

Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee Inquiry: Farming Connect

Background

Lantra as existing contract provider for Accredited Training and Lifelong Learning (Lot 2) and Farming Connect Horticulture (Lot 7) of the current Farming Connect Programme was asked to submit written evidence for the Committee to consider. Our evidence will focus on the following requests set out in Chair's letter of 23rd January 2024;

“How Farming Connect will support the implementation of the Sustainable Farming Scheme”

And

“your views and experience around the current operation of Farming Connect, especially your interactions with farmers, anything that hinders your work and anything you would like to see changed in the next round of tendering.”

1. How Farming Connect will support the implementation of SFS

Accredited Training

Farming Connect currently delivers 104 accredited course consisting of 35 Business topics, 17 Land topics, 19 Machinery and Equipment topics and 23 Livestock topics delivered through a Quality Assured Training Providers Network consisting of 7 Land based Colleges and 34 Private Training Providers. All these courses support sustainable business practices, aid economic growth and promote safe working practices. The following table summarises numbers of individuals trained across the three training category areas of Business, Land and Livestock.

Accredited Training	Completions			
	Business	Land	Livestock	Total
2015-2023	1983	3825	2170	7978
Since April 2023*	33	47	52	132
Total	2016	3872	2222	8110

*completed and claimed totals only, does not included approvals or those currently being trained

To support industry with the transition to SFS, more focus has been put on sustainable land management training with new offers within this programme on peatland restoration, soil and water management, maintenance of ponds and wetlands, conservation grazing, planting and woodland management, creating and maintaining wildflower meadows, all courses underpinning the Universal Actions of SFS.

Animal Health and Welfare Workshops

To prepare for the SFS, 3 new Animal Health and Welfare Workshop titles have been prepared in collaboration with the Office of the Chief Veterinary Officer (OCVO) to cover SFS Universal Action titles around Animal Health Improvement Cycle, Good Animal Welfare and Good Farm Biosecurity (UA15,16 &17).

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Professionalising the industry through Personal Development Plans and Continuous Professional Development

Since 2015, Lantra has worked with the Business Wales team to develop and enhance the existing BOSS website to include a dedicated platform for Farming Connect users. There are currently 19,043 FC clients with a registered BOSS account who can access:

- **Personal Development Plan** – The starting point of the client journey, which allows users to record long and short term goals, identify skills gaps and record development needs. 7,565 individual clients have created a PDP, of which 428 were created since April 2023.
- The BOSS platform is where clients can access the application form to apply for funding to complete over 100 training courses and to register and attend webinars.
- **Storfa Sgiliau** – A comprehensive on-line continuous professional development (CPD) record that **automatically** stores **all** Farming Connect completed activity on behalf of clients, including all accredited training certificates. The system also allows clients to upload learner records achieved outside of the FC programme, providing a one stop shop for all CPD recording. Lantra feel strongly that this tool will be critical for evidencing the completion of Universal Action 2 (UA2) and will be an essential support mechanism for all farmers entering SFS. Individuals can access and review their own CPD record and use as evidence of training undertaken and capability.
- **E-Learning** - fully funded modules specifically designed to upskill and retain knowledge of individuals across business, land and livestock themes. Since April 2023 there has been more focus on Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) related topics with 42 specific modules either already live or in development, all of which will be available from Year 1 of SFS. All modules are aligned to the 5 Sustainable Land Management Characteristics previously noted through WG consultation
 - How to become more resilient and productive
 - How to reduce, reuse and recycle inputs, nutrients and waste
 - How to reduce farm emissions and maximise carbon sequestration
 - How to protect and enhance the farm ecosystem
 - How to benefit people, animals and place
 - Please see Appendix 1 for more detail on e-learning development. A total of 7323 modules have been completed by Farming Connect clients, 548 completed since April 2023.

The development of e-learning modules is a very cost effective way of delivering training, WG key messages and measuring learning outcomes. On average it costs £2,550 to develop one e-learning module which can be completed multiple times by thousands of users. Therefore, Lantra feel that the current support for developing modules should continue in a future contract and more support should be made available for clients to undertake ICT training to ensure clients have the right skills and confidence to access and complete online training. We also need to be aware of the different learning styles favoured by individuals.

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Forestry/Woodland Management

We recognise that the 10% tree cover ambition outlined in the SFS Consultation is likely to create additional interest in training and development in these topic areas and are confident the necessary offers will be available to potential learners.

Horticulture

Farming Connect Horticulture was a new delivery priority for the current contract. Our data indicates that there are around 550 commercial horticultural businesses in Wales. Since April 2023, 155 horticultural businesses have registered with Farming Connect. These horticultural registrations have accounted for 20% of **new Farming Connect registrations during the same period** (Dairy/beef/sheep/cereals being used as defining categories). 352 individuals have accessed either Horticulture Business Support or attended a webinar, training day or study visit. 31 Training days/study tour events have been put on to both ornamental and edible commercial horticulture businesses. The Industry Voice workstream has allowed businesses and organisations to collaborate and share thoughts on wide ranging themes including Plant Health, Peat Free, Horticulture Grants, surveys and data. Grower engagement continues to rise and feedback evidence gained from beneficiaries shows they value the learning and experiences they gain from attending Farming Connect horticulture events.

We will continue to support commercial horticultural businesses to access Farming Connect services and prepare for the SFS. We are pleased to have made such significant progress in mainstreaming the Farming Connect Horticulture Programme since April 2023.

2. Current and future requirements for Farming Connect

Interactions with farmers/growers/foresters and woodland managers

Farming Connect Lot 2 (Training) and Lot 7 (Horticulture) continue to engage with farmers through the Farming Connect Marketing contractors, Menter a Busnes. We have built in additional planning and co-ordination meeting with delivery managers to support the Client Journey and to drive up “cross-selling” between Lots. We actively engage with farmers and delivery Stakeholders like Colleges and Training Providers to support with new technology and scheme changes as well as seeking ideas around future learning and skills needs. Our Horticulture team is heavily engaged with the revamped Royal Welsh Agricultural Society Horticulture Village 2024.

Anything that hinders our work and like to see changed.

Budgetary uncertainty is a concern. A reduced budget for 2024/25 of 15% means re-planning and review of anticipated commitments for the year ahead. We are currently reviewing the likely impacts of these cuts which we will be able to share with the committee once this work is complete.

All Farming Connect clients require a BOSS Registration to access e-learning, apply for training and to attend webinars. It is positive that over 19,000 BOSS accounts have been created for clients, however, not all accounts are actively used. Lantra would like to see more focus on supporting clients with the BOSS system in a future contract. Lantra would

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like to explore the opportunity of enhancing the sign in features of BOSS, to also include a PIN being sent via text message and for the system to remember clients for 7 days, similar to RPW and other Government platforms. We appreciate that any IT developments have a cost and timescale implications.

Students studying Land-based subjects are currently not eligible to apply for Farming Connect training. With the industry needing to recruit young people into the agriculture, horticultural and forestry sectors we see this as an opportunity lost to give targeted support to young people and encourage new entrants. In future contracts, Lantra would like to see more support for young entrants and for FE students from a non-farming background who are currently ineligible for FC support.

A future contract should focus more on careers work within the sector, to raise the profile of the industry and to gain recognition that agriculture, horticulture and forestry can offer a rewarding and a professional career of choice. Lantra would like to explore the opportunity of emulating within Wales the current careers work being delivered by Lantra for Scottish Government. This work allows direct engagement with Schools through a network of Ambassadors backed up with significant audio visual and hard copy collateral to target young people and their parents regarding careers opportunities in the Land-based sector. This work should be done in collaboration with Careers Wales.

Not all work needs to be funded through the Rural Affairs budget, we would encourage reviewing how collaborative cross departmental working with DfES could identify ways of addressing common work areas like Net Zero Skills, Apprenticeships, Personal Learning Accounts, Labour Market Intelligence as examples.

The **impact** of completing training courses is hard to measure quantifiably, as baseline recording does not currently take place at the start of the client journey. However, there is significant qualitative evidence through evaluation feedback forms and case studies which records the positive impact that undertaking training has on developing competencies, personal development, social wellbeing, health and safety, animal health and welfare and wider environmental benefits.

Any gaps in provision between contracts will result in delayed take up and momentum loss at a critical time for the agriculture and forestry industry.

We welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the Committee and would be more than happy to support the ongoing work of the Committee with further written or verbal updates.

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Appendix 1

E-learning Provision Mapped to Universal Actions

	Universal Action	E-learning Provision	In Development/Complete
1	Benchmarking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suite 2, Module 1 – Benchmarking & Business Planning Farm Benchmarking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Development Complete
2	Continuous Personal Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All e-learning modules link to CPD 	
3	Soil Health Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving Soil Health Climate Change and Land Management Farm Nutrient Management Weed Control Suite 3, module 2 - Building fertility (slurry/muck, crop rotation, green manures) Suite 5, module 1 – Soil Health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete Complete Complete Complete In development In development
4	Multispecies cover crop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grassland Species Grazing Livestock on Fodder Beet Suite 3, module 6 - Grassland management (including multi-species swards and mixed grazing) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete Complete In development
5	Integrated Pest Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suite 3, Module 4 – Integrated Pest Management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Development
6	Managing heavily modified peatland habitat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suite 4, module 4 - Managing and restoring peatland 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Development
7	Habitat Maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suite 5, module 4 - Managing and creating in-field and semi-natural habitats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Development
8	Create temporary habitat on improved land	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suite 5, module 4 - Managing and creating in- 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Development

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		field and semi-natural habitats	
9	Designated Site Management Plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suite 6, module 1 – Farming in protected landscapes Suite 6, module 2 – Protecting and enhancing the historic environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In development In development
10	Ponds and scrapes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suite 5, module 5 - Lowering the risk of diffuse pollution (water quality) Suite 5, module 6 – Efficient water use (including harvesting and storing) Suite 5, module 7 – natural flood management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In development In development In development
11	Hedgerow Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suite 4, Module 7 – Hedgerow Management Cycle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In development
12	Woodland Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suite 4, Module 5 – Woodland Management Tree health – tree pests and diseases Tree identification Continuous cover forestry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In development Complete Complete Complete
13	Create new woodland and Agroforestry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agroforestry Benefit of trees on upland farms Natural Capital and Net Zero Suite 4, Module 5 – Incorporating Trees (including agroforestry) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete Complete Complete In development
14	Historic Environment – maintenance and enhancement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suite 6, module 2 – Protecting and enhancing the historic environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In development
15	The Animal Health Improvement Cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suite 4, Module 2 – Animal Health Improvement Cycle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In development

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16	Good Animal Welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Various modules already available on good animal welfare/disease identification and control under Livestock including Body Condition Scoring (cattle & sheep), Sheep Lameness, Cattle Lameness, Lambing Survival etc • Suite 6, Module 4 – Animal Welfare 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lots available on BOSS • In development
17	Good Farm Biosecurity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biosecurity & quarantine • Biosecurity for Pig Smallholders • Suite 2, Module 6 - Biosecurity (livestock and arable) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete • Complete • In development

Other e-learning modules also in development:

- Energy efficiency on dairy/arable/poultry/beef & sheep farms
- Renewable energy – heat
- Renewable energy - electricity
- Breeding for worm resistance
- Succession – it's not just about tax
- Beef nutrition – Suckler cow
- Dairy nutrition – dairy cow
- Identifying habitats
- Biodiversity - bracken
- Automatic monitoring systems for biodiversity
- Suite of 6 modules from NFU Energy:
 1. Energy Basics:
 - a. An overview of the UK energy grid.
 - b. Understanding your MPAN and your energy bill.
 - c. Different types of energy contracts – imports and exports. Incl. online contracts.
 - d. Understanding industry charges (MOP, Data collection, Grid capacity, LLF, etc).
 - e. Problem solving – Ombudsman role.
 - f. Monitoring and measuring

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Modules in development for Horticulture:

- On site composting for your horticultural enterprise
- How to recognise some of the most common pests, diseases and weeds in horticultural crops
- An introduction to the principles of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) in horticulture
- A guide to the main types of propagation of Hardy Nursery Stock

Appendix 2

Farming Connect Accredited Short Course Programme 2015 - 2023

Information below taken from 1298 evaluation forms

Question	Yes	In % Terms	No	Undecided or left blank
Did the training course meet your training needs?	1280	99%	6	12
Will you be able to apply in your job role what you have learnt during the course?	1270	98%	7	21
Will completing the training make you more productive and efficient in your work/business?	1275	98%	2	21

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