to identify local priorities and address these in the results of their collaboration. For example, the Blackstairs group looked at commonage governance, bracken control, scrub management and the protection and enhancement of local archaeological features. In the Burren example, they have also been working on scrub control, but this is alongside stone wall repair, providing water for cattle and also improving access for farmers and visitors alike. The SUAS project, meanwhile, focused on flock management, improving breeding stock, joint marketing and planning burning and swiping programmes for heather control.

In summary, there are clear examples of collaboration at scale in Ireland, and although not fitting directly into the farmer-cluster concept as it appears in England, farmers and/or land managers are working together on shared objectives in their localities.

4.3 MAINLAND EUROPE

Further afield, there is a consortium known as the Farmer Clusters for Realising Agrobiodiversity Management across Ecosystems (FRAMEworks) which includes 11 pilot cluster activities in Europe across nine different countries. These are all funded from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme. Cluster activities span a number of different types of agriculture businesses, including olive groves, viticulture, orchards and arable farming. There is more information in Appendix 4 about an example of these projects.

4.4 AFRICA: MAASAI MARA

There are various examples of collaboration in many parts of the world and it is important to recognise the huge progress being made in the global south. For example, collaboration has been used as a management tool for decades in certain parts of Africa. Notably, the Maasai Mara and the Mara North Conservancy in particular is but one example of formalised approaches to collaboration at landscape scale. There are further details on this in Appendix 5.





5. Existing Farmer Clusters in Scotland

A significant part of this research was to explore existing farmer clusters in Scotland. To learn about challenges and successes, and better understand operations and governance. We spoke directly with members in a number of clusters and highlight their work in the case studies, as found in the Appendixes.

We note that there are opportunities for collaborating land managers to access the Agri-Environment and Climate Scheme (AECS) funding. However, access to this scheme can be difficult and collaborative efforts are not well incentivised. In many cases this scheme is failing to deliver, either for biodiversity or for crofters and farmers, many of whom have applications rejected or abandoned applications due to the bureaucratic load.

While some report challenges with AECS, the Strathmore Wildlife Cluster (Appendix 6) aims to coordinate its work with existing and future Agri-Environment & Climate schemes. This cluster, set up in 2018 with 12 cluster members and covering an area of over 7000 ha, initially focussed cluster activity on preserving and restoring the existing populations of grey partridges. Activities have now expanded to include other farmland red listed bird species.

One of the most established farmer clusters examples in Scotland is the West Loch Ness Cluster (Appendix 7). This cluster covers an area of over 15,000 ha, where the 8 neighbouring farmers' flagship project has been to rewet a 50 hectare area of marshland. Each of the landowners participating has already championed a variety of positive environmental policies on their own land (e.g. hedges, set-aside, beaver and other species introductions) however, they recognise that in order to progress further, they need to work collaboratively to achieve landscape scale changes.

See Appendices 8, 9 and 10 for more cluster examples in Scotland.

Furthermore, it is important to note that since the writing of this report, two farmer clusters have been formed: the Glen Urquhart Farmer Cluster and the Lunan Burn Wildlife Cluster. Additionally, a farmer cluster based around the Laich of Moray is in its early stages of development.

6. Synthesis of Case Studies and Other Evidence



6.1 INGREDIENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL CLUSTER

This research found that there are several key 'ingredients' which are likely to help to ensure that an operational farmer-cluster is successful. Our research indicates that these include:

SELECTION OF THE RIGHT SCALE

Finding a cluster scale that makes sense to members and allows them to appropriately consider and manage objectives is important. The size of the area covered by a cluster is often dependent on management priorities: for example, species distribution or river catchment area. Experiences from within existing clusters suggests that clusters that cover larger areas can be more difficult to facilitate; this can be for a range of reasons, including different geographic or ecological characteristics within the extended area, or a lack of social cohesion over a larger, more disparate area. It can also be the case that the larger number of participants makes a cluster too cumbersome to manage.

CLEARLY FOCUSSED PRIORITIES

Ensuring that members are in agreement on cluster priorities and have a common goal is essential. The identification of cluster priorities may have taken place externally (e.g. environmental NGO, government agency) or locally by cluster members. In either case, it is important that the focus of the cluster is clear at the outset and members have an understanding of this.

In many cases the focus will be specific (individual species or groups of species are good examples of this. e.g. corn bunting, grey partridge, farmland waders, great yellow bumblebee). In other cases the focus will be on habitats or particular outcomes associated with habitat management (e.g. restoring riparian habitats or reducing downstream flood risk are examples of this). There are also examples of

there being particular needs, such as with crofting and the management of livestock.

Starting with a narrower range of priorities allows a cluster to add additional priorities as the cluster becomes stronger and more cohesive.

FACILITATION AND FUNDING

Ensuring facilitators are in place to coordinate members, organise meetings and training events, coordinate conservation efforts, undertake wildlife surveys, provide advice on species management, manage volunteers and seek funding (e.g. via agri-environment schemes) is a vital ingredient of a successful cluster. It was highlighted multiple times that these facilitators should be place-based and have sufficient resources and long-term funding to support farmer clusters.

LOCAL 'BUY-IN'

Ensuring all participants have bought into the idea of the cluster is an important ingredient of success. As much as possible, there should be local buy-in and mutual understanding, not only about the need to work together, but the benefits of doing so. Motivations for buy-in are varied and range from an interest in the focus of the group to not wanting to be left out of an initiative that peers are part of.



6.2 POTENTIAL FOR CLUSTERS IN SCOTLAND

This project has investigated the drive for farmer cluster momentum, why farmers, crofters and/or land managers are choosing to collaborate in particular ways, what brings groups together in established farmer clusters, and along which themes and sectors they mobilise.

From this research, there is evidence to suggest significant momentum for more farmer clusters across Scotland. Motivations for these clusters do vary, but our research highlighted that members were generally keen to collaborate due to conservation interests, biodiversity enhancement, the appeal of sharing resources, single species management and landscape-scale restoration.

6.3 EXAMPLES OF POTENTIAL NEW CLUSTERS

During the evidence gathering conversations with land managers, environmental NGOs, and other stakeholders it became clear that there are a wide range of potential new farmer clusters in Scotland, specifically in the Highlands. Some suggestions are outlined below. This is not an exhaustive list but gives an indication of the potential and may act as a catalyst for further ideas.



GREAT YELLOW BUMBLEBEE CLUSTERS

The Great Yellow bumblebee is one of the rarest British bumblebees, now restricted to machair and other flower-rich areas in the Orkneys, Scottish islands, and Caithness and Sutherland. As with many species, effective management should ideally take place at a landscape scale. Discussion with the Bumblebee Conservation Trust suggests that there is good scope for two or three clusters of approximately six farms focussed on management to benefit the Great Yellow bumblebee. Locations could be concentrated around hotspot locations. (Castletown, Halkirk and Keiss). The size of the cluster could be focussed on bee forage and dispersal distances (approximately 1km and 5km respectively).

This type of cluster has the advantage of being focussed on one thing (clear and non contentious) whilst providing a range of other benefits (eg pollinators). Bumblebees are useful as an indicator species and are also a Scottish priority species for conservation.

There is potentially some scope to involve local farmers as a resource to drive the project forward in a paid capacity. This builds local capacity/skills and knowledge and reduces the risk of short term projects that can fade away. Work could involve maintaining communication, awareness raising, monitoring, meetings, fundraising for work, collaborative agri-environment scheme applications.

Estimated facilitation time commitment of approximately 2 days a week, but could be spread between different people.

RIPARIAN WOODLAND CLUSTER

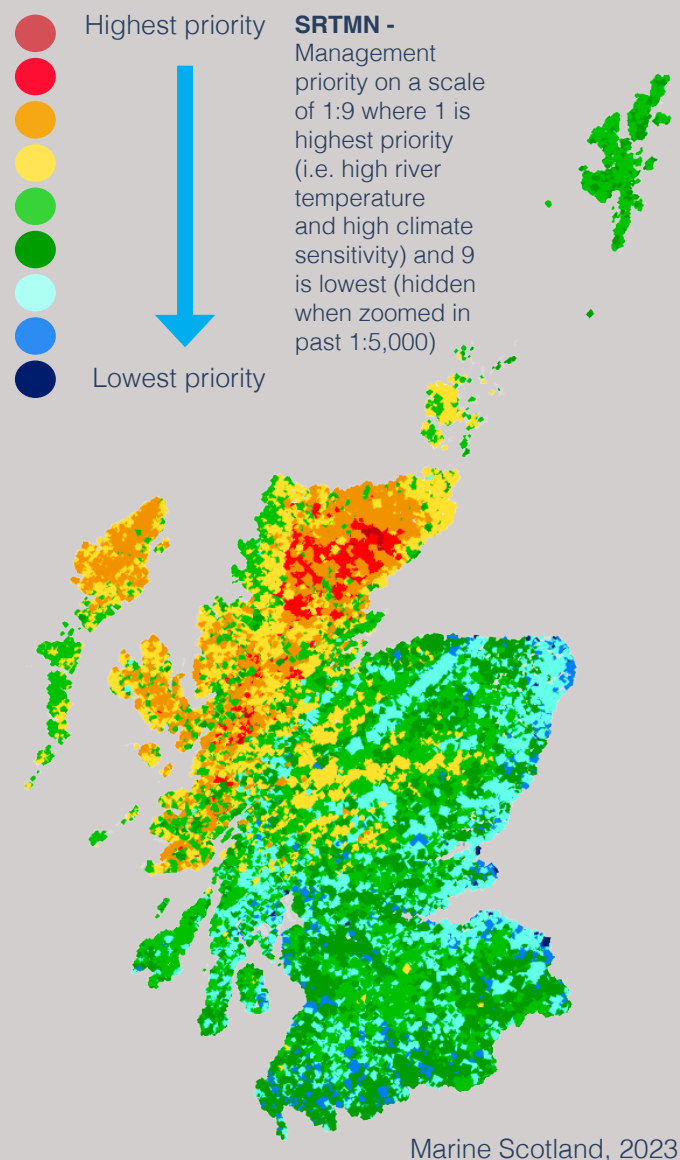
Salmon fishing on Highland rivers is of high economic and cultural significance. As with salmon in most fisheries throughout Scotland, salmon numbers in the Highlands are in decline. North of Scotland salmon rivers are particularly vulnerable to increasing water temperatures associated with climate change. Map 2 highlights the priority of rivers for management based on river temperature and climate sensitivity. Large sections of rivers in the north Highlands have been classed as high priority for management based on river temperature and climate sensitivity.

Increasing woodland cover beside salmon rivers - and their tributaries - has the potential to significantly improve habitat for fish, as well as a wide range of other species, and help moderate increases in water temperatures. There is good potential for collaborative river management and riparian woodland projects throughout the Highlands. In some areas, for example the Kyle of Sutherland, there is already good facilitation capacity in place to deliver this collaborative management. In other areas there is limited, or no, facilitation capacity and farmer / land manager clusters offer a solution to this.

SHARED LIVESTOCK MANAGEMENT

Discussions with conservation land managers has identified, in some cases, an increasing need for large herbivore (cattle) grazing on upland and west coast sites. Cattle grazing offers a number of benefits. Cattle are less selective graziers than sheep and are ideal for removing long, coarse grass growth. This generalised feeding behaviour is useful in maintaining species diversity of herb-rich swards and encouraging woodland / scrub regeneration.

Map 2. Riparian Woodland Cluster



There are considerable challenges associated with re-introducing cattle grazing to upland and west coast sites. One of the biggest constraints is the ability to winter cattle where costs of housing cattle - or constraints associated with out-wintering cattle - can be prohibitive. A potential solution to this is to encourage and facilitate linkages between cattle farmers with good scope for cattle wintering (typically in eastern / lowland locations) and conservation grazing sites in western / upland locations.

Evidence gathering as part of this project and other work has identified potentially interested cattle producers and potential conservation grazing sites. A facilitation role could play a key role in developing this concept further.



7. Recommendations

The Scottish Government's Biodiversity Strategy to 2045 aims 'to protect and restore biodiversity, support healthy ecosystems, connect people with the natural world, and maximise the benefits of a diverse natural environment and the services it provides, contributing to sustainable economic growth in Scotland.' They outline that they must take action on 'key pressures on biodiversity, including climate change, invasive non-native species and habitat fragmentation.' Research undertaken for this report provides evidence to suggest that farmer clusters provide solutions to this. This report identifies a pathway for collaborative activity at landscape scale to assist with achieving Scotland's biodiversity targets, whilst supporting rural communities to do so.

Similarly, the recent Agriculture bill consultation from the Scottish Government highlighted an appetite for integrated land management plans in delivering key outcomes, including community wealth and rural development, biodiversity and peatland and woodland targets. This report highlights some of the ways farmers clusters can support the delivery of the key outcomes from the Vision or Agriculture (e.g. high quality food production, nature restoration, wider rural development).

Farmer clusters, as a concept, can assist farmers, crofters and/or land managers to work more cohesively together in their locality, enabling them to collectively deliver greater benefits for soil, water and wildlife at a landscape scale. The scale and success of these is demonstrable in England, with over 100 farmer clusters in existence with support from Natural England. Scotland, on the other hand, shows great potential where there are currently relatively small numbers of established clusters, with more forming. However, tailored support is needed in order to maintain this trajectory to encourage more collaborative working and to strengthen existing networks.

This research puts forward several key recommendations to better support farmers and land managers in farmer-cluster and landscape scale activity. These are as follows:

7.1 FACILITATION

A key finding from this research is that there should be long-term support and funding for farmer clusters. Evidence suggests that funding specifically for facilitators is instrumental to the success of a farmer cluster and its objectives. The Highland Good Food Partnership propose an initial payment system that pays clusters on a per member basis, rather than an acreage charge for facilitators. This funding will then act as the seed capital to carry out the necessary mapping and planning phases on landscape scale management.

England, in particular, provides some helpful examples of farmer cluster facilitation. Facilitators are paid for their work on a 'per hectare rate' and the cluster itself is often paid on a per member rate (approximately £500 per member). All facilitators are part-time with a cluster, and therefore can manage two, or sometimes three each. Funding for a facilitator is a cost-effective way to tackle the biodiversity crisis at a scale that could bring about significant ecological and community benefits.

Finally, this research has found that stakeholders would generally prefer a simple payment system. Funding could be paid on a per member basis to encourage many to work together and should be ring-fenced for a facilitator to encourage interested parties to come together and plan collectively.

7.2 BUILDING LOCAL CAPACITY

The need for a facilitation role in farm clusters is clear (see 7.1). Central to the question of facilitation is who this role is carried out by. In some cases, there is a well-established organisation with locally placed staff who can undertake this role. For example, The Tweed Forum in the Borders was instrumental in the Natural Flood Management work and Eddleston Water study in the Scottish Borders (Spray et al., 2021).

Where established, relevant organisations do not exist to help a cluster it is likely that new facilitation capacity will be required. There is a strong case for, as much as possible, using members of the cluster community to take on the facilitation role. This can be an individual land manager embedded in the community; it could be a partner, son or daughter of the land manager; or, it could be a member of the community with a strong interest in the focus of the cluster.

There is a high degree of risk associated with the facilitation roles carried out by relatively short term (1-3 year) project officer type roles. Unless the group has strong motivation and resilience, there is a high likelihood that the initiative will falter once the funding comes to an end. Building local capacity by enabling community members to take on the facilitation role is likely to offer a much longer-term chance of success, allowing for the development of new income and employment and building skills and knowledge embedded in cluster areas. This approach requires a strong support and learning mechanism (see 8.3).

7.3 PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING AND SUPPORT

Facilitation of farmer clusters is a relatively new role, particularly in a Scottish context. As shown in earlier sections of this report, there are growing number of established clusters. However, if clusters and their facilitation are to become mainstream, then there is a pressing need to build a network of learning and support that enables these clusters to succeed.

A peer-to-peer learning and support network could take a number of forms. Central to this is the ability of new and emerging clusters to be able to call on advice and support for the various aspects of cluster development. This may include (but not limited to):

- A shared resource hub with help and advice about setting up farm clusters. This could include an interactive farm cluster map showing the location of clusters and contact details to enable information sharing.
- Identification of key organisations with the capability to help with the development of farm clusters. Examples of these include the Highland Good Food Partnership, Scottish Agricultural Organisation Society, Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Farm Advisory Service (Scottish Agricultural College). Other organisations are highlighted in the Appendix of farmer clusters.
- Initial 'pump prime' funding to allow groups to scope out the potential for farmer clusters. This would be 'at risk funding' as there would be no expectation that a cluster may form as a result of this initial work. However, funding amounts are likely to be relatively low.

7.4 COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY RECOGNISED IN POLICYMAKING AND PRACTICE

As previously mentioned, the recent Scottish Agriculture Bill consultation and related Vision for Agriculture has highlighted the benefits of integrated land management and collaborative activity at a landscape scale as ways of achieving some of the goals set out in the Vision for Agriculture, as well as other Scottish Government targets. The Agriculture Bill's consultation asked whether 'the new Agriculture Bill should include a mechanism to enable landscape/catchment scale payments to support nature maintenance and restoration?' for which Tier 4 funding could support facilitation for farmer cluster projects.

This research recommends that integrated land management and collaborative activity continuously be recognised in policy and practice to support the delivery of tangible action.

7.5 CROFTING-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that Common Grazings, and the committees that oversee them, are the bedrock of most collaboration that occurs in crofting townships, whether directly or indirectly. It is important that recommendations made by Sutherland (2023) are supported, many of which are directed at providing direct financial incentives and rewards for simply maintaining or reviving the framework and machinery of Common Grazings committees. Maintaining administrative structures, rather than creating new ones, will be better positioned to sustain effective collaboration to achieve agri-environmental targets.

One of the main features that several



crofters suggested as a crucial aspect of collaboration was when they collectively provided mentorship for new and/or young crofters; and so should be given high priority in any attempt to provide institutionalised support for crofting collaboration.

While established grazings committees attached to specific townships are the obvious nodes through which support for crofting collaboration could be funnelled, it would be important to ensure that there was some flexibility and that a group of crofters spanning multiple townships could also receive support, and while this might be better placed or achieved through specific measures (e.g., under Tier 4 of the new agricultural support framework) tailored for crofting, it should also be possible for them to apply for support under measures for 'general' farmer clusters if that is their choice.

It is outwith the scope of this report to make detailed recommendations for the various tiers of support envisaged for the new system which will begin in 2025. However, one of the key reforms that is needed is to make any new biodiversity-targeted measures better tailored for Common Grazings (the uptake for AECS among Common Grazings is very low, especially for areas outwith peatland Special Areas of Conservation). A more 'Locally-Led' style approach, borrowing from the lessons learnt in Ireland through their EIPs or similar schemes such as the Burren Project, Suas in Wicklow or Blackstairs Farming Futures, would enable a much higher proportion of the estimated 15% of High Nature Value Farmland situated on Common Grazings to be better managed for the benefit of both biodiversity and the crofting shareholders.

It may be advisable when seeking concrete support for crofting collaboration to seek synergies with the kinds of crofting development support administered by the Crofting Commission, even though this is still severely under-resourced. Strengthening crofting collaboration can potentially be achieved through making it easier to

get access to support under the Crofting Agricultural Grant Scheme (CAGS), through enabling higher rates of support (collaborative actions/activities should become eligible to receive 80% of the total cost in grant funding, currently confined to Common Grazings and young/new entrant crofters). Currently CAGS is largely an engineering or 'works'-focused scheme, but if this could be expanded to simply reward measurable collaborative activity, such as gathering, machinery groups, clipping and other measurable and reportable activities, with 'bonuses' for the participation of young or new entrant crofters, then this could serve to significantly strengthen the extent and intensity of collaboration in crofting townships and thereby make a significant contribution to maintaining active crofting and the management of Common Grazings.

As with farming clusters, having dedicated advisers available to assist in putting schemes together and bringing them to a stage where they are application-ready would be very important and helpful.

While it is true that many of the features of crofting collaboration are not in themselves unique except in the terminology that is sometimes associated with them, it is nonetheless important to understand that modern crofting collaboration is built on a deep historical and cultural legacy. These foundations are practical and honed to the nature of the climate and terrain of the crofting counties, but they also contain integral elements of emotional trauma and struggle which make them different to the kinds of collaboration which arises organically in farming areas in other parts of Britain, though they do have analogues in Ireland and in parts of southern Europe where the peasantry had to fight for land rights.

Therefore, while the details and construction of support for crofting collaboration in the new agricultural support landscape may end up resembling much of what is proposed for farming clusters, it is important that any such collaboration support be housed with other forms of crofting-specific support.

8. Conclusions

The Highland Good Food Partnership recognises the clear potential for farmers, crofters, producers and other land managers to deliver significant environmental, community and rural development gain through collaboration. Evidence in the literature, and in practice, makes it clear that collaboration at landscape or more local levels has been shown to deliver a wide range of environmental, socio-economic and cultural benefits, enabling farmers to achieve far more together than would have been possible if confined to traditional boundaries of farming businesses and land holdings.

Supporting and enhancing collaboration can also result in a wider spectrum of positive effects that can strengthen farming and rural communities, improve livestock health and welfare, enhance mental health and promote knowledge exchange and mentoring.

Supporting informal or collaborative structures such as formal ones, such as Common Grazings committees in a crofting context, or a variety of formal or informal approaches to setting up farmer clusters offers an important opportunity to support rural resilience, while also making critical contributions to tackling some of the most urgent issues facing the world today.

The farmer clusters that have been formed so far in Scotland have tended to have managing for biodiversity as their principal or even exclusive purpose. However, as the research for this project has clearly shown, the cluster model has the potential to bring significant benefits and synergies to a wide range of collaborative activities, if looked at in a broader and more flexible way. There is also great promise for this approach in the areas of tackling and reducing greenhouse gas emissions in agriculture, in enabling local food producer groups to operate at a scale that



will help them to market their produce and become more financially and organisationally sustainable as well as in the less quantifiable areas of mentorship, skill transfer, improving productivity, improving animal health and welfare, and conserving built heritage in farming or crofting areas.

There is a unique opportunity to ensure that the new Scottish agricultural and rural development support system scheduled to begin in 2025 should embrace these approaches and build mechanisms for supporting them, particularly under the Tier 4 suite of measures.

In conclusion, farmer clusters can create a framework for transformative, landscape-scale change at local levels and they have the potential to scale up nature-based or township or rural community-level solutions whilst also supporting rural resilience throughout. There are demonstrable examples in England of best practices, where over 100 farmer clusters are in existence. In Scotland, there are a number of already established farmer clusters, all of which are creating positive change in their localities. In Ireland, the locally-led model shows how much can be achieved when groups of farmers sharing a landscape get together and unite to tackle common priorities, presenting those needs to government and then negotiating for support for mutually agreed programmes of work. However, to further support the work of farmer clusters, and to encourage more land managers to work collaboratively at landscape or community scale, this research highlights that specific intervention is needed. This includes, but is not limited to, funding, specifically for facilitators to work with interested members and coordinate mapping and surveying, more support for peer to peer learning, and better integrated land management in policy making.



REFERENCES

1. Boulton, Lockett and Seymour (2012). A Review and Evaluation of Collaborative Landscape-Scale Management Initiatives. Scottish Natural Heritage.
2. Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust. Farmer Clusters: How they work and how to form one. [Online]. Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust. Available at: <https://www.gwct.org.uk/media/658045/farmer-clusters-guide.pdf> [Accessed 30 June 2023].
3. Hunter, J. (1976). The Making of the Crofting Community. Edinburgh.
4. Lawton, J.H., Brotherton, P.N.M., Brown, V.K., Elphick, C., Fitter, A.H., Forshaw, J., Haddow, R.W., Hilborne, S., Leafe, R.N., Mace, G.M., Southgate, M.P., Sutherland, W.J., Tew, T.E., Varley, J., & Wynne, G.R. (2010). Making Space for Nature: a review of England's wildlife sites and ecological network. Report to Defra.
5. Marine Scotland. (2023) Marine Scotland - National Marine Plan Interactive. [Online]. Marine Scotland. Available at: <https://marinescotland.atkinsgeospatial.com/> [Accessed 30 June 2023].
6. NatureScot. (2022). The Proportion of Scotland's Protected Sites in Favourable Condition 2022. [Online]. nature.scot. Last Updated: March 31st 2022. Available at: <https://www.nature.scot/doc/proportion-scotlands-protected-sites-favourable-condition-2022> [Accessed 15 March 2023].
7. Prager, K. (2015). Agri-environmental collaboratives for landscape management in Europe. Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability, 12, 59-66.
8. Spray, C., Black, A., Bromley, C., Caithness, F., Dodd, J., MacDonald, A., Romero, R., McDermott, T., Moir, H., Quinn, L., Reid, H. (2021) Eddleston Water Report: Summary Report. Tweed Forum. Accessed: <https://tweedforum.org/eddeleston-project-database/>. Date Accessed: 23/01/2023
9. Sutherland, J. (2023). Common grazing in the age of 'conditionality' - Policy Spotlight. (Policy Spotlight; No. 11). SRUC's Rural Policy Centre. <https://doi.org/10.58073/SRUC.22109840.v1>
10. FRAMEwork (Farmer Clusters for Realising Agrobiodiversity Management across Ecosystems) - Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust

Appendix 1: Pevensey Levels Cluster, England

Established	2018
Area	Over 5000 hectares in the Pevensey Levels, England
Number of Members	Approximately 50
Focus	• Maintaining and improving status of SSSI (unfavourable) within the cluster • Maintaining and enhancing biodiversity on floodplain grazing marsh and associated fresh water ditches; wet grassland • Extend and link existing habitats to increase connectivity and reduce fragmentation.
Facilitation & Support	The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust
Key Learnings	Cluster is bound together by a significant wetland area: Pevensey Levels. This geography easily helps define cluster area, members and aims for the cluster. Members have similar ground and issues which makes for effective exchange of best practice ideas.

Appendix 2: Blackstairs Farming Futures cluster, Ireland

Established	2014
Area	Blackstairs Mountains (Co. Carlow and Co. Wexford)
Number of Members	Approximately 40-50
Focus	Locally-led agri-environment scheme
Facilitation & Support	EU-funded European Innovation Partnership (EIP) scheme; support provided by European Forum for Nature Conservation and Pastoralism (EFNCP), Irish Uplands Forum
Key Learnings	Progress has been made on commonage governance, documenting and raising profile of 'land management archaeology', bracken clearance
Key Outcomes	Succeeded in getting farmers from parishes all around the mountains to come together, recognise their common situation, and join each other in trying to improve their upland agricultural management as well as improve the condition of the designated upland habitats on the mountains

Appendix 3: Sléibhte Chuailgne, Cooley Mountains Farmers, Ireland

Established	This group has no formal structure, except for specific projects. Roots of more active collaboration go back to immediately post-foot and mouth slaughter of all livestock on the mountains in 2001
Area	Cooley Mountains - Co. Louth
Number of Members	Approximately 45, with another 20 occasionally involved
Focus	Range of focus activities, including burning management, agri-environment, water quality and archaeology
Facilitation & Support	Occasional support from Irish Uplands Forum; much activity happens under aegis of local Irish Farmers' Association branch
Key Learnings	Bringing in and working with specialists from Teagasc, local authority, Environmental protection Agency, National Parks and Wildlife Service, academics etc can enable small groups of farmers and their communities to tackle quite big and technically-challenging issues
Key Outcomes	Application (unsuccessful) for Locally-Led EIP funding in 2019; burning plans for mountain areas; archaeological projects.

Appendix 4: Basse-Durance Valley Farmer Cluster

Established	2020
Area	1762 ha, and landscape type: orchards
Number of Members	10, bringing together organic and conventional fruit growers, mainly producing apples & pears.
Focus	• Integrated Pest Management (voles and codling moth) • Reducing pesticide use (insecticide and herbicide) • Enhancing farm economic and social viability.
Facilitation & Support	The farmer cluster is facilitated through GRCETA; Le GRCETA de Basse Durance est une association d'arboriculteurs, créée en 1962, dont l'objectif est d'aider ses adhérents dans le travail d'amélioration technique, économique et sociale de leurs exploitations agricoles. GRCETA: Groupement de Recherche sur les Cultures et Techniques Agricoles des Sols Forestiers d'Aquitaine
Key Outcomes	• Integrated Pest Management (voles and codling moth) • Reducing pesticide use (insecticide and herbicide) • Enhancing farm economic and social viability • committed to installing bat roosts and tit nesting boxes in their plots in order to increase the natural regulation of their main pests • installing flower strips near orchards to improve pollination while helping crop auxiliaries.

Appendix 5: The Mara North Conservancy (MNC)

Established	2009
Area	28377 hectares
Number of Members	The conservancy is a partnership between 12 tourism partner members and over 1000 Maasai Landowners
Focus	A Not-For-Profit organisation to support conservation efforts in the Greater Maasai Mara Ecosystem with the aim to create a best-practice, world-class conservancy with long-term commitments to the environment, wildlife, and local communities
Facilitation & Support	Private stakeholder contributions and tourism revenues
Key Learnings	That having an established network of community members is fundamental to success
Key Outcomes	MNC is one of the largest community and private sector owned conservancies in the world, helping to alleviate poverty and ensuring environmental sustainability.

Appendix 6: Strathmore Wildlife Cluster, Perthshire Scotland

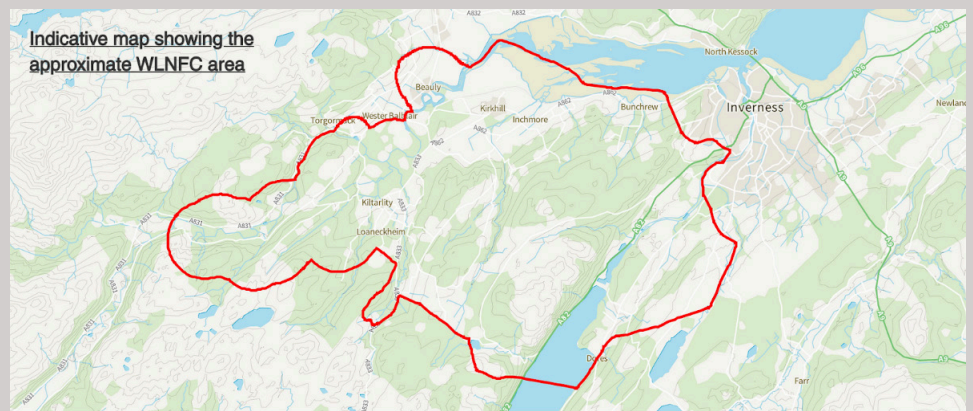
Established	2018
Area	7000 ha
Number of Members	12
Focus	The Cluster initially was developing its conservation plan, concentrating on restoring and preserving the existing populations of grey partridges and now have expanded the focus to include other farmland Red listed bird species i.e. which used to be a common sight in the Strathmore valley. The cluster chose to focus on grey partridges because recovery of this species will provide a good barometer for their broader work with wildlife. If cluster members get it right for Partridges, with the right habitat and seed mixtures, (somewhere to nest, feed and cover for young)then these conditions should create benefits for other farmland species, pollinating insects on those floristic habitats and a number of mammals namely the Brown Hare too. Where feasible, the cluster aims to coordinate its work with existing and future Agri-Environment & Climate schemes open to Scottish Farmers and share its learning with other clusters across Scotland.
Facilitation & Support	Facilitator acts in a voluntary capacity. Support for cluster activities is supported solely by the cluster members.
Key Learnings	Too focused early in our establishment on one species, now working with waders, other red listed farm birds, insect pollinators and a number of mammals.
Key Outcomes	- Floristic character in the landscape is vital as without flowers there is no pollen and nectar for insects or seed as an outcome for bird species. There is a need for farm business to return a profit as without the delivery of biodiversity on a landscape scale is challenging. Supplementary feeding through the Hungry Gap (Jan-April) for farmland bird populations is another cost. - There is an ever increasing number of farms and estates who want to join the cluster, however geography, time and costs limit the expansion. - External communications to neighbouring clusters would be useful across the country and assistance with this promotion from NatureScot or other bodies could help deliver this more and better outcomes.

Appendix 7: West Loch Ness Farm Custer, Highlands Scotland

Established	2021
Area	20000ha, 6500ha of which is under cluster member management.
Number of Members	8
Focus	Wetland creation and habitat connectivity.
Facilitation & Support	Seed capital through private funding opportunities, (eg Highlands and Islands Environmental Foundation and Lund Fund). Larger grants through public funding- Biodiversity Challenge Fund and Nature Restoration Fund (both Nature Scot). Facilitation and project management are currently funded by NatureScot's Nature Restoration Fund. This funding will cease at the end of March 2024.
Key Learnings	• Members must be trusting of each other, and this only happens through having an established relationship as neighbours, allowing people to bring sensitive information about their land to the discussion. • Barriers include having a facilitator who is also a farmer member of the cluster makes it difficult to have the time needed to carry out the role. There needs to be mutuality between people in a cluster: it is important that interested parties have shared interests which bring them together. It must be farmer-led and have a facilitator, most notably someone who is external and trained in surveying (i.e. ecologists) • Importance of baselining and monitoring.

Appendix 8: East of Scotland Corn Bunting Project

Established	Initial links made through PhD study and associated project from 2003; increased advisory effort from 2014 onwards have expanded initial links
Area	Combined area of Angus and Fife Clusters (participating farms) 6,600ha
Number of Members	32
Focus	Corn bunting conservation
Facilitation & Support	All carried out by Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
Key Learnings	The role of the facilitator is vital and a lot of facilitator effort is required. Making the cluster as collaborative as possible (ie creating a defined group and getting people together at events) can help deliver positive outcomes. Identifying a tangible benefit to land managers to encourage their participation can be highly beneficial. A smaller, more focussed cluster is better than a large group where the effort can be spread too thinly. However, it is important that a group isn't too small where a lack of enthusiasm from one or two participants can have a negative effect.
Key Outcomes	Enhanced habitat for corn bunting



**West Loch Ness Farm
Custer, Highlands Scotland**

Appendix 9: Glen Urquhart Farmer Cluster, Highland, Scotland

Established	2023
Area	Glen Urquhart and Strathglas, initial members mostly upland livestock holdings
Number of Members	Initially 9, going up to 13 through word of mouth in one month after forming
Focus	Water quality and health
Facilitation & Support	Part time facilitator 1 day per week, funded by Soirbheas and Affric Highlands , with project support from Affric Highlands
Key Learnings	So far, having a funded facilitator is key
Key Outcomes	Environmental improvements to farms with help to improve watershed health

Appendix 10: North East Scotland Farmer Cluster, Aberdeenshire

Established	2020
Area	1497 ha
Number of Members	4
Focus	Improving biodiversity, soil health, pollinators
Facilitation & Support	Facilitated through the James Hutton Institute via European Framework project
Key Outcomes	Improvements in biodiversity seen at a landscape scale as opposed to a single farm
Key Learnings	Ways to implement the Framework system for biodiversity sensitive farming across Europe.

HIGHLAND

**GOOD
FOOD**

PARTNERSHIP

