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## **Monitor Farm Programme Handbook**

**Version 7 (May 2023)**

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## **1. Introduction**

This handbook contains information and experiences of best practice when implementing a Monitor Farm Programme. It provides an overview of the programme, including its aims and guiding principles.

The information in this handbook was originally derived from an internal workshop on Monitor Farm planning and facilitation led by the Scottish Agricultural Organisation (SAOS). It has been developed as experience of facilitating Monitor Farm Programmes has grown.

## **2. Overview of Monitor Farms**

### **What is a Monitor Farm?**

The Monitor Farm is a concept that originates from New Zealand. It was adopted in Scotland in 2003 and rolled out to England, Northern Ireland, and Wales in 2014.

The two unique principles that underpin the Monitor Farm Programme are that it is a farmer-led, farmer-driven project with business efficiency and benchmarking at the heart of its activity.

Farmers tend to engage with the programme on account of it taking place on a real farm, providing a hands-on approach to personal and business development.

### **A Monitor Farmer should be...**

- Willing to speak openly about their business, disclosing information and sharing their decision-making process with the wider farming community
- Open-minded, receptive to new ideas and willing to embrace change
- An ambitious individual looking to set personal goals and reach them

### **What's involved?**

- Working closely with your AHDB Knowledge Exchange Manager
- Assembling your steering group
- Undertaking baseline assessments
- Submitting harvest figures into Farmbench
- Continued monitoring of benchmarked figures with your Arable Business Group (ABG)
- Hosting knowledge exchange meetings – 3 to 4 over the winter and 1 in the summer
- Updating audiences on farm progress between meetings
- Bringing specialist advice onto farm (expert speakers and consultants)
- Seeing real progress through setting actions and following up on them
- Adopting an evidence-based approach to change, carrying out co-ordinated on-farm trials

- Incorporating all aspects of the farm business, including family objectives, succession and diversification options
- Equipping your steering group and ABG to continue to run meetings after the programme has ended
- Enjoying the social aspect – the programme should be run professionally but also fun

### The evidence-based approach



### Programme aims

The Monitor Farmer, steering group and Knowledge Exchange Manager will work together to create a programme that:

- Develops systems that reduce production costs, improve physical and financial performance, and free up management time
- Addresses problems practically by trying out techniques and embracing new ideas, working towards the adoption of best practice
- Creates an open forum for group discussion and sharing experiences, thereby building sector resilience
- Promotes the setting of specific goals and budgetary targets
- Brings independent, locally relevant knowledge exchange to the farm and surrounding area
- Influences farmers' attitudes towards change
- Makes use of benchmarking against peers, highlighting areas of improvement
- Increases awareness of the markets available for primary produce and ways to take advantage of them to improve returns
- Fosters learning between farmers and from specialist advisors on how to best implement environmentally friendly practices/activities
- Increases the confidence of, and numbers of, young people who influence business decisions within the agricultural sector
- Gives participating farmers the skill and confidence to take the Monitor Farm approach to a wider audience after the three years

In summary, the programme aims to improve performance on a real farm by benchmarking, setting goals, recording progress, sharing information and ideas, adopting new systems and techniques, having a market-led approach, ensuring knowledge transfer to the wider community, enhancing the natural environment and developing people.

The programme serves as a starting point for a journey of personal change and wider community enrichment that has the potential to continue long after the conclusion of the formal three-year period.

### **3. Your Knowledge Exchange Manager**

The role of your Knowledge Exchange Manager (KEM) is to facilitate meetings effectively so they can be productive and enjoyable. The KEM should also ensure meetings allow the group to learn, promote the sharing of information and ideas and help solve problems and make decisions.

Facilitation: *'Making easy the act of assisting or making easier the process or improvement of something'*

#### **As the facilitator, your KEM will:**

- Facilitate benchmarking and analysis
- Respond to the needs of the group and use their resources
- Agree an agenda for your meetings
- Invite specialists to support them
- Engineer meetings to maximise participation and focus
- Agree on actions for the Monitor Farm and help the host achieve their goals
- Produce regular reports, summaries and information and ensure effective dissemination
- Assist in an objective and impartial manner
- Generate publicity and oversee communications
- Keep in regular contact with, and support, you.

### **4. Your steering group**

The Monitor Farm Programme is a farmer-led project and as such the steering group is an essential component of the model.

#### **Your steering group will:**

- Determine the overall strategy and set specific objectives for the Monitor Farm
- Advise and challenge the Monitor Farmer and KEM
- Make a vital contribution to the overall success of the project
- Consider the farm's performance against objectives and initial baseline analysis
- Help the Monitor Farmer to prioritise activity and programme content
- Provide feedback on the programme
- Provide points of contact for ABG members

- Help to promote programme activity to the industry
- Support the Monitor Farmer and knowledge exchange manager in conducting the meetings

### **Steering group meetings**

- Occur at least twice a year, offering opportunity to review and plan the programme
- Steering group meetings take place separately to the Monitor Farm and ABG meetings
- Have organised agendas
- Are initially led by the KEM with responsibility shifting to the steering group members in time

### **Composition of Steering Group**

Steering Group members should be invited by the host Monitor Farmer and usually consist of four to seven members including the host themselves, their KEM, two more growers and the host's agronomist.

The group must work well as a team and be committed to the principles of the project, their tenure as members may last for the duration of the three years. It's useful to identify members with specific skills or knowledge that can add value to the project.

A Monitor Farm's steering group should feel they have ownership of the programme and get involved in running meetings, leading breakout session and delivering presentations.

## **5. Baseline assessments**

The initial determining of baselines is a pre-requisite of a successful Monitor Farm project. Baseline monitoring or benchmarking is defined as '*the search for best practice that leads to superior performance*'.

### **Effective benchmarking can...**

- Allow for future comparison, measuring change and demonstrating success
- Improve decision making
- Ensure an objective, evidence-based approach as opposed to subjective assessment
- Provide information for the steering group to discuss and evaluate
- Fuel discussions in the arable business group
- Feed into effective knowledge transfer
- Identify priorities for the programme
- Reinforce the value and benefit of collecting data and keeping good records
- Allow for comparison between systems within the group

## How it's done

- Firstly, a framework is established for the Monitor Farm to measure and record
- Once that is done the critical aspects are identified – decide what you want to measure
- Baseline measurements results are then recorded, and key performance indicators are established
- A SWOT (Strength, weakness, opportunity and threat) analysis is conducted at the first meeting and then reviewed periodically
- At least one session per year is dedicated to business and accounts analysis

## What measurements can be included in the benchmarking process?

Benchmarking can be divided into two categories:

**Physical:** Such as soil analysis, yields, horsepower per hectare, weather, altitude, energy use and carbon footprint.

**Financial:** Such as labour, environmental audits, gross output analysis, variable costs, sale prices, gross margin, overheads, net margin and cost of production.

## Benchmarking challenges

Benchmarking can be a powerful tool in demonstrating the potential for businesses to improve their performance, but the process is not without its issues.

Challenge	Action
Standardising the measures being benchmarked	Establish clear protocols for data collection and assumptions
Confidentiality	If other members of the group contribute to the benchmarking be sure to secure their agreement before releasing any figures
Presentation	Results and outcomes should be simple to follow and easy to understand with key figures highlighted
Whole farm vs. enterprise issue	Understanding of the whole farm and the implications involved in splitting out enterprises
Quality of data and validity	Stick to a strict process when collecting data to ensure it is consistent and compatible

## 6. Field-scale demonstrations (on-farm trials)

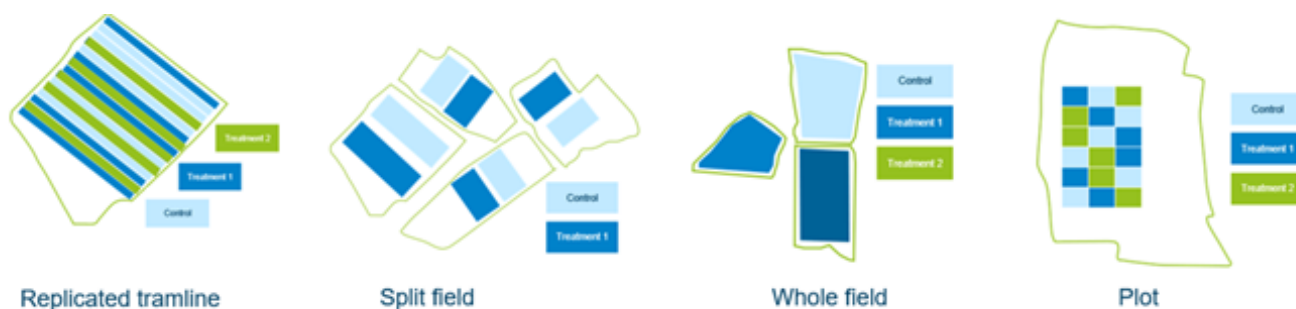
Farmers who conduct on-farm trials are more likely to be able to adapt to change. This is because their decisions are based on evidence gathered in their unique (e.g. climatic, rotational, economic, market and management) farming circumstances. However, effective trials require time and attention to detail. With appropriate planning and implementation, they can show whether the impact of a new approach is real or if it occurred by chance.

### What should be considered?

- Site selection: use representative areas or samples that reflect characteristics of the field
- Methodology: choose a method that can be repeated at another time or location and carried out by another person
- Logistics: take into account labour requirements and location of the trial to ensure it doesn't compromise other activities on farm
- Third parties: if partly funded by a commercial company, ensure that they are happy to share the data regardless of the trial outcome

### Planning an on-farm trial

1. **Set the question:** Setting a question to answer before the trial starts will help inform trial design, including treatments, data collection and analysis. If it is not realistic to answer the question, simplify it
2. **Define the treatments:** Consider each variable separately, considering in-field variation and opportunity for replication. One treatment should be a control (farm standard)
3. **Treatment application:** Think through the logistics of applying the treatments – what equipment will you need? Have you got the time to carry out the work?
4. **Design the layout:** Factor in field size, number of treatments needed and in-field variation. Ideally, each treatment should be on land as uniform as possible to see the effect of the treatment (rather than inherent variation). For example, if there is a slope in a field, lay the trial across the slope so that each part of the slope gets the same treatment



5. **Measurements:** Decide what measurements can be taken that will help answer your question. Remember that more measurements can give you more confidence in the results



6. **Run the trial:** It is important that the management of the trial, including data collection, is consistent. Be careful of farm management changes (new staff/contractors/machinery) and the impact this could have on data collection
7. **Record the results:** Keep a clear record of data throughout the trial. Making a note of observations throughout the season can help add context to results at the end of the trial (e.g. grazing, pest damage, weather conditions). Depending on the trial, data visualisation tools such as yield maps or Excel spreadsheets can be an important tool in spotting differences between treatments
8. **Communicate the findings:** Sharing trial progress and results at Monitor Farm meetings, webinars or on social media can encourage others to contribute relevant data or knowledge on your trial.

## 7. Beyond Monitor Farm meetings

### Communicating success

It is important to make sure as many farmers and other levy payers in the UK can benefit from the Monitor Farm Programme as possible.

For this reason, we need to communicate what happens on the Monitor Farms, in meetings and throughout the year, as widely as possible. This is achieved through a variety of means including writing articles, press involvement and open days.

Within reason, Monitor Farmers should be willing to share their experiences of the Monitor Farm project, with AHDB, the media and other farmers, via various communication channels.

AHDB can provide media and communications training for those who would like it, from writing articles to giving interviews on camera.

### Summer open day

The summer farm walk is a great opportunity to:

- Promote the project to a wider audience
- Encourage engagement and participation in the project, through on-farm trial demonstrations
- Summarise the learning to-date and changes made
- Promote the project to a wider audience utilising media and digital content
- Collaborate with other farming and rural organisations to boost the effort and resources applied.

The meeting should take the form of a farm tour involving stop points to look at key issues, possibly manned by the steering group. Attendees could be divided into smaller sub-groups to encourage better discussion.

The meeting may require the involvement and support of many people to make the delivery a success, such as by manning the stations, organising parking, leading sub-groups, guiding the tour, helping with catering, putting up signs or distributing hand-outs.

### **Monitor Farm legacy**

Planning for the end of the Monitor Farm project is critical. It is important to review:

- The project's learnings and the changes made by the host Monitor Farm
- The Monitor Farm objectives noted at the start of the project and if they have been achieved

A key objective of the Monitor Farm project is that the ABG is equipped and motivated to continue to meet beyond the three-year term of the project. The ABG can either continue as the existing group, or as a new Monitor Farm.

### **What does a Monitor Farm legacy look like?**

- The ABG is motivated and equipped to continue
- The Monitor Farm has fast-tracked its development and met key objectives
- The Monitor Farm has a strategy for ongoing development for the next five years
- The Monitor Farm is a business fit for the future
- Enhanced capability and leadership skills amongst the steering group
- Members of the ABG and meeting attendees have an improved ability to farm efficiently

## **8. Top tips**

- Continue to be open and willing to try things
- Establish a strong and effective steering group early, getting people actively involved in the project and developing leadership qualities
- Establish a vibrant ABG who are all willing to get involved, share experiences and ideas
- Monitor the farm's performance by providing good benchmarked technical and financial information
- Keep the meetings topical, practical and relevant
- Keep meetings fresh – consider including learning journeys, best practice visits and speakers from non-farming businesses

- Focus on improving the performance and profitability of the Monitor Farm with the Monitor Farmer objectives written down at the onset of the project
- Aim to equip farmers to think more objectively – to know where to find information, and to improve their decision-making, adopting a more professional business approach
- Consider a meeting with the processing/marketing trade to better understand market influences and break down the ‘them-and-us’ barrier
- Work with AHDB to build good relationships with local/regional media to share outcomes and best practice beyond those directly involved