

Communicating with organic producers in Wales

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Summary

This paper reviews the services and activities through which the research and development community communicates with producers in Wales. These include publications (in hard copy and electronic media), one to one advisory services and group activities. It examines the appropriateness of different approaches for different situations, and makes the case for better integration of services under the new rural development plan.

Key words: Extension, knowledge transfer, advice demonstration farms

Introduction

A range of challenges arise in organising knowledge transfer for organic producers. Sustainable agricultural methods are considered to be knowledge and information intensive and lack of information remains a barrier for conversion to organic farming. However, little is known about what type of knowledge or information the farmers might require, when and how they require it and where it will come from. It is likely that information needs of organic converters include organic standards and inspection, organic husbandry and production economics, market intelligence, marketing, farm business planning, conservation and on-going advice needs during conversion (ADAS/OCW, 2005).

There is very little research in Europe on how knowledge networks for sustainable agriculture should be organised (Röling *et al.*, 1998) and the public attitude has undergone major change in returning from a expectation of full privatisation and producer paid services to greater involvement of the public sector again. A considerable body of research has been carried out in the last 20 years, but much of it does appear to have very much direct impact on the practises of organic farmers. Also the organic sector by its nature is a bottom up approach with farmers having strongly influenced current practises and standards, so what role should government funded agencies play in public support and information provision?

The Organic Centre Wales has been set up to act as the focal point of information to support the development of the organic sector in Wales and knowledge dissemination to producers is an important part of the centre's remit. The knowledge transfer services available in Wales to organic farmers, and those in or considering conversion were reviewed, with regard to their objectives, scope and approach.

Services Provided for Organic Farmers in Wales

In Wales publicly funded knowledge transfer activities are delivered by a range of organisations and projects (see Table 1). At present, all these services are free at the point of delivery, although this will change with the introduction of the Farm Advisory Service in April 2007, after which time, producers will be expected to contribute at least 20% of the cost of delivery.

Table 1. *Publicly funded knowledge transfer activities in Wales*

Service	Description	Delivers	Administration/ Delivery	Funding
Organic Centre Wales (OCW)	Dissemination of information on organic food and farming to producers and other interested parties in Wales	Free publications Technical helpline Management of OCIS	Partnership of ADAS, Elm Farm Research Centre, IGER, the Soil Association, Institute of Rural Sciences (UWA)	Welsh Assembly Government and Farming Connect
Organic Conversion Information Service (OCIS)	Helps farmers understand the implications of converting to organic systems	Free phone helpline, information pack max 2 advisory visits	Managed by OCW; visits delivered by ADAS and OAS	Welsh Assembly Government
Farm Business Development Plans	Review of current business/ financial performance and options for the future	Up to 5 days of free on farm advisory visits	Three (out of 10) consultancy firms, have organic expertise	Farming Connect
Technical Advice	Help with production issues	Up to 2 days of free one to one advice	Five (out of 10) consultancy firms have organic expertise	Farming Connect
Environmental Opportunities Reviews and Specialist advice	Inventory of environmental resources on the farm, identify potential risks and opportunities special issues	Free one to one advice	Delivered by ADAS	Farming Connect

Organic Centre Wales (OCW)

The OCW was established in 2000 as a focal point for the dissemination of information on organic food and farming to producers and other interested parties in Wales. It is run by a partnership of five organizations actively involved in organic farming research and knowledge transfer in Wales: ADAS, Elm Farm Research Centre (EFRC), the Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research (IGER), the Soil Association and the Institute of Rural Sciences at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth (IRS) which also hosts the centre. It is funded by the Welsh Assembly and Farming Connect (see below). Knowledge dissemination to producers is a key element of OCW's

remit and services include: a technical helpline available to all farmers in Wales; the production of technical guides/fact sheets, research summaries, policy briefing and other relevant publications; Management of the Organic Conversion Information Service (OCIS) in Wales and the Farming Connect Organic Development programme (see below).

Organic conversion information service (OCIS)

OCIS helps conventional producers to understand the implications of organic conversion, and thus make an informed decision about the future direction of the farm. In Wales, OCIS is funded by the Welsh Assembly and includes telephone advice (through the OCW helpline), an information pack with basic information on organic food and farming and up to two on farm advisory visits, delivered by ADAS and the Organic Advisory Service.

Farming connect

Farming Connect provides a wide range of services to farmers including business, technical and environmental/conservation advice. It is funded by the EU with match funding from the Welsh Assembly, and is available to all farmers in Wales (organic and conventional) who can demonstrate a labour requirement of at least 550 hours per year. The farming connect programme is underpinned by five development programmes for important farming sectors such as beef and sheep, dairy, grassland, alternative land use (including horticulture) and organic farming. OCW manages the organic programme and as such is responsible for managing a network of development farms (institutional), demonstration farms (commercial) and producer discussion groups. It also organises seminars and workshops and provides market intelligence information for the sector. In this work OCW draws heavily on its partner organisations to deliver the programme. The different services employ a wide range of approaches and techniques to communicate with farmers.

Approaches to Knowledge Transfer

One to one advice

The one to one approach is used to deliver advice in areas that are commercially sensitive, or by their nature farm specific. These included the Farm Business Development Plans and Environmental opportunities reviews, technical advice days under Farming Connect and the on farm advice element of OCIS. They tend to be highly structured by nature and have very specific objectives and focus on one particular aspect of farm management.

Group activities

Group activities include the Demonstration and Development farm events, Discussion group meeting, seminars workshops conferences etc. These tend to be less structured compared to one to one services, and can cover a wider range of topics including technical, business/ marketing, environmental and policy issues. One their key aims is to promote the sharing of experiences and knowledge between producers, and a group approach to problem solving and have a high level of producer involvement. The discussion groups, for instance are led by producers, who decide the topic, scope and frequency of meetings. In the case of development and demonstration farm events, the Development Centres take a lead role in developing the agendas and selecting the farms. They take into account a range of factors including the needs of the industry (as they perceive them, based on regular contact with all stake holders in the food supply chain), the policy environment and the resources/ research development activities on the particular farm in question.

The group activities are also one of the main mechanisms through which producers communicate with the research and development community, and are vital in terms of keeping the support organisations in touch with the communities they serve. The discussion groups in particular also provide a framework with in which farmer participatory research projects can be undertaken.

Work currently underway includes variety trials and a project assessing the quality of propagating media.

Literature and electronic information

A range of printed and electronic material, aimed specifically at producers supports the one to one and group work. The Organic Centre Wales has developed it's website (www.organic.aber.ac.uk) to become the main resources for producers (and others) on organic food and farming issues in Wales. It provides regular updates on the sector through two monthly e-mail bulletins, one on the sector generally, and the other focussed specifically on marketing and market intelligence. Printed materials include Technical Guides (2–30 pp.), Fact Sheets (1–2 pp.), Project Report Summaries and contributions to the Organic Farm Management Handbook (approx 225 pp.). The farming press is a key communication channel, in particular the Welsh Assembly's monthly publication 'Gwlad', is a bilingual magazine sent all farmers in Wales free of charge.

Discussion

Successful communication relies on a variety of mechanisms and approaches. There are clearly some areas that are most appropriately dealt with in the context of one to one advice. This is particularly true in areas that involve detailed discussion of commercially sensitive and confidential information, or, where advice is sought in and has to be targeted to a very farm specific situation (e.g. the implications of organic conversion).

On the other hand, there are clear and well documented examples of the benefit of a group approach to problem solving and the sharing of information and knowledge (for example Röling *et al.*, 1998; Scoones *et al.*, 1994). One of the challenges is to link these different services and information channels together effectively. In Wales they are currently delivered as separate services and while there is effective signposting from one to the other, the end result from a producer's perspective is a series of reports, each focusing on a different area of management. This can mean duplication of effort on the part of advisors and makes it difficult for farmers to assimilate the necessary information to draw up a coherent plan of action. In the context of the new Rural Development Plan, and the introduction of the farm advisory service in March 2007, there is an opportunity to develop a much more integrated support network, where the different services contribute to a single document, culminating in an action plan that covers all key management areas (Financial/ business management, Technical enterprise issues, Animal Health and Welfare, Environment, Family and social issues) while also serving to satisfy some requirements of organic certification. This approach has particular relevance for the organic systems, because they are themselves more integrated and what happens in one part of the system inevitably has an impact on other parts. Issues such as nutrient management, environmental issues, animal health, and organic conversion can only be fully understood when all parts of system are considered together. It would also provide a context within which group activities such as those described above, and other information sources can be assimilated.

References

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