

Economy, Trade & Rural Affairs

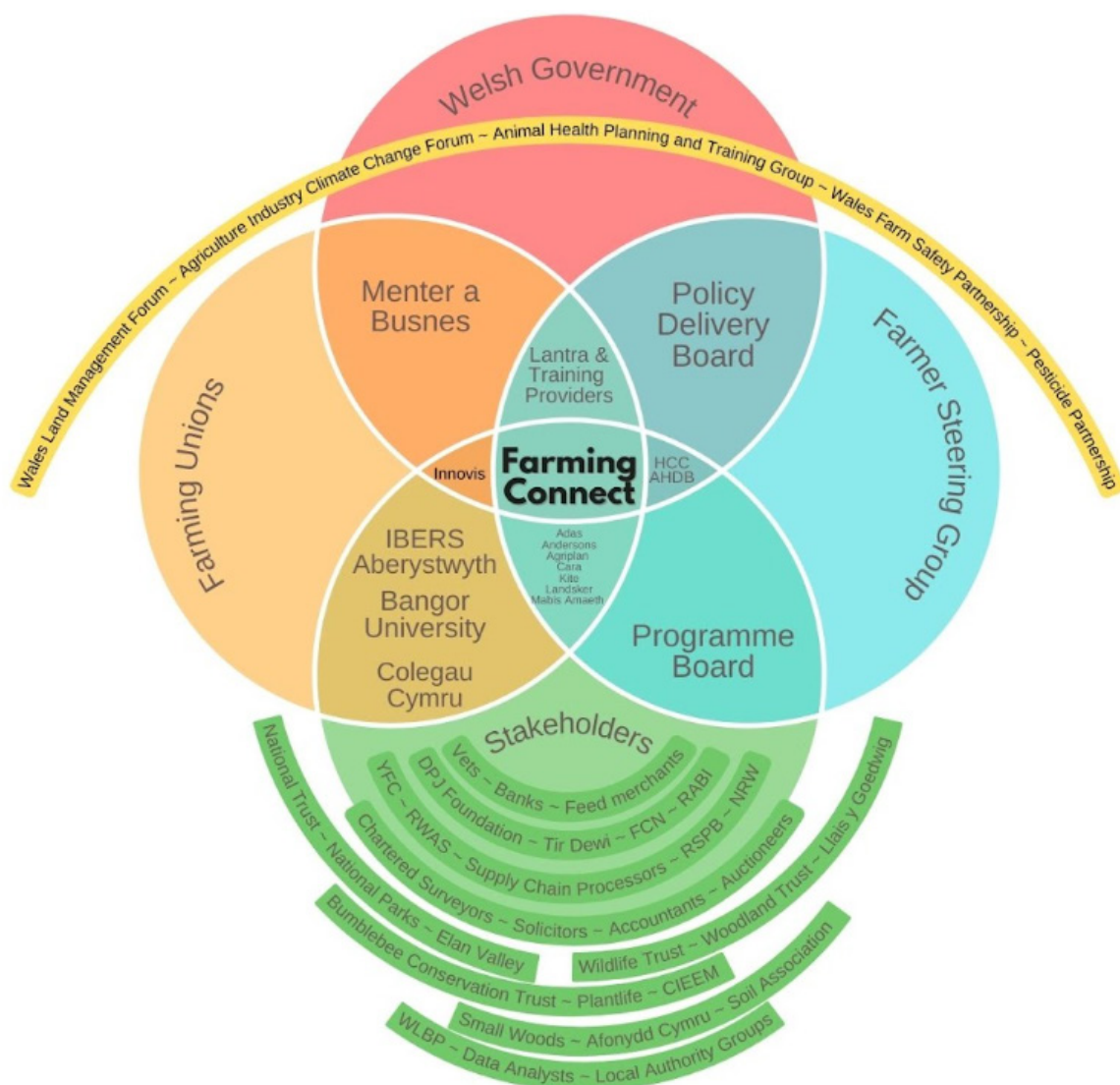
Committee Inquiry on Farming Connect

Menter a Busnes, a not-for-profit company, has been involved in the delivery of Farming Connect since its inception in 2001. In the current Farming Connect Programme, we are responsible for the delivery of 5 out of the 7 procured Lots and a sub-contractor to Lantra Wales in the delivery of the other 2 Lots. Through on-going delivery of Farming Connect over the last 23 years, we have extensive experience of on the ground delivery across Wales, and pride ourselves in developing innovative ways of engaging with farmers. As deliverers of the programme it is crucial that we work with a wide range of organisations in the agricultural and environmental sectors. Our collaboration with the supply chain, businesses and individuals across Wales helps us deliver an integrated, high quality Knowledge Transfer programme.

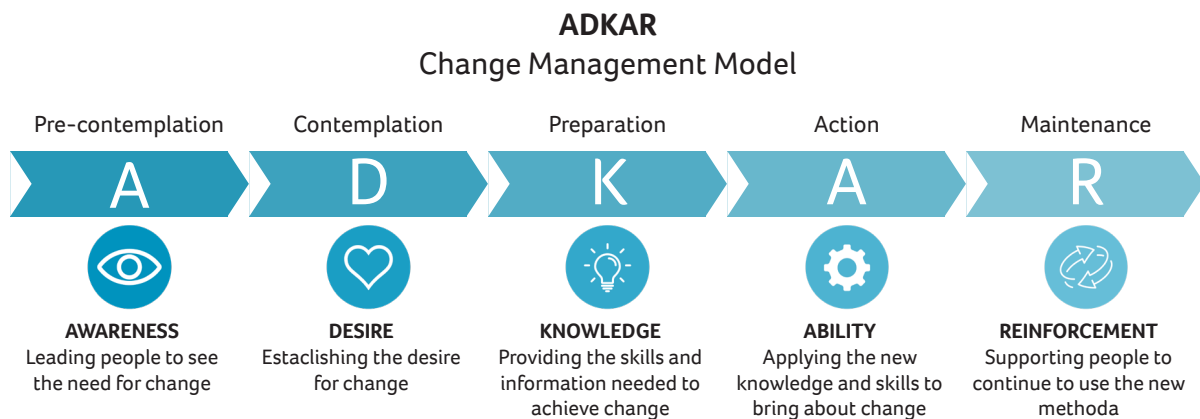
Our views and experience around the current Farming Connect programme can be summarised as follows:

1. Farming Connect is a recognised, well-trusted brand which provides an independent and quality assured one stop shop for support and guidance for Welsh farmers. Maintaining this support in an integrated manner is of paramount importance. Such an approach adds value and avoids duplication of provision. It also helps ensure that consistent messages are shared with the sector, especially as we look to move the industry forward in an ever changing world.
2. Farming Connect is a flagship programme which is the envy of the other devolved countries in the UK, and further afield, as far as New Zealand. Dr Norman Weatherup from the Knowledge Transfer and Innovation Policy Branch at CAFRE, Northern Ireland, recently said, **“We in CAFRE (College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise) Northern Ireland are very impressed by many aspects of Farming Connect. The wide range of services offered from webinars, discussion groups, benchmarking, skills workshops, podcasts, mentoring, knowledge exchange hub, try it out fund, EIP projects, and much more is excellent. The extensive library of material that can be accessed via the easily-navigated website is very helpful. There is something for everyone at all levels in the Farming Connect suite of products.”**
3. As Farming Connect is delivered by an independent, not for profit company, farmers can be assured that the advice and guidance they receive is trusted, unbiased and not influenced by commercial interests. Whilst we appreciate that advice and guidance on technical and farm business development matters is available to farmers from a range of sources, access to independent advice and information is vital.

- The programme governance structure includes a Programme Board which provides overarching guidance and strategic direction. The Programme Board has an independent chair and a wide range of members representing various stakeholders, including NFU, FUW, HCC, AHDB, Colegau Cymru, Chair of the Animal Health and Welfare Group, Chair of the Agriculture Industry Climate Change Forum (AICCF), YFC, RWAS etc. This model works well and the last independent evaluation commissioned by Welsh Government and published in 2021 states that the **“Programme management was found to have worked well throughout the evaluation, with a highly experienced and knowledgeable team in place. A strong emphasis on feedback and continuous improvement maximised the effectiveness of Farming Connect in real time, and the programme was actively managed in response to changing needs and conditions (as illustrated in the response to COVID-19)”**. In addition to the Programme Board the governance structure also includes an internal Welsh Government Policy Group. Group. In an effort to provide feedback on the services to ensure optimal delivery and reach, Menter a Busnes also established a Farmer Steering Group as part of the current programme.
- To deliver the Farming Connect Programme, Menter a Busnes, work in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders, companies and organisations. This has been key to the success of the delivery to date and it also facilitates discussion to eliminate service duplication. Some of these are listed below:

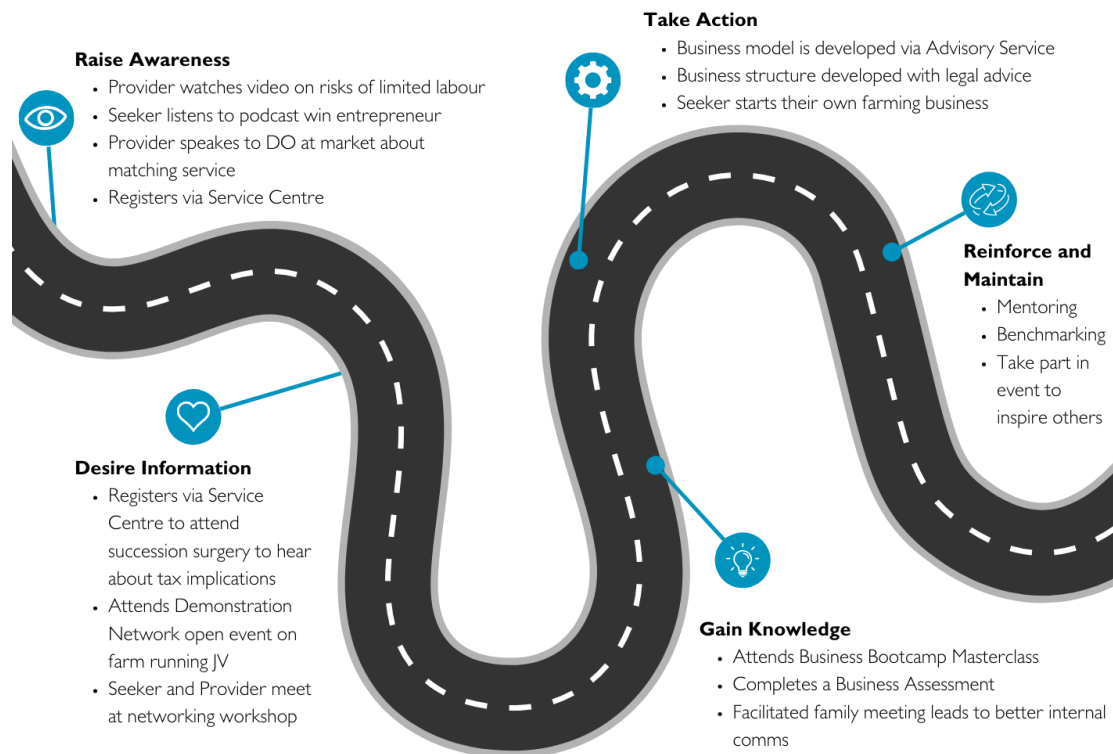


6. Menter a Busnes have based the knowledge transfer methodology of the Farming Connect programme on the ADKAR change management model, which has resulted in providing a cyclical offer which enables regular and iterative engagement with the programme. Known operationally as the ‘client journey approach’ it empowers individuals to make manageable, sustainable and incremental changes on farm, from raising awareness of a particular subject to providing knowledge, instigating action and maintaining or reinforcing the action.



The diagram below shows how the ADKAR model is put into practice.

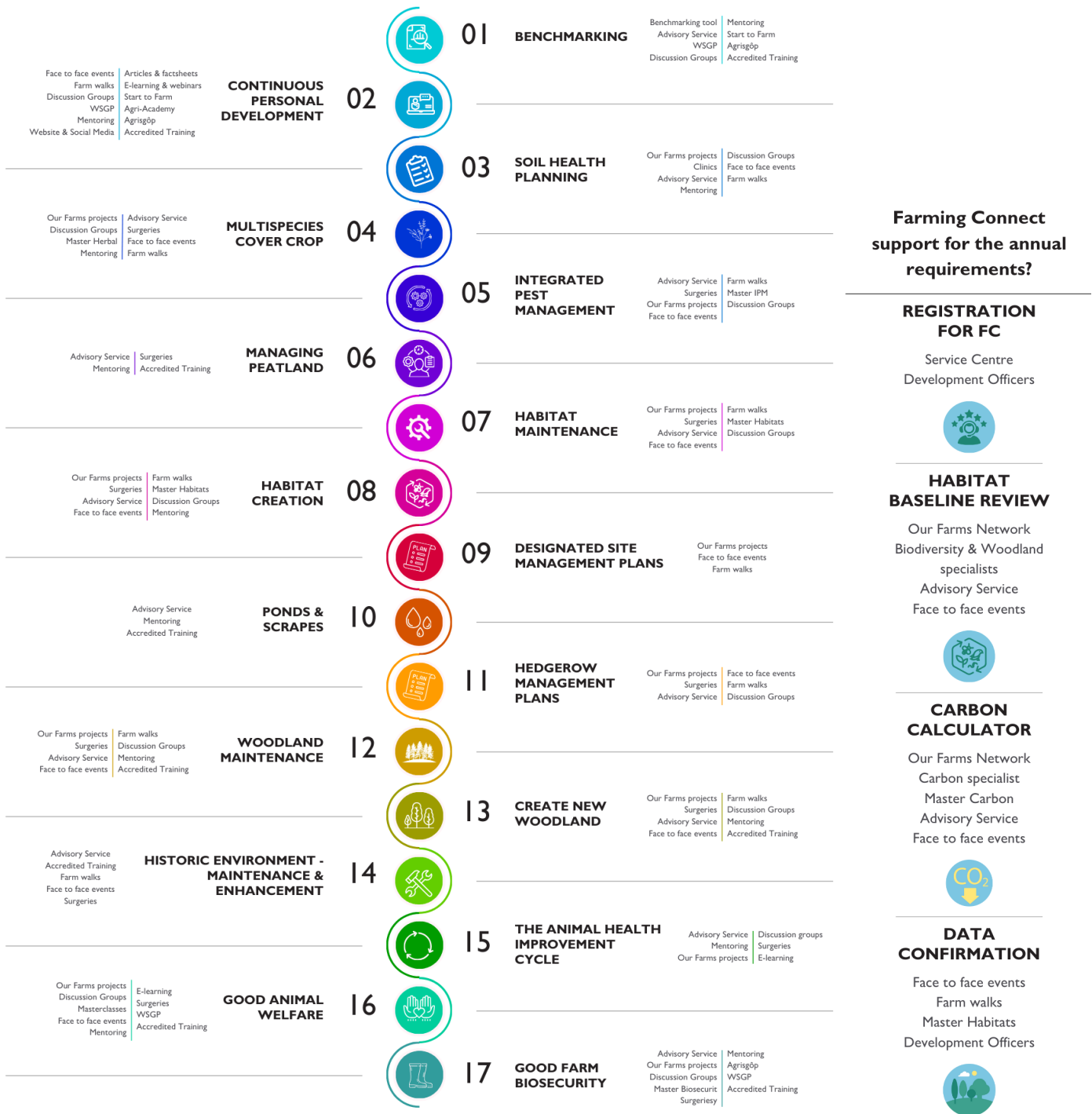
Business



7. Analysis of return on investment has been undertaken with some elements of the programme. One such element is the Prosper from Pasture programme, aimed at developing knowledge, skills and confidence in grassland management. An economic analysis undertaken by ARAD, an independent research company, has found that for every £1 invested in the programme creates a return on investment of £17.36.

8. The current Farming Connect programme delivery is in alignment with Sustainable Land Management (SLM) objectives which will help farmers transition and implement to proposed SFS characteristics currently in consultation. This has been mapped out in a comprehensive operational document, the Programme Overview document. The universal actions and scheme rules within the SFS and details of the Farming Connect well-known and easily accessible services to help this transition are summarised in the diagram below:

Farming Connect current delivery supporting the transitioning to the Sustainable Farming Scheme



Farming Connect support for the annual requirements?

REGISTRATION FOR FC

Service Centre
Development Officers



HABITAT BASELINE REVIEW

Our Farms Network
Biodiversity & Woodland specialists
Advisory Service
Face to face events



CARBON CALCULATOR

Our Farms Network
Carbon specialist
Master Carbon
Advisory Service
Face to face events



DATA CONFIRMATION

Face to face events
Farm walks
Master Habitats
Development Officers



- The programme's primary mission is to develop a more professional industry through its support for Continuous Professional Development, not only for farmers but also for all personnel and subcontractors delivering on behalf of the Programme e.g. farm advisers, training providers, vets, legal and financial advisers etc. The objective is to ensure high quality service and consistent messages that align with Welsh Government policies being shared across the industry. The development to date in the CPD offering via Farming Connect puts the programme in a strong position to be able to support farmers from the start with the Universal Action in the SFS.

Interaction with farmers

To date a total of 27,799 individuals have registered with Farming Connect, representing 13,085 businesses.

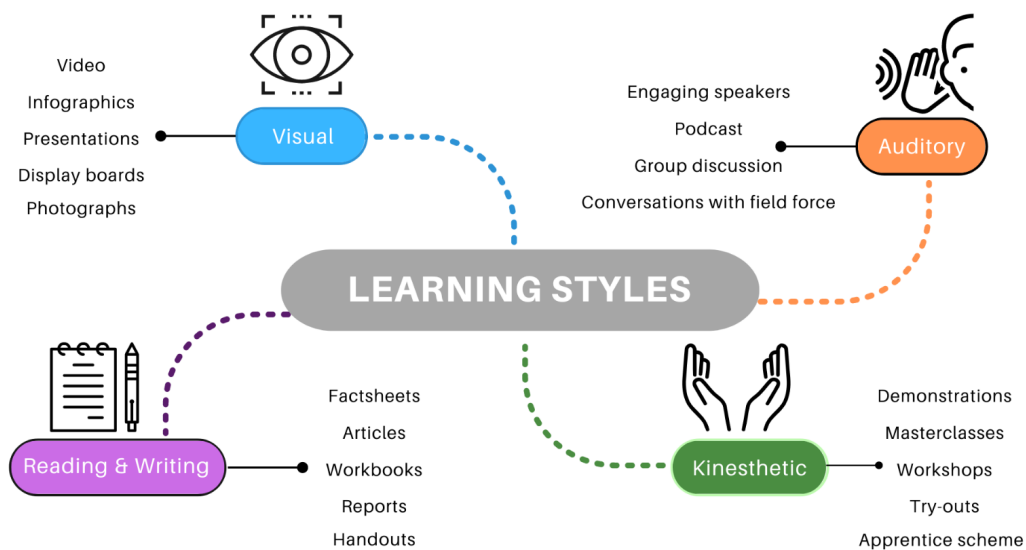
The ADKAR model mentioned above was used to measure the success of the Farming Connect programme between 2015 - 2022 as is illustrated in the diagram below (Measuring Success Report, 2022):



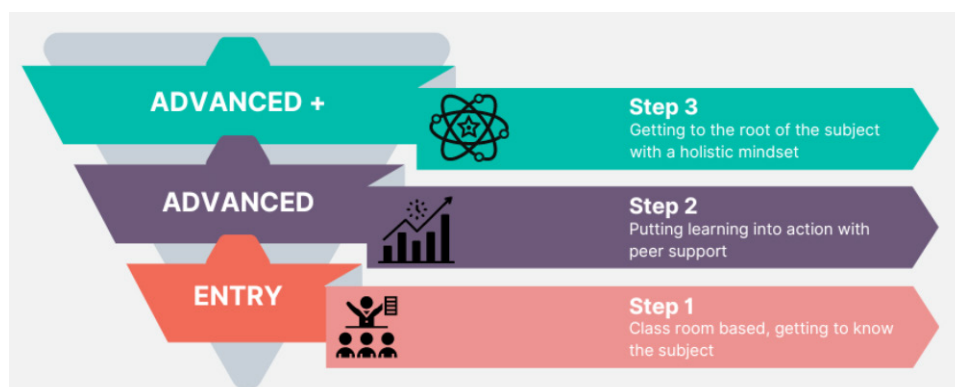
In addition to the 77% of registered businesses engaging in 3 or more Farming Connect activities, 33% have engaged in 10 or more Farming Connect activities as of August 2022. This not only shows the wide reach of the programme but also that the services are meeting the needs of farmers. It shows that the customer journey approach developed into the delivery of the programme is working and iterative customer relationships have been formed.

The success of Farming Connect's interaction with farmers can be attributed to the following:

- A team of local, trusted front line staff who understand farmers and who are able to communicate with farmers in their preferred language and transfer complex information in a straightforward and clear manner. They are trusted by farmers and work closely with Farm Liaison Officers (FLS) and other stakeholder officers in their areas.
- The Service Centre which provides a bilingual service to all farmers across Wales
- The variety of services available is a key to the engagement success. We recognise that farmers learn in different ways as illustrated below. A move to solely online delivery would significantly stifle development and hinder learning especially due to the challenges of internet access in rural parts of Wales. This is particularly true in times of change when peer to peer support is crucial to implement new ways of working and for mental health within the industry.



4. Strong facilitation skills and the long-established use of action learning approaches have worked well to engage with farmers and have had transformational effects on attitudes and behaviours. This has been highlighted in the Farming Connect evaluation - "Features that have worked well include self-help and action learning approaches, encouraging beneficiaries to self-define goals 'bottom up' to ensure a close fit with their needs and buy-in to the process, practical, farm-based learning and peer-to-peer support".
4. The ability of the delivery company to be flexible and respond to changes in government priorities and industry demands has also been instrumental in the success of the delivery. This was noted in the evaluation report - "flexibility to adapt the focus of an activity in response to changing conditions and to suit the working patterns of those involved". The ability to adapt programme scope after its commencement should be ensured.
4. Flexibility within the contract and the delivery company's creative approach to developing innovative new formats for engaging and communicating key messages has been fundamental to the success of the project. Some examples include:
 - Development and rollout of the Prosper from Pasture model provides an opportunity for participants to share best practice, view innovative management practices and learn from their peers with the aim of implementing management changes to improve profitability and improve environmental performance. The Prosper from Pasture model has been developed to enable progression, through the modular learning approach, delivering three different levels of knowledge and learning from entry, advance and advance+ levels for Discussion Group delivery as explained below:



- Development and delivery of large multi-station events
- The ability to rapidly adapt delivery methods at the start of the pandemic with the rollout of digital delivery of services such as Surgeries, Webinars and the Zoom Around the World concept, ensuring greater value for money.
- Addressing key industry challenges such as succession with ground-breaking approaches, namely the Start to Farm matching service and family kitchen table succession meetings.
- Development and expansion of on-farm project work under the Demonstration Network to ensure more Welsh farmers can access support for project work, which in turn will accelerate the bridge between scientific knowledge, innovation and on-farm practices. These developments include:
 - Roll out of four Pan-Wales Projects across the Demonstration Network to provide an opportunity for application of projects on multiple sites with various geographical, climatic and management conditions which results in a strong data set to support findings under conditions many Welsh farmers can relate to and learn from.
 - Roll out of discussion group projects focusing on a practical aspect that is of interest and benefit to individual groups benchmarking under one of the three key themes.
 - Roll out of the Try Out Fund to encourage farmers to apply either individually or within a small group for funding to run one-off farm try-out projects on their own farm/s.
- Development and delivery of different areas of work within Welsh agriculture including the Welsh Sheep Genetics Programme and Horticulture, which demonstrates the versatility of Menter a Busnes to deliver in new areas of focus as and when required.

What hinders our work and what we would like to change

1. Over complicated eligibility and limitations on some of the services e.g. Advisory Service and Accredited Training
2. BOSS platform, complex accessibility to crucial online Knowledge Transfer events.
3. There have been missed opportunities to capture robust return on investment evidence due to fragmented, ad-hoc independent evaluation contracts. An evaluator should be appointed at the commencement and for the duration of the programme.
4. The ability to deliver new initiatives within a contract, due to the specification leaving minimal room for innovation and flexibility.
5. The revised eligibility criteria is limiting our ability to support and inspire the next generation of farmers and growers due to students not being eligible for the current programme. 662 students were supported between 2015 - 2023.

What could hinder the delivery of Farming Connect in the future

1. A gap in delivery would:
 - a. abandon farmers in times of considerable change and it is integral for the continuation of the well-known and accessible Farming Connect services such as Habitat & Biodiversity mapping, Carbon Audits, Nutrient Management Plans, Health Plans and Benchmarking as farmers transition to the SFS.
 - a. a loss of expertise within the knowledge transfer and advisory programme team as highly experienced and respected personnel would seek employment elsewhere.
2. The Farming Connect contract between 2015 - 2022 was split into 3 Lots. The new programme which commenced in 2023 was divided into 7 Lots. Dividing the contract into too many small-scale contracts poses a greater risk to the integrated and coordinated approach to the delivery and adds to the management costs and increases risks of duplication within the programme. One example is in the current programme between Lot 3 Advisory Service and Lot 7 Horticulture also offering advisory service separately to growers in Wales. Multiple contracts could increase the risk of duplication of services to the industry. There is a risk of a programme that could appear disjointed to the farmer with numerous contract holders
3. Short term contracts also produce the same challenges. For example short term contracts stifles the implementation of on-farm projects which require time to develop proposals and which require at least 2 full farming calendar years in order to show any kind of impact.
4. Reasonable lead in time of at least 3 months needs to be built in between the contract award and the commencement of a new programme to ensure staff retention and continuous delivery for farmers in a crucial period of upcoming change.
5. Financial security is needed to allow contracts to be awarded for a minimum of 3 years and preferably for 5 years as project activity needs to be planned in advance.

To conclude, having a trusted and independent knowledge transfer programme and advisory service to support the industry in times of unprecedented change is of paramount importance for the Welsh rural economy as well as ensuring that Welsh agriculture can be a global leader in terms of technological and scientific development related to sustainable land management and food production.