



COUNTRYSIDE
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A Realist Evaluation of Local Scale Advice for Nature Friendly Farming

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Farming and land management advice is essential for the successful delivery of key environmental policies and compliance with regulations that will improve nature. This research strengthens the existing evidence base about how local advice can improve the implementation of nature friendly farming, use spatial targeting, and help deliver a more coherent regulatory and policy landscape.

Rapid Realist Review

The research completed a rapid realist review to develop initial programme theories. These programme theories explain what works, for whom, under what circumstances and how. The review included UK-based studies published from 2008 onwards and comprised peer-reviewed articles, government and agency publications, NGO reports, and grey literature. Articles were published in English and addressed advisory models, spatial priorities, mechanisms of delivery and/or environmental outcomes. The search and screening process returned 302 records, of which 82 were included in the review. From this, four context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) configurations which directly align with the main research questions were created, in addition to five cross-cutting CMO configurations.

Methods

The CMO configurations were tested and refined through realist evaluation. Semi-structured interviews with 17 advisors were completed to examine the different contexts in which advice is given, explore how advisors approach spatial targeting, navigate providing coherent advice and ensure their knowledge is current. In addition to interviews with advisors, feedback from 16 advice users (farmers and land managers) was collected via feedback forms (13) or short interviews (3) to sense check the validity of the findings. Evidence from the interviews was organised against each of the CMOs and reviewed to understand the impact of differing contexts on the mechanisms and outcomes in the examples given by participants.

Findings

Advisors and advice users considered four of the five cross-cutting CMOs to be foundational for effective advice delivery. Advisors emphasised the importance of trust, long-term engagement, and maintaining both contextual and technical relevance to local and national agri-environmental aims. These factors enabled them to address challenges in the advisory landscape and help farmers translate regional and national plans into farm-specific actions and adopt new practices. Farmer groups were also found to inspire confidence to adopt new practices in advice users. Collective approaches have the potential to lead to tangible landscape-scale change when routes to implementation were available.

Conclusion and recommendations

Overall, the research demonstrates what works for the delivery and implementation of local scale advice, in what contexts and for whom. The report concludes with the following refined CMO configurations:

1. **Spatial targeting:** When advisory services are spatially targeted to priority locations and delivered by trusted local actors who tailor guidance to local conditions including the environmental and farming contexts, advice users perceive advice as highly relevant, credible and reason that it is something they can confidently act upon, leading to greater advice user engagement, adoption and sustained implementation of recommended practices which results in environmental and farm business improvements.
2. **Alignment with wider goals:** Where locally embedded advisors interpret regional/national priorities (Local Nature Recovery Strategies, catchment plans) into farm-specific actions through tailored support, and convene groups to coordinate across holdings and show how individual efforts contribute to shared landscape outcomes, advice users understand how their actions contribute to wider goals and develop shared values and purpose, increasing advice user participation and leading to more effective delivery of locally relevant practices.
3. **Coherence:** When advisors have support to coordinate and align messages across organisations, projects and funding streams, advice users receive consistent, holistic guidance, meaning they feel reassured and confident in their ability to act on advice, which leads to greater adoption of recommended practices and efficiency of delivery at a landscape scale.
4. **Effectiveness:** Where advisory presence is regular, continuous and trusted and combines group learning and evidence of impact with targeted one-to-one and enabling incentives, advice users experience advice as doable and valuable and recognise the recommendations as both practical and worthwhile for their farm, so they take up more agri-environment options, improve their compliance, and ultimately deliver environmental gains.
5. **Trust and credibility:** Where advisors are locally embedded, impartial, and demonstrate competence through both technical knowledge and relational understanding, advice users perceive collective shared values and motivations for their land and trust the advice, so take up more of the recommended agri-environment options.
6. **Continuity and stability:** When delivery systems are stable and long-term and advisors bring strong interpersonal and technical skills, advice users develop confidence and familiarity with advisors over time, gaining evidence that advice works for their farm, which supports sustained practice and behaviour change and improves environmental outcomes.
7. **Advice user agency:** When participatory and user-led design processes are well-supported across local, regional and national levels, advice users perceive resulting actions as their own decisions rather than external requirements and develop a strong sense of ownership, leading to commitment and follow-through for improved environmental outcomes.
8. **Knowledge integration:** Where advisors integrate up to date scientific evidence with advice users' experiential and place-based knowledge, advice users perceive advice

as credible, feasible, acceptable to the farm business, and likely to be effective, so they are more likely to adopt the recommended actions.

- 9. Advisor currency:** When advisors demonstrate up-to-date technical knowledge, contextual understanding and/or recognised accreditation, advice users view guidance as temporally and geographically relevant, reflecting best practices and actionable, fitting with their farms' circumstances, leading to advice users adopting relevant and innovative actions and implementing them to a high quality.

It makes the following recommendations for advice delivery:

1. Invest in the existing network of farmer groups;
2. Provide sufficient and consistent funding so that advice on nature friendly farming can be actioned;
3. Support advisors' continuing professional development; and
4. Create mechanisms to support the coordination of advice.

In addition, specific recommendations that the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) can take to champion more effective advisory services within its statutory remit are provided. These are presented in line with the four main types of activity that the OEP undertakes as part of its defined powers and duties: scrutinising Environmental Improvement Plans and targets, scrutinising environmental law, advising government on environmental law, and enforcing against failures to comply with environmental law.

1. Introduction

Farming and land management advice is essential for the successful delivery of key environmental policies and compliance with regulations that will improve nature. Breyer et al. (2020) and Short et al. (2022) found that local advice, delivered through mechanisms such as the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund, can support the implementation of agri-environment scheme options, and promote scheme uptake and option coherence. Barkley et al. (2025) confirmed what other studies have found, that advice and guidance is sought out by a significant proportion of agri-environment agreement holders, and this is not limited to those with less land management experience. This research demonstrated that agreement holders are reliant on, or choose to request, a wide range of sources of advice and guidance. This contributes to and further fragments the nature of advice provision across England.

Although there are positive examples of farming advice in England, such as those detailed above, the context and offer remain fragmented, difficult for advice users (in this report, farmers and land managers) to navigate, and sometimes inconsistent in their objectives (Chivers, 2021). Ongoing policy developments continue to affect the context in which farmers and land managers are operating, whilst reviews (such as the Corry review, 2025) demonstrate the importance of working with trusted partners in a complex regulatory landscape. Several recent reports have identified that effective advice is essential for the successful delivery of agri-environment schemes and compliance with farming regulations. In particular, the National Audit Office's review of Defra's Farming and Countryside Programme (2024) recommends a 'comprehensive and unified package of advice for farmers'.

The Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) has a statutory mandate that includes scrutinising Environmental Improvement Plans (EIPs), monitoring and reporting on the implementation of environmental law, advising government on changes to environmental law, and enforcing compliance. Strengthening the evidence base on effective advisory services directly supports these duties: well-targeted, high-quality advice can improve the delivery of EIPs and environmental law on the ground.

In the context of the government's EIP 2023 (and its expected 2025 update), which set out ambitious goals for nature recovery and sustainable farming, understanding "what works" in farm advice is crucial for bridging policy targets with on-farm action. The OEP commissioned this research to inform its oversight of agri-environment schemes and to guide future advisory reforms in line with its mission to protect and improve the environment. To assess "what works", for whom, under what circumstances and how, the research employs a realist evaluation to develop and refine programme theories. The programme theories are expressed as configurations of context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) hypotheses (HM Treasury, 2025).

The research aimed to strengthen the existing evidence base about how local scale advice can improve the implementation of nature friendly farming. Additionally, the research aimed to explore how local scale advice can utilise spatial targeting and help deliver a more coherent regulatory and policy landscape. In each case, the research aimed to understand not just whether an intervention works, but how, for whom, and under what circumstances through the development of CMO configurations to highlight underlying causal pathways through realist

evaluation. To address these aims, the research first developed programme theories to test in response to four key research questions (RQ):

1. How can local scale advice be spatially targeted in terms of where it is delivered and what it advises? (Spatiality)
2. How can local scale advice help connect farm-level contexts to regional and national environmental priorities? (Alignment)
3. How can local scale advice bring multiple areas of advice together to achieve greater coherence and efficiency? (Coherence)
4. How can local scale advice improve environmental outcomes through agri-environment agreements and regulatory compliance? (Effectiveness)

To do so, the research utilised a Rapid Realist Review (RRR) to develop initial programme theories. An overview of the RRR and the programme theories is provided in section 2. This was followed by semi-structured interviews, through which the theories were tested and refined. The theories were further affirmed through feedback from advice users. The methods and their limitations are explained in section 3. A realist evaluation of the interview findings is presented in section 4. This section maps the evidence onto each of the theories and presents refined versions in each case. The report concludes in section 5, with a reflection on the key findings and recommendations.

2. Identifying CMO configurations – Rapid Realist Review

The rapid realist review (RRR) examined how advice works, for whom, and under what circumstances, with the aim of identifying the mechanisms that underpin effective advisory systems and the contexts in which they operate.

The RRR synthesises evidence using CMO configurations, which explain not just whether an intervention works, but how, for whom, and under what circumstances. Context (C) refers to the conditions in which an intervention takes place, Mechanism (M) captures the processes or reasoning that the intervention triggers, and Outcome (O) describes the resulting effects. Together, the CMO configurations can be used to develop programme theories, or hypotheses, about how advice is expected to work and what outcomes will be generated, depending on the contextual influences and underlying mechanisms. This highlights the underlying causal pathways, enabling transferable insights to be drawn for policy and practice.

The review included UK-based studies published from 2008 onwards (post-Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) health check), with some international examples where transferable. Eligible sources comprised peer-reviewed articles, government and agency publications, NGO reports, and grey literature, provided they were published in English and addressed advisory models, spatial priorities, mechanisms of delivery, or environmental outcomes.

The search and screening process identified 302 records, of which 82 were included in the review. The key word search strategies did not pick up many of the Brockett et al. (2019) and OEP-provided resources because they were either not publicly available or not indexed. Any overlapping references were accounted for during the de-duplication and screening steps. From the 82 records included, 98 CMO configurations were extracted and subsequently synthesised (see Figure 1)¹.

¹ The full Rapid Realist Review methodology and findings will be published as an open access, peer-reviewed article. The link to this article will be made available following its publication.

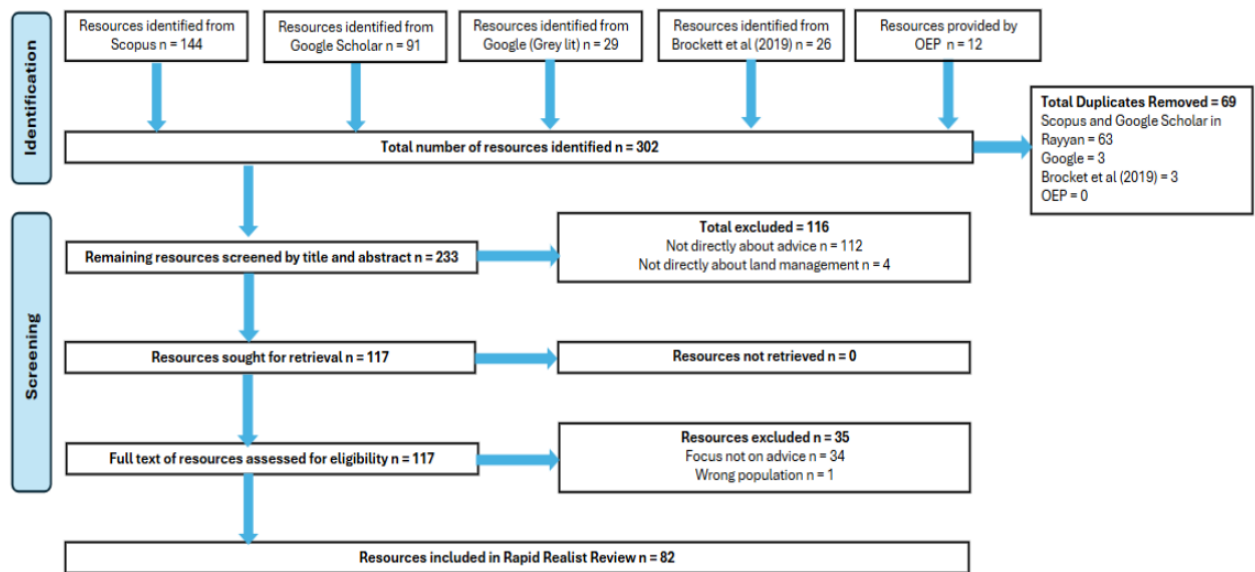


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram detailing search and screening results for this rapid realist review.

Data were extracted using a structured template, recording study details, CMO components, quality assessment, implications and recommendations. Through this process, four core CMOs that directly align with the review questions and offer the strongest explanatory insights were distilled. From this point on in the report, each CMO is assigned a number (CMO1, CMO2, etc...) and these numbers will be used throughout the analysis.

2.1. Spatiality

RQ1: How can local scale advice be spatially targeted in terms of where it is delivered and what it advises?

This question focuses on the geographical targeting and tailoring of advice, and how this can ensure that advice is delivered in the right places (such as priority catchments or landscapes) and that its content fits local environmental and farming contexts. Evidence in the dataset shows spatially targeted approaches are crucial for relevance and impact.

A consistent finding of the RRR is that advisory efforts yield greater impact when they are geographically focused and context-specific, and this is strongly affirmed by wider UK evidence, for example, from the Local Convenor tests (FWAG Southwest 2024; High Weald NLP, 2024; Peak District NPA, 2024; Pilio 2024; Westcountry Rivers Trust, 2024). Studies have shown that place-based approaches can produce outsized gains, for instance, water pollution mitigation advice delivered in priority catchments has led to demonstrable water quality improvements (Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF) Evidence Team, 2014). Equally important is local tailoring of content. Numerous UK case studies have noted that “one-size-fits-all” guidance often fails to motivate change, whereas advice reflecting local soils, climates, and farm systems is far more likely to be perceived as relevant and acted upon (Mills et al., 2011; Defra, 2022). The evidence shows that locally embedded advisors and convenors, who

have established relationships and a strong understanding of local contexts, consistently achieve higher levels of engagement (Brockett et al, 2019; Chivers, 2021).

The resulting CMO configuration for spatiality is:

CMO1: When advisory services are spatially targeted to priority locations and delivered by trusted local actors who tailor guidance to local conditions (Context), users perceive advice as highly relevant and credible (Mechanism: salience and trust), leading to greater engagement and adoption of recommended practices where they matter most (Outcome).

2.2. Alignment

RQ2: How can local scale advice help connect farm-level contexts to regional and national environmental priorities?

Alignment refers to how local advice bridges the gap between what happens on individual farms and broader policy priorities. This research question was examined to understand how this approach can ensure practices contribute to regional, national, or global environmental goals. The RRR showed that alignment improves when advice delivery, funding, and governance are configured to make these links explicit.

The literature on connecting farm contexts to regional/national goals yielded insights into the “boundary-spanning” role of advisors, strongly supported by examples in both the UK and Europe. Our review found that on-the-ground facilitators or convenors can effectively interpret broad targets (like those in Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) or the Environmental Improvement Plan) into concrete, farm-specific plans. The RRR underscores a critical point: when advisory services bridge the gap between top-down targets and bottom-up action, environmental policies become far more implementable on the ground. The literature also showed that it is crucial for these individual farm plans to be connected and coordinated by a facilitator or convenor, who can support collective planning at the landscape-level and demonstrate the impact of this alignment at the regional/national level. Evidence from farmer clusters, catchment partnerships, and convenor-led trials shows that these roles enable collective planning and more coherent action towards common targets (High Weald NLP, 2024; Peak District NPA, 2024; FWAG Southwest, 2024; Westcountry Rivers Trust, 2024; Pilio, 2024).

The resulting CMO configuration regarding the role of advice in alignment is:

CMO2: Where advisors interpret regional/national priorities (LNRS, catchment plans) into farm-specific actions and convene groups to coordinate across holdings (Context), advice users see how their actions contribute to wider goals (Mechanism: goal alignment & perceived contribution), increasing participation and delivery of landscape-relevant practices (Outcome).

2.3. Coherence

RQ3: How can local scale advice bring multiple areas of advice together to achieve greater coherence and efficiency?

This research question explores how the integration of advice across different domains (such as soil, water, biodiversity, productivity, compliance) and providers (public, private, NGO), may reduce fragmentation and duplication while creating a more streamlined, holistic advisory system, and considers the extent to which opportunities for coherence are developed.

Advice users commonly receive advice from multiple sources (government officers, agronomists, environmental NGOs, industry consultants) each often focusing on separate issues (water, soil, habitat, regulation) which can sometimes lead to duplication or uncoordinated messages (Chivers, 2021; Vrain and Lovett, 2016), which in turn can undermine user confidence (Chivers, 2021). Notably, the RRR did not suggest that having multiple actors is inherently bad, but it emphasised coordination as the remedy. Indeed, there is evidence that advice users benefit most when advice is not only consistent but also integrates multiple forms of knowledge - practical, scientific, and policy-based (Prager et al., 2017) This adds nuance to the debate on pluralistic extension systems (Sutherland et al., 2013): diversity of provision must be coupled with integration mechanisms. Our findings show that when different advisory programs align their content, timing, and objectives, advice users experience a “one-stop-shop” effect and a more seamless support system. The findings show that coherence requires strategic coordination at government level.

The CMO configuration for advice coherence is:

CMO3: When advisory actors coordinate and align messages (Context), advice users receive consistent, holistic guidance (Mechanism: reduced cognitive load & message coherence), which improves adoption and efficiency of delivery (Outcome).

2.4. Effectiveness

RQ4: How can local scale advice improve environmental outcomes through agri-environment agreements and regulatory compliance?

The final research question explores how advice may deliver measurable improvements in environmental outcomes, for example, by enhancing farmer uptake, ensuring compliance, improved environmental performance and supporting more ambitious action.

Continuity and embedded presence are central to sustained engagement (Sutherland, 2013; Chivers, 2021). Evaluations consistently show that trusted local advisors, such as CSF officers and convenors, generate higher uptake because their ongoing presence builds relationships, credibility, and accountability. Stop-start or short-term provision, by contrast, undermines trust and reduces follow-through (CSF Evidence Team, 2014; Defra, 2022; NAO, 2024).

The RRR found that the most effective strategies blend both one-to-one advice and group-based learning. Group-based methods (farmer field schools, discussion groups, peer networks) are powerful for building knowledge, awareness, and social norms. They create a sense of community, reduce the isolation in decision-making, and can spark enthusiasm through peer inspiration (Šūmane et al., 2018). The motivation generated by these group approaches often needs to be supported by individualised advice on specific topics, for example, a workshop might persuade an advice user of the importance of nutrient management, but a one-on-one visit is usually needed to tailor a nutrient plan to that person's fields and to overcome any unique barriers they face (CSF Evidence Team, 2014). Advice is most powerful when supported by enabling financial mechanisms; it helps advice users understand what to do and why it matters, while incentives make adoption feasible and worthwhile. In sum, effective advice isn't just about content, but the pedagogy and support structure through which that content is conveyed.

The resulting CMO configuration is:

CMO4: Where advisory presence is continuous and trusted and combines group learning with targeted one-to-one and enabling incentives (Context), advice users experience advice as doable and worthwhile (Mechanism: capability, confidence, reduced risk), yielding higher uptake, compliance, and environmental gains (Outcome).

2.5. Cross-cutting CMO configurations

In addition to the four review questions, the RRR identified a set of CMOs that operate across all domains of advisory delivery. These cross-cutting CMOs are not about the content of advice (spatial, aligned, coherent, or effective), but rather about the enabling conditions that make any form of advice more likely to succeed. Elements of these mechanisms were evident and repeatedly observed across the four thematic CMOs, for example, trust and credibility underpinning spatial targeting, alignment, and effectiveness; or integration of knowledge appearing in both coherence and effectiveness domains. Their recurrence across diverse contexts reinforces their importance as system-wide enablers of successful advice delivery.

The five cross-cutting CMOs are:

CMO5: Trust and credibility

Where advisors are locally embedded and perceived as competent and impartial (Context), advice users trust the advice (Mechanism), increasing uptake and cooperation (Outcome).

CMO6: Continuity and stability

When delivery systems are stable and long-term (Context), relationships and learning compound over time (Mechanism), supporting sustained practice change and environmental outcomes (Outcome).

CMO7: Advice user agency

With participatory and user-led design (Context), advice users perceive advice as “theirs” (Mechanism), increasing commitment and follow-through (Outcome).

CMO8: Knowledge integration

Where advisors integrate scientific evidence with local experiential knowledge (Context), advice is seen as credible and feasible (Mechanism), leading to greater adoption (Outcome).

CMO9: Advisor currency

If advisors are current both technically and contextually (Context), advice users view guidance as relevant and actionable (Mechanism), improving scheme uptake and outcomes (Outcome).

In summary, the RRR revealed that where and how advice is delivered locally greatly influences its success. Spatially targeted, context-rich advisory approaches (Spatiality) create relevance; aligning farm advice with broader goals (Alignment) gives advice a clear purpose; integrating multiple advice streams (Coherence) makes it efficient; and fostering trust and actionable guidance (Effectiveness) turns advice into real-world improvements.

3. Refining the CMO configurations – Methods

Following the RRR, the CMO configurations were tested in interviews with 17 advisors (Table 1). The research took a purposeful sampling approach, with the research team contacting advice providers in areas where they had most recently made connections. In taking this approach, the research team had a good idea of potential participants' availability to take part in the research, and ensured participants could provide relevant insight into the research questions. Participants represent 14 organisations and reflect a range of experience, advice types, topics, and geographic locations.

Table 1: Advisor participant details

Participant ID	Region	Focus of advice	Funding mechanism
A01	South-west	Nature recovery (commons and SSSIs)	Public
A02	South-west	Water and wetland management	Public and private
A03	South-west	Nature recovery, project management	Public
A04	South-east	AES, arable and grassland	Private
A05	South-west	Facilitation, ecology and conservation	Public
A06	National	Land management, farm business	Private
A07	Midlands	Land management, farm business	Private
A08	South-west	Facilitation, nature recovery	Public and private
A09	South-east	Facilitation, nature recovery (birds)	Public
A10	South-east	AES, land management	Public
A11	South-west	Catchment-scale nature recovery	Public
A12	North-east	Facilitation, nature recovery	Public and private
A13	South-east	Facilitation, nature recovery	Public and private
A14	North-east	Nature recovery (meadows focus)	Public
A15	South-east	Facilitation, nature recovery	Public and private
A16	South-east	Catchment-scale, floodplain habitats	Public and private
A17	Midlands	Natural flood management	Public and private

The interview questions were developed to explore the differing contexts in which advice is given, from different perspectives, and considered how advisors approach spatial targeting, navigate providing coherent advice, and ensure their knowledge is current. The interview schedule comprised five parts, each of which captured evidence relating to specific CMO configuration. In addition to interviews with advisors, feedback from 16 advice users was collected via short feedback forms on each of the core CMOs at a cluster event in the south-east (13) and through short interviews with 3 advice users (Table 2) to sense check the validity of the findings.

Table 2: Advice user participant details

Participant ID	Region	Farm type	Farm size (ha)	Agri-environment agreements
LM1 and 2	South-east	Charitable land-management body (common grazing, chalk stream and species-rich unimproved pasture)	170	Significant areas in Higher Level Stewardship and the Basic Payment Scheme. Currently applying for Countryside Stewardship Plus on key SSSI grassland parcels.
LM3	South-west	Low-intensity livestock	10	8ha in mid-tier Countryside Stewardship, Sustainable Farming Incentive soil and hedgerow management and preparing Sustainable Farming Incentive application for species-rich grassland.

Following the preparation of research materials (schedules, feedback forms, consent form, participant information sheet and debrief form), ethical approval for the research was granted from the University of Gloucestershire's Research Ethics Committee.

All interview data was uploaded to NVivo for analysis, with each CMO listed in section 2 used as a node for coding. The data was analysed, and evidence organised against each of the CMOs which emerged from the RRR. The evidence for each node was then reviewed to understand the extent to which it supported or refuted the CMOs. In addition, the impact of differing contexts, both enabling and inhibiting, on the mechanisms and outcomes present in the examples given by participants were also noted and the evidence for how or why different mechanisms are triggered in different contexts, generating different outcomes are described in section 4. The linkages between each CMO were also analysed, notably to understand how the cross-cutting CMOs identified in the RRR enabled the four core CMOs. The results of this analysis and the subsequent refinement of each CMO as a result of the evidence are provided in section 4.

3.1. Limitations

The sampling approach led to a geographical bias towards the south of the country; however, the research team's knowledge of advisors from these areas did ensure that participants represented the range of experience, advice type and topic, and delivery mechanism that were sought for the research. Despite this, we acknowledge that the final programme theories should be transferred to other areas of the country with caution, and with awareness of any geographically specific contexts which may subsequently affect mechanisms and outcomes.

Where responses were received, snowball sampling was also employed, with participants asked to share the interview request with colleagues within and beyond their organisation. On two occasions, this request was declined; participants commented that advice providers are commonly asked to take part in interviews, and that recently it has been very challenging to find the time to do so. In addition, there was a perceived reluctance to contribute to further research until the reality of agri-environment scheme provision changes. Following an initial round of invitations, from which 13 interviews were arranged, a further national canvas was completed through a network of advisors convened by a national NGO. This yielded two further

interviews. Two final interviews were arranged with contacts made at an event during the research timeframe, though again, this was in the south.

The difficulties of recruitment expressed by the two advisors above were shared by several more when asked to share an interview request with their clients. Therefore, the decision was made to triangulate the data from the interviews with advisors with a supplementary, though not representative, group of advice users. Had the findings from advice users' contributions been significantly different to those of advisors, further interviews would have been sought to ascertain how the CMO configurations differed for advice users.

4. Refining the CMO configurations – Findings

As found in recent Test and Trials (Defra, 2022; High Weald, 2024; Peak District NPA, 2024) and supported by academic literature (Mills et al., 2011; Sutherland et al., 2013; Šūmane et al., 2018; Hejnowicz et al., 2021), four of the five cross-cutting CMOs (CMO5, 6, 8, 9) were considered by participants as foundational in the delivery and implementation of advice. Advisors defined trust as a blend of competence, integrity, benevolence, and place-based knowledge, and this was reflected in all 16 advice users' responses. Trust is perceived as a mechanism that makes advice feel relevant, fair, and doable as it reduces perceived risk and simplifies choices. Advisors repeatedly emphasised that, in building trust, technical and contextual competence and honesty are non-negotiable foundations. As A01 stated: *"if you don't know something ... you can't lie your way out of it. A farmer can smell it a mile off"*, suggesting that credibility comes not from knowing everything, but from being honest about uncertainty and actively seeking solutions.

As Sutherland et al. (2013) suggest, participants also viewed continuity and relationship history as essential in building trust. Long-term engagement creates the conditions in which advice users are prepared to receive and implement advice; however, this can be difficult to achieve when funding is tied to short-term projects: *"relationships and trust are quite critical to that advice delivery, so we're chasing around for different funding to engage with farmers over as long a period as possible"* (A02). Although recognising the importance of continued training and accreditation in the advice sector, one advisor explained that advice users often value experience over formal credentials:

"You might have an advisor who's been doing the job for 30 years. Someone comes fresh from their training, has got all these qualifications, but you could argue that 30 years' experience would trump any newly qualified" (A09).

When commenting on the importance of continuity, participants also discussed the role of interpersonal skills in the advisor/advice user relationship, noting that *"[advisors] have access to [advice users'] lives in a way that other people don't... you see all kinds of things which are a privilege to share with people"* (A10). Another demonstrated their importance in a rapidly changing context: *"there are things that are really worrying...having somebody there who can give advice is really important"* (A14). Participants' evidence suggests that the development of these skills is as crucial as technical currency in ensuring advice users understand and feel comfortable with acting on their advice.

From the foundation developed through CMO5, 6, 8 and 9, advisors explained how it was possible to overcome the challenges of an often-fragmented advisory landscape (Vrain and Lovett, 2016; Chivers, 2021), to support advice users to understand how regional and national plans translate into farm-specific action, and to support the adoption of new practices (CMO1, 2 and 3). Evidence from the feedback form suggests that this should remain an important focus of advisory organisations, with 11 of 13 advice users commenting that they have received advice that was confusing or contradictory.

In addition, it was clear from those participants involved with farmer groups that their presence inspired confidence in advice users and led to tangible landscape-scale change when there were routes to delivery available, through capital funding or volunteer support (CMO4).

“That facilitation model, it was fantastic to bring a cohort together all looking at a similar issue across the landscape, but it didn’t allow for that one-to-one, so it made it really difficult for delivery... what we were able to do, which was quite an innovative thing to do... we would speak to the landowner and say, you know, “what is it that you wanted to do” and let’s say for example, they said, “I want to do some hedge planting”, [advisor’s organisation] were able to utilise their volunteers to actually deliver the work on the ground... and if we had the in house funds we could help them with the implementation too.” – A12

A12 remarks on funding for implementation. This was a common theme throughout the interviews, with all advisors commenting on the importance of securing funding to deliver agreed actions, as this is considered a key motivating factor in users acting on advice. When answering the question “What prevents advice from turning into action on your farm?”, 11 of the 13 advice users who completed the feedback form left comments related to time and money.

When asked whether advice itself should be funded by the advice users, public, or private money, participants’ responses were mixed, and the importance of understanding the specific contexts in which users may pay for advice, and those in which advice may be better funded through public or private means became clear. For example:

“Farmers often pay for advice when they think it’s going to help their profit margin, but I don’t think they would pay for advice on, you know, how to get more yellowhammers in their fields or something, which is what we’re paying for.” – A15.

The final cross-cutting CMO, advice user agency (7), was considered crucial in the delivery of outcomes from collaborative schemes too:

“It’s just bringing all those groups to hear each other’s opinions... just out on site or whatever, and then the farmers will suddenly come up with “oh, but we could do it this way, we could do this” and they become more creative... and coming up with novel techniques to, you know, to squash molinia with kind of upside down harrows and things so, you know, so there’s a lot of ingenuity out there and that’s great” – A03

Advice users concurred with this, with one quoting:

“The practical link between the targets you have at national and at regional and local level will only be reached if there’s this very bottom-up education and motivation at landscape scale to get people to act somewhat differently from what they would do... So, I think it’s made a huge difference, and it needs to continue.” – LM3.

Pages 18 to 40 present the evidence advisors shared relating to each CMO. Following a narrative reflection on each of the CMO configurations, the evidence is tabulated to demonstrate how advisors perceive different contexts may trigger different mechanisms and thus generate different outcomes. The contexts which enable progress towards nature friendly farming have been noted throughout as enabling (+) and those which hinder such progress

are labelled inhibiting (-). The evidence supporting each CMO configuration was then used to refine the initial programme theory developed during the RRR, resulting in a final CMO configuration that informs recommendations for local advice.

4.1. Spatial targeting

Spatiality refers to the geographical targeting and tailoring of advice, ensuring that advisory services are delivered in the right places (such as priority catchments or landscapes) and that advice content fits local environmental and farming contexts. A consistent finding of the RRR is that such targeting yields greater impact, ensuring limited resources generate maximum environmental benefit. Evidence grounded in the ecological and farm-system realities of particular places enables advisors to deliver recommendations that are perceived as relevant and feasible by advice users (Ingram, 2008; Mills et al., 2011; Šūmane et al., 2018). From a realist perspective, the variability of outcomes across contexts is not a weakness but a reflection of how mechanisms, such as trust, perceived fit, and legitimacy, operate differently under different local conditions.

Evidence from the interviews confirmed that advisors consider ‘local advice’ as more than simply geographic. Instead, participants perceived such advice to be defined by an extensive understanding of the local farming context, including farm business needs, community relationships and landscape-specific challenges, as Mills et al. (2011) suggest. Table 3 demonstrates how the interview evidence maps onto the CMO configuration for spatial targeting.

CMO5, 6, 8 and 9 are crucial in enabling this CMO, with the importance of trust and credibility clear in participants’ responses. Advisors described place-based knowledge, knowing the landscape, communities, and local farming context, as integral to being trusted. Users value advice that ‘fits’ the farm and community; as Advisor 02 explained, the goal is an *“integrated local delivery model... making advice relatable”*. When such contextual knowledge is visible, advisors become legitimate intermediaries who can translate policy into practice.

Table 3: CMO configurations and evidence pertaining to CMO1.

CMO1: When advisory services are spatially targeted to priority locations and delivered by trusted local actors who tailor guidance to local conditions, users perceive advice as highly relevant and credible, leading to greater engagement and adoption of recommended practices where they matter most.			
Context (enabling (+) and inhibiting (-))	Mechanism	Outcome	Evidence
Advice is tailored to the farm level (+)	Advice users understand the direct benefits of each option presented	Advice users are inspired to work for nature on their land and recommended practices are adopted and delivered to a high quality.	“If there's a chance that something very like local would benefit, like grey partridge or turtle dove from cultivated margins, obviously my job is to suggest that, but it's also to say the pros and cons of that option and try and persuade them... if they don't want to do it, then they're not going to put the effort in to get it in good quality condition” – A04.

	Users perceive advice as highly relevant		“It's like trying to learn and understand their particular farm and their particular issues, and then... I whip out a map and I could say, you know, for example, “wouldn't it be really lovely to put a pond in this area? I've just noticed you know a bit of water logging ...” And they're like, “oh yeah, I'm always struggling in that corner, a pond would be great. I think a pond's a great idea.”” – A11.
Advisors take time to understand advice users' motivations and business strategy (+)	Advice users trust the advisor and perceive the advice as credible	Advice users are clear as to how practices align with their long-term strategic goals and thus choose to implement them.	“I think the best advice starts with a visit, because then... you get to know the person a lot better. That's really critical in my experience” – A06. “I think that's when they really do receive the advice. When you can link it back to improving their farm, their farm resilience, their farm output.” – A11.
Advice content is guided by a ‘blueprint’ (-)	Induces advisors to provide generic advice.	Options/practices chosen may not be appropriate for the farm business and/or local landscape, and advice users may choose not to engage.	“I think the danger is that sometimes we have as you go in with the blueprint which is, which is dangerous because that that assumes that everyone's kind of similar. And I think farming is one of the industries that every farm business is different in many, many ways, so you have to go in with an open mind and work with what they're doing... to deliver advice that suits those needs” – A09.

Taking the above evidence into account, a refined CMO is as follows:

When advisory services are spatially targeted to priority locations and delivered by trusted local actors who tailor guidance to local conditions including the environmental and farming contexts, advice users perceive advice as highly relevant, credible and reason that it is something they can confidently act upon, leading to greater advice user engagement, adoption and sustained implementation of recommended practices which results in environmental and farm business improvements.

4.2. Alignment with wider goals

Alignment refers to how local advice bridges the gap between what happens on individual farms and broader policy priorities, ensuring farm practices contribute to regional, national, or global environmental goals. This role of knowledge broker is well documented in agricultural extension research. For example, Sutherland et al. (2013) noted that farmers are more willing to engage in agri-environmental schemes when advisors help them see how individual farm actions contribute to larger landscape outcomes. Participants in this research provided examples of their work with advice users to demonstrate the collective impact of their efforts, including through the development of specific monitoring and evaluation programmes with other local stakeholders.

Evidence from the RRR also highlighted that alignment requires deliberate facilitation (Breyer et al., 2020). Participants reflected this in their responses, noting the time they spent gathering information relevant to their local area to support on-farm planning, and developing programmes to ensure advice users could see the results of their work. Although participants were largely positive in their responses regarding alignment, their contributions highlighted that the cross-cutting CMO of continuity is essential in ensuring advice users remain motivated to engage with positive environmental practices, particularly in the face of changing national priorities.

Table 4: CMO configurations and evidence pertaining to CMO2.

CMO2: Where advisors interpret regional/national priorities (LNRS, catchment plans) into farm-specific actions and convene groups to coordinate across holdings, advice users see how their actions contribute to wider goals, increasing participation and delivery of landscape-relevant outcomes.			
Context (enabling (+) and inhibiting (-))	Mechanism	Outcome	Evidence
Locally embedded advisors interpret regional/national priorities into farm-specific actions and demonstrate the links between local action and higher-level goals.	Advice users feel attached and take ownership of actions at the local level and their understanding of the connection between local, regional and national goals improves.	Advice users are more willing to participate in and sustain recommended actions.	"I'm working with all these different partners to kind of think what should we do in this one specific field? How does that link up with like the habitats that are in the landscape? And how does that then link up to like national projects, you know, like local nature recovery strategies? How do we make sure that what we're doing on that one specific field in this one specific location with this one specific landowner actually has the most impact in like that wider kind of context as well? Because again, a lot of landowners don't have access to these maps and this kind of information, so it's my job as a facilitator to try and help guide them in the way that's going to have the most impact." – A05.
Advisors convene groups to coordinate across holdings (+)	Advice users' understanding of the potential contribution of their actions to	Groups of advice users work together to deliver landscape-scale	"We had about 16 members fill out the survey in the summer and I think it was around like 300 hectares of land, they've changed their management of 300 hectares of land to try and implement things that we've talked about with the group, which is a decent amount of area." – A05.

	wider goals is improved and group members develop shared values based on this.	changes, relevant to local priorities.	“So, the cluster model gives you that ability to have landscape scale and look at more, bigger, better, but it's manageable, it's doable and it's a way that farmers want to do it.” – A13.
Advisors provide feedback from local monitoring and evaluation data (+)	Advice users see the tangible benefits of their work, locally, regionally and nationally.	Advice users are inspired to continue with actions.	“Being able to go back to farms and say for all of your contributions over the last 5-6 years... they see that actually they're contributing to something, A we've got data and B we can show it's making a difference, it is one of the biggest motivating factors” – A13. “Some farmers are wanting support in setting up baseline monitoring, because you know they've been under stewardship schemes for years and sort of anecdotally feel what some of the changes or impacts of that have been, but they don't really know what a difference they've made” – A16.
Regional/national priorities change quickly and without warning as a result of policy change (-)	Where this happens without consultation, advisory continuity is disrupted and advisors and advice users are unclear how higher-level priorities may best be implemented at the local level	Advice users are apprehensive to participate in agri-environment schemes.	“The current challenge at the moment is these short closures and very short-term schemes and Defra promising things but not delivering on them on the time scales they originally set out. So for Higher Tier, it's been like over a year of waiting and working on them and that's very frustrating as well as the short deadlines and some really tricky conversations as well, sadly.” – A04.
National advisory services provide interpretation of regional/national priorities in 'off the shelf' farm plans (-)	Advice users feel that the resulting plans do not reflect their circumstances	Advice users are less willing to adopt actions.	“So, it wasn't just can you do the whole farm plan, we had time to say... this is why we're doing it, this is where it fits, these are the key things we want to look for, these are the key stories for the farm, this is what we want to do with the work... So it's not just straight off the shelf, from someone who comes down from Cumbria, does a quick walk over, writes and recommends, it's a very managed process” – A13.

Taking the above evidence into account, the CMO has been refined as follows:

Where locally embedded advisors interpret regional/national priorities (LNRS, catchment plans) into farm-specific actions through tailored support, and convene groups to coordinate across holdings and show how individual efforts contribute to

shared landscape outcomes, advice users understand how their actions contribute to wider goals and develop shared values and purpose, increasing advice user participation and leading to more effective delivery of locally relevant practices.

4.3. Coherence

Coherence refers to the integration of advice across different domains (such as soil, water, biodiversity, productivity, compliance) and providers (public, private, NGO), reducing fragmentation and duplication while creating a more streamlined, holistic advisory system. The need for coordination and coherence to overcome fragmentation in a highly pluralistic advisory landscape (Knierim and Ingram, 2024) emerged strongly from the RRR. Notably, the RRR did not suggest that having multiple actors is inherently bad, indeed pluralism can spur innovation, but it emphasised coordination as the remedy. Participants concurred in their interviews and explained how coordinated systems would be of benefit to them in ensuring the timely and coherence delivery of advice.

The RRR highlighted that structural factors like short-term funding exacerbate fragmentation (ad hoc projects popping up then ending), whereas longer-term, institutionalised advice fosters coherence. Participants reflected on this short-termism; in particular, the competition that it induces: *“No. We’re all in silos, because we’re all chasing funding, aren’t we, just going to tick your box and off you go... advisors need to feel comfortable and secure enough financially to have that capacity to do the sharing.”* (A11)

Table 5: CMO configurations and evidence pertaining to CMO3.

CMO3: When advisory actors coordinate and align messages, advice users receive consistent, holistic guidance, which improves adoption and efficiency of delivery.			
Context (enabling (+) and inhibiting (-))	Mechanism	Outcome	Evidence
Advisors liaise with local stakeholders to coordinate key messages (+)	Reduced cognitive load and improved message coherence for advice users means they feel confidence in acting on advice.	Advice users are willing to take actions which work for their farm and the wider landscape.	“We’re also focusing on that in terms of how do we bring together the different areas of advice that farmer might be receiving that potentially have contradictions or trade-offs within them that each of those individual advisors might not be aware of, and how do you kind of support the farmer to navigate the complexity and confusion that that might create within contradicting advice. So, I think that’s a big thing for us... how do you take that holistic whole farm look, how do you contextualise it in the environment so that you can give a cohesive vision or support the farmer to create a vision for their farm that takes all that into account.” – A02.
A county-/regional-level advisory structure is present to support local advisors (+)	Reduced cognitive load and message coherence for advisors improves their capacity and confidence in providing advice	Advisors can more easily provide coherent and current advice to users.	“So, [area] County Council said what we’re going to do is we’re going to set up this farming officer forum. We’re going to have newsletters that come out to basically give updates on our projects that we’re delivering. We will have regular meetups in person, so we can all come together and the reason behind that is we as our advisors we all felt like we were going down the farm track, providing the advice, and sometimes you might

			stumble and think the Wildlife Trust have been here, but I wasn't aware of their project, so you kind of need to be in the loop so the Council decided to pull that together. I think they've got limited funds to do so, but it is something that's running in our area that helps keep us all to connected.” – A12. “[Organisation] have just started a network of advisors, so a landscape community of practice. We have meetings once a quarter for a couple of hours on Zoom... [organisation], I think, are really only just now starting to get to grips with pulling advisors together... it's becoming more and more coordinated” – A16.
Advisors have access to a central system for coordination (+)	Reduced cognitive load and message coherence for advisors improves their capacity and confidence in providing advice	Advisors can more easily provide coherent and current advice to users, leading to improved uptake.	“It's just like it's like a pick and mix for someone that doesn't even know where to begin, so a centralised system for these grants would be best.” – A11. “It is difficult because I feel like it's piece meal, you've got to do a bit of running around to find out where this information is. I think more collectively it would be great to have it in one place.” – A12.
The capacity to provide advice depends on diverse funding streams (-)	Advisors delivering certain types of advice may be motivated by competing project or organisational interests, and provide inconsistent advice.	Advice users do not participate in agri-environment schemes as the benefits of a specific scheme are unclear.	“They [the ecologist] ended up getting a phone call from the farm advisor saying essentially that they had no right to go and survey the farm because it's in the best interests of everyone involved, the advisor and the farmer, if the farmer didn't know what habitats he had on his farm... then he will be able to blindly take on any option that makes him the most money without having any kind of a conscience about it.” – A05. “It's actually really hard to work with other land advisors in the in the area because they'll have their own project targets sometimes, and there's a little bit of a clash.” – A11. “I have to be quite careful on my patch, because there's a few different organisations... working already in an advisory capacity... so I haven't, mainly because of just the awareness of stepping on people's toes” – A16.

Taking the above evidence into account, we propose the following refined CMO:

When advisors have support to coordinate and align messages across organisations, projects and funding streams, advice users receive consistent, holistic guidance, meaning they feel reassured and confident in their ability to act on advice, which leads to greater adoption of recommended practices and efficiency of delivery at a landscape scale.

4.4. Effectiveness

Effectiveness refers to the ability of advice to deliver measurable improvements in environmental outcomes, by enhancing user uptake, ensuring compliance, improved environmental performance and supporting more ambitious action. The RRR found that the most effective advisory strategies blend both group-based learning and the delivery of individualised advice, leveraging the strengths of each. The inspiration and motivation generated through group-based methods often need to be followed up by personalised advice to translate general motivation into farm-specific action (Brockett et al., 2019). An Environment Agency study (Ipsos MORI, 2016) mirrors this finding, noting that farmers valued group events for learning the “why” and seeing others participate but often credited subsequent one-to-one advice as the moment they figured out the “how” for their own farm.

Participants confirmed the effectiveness of a blended strategy, noting that funding for farmer groups had a significant impact on farmers’ engagement and the delivery of actions. Although feedback on the group approach was largely positive, some participants noted the lack of support for one-to-one advice and explained that this hindered further delivery of outcomes. A02’s response captures the general perception of the effort required to ensure that work with advice users, be it one-to-one or collective, ultimately happens: *“we do find that there is a strong need for proactive engagement with farmers... it shouldn’t be underestimated how much effort is required to actually get people to engage in the first place.”*

For advice to lead to environmental change, participants noted the importance of specific funding for action. They described how local advice facilitated access to funding opportunities through local organisations, such as water companies. Participants referred to the importance of creating a foundation for this CMO (through CMOs 5,6, 8 and 9) and demonstrated its strong linkage with CMO3. Overall, they agreed that where possible, funding should not be tied to a standalone project but provided for an advisor or facilitator to oversee projects over several years, to support continuity and the development of trusting relationships.

Table 6: CMO configurations and evidence pertaining to CMO4.

CMO4: Where advisory presence is continuous and trusted and combines group learning with targeted one-to-one and enabling incentives, advice users experience advice as doable and worthwhile, yielding higher uptake, compliance, and environmental gains.			
Context (enabling (+) and inhibiting (-))	Mechanism	Outcome	Evidence
An advisor’s presence is regular, continuous and trusted (+)	Users trust their advisor’s competence and are confident acting on their advice.	Advice users take up more agri-environment options, leading to improved environmental outcomes.	“To see that behaviour shift is to keep those long-term advisors in place and then the farmers might be much more trusting and much more willing to get involved.” – A11.

Enabling incentives are available for implementation (+)	Advice users perceive actions as worthwhile and practical to carry out, and the benefits to their farm are clear to them.	Advice users take up more options, leading to improved environmental outcomes.	"We've certainly noticed that farms that are engaged with clusters have significantly increased their engagement with advice and project work, now part of that is because clusters have been really successful in bringing in money for projects" – A09. "I've mentioned FIPL [Farming in Protected Landscapes] before. I think that's a great example... farmers can come up with their own ideas, work with local FIPL advisors and come up with a really cool scheme, and they do come up with really innovative schemes... so if [organisation] could say here's some money, you've got the ability to be flexible with it, that's where it really works". – A11.
Advice users and advisors demonstrate examples of best practice and results (+)	Advice users understand the new norms for their area and see actions as doable and effective.	Advice users take up more, leading to improved environmental outcomes., with advice users continuing good practices.	"Actually, quite a few land managers are quite competitive about the environment, you know that they're quite competitive about their crops, how they look, yields, things like that. But they're equally as competitive about the environment. So, I heard about farmers in a in a farmer cluster comparing and boasting about the number of it was either field mice or harvest mice numbers that they've got, it was one of their target species and... they started counting the numbers of these things that they were getting and that is brilliant." – A06. "From a species perspective, working on a field scale is really important, hence that granularity of advice on the ground, but there's the connectivity at a cluster level when they come together have a bit of banter and there's peer group pressure and it's "you've got more barn owls than I have, I want more too"". – A13.
Knowledge sharing is encouraged through farmer groups (+)	Farmers feel confident and inspired to try new actions	Group cohesion develops and farmers begin trying new actions.	"You need those driving force farmers who are like, yes, we should do this and then ... a lot of people will sort of say "oh, well, they do it like that, oh, maybe we can too"" – A04. "So, by bringing them together, it was for the greater cause and they were able to learn from each other. So, there was that sort of peer-to-peer engagement that really supported them where they were able to kind of meet other farmers in their area and sort of say "I'm struggling with this issue, how have you managed to fix it or I've got this problem, what did you guys do?" So that was an extra benefit to the group itself." – A12.
Advisors share the results of monitoring	Advice users understand the effectiveness of their	Good practices that are delivering environmental benefits are continued.	"A lot of farmers are very, very keen to be making a positive environmental impact, and I think projects like that when they can see that it's not just you know, a positive impact on their farm, but if it's, you know

and evaluation with their groups (+)	work and feel inspired to continue their action		wider, you know if it's more positive and wider impact as well, which they hadn't realised before, it's definitely a bigger motivator to then actually, you know, take those steps and try very hard to find that funding and implement their ideas." – A07.
An advisor's presence is continued and trusted (-)	Users continue to take advice without questioning advisor's motivations.	Potential for environmentally harmful actions to be unintentionally implemented.	"We could get a blind spot, so say we're comfortable with [advisor], and you're beholden to [advisor] and he doesn't have the time and actually he might miss out on some stuff, so we need to be aware of that and we need to have, I guess, checks and balances in place." – A13.
Funding for implementation is not available (-)	Advice users do not perceive actions to be worthwhile	Advice users take up limited agri-environment options or projects, or none at all	"Advice in itself doesn't really get traction. I think advice to open a new funding stream or to achieve better sustainability on your farm... is the advice that sits well. I just think advice by itself, farmers aren't really open to it" – A15.

The final core CMO has been refined as follows:

Where advisory presence is regular, continuous and trusted and combines group learning and evidence of impact with targeted one-to-one and enabling incentives, advice users experience advice as doable and valuable and recognise the recommendations as both practical and worthwhile for their farm, so they take up more agri-environment options, improve their compliance, and ultimately deliver environmental gains.

4.5. Trust and credibility

Trust has consistently been highlighted as a linchpin of advisory effectiveness (Sutherland et al., 2013; Ingram, 2008), and this cross-cutting CMO was also considered fundamental by all participants. Trust grew when advice users sensed that advisors genuinely cared about them and the land they managed. The feeling that an advisor's values matched their own was described as a defining feature of trusted relationships. Advisors spoke passionately about doing the work for the right reasons: *“That’s why we’re doing it... otherwise we’d be in London, in a bank”* (A04), and *“I wouldn’t be doing it if I didn’t care. It’s not a well-paid job by any means, it’s a job that gives me purpose”* (A11). Such reflections suggest that advice users trust advisors who are not merely experts, but people whose values align with those of the farming community and who care about both the farm's success and the wider environmental outcomes. Although participants were largely positive about their commitment to their roles, we note that their work requires the capacity to navigate complex social, emotional, and institutional terrain, and that this can bring challenges. While the formal remit of advisors is to support behaviour change via scheme uptake for environmental improvement, the interviews reveal that these objectives are inseparable from the relational and affective dimensions of practice. Advisors frequently act as intermediaries between policy and lived experience, and future advisory programmes should recognise the essential role of emotional labour in navigating this space.

Advisors who draw on robust scientific evidence, complemented by locally grounded experiential knowledge, enhance both the perceived legitimacy and practicality of their guidance (Šūmane et al, 2018; Sohad and Mafrolla, 2025). The mechanism of trust therefore derives not only from continuity and relationships, but also from confidence in the quality and applicability of the information conveyed. Participants were careful to stress that longevity alone does not guarantee trust. As one reflected about long-serving colleagues: *“There have also been advisors that have worked in [region name] for decades and they, you know, they use their names as swear words”* (A11). What truly sustains credibility is not just being present over time but being seen to deliver advice that works, advice that users can recognise as effective and beneficial. In this sense, we note that continuity (CMO6) provides the opportunity for trust to form but demonstrated competence (CMO1, 8 and 9) and tangible outcomes (CMO2 and 4) are what ultimately secure it.

Table 7: CMO configurations and evidence pertaining to CMO5.

CMO5: Where advisors are locally embedded and perceived as competent and impartial, advice users trust the advice, increasing uptake and cooperation.			
Context (enabling (+) and inhibiting (-))	Mechanism	Outcome	Evidence
Advisors are locally embedded (+)	Advice users perceive their advisor's shared motivations and values,	Advice users take up more of the	“Part of your job as an advisor is to know the local area in all respects, and that is about knowing the community, knowing the people and knowing the place and what's possible.” – A10

	and see how their advice supports their care of their land	recommended agri-environment options	
Advisors are competent and impartial (+)	Advice users perceive advice as legitimate, practical and applicable to their business	Advice users take up more of the recommended agri-environment options	"I think people are quite relieved to have just a new face because I think you know, tensions had gotten so bad... they were sick of certain people. So, I think that they were just grateful for different people turning up" – A01. "A lot of land managers tend to be quite practical people. You know, "I'll happily do A,B and C, but I'd quite like to see that it delivers D, E, and F" – A06.
Advisors are perceived as incompetent (-)	Advice users do not trust the advice they receive.	No action is taken.	"You know, if you if you don't know something... you can't lie your way out of it. A farmer can smell it a mile off" – A01.

Taking the above evidence into account, this important cross-cutting CMO has been refined as follows:

Where advisors are locally embedded, impartial, and demonstrate competence through both technical knowledge and relational understanding, advice users perceive collective shared values and motivations for their land and trust the advice, so take up more of the recommended agri-environment options.

4.6. Continuity and stability

A National Audit Office analysis (2024) warned that constant scheme changes and pilots can erode farmer confidence, recommending government maintain continuity in delivery. Participants concurred, noting that scheme changes were challenging from a technical perspective for themselves (staying up to date with the latest changes) and for advice users, for whom the changes pose not just uncertainty regarding their practices for positive environmental outcomes, but also significant questions for their business resilience too.

The RRR adds evidence that continuity enables advisors to follow up on outcomes, closing the loop to see if advice worked and adjusting accordingly. This refines the understanding of why continuity matters, it is not only about trust, but also about learning and accountability within advisory work. Participants reflected that long-term engagement can also transform advice into reassurance: one advisor explained that long-standing clients saw them as *“a comfort blanket or a form of quality assurance”* (A06).

Table 8: CMO configurations and evidence pertaining to CMO6.

CMO6: When delivery systems are stable and long-term, relationships and learning compound over time, supporting sustained practice change and environmental outcomes.			
Context (enabling (+) and inhibiting (-))	Mechanism	Outcome	Evidence
Advisors have time and skills to establish relationships with their clients (+)	Relationships built on trust form and advice users feel able to have an honest conversation about the best options for their land, meaning they can agree that agri-environment schemes are relevant to their business	Advice users deliver improved environmental outcomes through scheme implementation.	“I think Landscape Recovery is showing a lot of promise, as it allows for a good working relationship to develop between the advisor and the land manager.” – A01. “Relationships and trust are quite critical to that advice delivery, so we're chasing around for different funding to engage with farmers over as long a period as possible to influence change” – A02. “There used to be county level advisors who were given some autonomy, who tended to stick around for some reason, for quite a few years. Relationships developed, farmers could phone up and and say, you know is this what you're after and they could be a very honest discussion.” – A06 “The non-technical skills are just as important. How do we approach the farmers. Where do we find the farmers and get details in the first place,

			like how do we actually get on to farm and start the conversation? So I think that is something that's definitely got higher up on the agenda." – A12 "I think it's the relationship building is so important, the one-to-one, the really understanding the individual, their needs, their motivations, their limitations, you need all of that in order to give them the right advice" – A16.
Advisors have the capacity to arrange repeat farm visits (+)	Both advisors and advice users compound their knowledge of the farm, enabling them to agree iterative changes in practice.	Advice users take action to further improve environmental outcomes.	"If we're giving full management advice, our farm management team might walk the farm once a week... quite often, we respond to, you know, if a client sees something that they don't like or not expecting, they'll give us a call, and we'll go and have a look at it" – A06. "I become a part of their farming team... we're always seeing each other each month, we're always having conversations about it... I want to see the results and things as well, I want to see what works and what doesn't, so I will message them and say can I pop out and see how that thing looked from last year and they'll say yes" – A08.
Advisors do not have the "soft" skills for communicating with those receiving advice (-)	Trusting relationships between advisors and advice users do not develop meaning advice users do not feel confident in the advice they receive.	Advice users do not change their practices based on the advice given.	"There's a lot of knowledge and experience that can't necessarily be taught, to just be able to have a conversation and be heard by the farmer, because that's really if they don't like you, they don't listen" – A08. "How you are a better advisor is that you're curious. So you start with the farm, and also really I think it's quite deep listening because you really need to understand, some quite difficult and personal things. You have access to their lives in a way that other people don't." – A10.
Delivery systems are in flux (-)	Advice users do not trust environmental schemes. Advice users prioritise actions which ensure the resilience of their farm business	Advice users do not participate in agri-environment schemes	"I mean for farmers in general, it's a massively changing industry at the moment and there's a lot of pressure from government, from local people, from industry to shift how things are happening, while also them still somehow carrying on farming at the same time, so there's a lot of pressure to sort of do everything can and be everything for every everyone which is very challenging. And then also, particularly in the last you know two years, government's real sort of lack of support has been a real struggle and it's really shaken the foundations of how people are viewing the security of their farm business moving forwards and then really kind of re-evaluating that kind of stuff. So, they want support, they want help in figuring it all out" – A05.

			“If you've got a scheme which is being turned, flipped on and off like a switch with no signalling... you can't do handbrake turns in farming, you've got a plan 3-4 years ahead, it's a slow burn business and the advice context has to wrap around whatever is out there and at the moment agri-environment is absolutely dreadful, because there's a lack of understanding about how the business works” – A10.
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Taking the above evidence into account, we propose the following refined CMO:

When delivery systems are stable and long-term and advisors bring strong interpersonal and technical skills, advice users develop confidence and familiarity with advisors over time, gaining evidence that advice works for their farm, which supports sustained practice and behaviour change and improves environmental outcomes.

4.7. Advice user agency

Agency and co-design have been increasingly emphasised in recent literature on agri-environmental policy, with studies showing it is particularly valuable for bringing land managers together, especially for work at the landscape-scale (Chivers et al, 2025a; Barkley et al, 2024; Broadmeadow et al, 2023). For the purposes of such approaches, it is important that co-design is viewed as a spectrum: while “full” co-design might be rarely achieved, it should be possible to implement aspects of co-design methodologies in many agri-environment contexts (Chivers et al, 2025b). The RRR highlighted that involving advice users in the design of schemes or advice (for example, through co-design workshops, pilot testing options on their land, or steering groups for local projects) leads to greater buy-in and practical fit of interventions. Studies have shown that when advice users help shape the solutions, the resulting measures are often more innovative and better tailored to real-world constraints (Waldon and Jones, 2017; Defra, 2022). Several participants supported this notion, with specific examples of co-designed approaches. In the following example, participant AO1 explains that a group of farmers developed their own farmer-led programme to provide a joined-up habitat across their land: *“It’s a cluster of 10 farmers that came together because of a rare butterfly that they have. So, they’re amazing and that’s quite an unusual thing... so they have all this linked up habitat. So, they were kind of doing landscape recovery before landscape recovery... that was very forward thinking because this scheme has come along.”* (AO1).

Although the RRR evidence suggests co-design should be standard practice, and participants’ comments on co-design were largely positive, some advisors did suggest that without the correct support, such approaches can be challenging. Strong facilitation can help ensure that local priorities are aligned with national goals during the co-design process.

Table 9: CMO configurations and evidence pertaining to CMO7.

CMO7: With participatory and user-led design, users perceive advice as “theirs”, increasing commitment and follow-through.			
Context (enabling (+) and inhibiting (-))	Mechanism	Outcome	Evidence
Advisors enable a participatory approach to design (+)	Advice users understand the contribution their suggestions make to the design of individual and collective schemes and perceive advice as theirs	Advice users feel committed to actions and seek ways to achieve them	“In some cases, like the farmer will know best and and say that, you know, I don’t think what you’re proposing is going to achieve the outcome I’d like to do it my own way. And you know, sometimes that’s fine” – AO1. “I’m always wanting to find out how it works... So if you know just how that land is managed and what people say would work better if we did it in a different way... Then it’s just bringing all those groups to hear each other’s opinions, you know, just out on site or whatever and then the

			farmers will suddenly come up with “we could do it this way, we could do this” and they become more creative.” – A03. “We’re going to be farmer led. So, we’re going to ask the cohort what is it that you would like to discover over the next two years that would make your business more resilient. So, it’s a bit of a blank sheet of paper, really. So ultimately, we’re going to have a series of events, on-farm events, online events, focusing on the topics that those farmers identify in order to help them become more resilient.” – A09.
Participatory approaches are not appropriately supported by actors at all levels (local, regional, national) (-)	Advice users feel discouraged and/or uncertain about the advice they receive, so do not feel confident in implementing advised actions	Limits the take up of new actions	“[Organisation] said “it needs to be locally led and developed” and they’re [the farmers] just not equipped to get to manage that kind of decision making. The social pressure it puts people under to make those decisions means that there’s not necessarily the right one for the nation, or they don’t have the governance structures or experience to be able to make that decision and uphold it. So it needs a very clear regulatory national framework in terms of expectations” – A02.

This CMO has been refined to account for the support required in ensuring participatory approaches are successful:

When participatory and user-led design processes are well-supported across local, regional and national levels, advice users perceive resulting actions as their own decisions rather than external requirements and develop a strong sense of ownership, leading to commitment and follow-through for improved environmental outcomes.

4.8. Knowledge integration

The RRR highlighted how effective advisors blend formal scientific knowledge (for example, research on conservation agriculture, or data on water quality) with advice users' experiential knowledge of their land. This creates a form of co-production of knowledge on the farm. The importance of integrating local and scientific knowledge has been well documented in sustainability science and agricultural extension literature (Šūmane et al., 2018). Mutual respect in knowledge exchange fosters trust and leads to more adaptive farm management. This has a direct bearing on advisory policy: training for advisors should include skills in participatory methods and local knowledge elicitation, not just technical expertise. Participants in this research concurred, commenting on the importance of interpersonal skills, and knowing the context in which an individual is likely to be prepared to receive advice, as A11 suggests: *“When they're really interested in it, I think that's when they really do receive the advice. When you can link it back to improving their farm, their farm resilience, their farm output.”*

Table 10: CMO configurations and evidence pertaining to CMO8.

CMO8: Where advisors integrate scientific evidence with local experiential knowledge, advice is seen as credible and feasible, leading to greater adoption.			
Context (enabling (+) and inhibiting (-))	Mechanism	Outcome	Evidence
Advisors integrate scientific evidence with local stakeholders' experiential knowledge	Users perceive advice as credible and feasible for their business, increasing their confidence in choosing actions	Higher relevant agri-environment option uptake	“You've got to do an on-farm visit to understand like, because obviously you're balancing what the landscape and local environment needs as well as what the farm business needs. So, you can't understand that context without being on farm and it's really through understanding how the business is organised and what the vision of the farm is and understanding their skills and what they'd like to achieve and then tailoring it from there. Obviously if there's a chance that something very local would benefit like grey partridge or turtle dove and cultivated margins, obviously my job is to suggest that” – A04. “Those courses, they are quite broad... once I've completed that course... it's then on me to then go back into the material and actually really get familiar with what's the most important on my local level, you know, particularly the impacts of soil type” – A07.

			“Part of your job as an advisor is to know the local area in all respects, and that is about knowing the community, knowing the people and knowing the place and what’s possible.” – A09. “If our goal is to recover nature, we need to make sure we are taking the best actions in a locally relevant way... we host the [local] environmental records centre, so I have access to all of that ecological information to try and help inform” – A16.
Advisors have access to continuing professional development (+)	Advice users understand how the most up-to-date research and information applies to farms of their type, in their local area, increasing their confidence in trying new actions that deliver for business and environment.	Recommended agri-environment actions align with contemporary best practice and are taken up by advice users	“I mean there’s always CPD sort of going on for me. I’m still training to be an agronomist, so I’ve done my FACTS exam, but I’m doing my BASIS crop protection exam, then there’s sort of a steady stream, I mean, I can see myself learning for the next 5 to 10 years... it is part of our job to have specialised knowledge in house, so you know, if that is of interest then there is encouragement to go and learn and pursue and to be able to be the champion of it within the company” – A07. “At the moment, I’m trying to upskill myself on regenerative practices, so I’ve attended multiple different workshops...it’s a lot of finding out who is doing what in different locations, is there something down south that’s absolutely fantastic, that we want to know more about here in the north east?” – A12.

This CMO has been refined to reflect that advice must be feasible within a farm business, and likely to be effective:

Where advisors integrate up to date scientific evidence with advice users’ experiential and place-based knowledge, advice users perceive advice as credible, feasible, acceptable to the farm business, and likely to be effective, so they are more likely to adopt the recommended actions.

4.9. Advisor currency

The term “currency” in our findings refers to advisors maintaining current knowledge of evolving schemes, regulations, and best practices, as well as staying current with local conditions. The RRR found that when advisors lacked up-to-date knowledge, for example, if a new grant or rule had emerged and they were unaware, their credibility could be quickly undermined in the eyes of advice users (Liu et al., 2018). Conversely, advisors who were seen as “on the ball” with the latest information and who could navigate the bureaucracy on behalf of advice users were highly valued and more effective at facilitating change (Birner et al., 2009; Raymond et al., 2010; Faure et al., 2012). This insight is strongly supported by survey research on advisor perspectives: for example, Hejnowicz et al. (2016) surveyed farm advisors in England and found that advisors themselves identified continuous professional development and better access to information as critical needs for delivering agri-environment schemes effectively.

Participants raised several points regarding their currency. Largely, their comments align with the key findings of the RRR, with A11’s comment on the importance of “*constant learning and constant skills building*” reflected in several other interviews. Some participants felt that accreditation was an important way of demonstrating their currency to those they advise. Although many were positive about access to training courses and support networks to ensure they could update their knowledge, there was evidence that remaining contextually current was a particular challenge in a time of policy and scheme flux.

Table 11: CMO configurations and evidence pertaining to CMO9.

CMO9: If advisors are current both technically and contextually, farmers view guidance as relevant and actionable, improving scheme uptake and outcomes.			
Context (enabling (+) and inhibiting (-))	Mechanism	Outcome	Evidence
Advisors are technically and contextually current (+)	Users perceive advice as credible and temporally and geographically relevant.	Advisors and advice users select relevant agri-environment scheme options and advice users implement the options to a high-quality.	“Farm advice, I think, requires constant learning and constant skills building...spending time with prescriptions, the best way to learn is doing applications with farmers...keeping up to date because those options are going to impact how I advise and how we deliver schemes going forward” – A11. “So, I've changed the way I'm writing. I'm changing the sorts of feedback that I'm giving so that it's very much linked to the prescriptions and to the type of scheme they might go into and actually giving recommendations of this could go into species rich grassland option, this could go into this option and actually saying things like that. So, my advice is much more tailored now to the schemes than it ever used to be.” – A14.

Advisors are accredited (+)	Advice users feel confident in their advisor	Advice users take up more agri-environment options.	"I think some kind of standard would perhaps be an interesting thing to look into" – A09.
Advisors have access to continuing professional development (+)	Advice users understand how the latest research/scientific advances are relevant to their work	Advice users take up more relevant and innovative agri-environmental actions	"I mean there's always CPD sort of going on for me. I'm still training to be an agronomist, so I've done my FACTS exam, but I'm doing my BASIS crop protection exam, then there's sort of a steady stream, I mean, I can see myself learning for the next 5 to 10 years... it is part of our job to have specialised knowledge in house, so you know, if that is of interest then there is encouragement to go and learn and pursue and to be able to be the champion of it within the company" – A07.
Advisors are not technically and contextually current (-)	Users are not confident about the advice that they receive	Advice users take up a limited number of the proposed agri-environment options.	"I don't think enough people who give advice on agri-environment schemes have enough formal ecological training... in terms of actually producing a coherent plan for a piece of land, I would say a very small proportion have those skills... having a minimum standard would be a step change... I think it would inspire more confidence in land managers as well" – A06. "We critically need more people who aren't just straight out of university with a degree... but they've worked on a farm or worked on nature reserves or worked in soil labs and then go on to become land advisors, because it's not just the theory, the theory people can find out from websites, but it's the practice and the experience and the knowledge... there's a lot of knowledge and experience that can't be taught" – A08.
Delivery systems are in flux (-)	Impacts advisors' capacity to remain informed on latest options	Advice users do not take up the most current agri-environment options	"Because you can go to a farm and you're talking to someone about a topic and they'll say, OK, what's available to me? ... But we don't know as much as, you know, we know as little as they do. So this, yeah, sort of the road map, the kind of the forecasting, even if it's bad news, at least you know, right, if it's going to be like no, it's not going to happen. You can say well actually no, it's not going to happen rather than we're waiting an announcement in the spring, which often means middle of the summer and that that's another thing that bugs me is the slipping of time scales" – A09.

CMO9 was refined to the following:

When advisors demonstrate up-to-date technical knowledge, contextual understanding and/or recognised accreditation, advice users view guidance as temporally and geographically relevant, reflecting best practices and actionable, fitting with their farms' circumstances, leading to advice users adopting relevant and innovative actions and implementing them to a high quality.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

This research provides evidence from 17 advisors regarding what works for the delivery and implementation of local scale advice, in which contexts and for whom. Considering the enabling and inhibiting contexts, the four core context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) configurations were refined as follows:

1. **Spatial targeting:** When advisory services are spatially targeted to priority locations and delivered by trusted local actors who tailor guidance to local conditions including the environmental and farming contexts, advice users perceive advice as highly relevant, credible and reason that it is something they can confidently act upon, leading to greater advice user engagement, adoption and sustained implementation of recommended practices which results in environmental and farm business improvements.
2. **Alignment with wider goals:** Where locally embedded advisors interpret regional/national priorities (LNRS, catchment plans) into farm-specific actions through tailored support, and convene groups to coordinate across holdings and show how individual efforts contribute to shared landscape outcomes, advice users understand how their actions contribute to wider goals and develop shared values and purpose, increasing advice user participation and leading to more effective delivery of locally relevant practices.
3. **Coherence:** When advisors have support to coordinate and align messages across organisations, projects and funding streams, advice users receive consistent, holistic guidance, meaning they feel reassured and confident in their ability to act on advice, which leads to greater adoption of recommended practices and efficiency of delivery at a landscape scale.
4. **Effectiveness:** Where advisory presence is regular, continuous and trusted and combines group learning and evidence of impact with targeted one-to-one and enabling incentives, advice users experience advice as doable and valuable and recognise the recommendations as both practical and worthwhile for their farm, so they take up more agri-environment options, improve their compliance, and ultimately deliver environmental gains.

The five cross-cutting CMOs, which participants considered to be fundamental in creating the foundation for delivering high-quality, coherent, trusted advice, which users felt they could act on, were refined to:

5. **Trust and credibility:** Where advisors are locally embedded, impartial, and demonstrate competence through both technical knowledge and relational understanding, advice users perceive collective shared values and motivations for their land and trust the advice, so take up more of the recommended agri-environment options.
6. **Continuity and stability:** When delivery systems are stable and long-term and advisors bring strong interpersonal and technical skills, advice users develop confidence and familiarity with advisors over time, gaining evidence that advice works

for their farm, which supports sustained practice and behaviour change and improves environmental outcomes.

7. **Advice user agency:** When participatory and user-led design processes are well-supported across local, regional and national levels, advice users perceive resulting actions as their own decisions rather than external requirements and develop a strong sense of ownership, leading to commitment and follow-through for improved environmental outcomes.
8. **Knowledge integration:** Where advisors integrate up to date scientific evidence with advice users' experiential and place-based knowledge, advice users perceive advice as credible, feasible, acceptable to the farm business, and likely to be effective, so they are more likely to adopt the recommended actions.
9. **Advisor currency:** When advisors demonstrate up-to-date technical knowledge, contextual understanding and/or recognised accreditation, advice users view guidance as temporally and geographically relevant, reflecting best practices and actionable, fitting with their farms' circumstances, leading to advice users adopting relevant and innovative actions and implementing them to a high quality.

Together, the nine CMOs demonstrate how, in enabling contexts, local advice can improve the implementation of nature friendly farming and broader environmentally beneficial farming practices, when appropriate enabling incentives are provided, and explain the importance of locally relevant, coherent messaging. The importance of trusted advisors who are embedded in, and have extensive knowledge of, local contexts was a clear message in each interview. When this is the case, advisors are positioned to provide tailored, farm-specific advice on agri-environment schemes and regulations to ensure relevance and feasibility for each farm. Additionally, the research confirmed that when local advice is consistent, relevant and supported by incentives and long-term monitoring, advice users are more likely to engage and adopt nature friendly farming practices. Where this is not the case, such as in the inhibiting contexts identified, negative or unintended outcomes may occur.

Although initially separated for the purposes of analysis, those CMOs found to create the enabling conditions for effective advice delivery in the RRR influenced the core CMOs. In addition, there are examples which demonstrate that one mechanism is insufficient to ensure a particular outcome. The relationships between the CMOs are shown in Figure 2 overleaf. We also note that several of the contexts listed in the tables are beyond the scope of advisors and advice users to change, playing out at a national societal or government level.

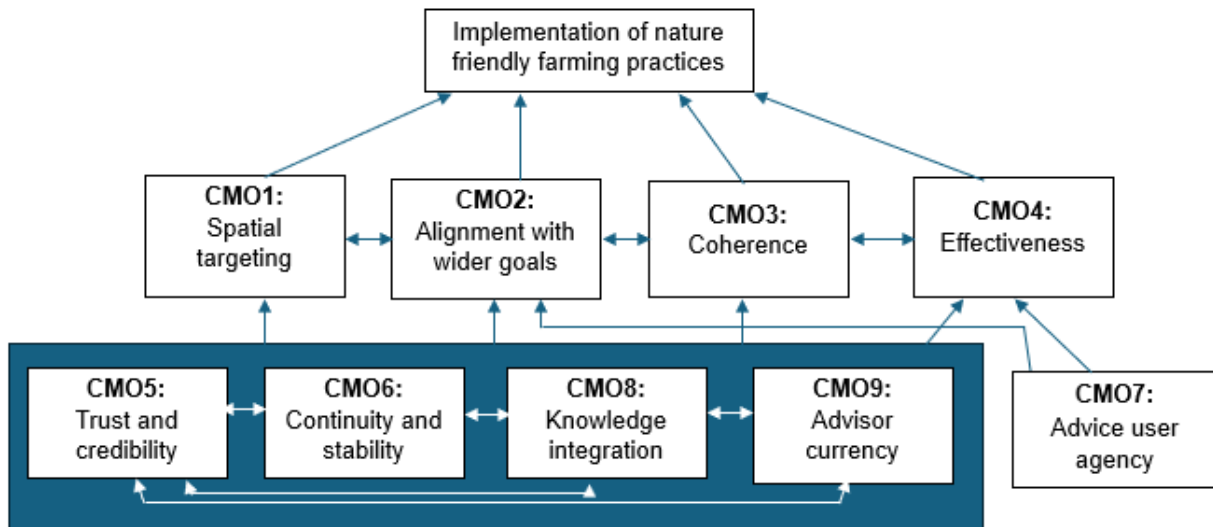


Figure 2: The relationships between CMOs and their contribution to the implementation of nature friendly farming practices.

Whilst participants recognised that many clients were changing their farming practices, there remains work to be done on assessing the exact impact of advice on environmental outcomes. There were positive examples of monitoring and evaluation in this research, and we suggest support continues for such programmes, and further consideration is given to how such approaches may be scaled up, for example, through taking an interdisciplinary approach which combines the work of environmental and social scientists to capture the contexts and causal mechanisms that lead to specific environmental outcomes .

Key recommendations from the research are as follows:

1. Invest in the existing network of farmer groups.
 - The research demonstrated the value that advisors place on farmer groups in delivering improved, joined-up environmental outcomes. In particular, advisors felt that spatially targeted, locally delivered advice (CMO1) is most effective when it is embedded within trusted networks. Farmer groups already provide such a structure by fostering trust, shared values and credibility at a local scale (CMO5).
 - Peer-to-peer learning within groups strengthens advice user agency (CMO7), and group cohesion can foster engagement with agri-environment schemes, providing coherence of messaging and approach in the local context (CMO3) and aligning this with wider goals (CMO2).
 - The role of a skilled facilitator is central, and the research emphasised that continuity and stability in advice provision helps build long-term relationships and improve learning (CMO6). Appropriate, stable funding should be provided to ensure they can best deliver coordination to their group, maintain consistent messaging (CMO3) and integrate new scientific and contextual knowledge when it emerges (CMO8).

- Additionally, groups can create an environment in which approaches towards nature friendly farming can be co-designed by those involved (CMO7). This leads to the advice that emanates being perceived as relevant, actionable and grounded in shared challenges and opportunities. Along with the sense of ownership that co-design instils, this can increase commitment and sustain implementation. Efforts to co-design approaches towards nature friendly farming should therefore be supported within groups, perhaps via participatory methods training for facilitators, or the provision of a co-design guidance framework.
 - The provision of one-to-one advice is essential in translating messages received at group events to the individual farm scale, increasing the relevance, feasibility and motivation for advice users (reflecting CMO1 and CMO4). Tailored, one-to-one advice provision should therefore be included within group-based models too.
 - Advisors acknowledged that it was inspiring for advice users to see the positive changes their practice can bring to their farm and the wider landscape. Evidencing impact reinforces the perception that advice has been worthwhile (CMO4). Monitoring and evaluation at both the individual farm level and the group level should be supported, and can help strengthen adoption and long-term behaviour change.
2. Provide sufficient and consistent funding so that advice on nature friendly farming can be actioned.
- The research showed that even when advice is trusted and locally relevant, lack of time and financial capacity is a major barrier to its adoption. Securing funding to deliver agreed actions is essential, and makes recommended actions not only desirable, but doable (CMO4).
 - Access to funding can also strengthen individual alignment with wider goals (CMO2), whether that is at a national level (e.g. funding from agri-environment schemes) or more local level (for example, catchment-level funding from water companies).
 - Linked to recommendation 1, many farmer groups/clusters have already achieved the foundational enabling conditions – trust, continuity, coordinated messaging and a sense of agency (CMO5, CMO6 and CMO7) – to implement landscape-scale interventions. The potential to scale up action should therefore be explored, and appropriate funding mechanisms put in place, perhaps in a similar format to Farming in Protected Landscape funding. This would further strengthen the connection between individual practice and landscape-scale outcomes.
3. Support advisors' continuing professional development.
- Advisor currency emerged as a crucial factor in whether advice is perceived as credible and relevant (CMO9). Advice users responded positively to advisors

who were able to demonstrate both their up-to-date technical and contextual competency.

- Participants referred to a range of existing courses which supported their continuing professional development (CPD), such as BASIS training, and these should be continued. Some participants reflected on the potential for different accreditations, whilst others suggested existing offers were sufficient. Further research could explore this in more detail, focusing especially on whether existing accreditation pathways offer enough flexibility to accommodate the diversity of advisory types and roles that exist.
- As contextual knowledge is vital for advisor currency, technical accreditation should be combined with opportunities for place-based learning, allowing advisors to better understand the local context (environmental and social) they are working within.
- CPD should also recognise the emotional labour associated with advisors' work and appropriate support should be provided to ensure advisors have the capacity, skills, and guidance required to navigate this element of their role. Structured support associated with this area of advisors' work could help overcome the burnout and emotional strain described by some participants. In particular, targeted training could be provided on relationship building, mediating conflict or uncertainty, and supporting behaviour change.

4. Create mechanisms to support the coordination of advice.

- Advisors identified coherence (CMO3) as fundamental: when advice is aligned across organisations, users receive clear, consistent guidance. This reduces confusion, builds confidence and supports efficient delivery. Achieving coherence across the advisory system requires strategic coordination at government level. Defra and its delivery partners have a critical role in setting frameworks for collaboration.
- The research showed that the information advisors receive and share is disparate and difficult to interact with. This increases their workload and hinders their ability to provide timely, clear advice. Many participants commented on the potential value of a single interactive national hub for content, where advisors could access up-to-date material such as scientific evidence, regulatory updates and policy guidance in one place. This would support the integration of knowledge (CMO8) and help advisor currency (CMO9). Having such materials in one place could also help alignment with wider goals (CMO2), by ensuring that advice given is informed by national priorities, even though it may be tailored to the local context by advisors in practice.

From these key recommendations, we can derive some specific recommendations that the OEP can take to champion more effective advisory services within its statutory remit. These are presented in line with the four main types of activity that the OEP undertakes as part of its defined powers and duties: scrutinising Environmental Improvement Plans and targets,

scrutinising environmental law, advising government on environmental law, and enforcing against failures to comply with environmental law.

1. Scrutinising Environmental Improvement Plans and targets

- Champion spatially targeted, locally tailored advice delivery in government plans (e.g. ELMs/SFI).
- When scrutinising plans, look beyond coverage of advice (i.e. how many advice users are reached) to assess the quality and configuration of advice (continuity of advisors, integration across domains, use of co-design, for example).
- Require government reporting to distinguish between outputs (such as the number of advice visits) and outcomes (such as changes in practice or measurable ecological improvements), in order to better evaluate effectiveness.

2. Scrutinising environmental law

- Use scrutiny powers to assess whether government delivery bodies (Defra, Natural England, Environment Agency) are resourcing joined-up advisory systems, and monitor how advice provision is integrated into the regulatory landscape, highlighting where provision is fragmented or inconsistent and therefore potentially undermining compliance.
- Hold government accountable for the continuity of advice delivery, for example by pushing for long-term and sustainable funding capacity to be built into programme design.

3. Advising government on environmental law

- Advise that co-design be embedded in advisory programmes and any proposed reforms to environmental law. This would increase their perceived legitimacy, and be more likely to improve implementation, thus better connecting on-farm practices with statutory targets.
- Evidence shows that “advise and prevent” models outperform “detect and penalise” ones, so it should be recommended that advisory functions be explicitly recognised as part of compliance strategies within environmental legislation.
- Encourage government to legislate or regulate for minimum professional standards and continued professional development for advisors, as this is central to their credibility.

4. Enforcing against failures to comply with environmental law

- Where systemic advisory failures (for example, fragmented delivery, inconsistent messages or absence of tailored support) can be shown to undermine compliance, consider using enforcement powers to press government or agencies to remedy these gaps.
- Where appropriate and relevant, frame compliance failures as failures of state capacity, not just of individual land managers; if regulations are not supported by adequate advisory infrastructure, government bears partial responsibility.

- Use enforcement strategically, to ensure monitoring and evaluation are built into advice programmes. Without evidence of what advice can achieve, enforcement of environmental law risks being blind to some of the structural weakness outlined in this report.

These recommendations give the OEP a basis to:

- Scrutinise government's plans and targets not only for ambition, but for delivery mechanisms that are shown to work.
- Advise on legislative reforms that strengthen advisory systems as part of the environmental governance architecture.
- Enforce against advisory gaps that undermine compliance, framing these as systemic governance failures rather than just individual land manager-level shortcomings.

To conclude, this research suggests that advice is the “glue” that binds national ambitions to on-the-ground practice. The OEP can play a pivotal role in ensuring that local advisory systems are designed and resourced in ways consistent with the evidence base, thereby improving the chances that EIPs and environmental laws deliver tangible positive environmental outcomes.

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