



Expanding tree cover on farms: what matters to farmers?

A guide for advisors



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Purpose of this guide

This guide draws on three years of research with farmers from across England and has been developed in collaboration with farm advisors from the Forestry Commission and Natural England. It intends to help advisors to think through what farmers value and consider how these values can inform conversations about increasing tree cover on farms. To find out more about the research behind the evidence, see page 2.

We know that advisors already have expertise in understanding farmers and supporting them to deliver for the environment. Here are some important tips we have learnt from our conversations with advisors:

- **Building rapport and trust over time** is fundamental to the advice relationship. Each advisor has their own way of starting the relationship on a good footing, but farm visits, demonstrating a knowledge of farming, and expressing a willingness to learn about how the farmer has done things are particularly important.
- **Demonstrating expertise is an important part of building trust and gaining respect from farmers.** This expertise may be scientific (e.g. ecology-, hydrology-, or soil-related) or it may relate to legislation and grant scheme design.
- **Let farmers lead the conversation** and gain an understanding of their motivations, ideas, and issues on the farm. Gaining this bigger picture creates opportunities to bring trees into the conversation indirectly in ways that complement what a farmer may be looking for. For example, this might be in relation to an issue a farmer is having in another area (e.g. flooding or soil health).
- Avoid information overload and consider **translating government guidance into more accessible formats.** It is also useful to have **different forms of evidence and information** to hand. For example, some farmers may respond well to statistics on specific benefits of trees on farms, while others might prefer visual representations or broader descriptions.
- Always try to **share evidence that is most relevant to the geographical and farming context** (e.g. size, landscape, soil type, management objectives).

This guide is designed to complement advisors' existing knowledge, to support learning and development, and to encourage the discussion of values between practitioners, and potentially with farmers themselves.

The guide could be useful in the following ways:

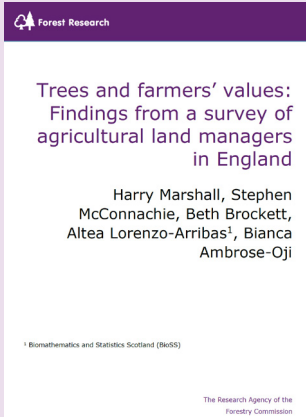
- To provide insights into how values influence farmers' views on trees and tree cover expansion
- To inform and help with planning of discussions with farmers about increasing tree cover on their farms
- As a prompt for discussion with other practitioners on 'what works' when encouraging tree cover expansion on farms.

This guide was developed through collaboration with farm advisors from the Forestry Commission and Natural England. The input and feedback of advisors was facilitated through a series of one-on-one interviews and group discussions.

Where the evidence comes from

Our research has explored what matters to farmers and how their values fit (or don't) with expanding tree cover on their farms. This has involved reviewing existing evidence and conducting 69 interviews, 2 focus groups, and a survey of 393 farmers across England. We have spoken with farmers from a range of backgrounds, including different farm business types, farm sizes, regions, age groups, genders, and career lengths. We have also explored how values and behaviour change over time by carrying out a series of in-depth, biographical interviews with eight farmers. While we have not excluded any specific tree contexts (e.g. hedgerows), our focus has primarily been on integrating trees into farming.

Previous research



Farmer survey

In 2022, we completed a survey of farmers in England. The survey explored how important different values are to farmers, both in general and regarding expanding and enhancing tree cover.

Download the report

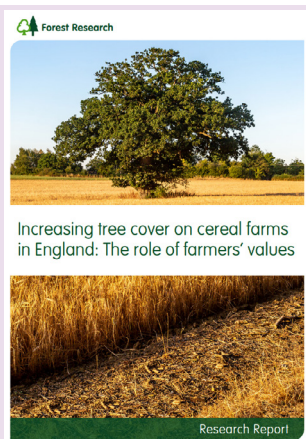


Dairy farmer focus

We have explored values in the context of dairy farming, producing a Research Report and an In Brief.

Download the Research Report

Download the In Brief



Cereal/arable farmer focus

We have explored values in the context of cereal/arable farming, producing a Research Report and an In Brief.

Download the Research Report

Download the In Brief



Farmer journeys

We have conducted in-depth, biographical research with eight diverse farmers/farming families who have substantially increased the number of trees on their farms. This work explores how values and behaviour change over time. We published four case studies in late 2023 and a further four in early 2025.

Download the 2023 case studies

Download the 2025 case studies

What are values and why are they important?

Farmers make decisions about growing trees on farms based on a complex variety of factors. Alongside economic considerations and agronomic constraints, farmers' perspectives on increasing tree cover are significantly shaped by the values they hold.

Values can be understood as an expression of **what matters to people**, or what they consider to be good and important in life. For example, farmers may value their role as food producers, how a landscape looks and feels, or their relationship with the local community.

Values have a **strong influence on attitudes and behaviours**. Understanding the range of values held by farmers in relation to trees allows us to learn how, when, and where farmers may embrace having trees on their land.

'For a lot of farmers, the bottom line is important but not everything.'

Forestry Commission Land Use Advisor

The core values held by farmers may change relatively little over time, but it can also take time for each farmer to fully understand the connection between their farming practices and the things that are important to them. Each farmer may approach their values in a slightly different way and your view of caring for the environment may be a bit different to theirs. This guide aims to show that there will always be some common ground to explore.

Suggested questions to prompt conversations about what matters to farmers

- What do you enjoy about farming?
- Do you think there is a 'right' way to farm? Or a wrong way? Have you always felt this way, or have your views changed over time?
- How do you see your role as a farmer in this landscape?
- What does a healthy farm mean to you?
- How do concerns about livestock or crop health impact your decision-making on the farm?
- Is there anything that is stopping you from farming in the way that you would ideally like to?
- Has anyone or anything influenced how you feel about trees in relation to your farming? Has this changed over time?
- How do you think about the environment in relation to your farming practices? How do trees fit in with this approach?



What matters to farmers in relation to tree cover expansion?

The table below summarises a range of interconnected themes we identified through interviews with farmers relating to the things that farmers may value in relation to increasing tree cover on their land. In our survey of 393 farmers, farmers scored all of these themes highly. The most important themes in relation to planting trees on farms appear to be 'farm health' closely followed by 'food production' and 'farm business'. You can find more details on the survey results in the [associated report](#).

The following themes can be used as topics of conversation that you might explore with farmers in order to tease out the variety of things that matter to them. Bear in mind that each theme will likely mean something a bit different to every farmer. Many of the themes and values within them are also linked, so be prepared to move between themes and explore the links from the farmer's perspective. See the next section for how these values present opportunities for expanding tree cover.



Landscape relationship

How the landscape looks and feels and how it should look and feel. For example, appreciation of specific trees, a desire to preserve local landscape characteristics, or just enjoying the landscape.



Farm business

Running a good business. This likely includes profitability but may also involve ideas of what it means to run the business in a right or proper way. For example, producing quality food, continuity for the next generation, and sustainability of the business (economic, social, and environmental).



Farming identity

What it means to be a farmer. For example, the farming way of life, being part of a farming or local community, and respecting tradition and established ways of doing things.



Social influence

Caring what others think, feeling valued, being listened to. This could include how farmers want to be seen by others in their community and by the wider public. It also includes farmers wanting to be recognised for their skills and expertise.



Environmental values

Concern for the state of the wider environment. For example, this may relate to wildlife and biodiversity or a sense of stewardship.



Food production

Producing food. For example, the satisfaction, sense of purpose, and responsibility associated with producing food.



Farm health

The sustainability of the farm itself, including concern for the health of crops, livestock, and soils.

Opportunities for expanding tree cover

Considering the broad range of things that farmers value will help with identifying opportunities for and barriers to expanding tree cover on farms. This section explores opportunities for how expanding tree cover on farms may align with what farmers value. These opportunities are accompanied by illustrative quotes from our interviews with farmers and other values which could be related to them.

Opportunity: Farmers highly value the health of their crops and animals and want to create a resilient farming environment and business

Relation to tree cover expansion



Trees can play a role in providing animals with shade and forage and protecting crops and soil from heavy rain, windblow, and extreme heat.

Related themes



Farm health and Farm business: Getting to know how the farmer thinks about the health of their farm and how it is linked to the farm business can help you to understand how trees might support their vision.



Food production: Tapping into the responsibility farmers feel for food production provides opportunities to highlight the positive impact trees can have for crop health and yields.

Quotes from farmers

'There's got to be some thought for the long-term future, especially looking after soil. It's the old thing, we all survive because of six inches of soil and the fact that it rains... we all need to be protective of the soil as much as we can, if not for ourselves, for our next generation and the generation after that.'

Murray (Cereals, South East, 201–500 ha)

'We had actually lost two acres of sugar beet to windblow. I mean, hedgerows are one of those things that helps break the wind up... and trees.'

Arthur (Cereals, East, 101–200 ha)



Opportunity: Marginal areas may be sites for alternative uses of land

Relation to tree cover expansion



Tree planting may be viewed as a viable activity on land that is difficult to farm.

Related themes



Environmental values: Appealing to a farmer's interest in the wildlife on the farm can provide an avenue for exploring how planting trees on marginal land can enhance the biodiversity of the farming landscape.



Farm business: Expanding tree cover in marginal areas may appeal to farmers who are reluctant to take land out of agricultural production but want to farm in a more nature-friendly way.

Quotes from farmers

'A lot of people have bits of farm which you try and farm it because it's there, but it's a pain in the arse. It's where you're going to get stuck, it's where your crops are not going to grow... I think there's a huge, missed opportunity with that for planting trees.'

George (Dairy, South West, 101–200 ha)

'The margins around the fields are intensively managed for wildlife, whether that's birds, bees, insects, whatever. So we put the same attention to detail in the environmental stuff as we do in the cropping... it's a good synergy.'

Aaron (Cereals, East Midlands, 101–200 ha)



Opportunity: Farmers enjoy seeing trees in the landscape and can value them for aesthetic, personal, or historical reasons

Relation to tree cover expansion



Trees can play a role in a farmer's desire to preserve, restore, or improve the landscape.

Related themes



Landscape relationship: Knowledge of local landscape characteristics can inform your understanding of which tree species and locations a farmer may perceive as appropriate or desirable to plant.



Farming identity: Exploring how predecessors have shaped the landscape can highlight which landscape features farmers feel a responsibility to preserve or restore.

Quotes from farmers

'That's what I have inherited, all the trees and hedges, that's the package if you like. They're here, they've always been here, and we would be disappointed if they weren't here.'

John (Cereals, South East, 501+ ha)

'The person who owned it before just ripped out every hedge there was. I've got a plan to replant some of the hedges because it just looks horrible. The hedges are there for a reason.'

Allan (Dairy, South East, 201–500 ha)



Opportunity: Farmers often have an interest in encouraging the presence of specific wildlife or habitats on their farm.

Relation to tree cover expansion



Trees can play a role in providing and connecting habitats for the wildlife they want to see on their farms.

Related themes



Social influence: Understanding how a farmer sees their relationship with the public presents an opportunity to explore how planting trees for wildlife conservation can provide reputational benefits to the farmer from the wider community.



Farm health: Getting to know how the farmer thinks about the health of their farm and how it is linked to biodiversity can help you to understand how trees might support their vision.

Quotes from farmers

'The shelterbelts, that's where the herons nest, and you've got smaller birds nesting. They're getting the berries and that, getting their feed from the shelterbelts rather than eating the crops.'

Andy (Dairy, South West, 101–200 ha)

'I think enhancing the pathways and the habitats that we have will help beneficials and, hopefully, be part of the reason why we can use less insecticides.'

Callum (Cereals, West Midlands, 201–500 ha)

'I like having the areas of trees, I think it's good for wildlife, it just enhances the area in general.'

Murray (Cereals, South East, 201–500 ha)



Opportunity: Farmers value their role as custodians of their land and express a sense of responsibility to the next generation and the public more broadly

Relation to tree cover expansion



Expanding tree cover can provide farmers with an opportunity to act on their desire to preserve or improve the land and to create a sense of meaningful environmental impact.

Related themes



Social influence: Understanding how a farmer sees their relationship with the public presents an opportunity to highlight how expanding tree cover can be a way for farmers to both make a meaningful contribution to environmental impacts and to receive recognition for their care for the environment.



Environmental values: Highlighting the role that trees can play in mitigating and adapting to the impacts of climate change can be a way of tapping into farmers' concerns and sense of responsibility regarding environmental issues.

Quotes from farmers

'We manage so much of the landscape that we have to take responsibility for what people think of what we do.'

Sarah (Dairy, South West, 201–500 ha)

'What do we farmers manage, 70% of the land in the country? So I think it would be a bit tone deaf to not acknowledge that we have a major role in doing good, enhancing habitat or trying to fix carbon or undo some of what has been done... I think it's just the right thing to do, really.'

Callum (Cereals, West Midlands, 201–500 ha)

'As a landowner and a farmer, I want to be seen to be doing the right thing. And so, I suppose, the tree planting initiative was really started by me... so that you portrayed this, you know, this very wholesome kind of farm.'

George (Dairy, South West, 101–200 ha)



Opportunity: Working conditions and practices influence the health and wellbeing of farmers

Relation to tree cover expansion



Trees may be a valued constituent of the working environment which contribute positively to the mental wellbeing of the farmer.

Related themes



Landscape relationship: Understanding how trees make farmers feel can open up a conversation about the emotional and wellbeing benefits of having trees in the farming landscape.



Farm health: Highlighting the wellbeing benefits associated with trees can prompt a discussion around the importance of the farmer's wellbeing as a facet of overall farm health.

Quotes from farmers

'There's got to be some thought for the long-term future, especially looking after soil. It's the old thing, we all survive because of six inches of soil and the fact that it rains... we all need to be protective of the soil as much as we can, if not for ourselves, for our next generation and the generation after that.'

Murray (Cereals, South East, 201–500 ha)

'We had actually lost two acres of sugar beet to windblow. I mean, hedgerows are one of those things that helps break the wind up... and trees.'

Arthur (Cereals, East, 101–200 ha)



Barriers to expanding tree cover

While values present opportunities, they can also act as barriers. Even in cases where farmers would like to increase tree cover, this desire may conflict with other things they care about, and other context-specific factors may also limit their ability to act. Below are some of the key barriers we found over the course of our research. While mitigating some of these barriers will likely be outside an advisor's remit, it is useful to be aware of how they might feed into a farmer's willingness or ability to expand tree cover.

Barrier	Example quote from farmers
Trees may not fit with how farmers want to farm or how they see their role. For example, trees can be perceived to 'get in the way' of food production and take up valuable productive land. Producing food is important to farmers' identities as well as being their livelihood and therefore tree planting may be seen to contradict these values.	<i>'I do like trees, but I still think as landowners of good arable land, we have a moral obligation to produce food.'</i> Murray (Cereals, South East, 201–500 ha)
Farmers may be unsure or unconvinced about how trees may impact their practice – for instance, how trees may benefit or hinder livestock or crop health.	<i>'Unless you get enough rainfall at the peak rainfall period or whatever on the crop, I don't know quite what the yields will be like because the trees are going to take quite a lot of water. Normally, you find that wheat under trees is actually stunted because you have a lot of root under the ground, and that's taking the moisture.'</i> Arthur (Cereals, East, 101–200 ha)
Economic costs including the time, labour, and capital of sourcing and planting trees, as well as the related cost of taking land out of agricultural production, can limit farmers' willingness to expand tree cover. The trade-offs between tree-planting and business considerations are perceived as riskier by those in a less financially secure position or who have smaller farms.	<i>'So, when I've got two things: A, time and B, money, I plant trees and look after them. When I don't have money and I don't have time, I don't. You have to look after them and that's time you haven't got.'</i> Henry (Dairy, North West, 101–200 ha)
Tenancy status can constrain farmers' ability to increase tree cover on their land.	<i>'We can't plant trees on the land because of the landlord. It's very much their decision. As a tenant we can put them in the hedgerows and gap up.'</i> Ian (Dairy, South West, 201–500 ha)
Farmers can find grant schemes to be complex and time-consuming. Additionally, incentives may not always fit with the size and scope of farmers' aims for tree cover expansion on their farms. Uncertainty around possible changes to grant schemes can impact farmers' decision-making about which schemes to apply for and when.	<i>'There's so much legislation, you've now got to try and comply with everyone's requirements. But the problem is everyone doesn't know what each other's requirements are, and there's such a cross over between requirements.'</i> Arthur (Cereals, East, 101–200 ha)
Where increasing tree cover on farms is interpreted as part of a new farm enterprise (e.g. growing tree crops) the entry to new markets can create uncertainties for farmers due to the perceived skills and expertise required.	<i>'You start putting in fruit trees, who is picking those? Where are we selling those apples or whatever it is? They're putting in nuts or something like this, again, you need to find a market for all this.'</i> Murray (Cereals, South East, 201–500 ha)

Useful sources of further information

The Forestry Commission – www.gov.uk/government/organisations/forestry-commission

The Soil Association – www.soilassociation.org

The Woodland Trust – www.woodlandtrust.org.uk

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