



## Farm Advisory Service: One to Many

Evaluation and Recommendations

**RESAS**

Rural & Environmental Science  
and Analytical Services



Scottish Government  
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# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Executive Summary, Plain English Summary and Recommendations</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1	Executive Summary	1
1.2	Plain English Summary	3
1.3	Recommendations	4
<b>2</b>	<b>What is the Farm Advisory Service?</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1	Background	6
2.2	FAS Delivery	6
2.3	Goals of the Service	6
<b>3</b>	<b>What Has Been Delivered?</b>	<b>8</b>
3.1	Overall Findings	8
3.2	Achievement of KPIs	8
3.3	FAS Events	9
3.4	Events Feedback	11
3.5	Impacts of Events	13
3.6	Use of Advice Line	14
3.7	Web Metrics	15
3.8	Social Media and Video Content	15
3.9	Publications and Downloads	17
3.10	Podcasts	18
3.11	Croft and Small Farm Advisory Service	19
3.12	Newsletter	19
3.13	Online Tools	19
3.14	Conclusion	19
<b>4</b>	<b>Findings: Views of Service Users</b>	<b>21</b>
4.1	Summary Findings	21
4.2	The Survey	21
4.3	The Survey Sample	21
4.4	What did the sample use the FAS for?	23
4.5	Overall Sentiments	24
4.6	Business Impacts	26
4.7	Environmental benefits	27
4.8	Views on Future Delivery	29
4.9	Conclusions	29
<b>5</b>	<b>What are the Challenges? Stakeholder Perspectives</b>	<b>30</b>

5.1	Summary Findings.....	30
5.2	What Should the Goal of the Service Be? .....	30
5.3	Training, Information and Inclusion .....	32
5.4	Barriers to Seeking and Following Advice .....	36
5.5	How Should Change be Monitored? .....	39
<b>6</b>	<b>Conclusions and Recommendations .....</b>	<b>41</b>
6.1	Recommendations .....	41

# 1 Executive Summary, Plain English Summary and Recommendations

## 1.1 Executive Summary

This report provides an evaluation of the **Farm Advisory Service: One to Many** service (FAS OtM). This report complements an **evaluation** published by RESAS of the FAS One to One service in 2019. The FAS OtM service was procured by Scottish Government as part of the broader Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) 2014-2020, and seeks to improve the business and environmental performance of Scottish Agriculture through the provision of advice. The OtM component of the service comprises a range of features, including in-person events, providing information on the website, providing specialist support via the advice line, delivering a small farm and crofter subscription service providing discounted advice and a range of other outputs concerned with addressing a mass audience (i.e. podcasts, videos, social media, and downloadable technical publications).

The overall goal of the FAS service is: “Encouraging sustainable growth and broadening opportunities that will help create a more competitive dynamic agricultural sector that contributes to the long term viability of rural communities while maintaining high standards of animal health and welfare and environmental management.”

The FAS OtM contract further specifies the following aims for the service:

- Knowledgeable, multi-skilled farmers and crofters capable of delivering business, societal and environmental benefits within a complex legislative and physical operating environment.
- Greater uptake of agricultural practices that deliver increased economic performance whilst mitigating against climate change and enhancing biodiversity status.
- Increasing numbers of dynamic young people successfully entering Scottish agriculture, thereby injecting vigour in the development of thriving farm and rural businesses.
- Easy access to up-to-date and relevant knowledge and information to all farmers and crofters through a network of advisory centres, on-line resources and a telephone advice facility.
- Land managers using key national performance metrics (benchmarks).
- Improved uptake of integrated methods of managing plant and animal health, including the safer use of and reduced reliance on pesticides and antibiotics.
- Improved water quality through a reduction in diffuse pollution and run-off.

A survey was undertaken that 148 FAS users responded to, and eight agricultural stakeholders and two participants from FAS were interviewed. Overall, chapter 2 indicates that SAC Consulting have fulfilled their contractual obligations with regard to the delivery of FAS. Highlights of the delivery have included:

- Delivering over 800 events over a range of geographical locations, with consistently high feedback. As many as 15,656 people attended these events between 2016/17 and 2019/20.
- Consistently high satisfaction ratings and intention to change reported by 85% of event attendants.
- Provision of a small farm and crofter subscription service, providing subsidised advice to 2,188 crofters and 287 small farms in 2019/20.
- Delivery of numerous Women in Agriculture events and events supporting New Entrants over the course of the contract.
- Providing technical information, including a Farm Management Handbook. Between January 2020 and August 2020, 108,674 technical documents were downloaded
- Increased engagement with farmers through social media, website, podcasts, videos and newsletter over the course of the contract.
- An increase to 934 calls to the helpline in 2019/20 from 299 in 2017/18.
- Consistent achievement of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)
- Our survey also found high satisfaction with the service and evidence of changes on farms as a result of engagement with FAS, including monetary savings, environmental improvements, improved profit margins and a reduction in the costs of inputs.

Overall, there is clear evidence that the FAS OtM has delivered a wide-ranging programme which, insofar as we have data, appears to be well-regarded by those who use it. Given the relatively recent development of this service, this is positive. However, a challenge for the evaluation has been that, while a number of KPIs are specified, the delivery of advice via the OtM service is not accompanied by impact related goals or outcome-based monitoring. Moreover, as we do not have population level data about the use of the FAS among farmers, it is challenging to compare those who have received advice to those who have not. This makes it difficult to demonstrate the impacts of advice directly, and the scope for addressing this in the future is discussed in the recommendations of this report.

In terms of structure, this evaluation provides an overview of the outputs from the project ([chapter 2](#)), a survey of users to identify benefits and challenges ([chapter 3](#)) and interviews with key stakeholders and the delivery partners about the service ([chapter 4](#)). This data allowed the evaluation to identify where challenges in the FAS delivery model have been observed and provides discussion around how these challenges might be addressed. The final chapter provides further discussion of how the logic model of FAS might be developed going forward.

It should be emphasised that the recommendations for developing FAS further should not be understood as a critique of the service provided. Rather, it is more a matter of identifying the ways in which the service could develop in the future and build on the work that has already been done. Both the quantitative and qualitative data suggests that, irrespective of how effectively information has been delivered, farmers may face substantial barriers in engaging with and following advice. There are also complex questions about how these changes can best be monitored and coordinated with a view to supporting sectoral transformation and a response to the climate emergency. The evaluation seeks to engage with these questions, and can be understood in this context as seeking to enhance the delivery of advice.

## 1.2 Plain English Summary

### **What is the Farm Advisory Service?**

The first and current version of the Farm Advisory Service (FAS) was launched in 2016 and ran until December 2020. This was delivered as part of a number of European Union funded agricultural and rural development programmes in this period. The advice service provides free advice to farmers to improve their economic prospects and supports efforts to make farming more environmentally sustainable. Farming Advice of this sort is provided in European Member states, in part to support compliance with EU rules, although the nature and type of delivery vary.

### **How is FAS Delivered?**

Delivery of Farm Advice is split into 'one to many' and 'one to one' components. One to one advice is concerned with farmers developing plans with advisors to implement changes on their farm directly and was evaluated by Scottish Government in 2019. One to many (OtM) advice provides a range of services including in-person and online events, providing information and briefings online, responding to technical enquiries and producing content online to support the service's goals. It is the one to many service – delivered by SAC consulting - that is subject to evaluation here.

### **What is the purpose of this Evaluation and How was it Done?**

The evaluation took place to fulfil the requirements of EU funding and consider how the Scottish Government should approach farm advice in the future. The key questions were: what has been delivered by the one to many service, what are the impacts of this, and what improvements may be needed going forward? To answer these questions, SAC's reports and data were analysed and a short survey of FAS users and ten interviews with key stakeholders were carried out.

### **What did the Evaluation Find?**

The evaluation found that SAC Consulting had delivered a wide ranging service that fulfilled their requirements. Benefits included a large numbers of events, high satisfaction among attendees and increased use of FAS services over the contract period. However, the evaluation also notes that, at present, demonstrating the impacts of FAS OtM on farms is challenging, as there has been limited monitoring of the extent to which farmers use the service as well as limited monitoring of on-farm improvement. Going forward, identifying outcome based measurements to demonstrate the impacts of advice, improving the monitoring of FAS use among farmers and refreshing the 'mission' of the service are all recommended as methods to address these issues. In addition, it is recommended that techniques are developed to improve the engagement of those currently not making use of FAS and to support on-farm changes among those facing barriers to doing so.

### **Who is this Report for and What are the Next Steps?**

This evaluation will inform ongoing policy discussions about how to take forward the delivery of farming advice in the post-Brexit policy context. While the main purpose of the report is to inform policy making, it may also be of interest to those concerned with how the Farm Advisory Service is delivered at present and in understanding the challenges and benefits of the current delivery method. FAS will remain co-funded by the EU until March 2021 and then will be fully nationally funded until December 2021.

## 1.3 Recommendations

In the main report, the recommendations below are restated in the main text in greater context. However, a summary of the eight main recommendations is here:

**Recommendation 1: Review Monitoring Framework.** Review the KPI arrangements for a future service and consider the possibility of developing outcome based KPIs. Review the options for establishing effective monitoring of farm improvements, ranging from centrally set and monitored goals to goals established and monitored by individuals or groups of participants.

**Recommendation 2: Review Data Strategy.** Consider potential mechanisms for regular, representative farm data collection to determine the extent to which FAS is used within the farming population as a whole and how the service is viewed. Consider opportunities for integrating monitoring of farm environments within a broader environmental monitoring strategy. Consider the possibility of a specific farm data strategy for monitoring and benchmarking environmental impacts.

**Recommendation 3: Review Engagement Strategy.** Consider contractual mechanisms that support the goal of engaging with those who are under-represented in FAS, and the possibility of requiring a detailed engagement strategy that examines subjective and structural barriers. Review whether future farm advice should develop an appropriate customer management system that allows monitoring that tracks additional advice and engagement from customers, to monitor crossover between the different components of the service (in the event that delivery continues to be separated into 'one to one' and 'one to many' components).

**Recommendation 4: Review the 'mission' of the service.** Consider the value of establishing an updated 'mission' for the service, using a participatory mechanism to ensure wide cross-sectoral buy in. This should be cognisant of the climate emergency and the need to support nature in farming.

**Recommendation 5: Review Knowledge Integration:** Review mechanisms for knowledge exchange to ensure there is a consistent approach to climate change and environmental practice both on and off farm, potentially incorporating knowledge exchange initiatives like [SEFARI](#), the website that hosts the outputs from publicly funded research into food and agriculture. Similarly, consider the mechanisms for greater integration of FAS in relation to the broader farming advice context, and ensuring specialist knowledge is available and integrated into service provision.

**Recommendation 6: Consider Scope for More Holistic Training Integration.** Consider whether there is scope for more holistic integration of training with advice provision. Taking a long-term view, consider the scope for FAS to engage with longer-term training and advice mechanisms.

**Recommendation 7: Ensure advice is inclusive.** Consider the best mechanisms to mainstream the lessons of women-only training techniques, how best to ensure they are available and review barriers to participation that may exist for other equalities groups. For sensitive topics, for example, succession planning and mental health, ensure that FAS can provide an appropriate forum for discussing these sensitively.

**Recommendation 8: Engage with Barriers to Following Advice.** Consider developing mechanisms to cultivate small, facilitated groups of farmers which can collaboratively develop change over time. A common view among interview respondents was that achieving change is easier in the context of small groups of farmers, rather than individuals, and this should be considered as a mechanism for improving the take-up of advice.

## 2 What is the Farm Advisory Service?

### 2.1 Background

The Farm Advisory Service (FAS) is a component of the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) 2014-20. The service was launched in September 2016 and will be effective until 31 December 2020.

The Farm Advisory Service is one of the services procured to support the Scottish Government's policy of "Encouraging sustainable growth and broadening opportunities that will help create a more competitive dynamic agricultural sector that contributes to the long term viability of rural communities while maintaining high standards of animal health and welfare and environmental management."

From a procurement perspective, the provision of the FAS is split into two:

- FAS One to One
- FAS One to Many

The FAS One to One service – which is not the focus of the current evaluation – refers to several parts of the overall offering which provide one-on-one engagement with farmers and the development of specific plans for action.

### 2.2 FAS Delivery

The FAS One to Many component of the service, by contrast, refers to a range of services provided in addition to the development of farm specific plans. These comprise:

- In person and online events
- Maintaining a website to provide information on farming
- Providing and disseminating publications and technical information
- Providing specialist advice to respond to telephone queries
- Providing a social media presence and attending sector events
- Contributing to the farming press
- Providing a monthly newsletter
- Providing a range of outputs such as videos, online tools and podcasts

### 2.3 Goals of the Service

The goals of the One to Many component of the FAS are farming/crofting sustainability, as well as resource efficiency advice and agricultural business advice, including advice to new entrants. The outcomes specified in the tender for the FAS: One to Many service are as follows:

- Knowledgeable, multi-skilled farmers and crofters capable of delivering business, societal and environmental benefits within a complex legislative and physical operating environment.

- Greater uptake of agricultural practices that deliver increased economic performance whilst mitigating against climate change and enhancing biodiversity status.
- Increasing numbers of dynamic young people successfully entering Scottish agriculture, thereby injecting vigour in the development of thriving farm and rural businesses.
- Easy access to up-to-date and relevant knowledge and information to all farmers and crofters through a network of advisory centres, on-line resources and a telephone advice facility.
- Land managers using key national performance metrics (benchmarks).
- Improved uptake of integrated methods of managing plant and animal health, including the safer use of and reduced reliance on pesticides and antibiotics.
- Improved water quality through a reduction in diffuse pollution and run-off.

Both components of the FAS – one to one and one to many – relate to the EU Focus Areas below. Focus Areas structure the key goals of EU agricultural funding.

- Improving the economic performance of all farms and facilitating farm restructuring and modernisation, notably with a view to increasing market participation and orientation as well as agricultural diversification
- Facilitating the entry of adequately skilled farmers into the agricultural sector and, in particular, generational renewal
- Supporting farm risk prevention and management
- Restoring, preserving and enhancing ecosystems related to agriculture and forestry.
- Increasing efficiency in energy use in agriculture and food processing

## 3 What Has Been Delivered?

### 3.1 Overall Findings

- Primary interventions, such as events and use of the advice line, have been consistently delivered across the period while use of these services has increased.
- The FAS delivery has developed and improved over the years, with the addition of a newsletter, video content, podcasts and online tools which have enhanced the service.
- There has been a substantial growth in engagement with the FAS offering over this time, as measured in advice queries, event attendance, video views and social media presence.
- FAS feedback forms indicate high satisfaction among recipients for the service.

### 3.2 Achievement of KPIs

FAS key performance indicators were introduced in 2018. These are detailed in the annual reports for 2018-19, 2019-20, and on a monthly basis during 2020-21 (as the year has not yet been completed). As found in the annual reports, there are twelve KPIs attached to FAS One to Many contract delivery. These are:

1. Events
2. Event attendance
3. Event feedback – overall quality
4. Event feedback – relevance
5. Event feedback – intention to change
6. Bounce rate for the website
7. Website availability
8. 95 percent of call-backs are done within six working hours
9. 95 percent of routine queries are responded to within one working day
10. 90 per cent of detailed queries are responded to within two working days
11. 100 percent of complex queries are responded to within five working days
12. 100 percent of e-mail enquiries are responded to within one working day

As we can see, these relate primarily to event attendance, effective website maintenance and ensuring that queries are responded to. Based on the data available in FAS OtM annual and monthly reports, KPI 1 (number of events) was fulfilled in 2018-19 two months ahead of schedule. In 2019-20, the event KPI was fulfilled at the level of the number of events, but the total and average attendance at events was lower than the targets (4,917 attendants relative to a target of 5,400).

Looking at the KPIs overall in the period available, these have consistently been met, with the exception of frequent shortcomings with regard to KPI 6 – the bounce rate of the website – and KPI 11, which relates to responses to complex enquiries. Here, SAC Consulting have emphasised that while the responses are consistently made on time, the relevant paperwork is not always completed fast enough to confirm this. This appears to primarily be an issue of training and monitoring. A full review of the KPIs and SAC Consulting’s performance against them can be found in the supplementary documents accompanying this report.

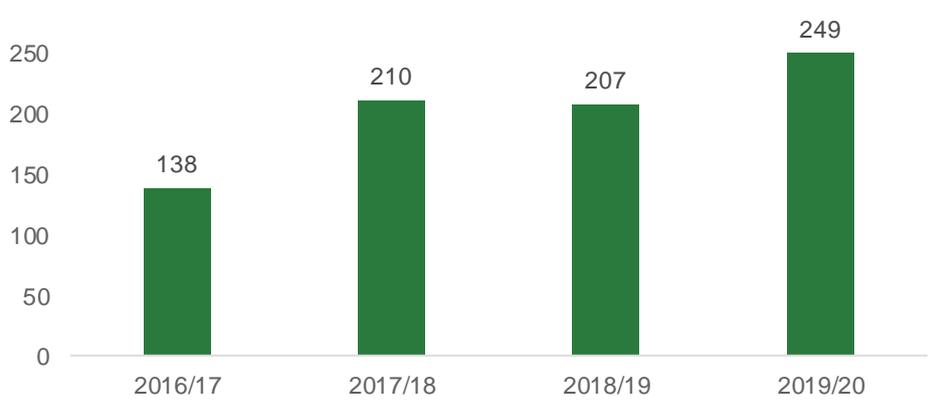
While the KPIs are indicative of the outputs of FAS, they do however raise important questions about how success in a future advice context should be measured. While website attendance, feedback forms and event participation are all useful metrics, it is worth considering how a future iteration of the FAS could also introduce KPIs specifically concerned with *impacts*. However, this is a challenging process, given the enhanced monitoring it would entail. This informs **Recommendation 1**.

**Recommendation 1: Review Monitoring Framework.** Review the KPI arrangements for a future service, and consider the possibility of developing outcome based KPIs. Review the options for establishing effective monitoring of farm improvements, ranging from centrally set and monitored goals to goals established and monitored by individuals or groups of participants.

### 3.3 FAS Events

A key part of FAS delivery has been the provision of events. With the exception of 2016/17, FAS have provided over 200 events per year, rising to 249 during 2019/20 (see Figure 3.1). The lower numbers in 2016/17 reflect the fact that, in that financial year, the FAS contract was only operational for nine months. During the 2020/21 financial year, to date, events have been altered to take into account restrictions on face to face meetings owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. As of August 2020, there had been 48 events, with a total of 1, 456 participants.

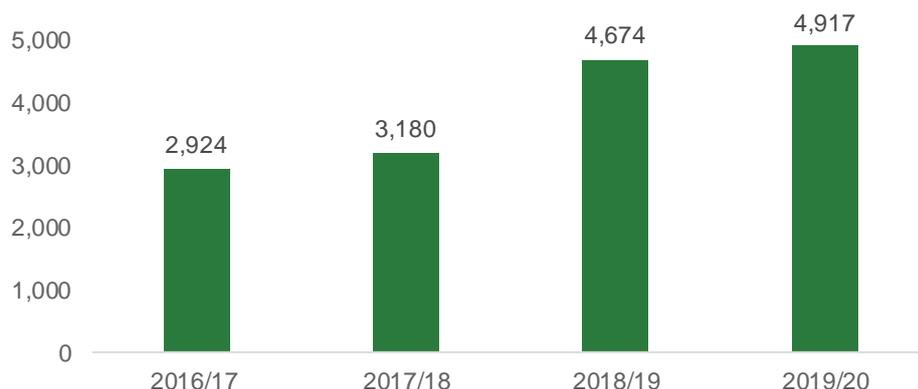
Figure 3.1: Number of FAS Events per Year 2016/17-2019/20



The events cover a wide range of topics, and have included 83 specifically aimed at New Entrants to farming, and 78 specifically focused on Women in Agriculture.

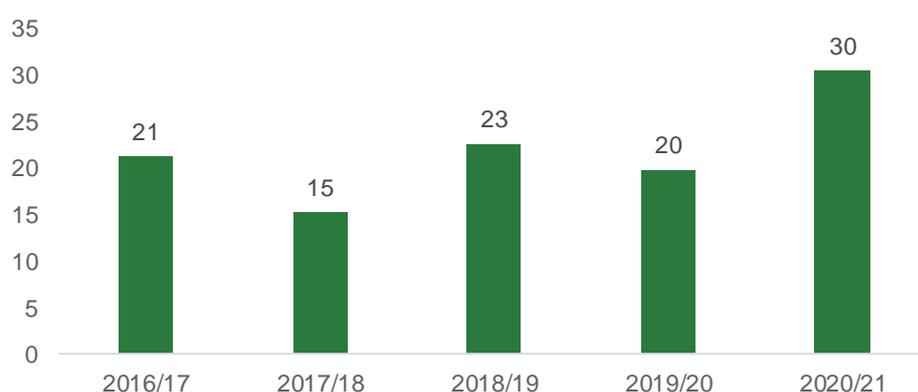
Event attendance has also increased over this period (see Figure 3.2). While it is impossible to state whether the attendees are unique, as individuals may have attended more than one event, the upwards trajectory is none the less positive. As we can see, when we compare 2017/18 to 2019/20, there is an increase of approximately 55%.

Figure 3.2: Number of attendees recorded per year, 2016/17-2019/20<sup>1</sup>



In Figure 3.3., the average number of attendees per event per year is provided, based on the available data. As this shows, while data is incomplete, the addition of online events has increased average event attendance in the 2020/21 period.

Figure 3.3: Average attendees per event 2016/17-2020/21<sup>2</sup>



In response to Covid-19, online events have replaced in-person events. As shown in Figure 3.3, this has increased average attendance, although it is also possible that reducing barriers to attendance has also increased the number of participants who are not from core demographics, i.e. non-farmers and academics.

<sup>1</sup> Calculated by summing monthly attendance, so does not represent unique users.

<sup>2</sup> January to August only.

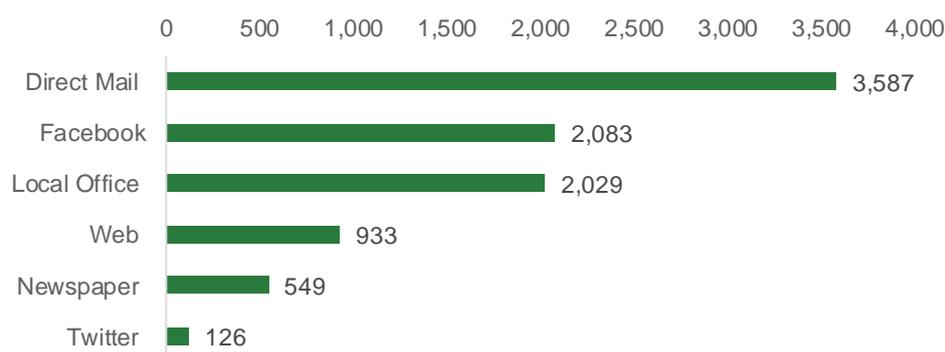
The events have taken place in a wide range of locations, consistent with the FAS' ambition to be a truly 'national' advice service (see Table 3-1).

Table 3-1: Geographical Locations of FAS Events, 2016/17-2019/20

Region	No. of Events
Highlands and Islands	211
North East Scotland	135
South East Scotland	44
South West Scotland	119
Strathclyde and Central Scotland	73

The FAS data also indicates that direct mail remains the most common means by which participants learned about events, although social media and local SAC Consulting offices remain important sources of information.

Figure 3.4: How Participants Learned of FAS Events, 2016/17-2019/20<sup>3</sup>



### 3.4 Events Feedback

FAS routinely collects feedback data during the events. On overall delivery, in the period May 2017 to March 2020, 68% of respondents rated the event as 'excellent', and 29% regarded the event as satisfactory. During the period April 2020 to August 2020 – during which the metrics of the feedback have been altered and therefore cannot be merged for analytical purposes - 58% of the respondents said the events were excellent and 39% regarded the events as good. As we can see, participant feedback has been consistently high throughout the duration of the programme. Similarly, other categories for feedback received positive results, as shown in Table 3-2 and Table 3-3.

<sup>3</sup> Where response given.

Table 3-2: Event feedback 2016/17-2019/20

	Less than Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Very Satisfactory	Excellent
Was the information easy to understand?	<1%	2.4%	33%	60%
Were there opportunities to ask questions?	<1%	<1%	25%	68%
How useful was the event?	<1%	5%	32%	60%
How relevant was the content of the event?	<1%	5%	30%	63%
How suitable was the event?	<1%	2%	32%	63%
Time Keeping?	<1%	3%	33%	58%

Table 3-3: Event feedback April 2020-August 2020

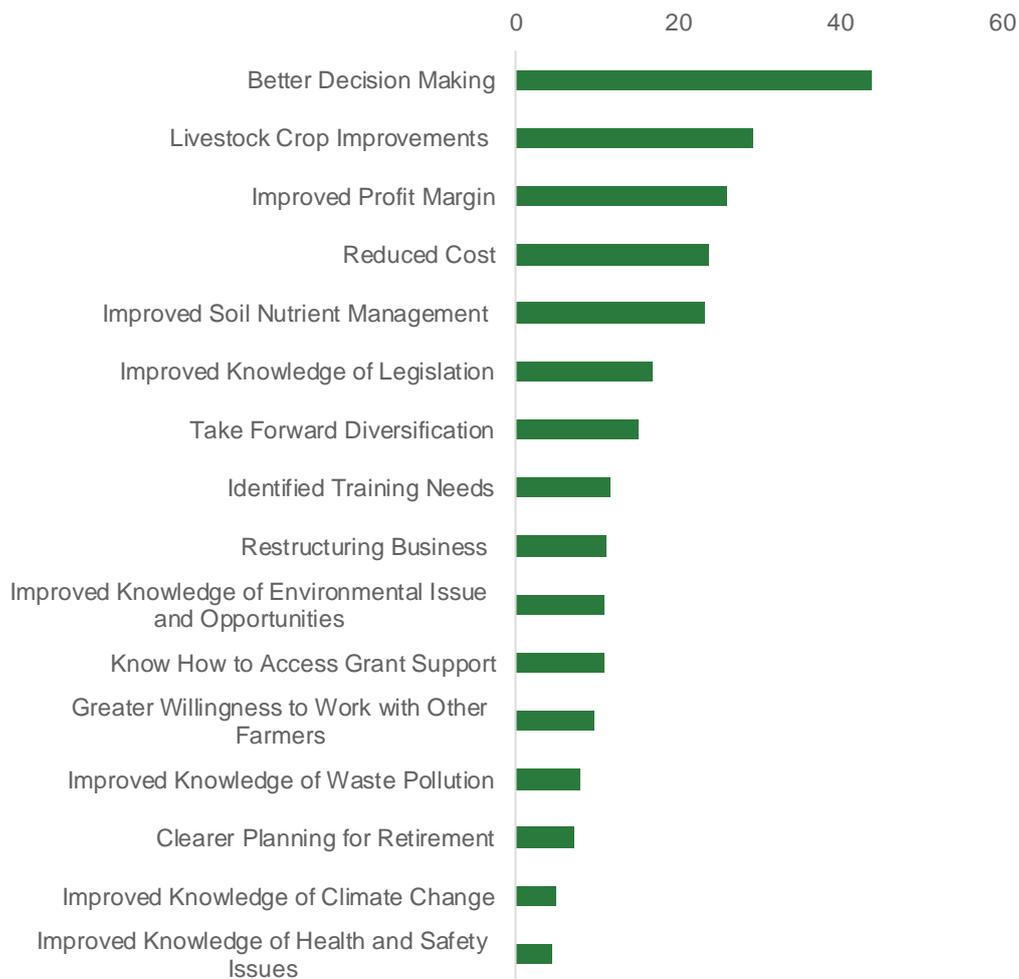
	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Was the information easy to understand?	<1%	3%	39%	58%
Were there opportunities to ask questions?	<1%	5%	39%	54%
How useful was the event?	<1%	5%	42%	53%
How relevant was the content of the event?	<1%	4%	35%	60%
How suitable was the event?	<1%	3%	39%	58%
Time Keeping?	0%	4%	27%	69%

This event feedback is encouraging and informs the view that the intervention has been delivered effectively.

### 3.5 Impacts of Events

FAS also collected, via event feedback forms, data on whether participants intend to make changes on their farm as a result of the event. Of all participants, 85% reported that they intended to make changes to their farm as a result of the information they received at a FAS event. They were also asked what these changes were likely to be, with the answers displayed in Figure 3.5.

Figure 3.5: Distribution of Intended Changes Reported, 2016/17-2019/20



In the first instance, it is encouraging that such a high number of respondents indicated they would make changes. However, the benefits noted vary considerably. While over 40% of participants noted ‘better decision making’ as a change they would make, only 5% reported improved knowledge of climate change and 8% reported improved knowledge about waste. From this perspective, there may be scope to improve the extent to which participants are encouraged to make changes on these key issues. At the same time, it has been observed by SAC that, rather than delivering events specifically concerned with climate change, climate change discussion is ‘mainstreamed’ within other subjects, e.g. advice on fertilizer use will incorporate concerns about reducing emissions. Therefore, it may be the case that the 5% is an underestimate. However, given the uncertainty here, it may be the case that, going forward, monitoring focused on the on-farm impact of advice and impact

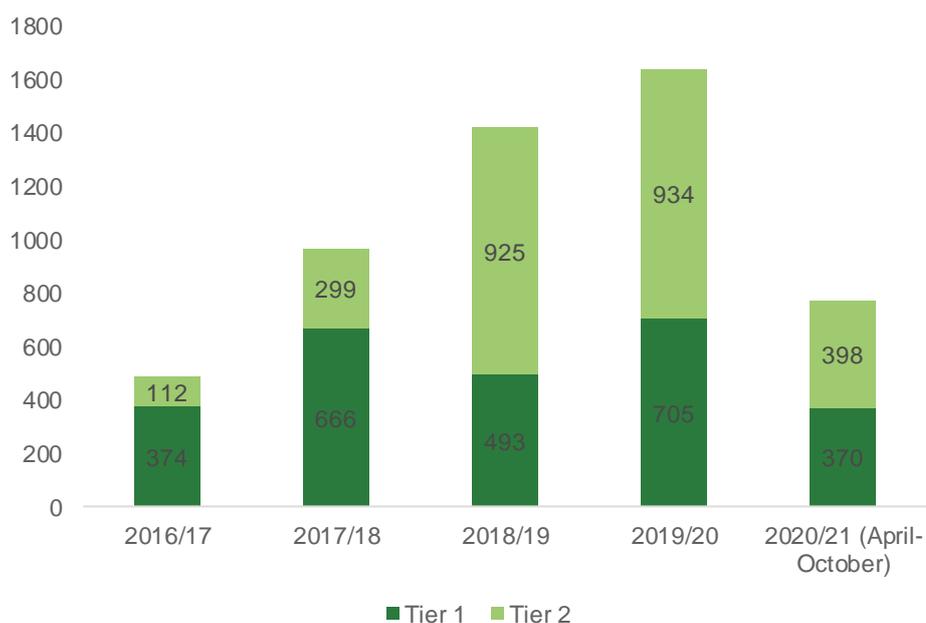
related KPIs, as in **Recommendation 1**,<sup>4</sup> could supplement our knowledge of the impacts of advice.

### 3.6 Use of Advice Line

FAS OtM provides farm businesses with up to 30 minutes of free advice. Calls to the advice line per year have increased from 486 in 2016/17 to 1,639 in 2019/20, an increase of 237%. As noted in the 2019/20 annual report, the service received an average of 135 enquiries a month. Adjusted for office hours, this equates to approximately one call every 78 minutes during this period. The lower numbers in 2020/21 are likely to reflect the shorter period under discussion, although the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on use of the advice line isn't entirely clear.

In terms of how calls progress, initial call handling is subcontracted to Ricardo, with SAC Consulting providing specialist and technical advice when a question exceeds a certain threshold. Non-technical calls – tier 1 – may be dealt with by the advice line staff, while more complicated enquiries – tier 2 – are dealt with by SAC Consulting directly. As we can see in Figure 3.6, both types of call have increased over the period in question.

Figure 3.6: Calls to FAS Advice Line, 2016/17-October 2020, by Tier



This is, again, indicative of effective delivery of the contract. A key challenge, however, is clarifying the extent to which the increased demand represents increased use from a subset of users, an increase in the base, or both. This is because, while data is available on the use of FAS, we do not have representative surveys of the farming population that specifically ask about the use of FAS, and

<sup>4</sup> Recommendation 1: Review Monitoring Framework. Review the KPI arrangements for a future service, and consider the possibility of developing outcome based KPIs. Review the options for establishing effective monitoring of farm improvements, across the spectrum from highly centralised and monitored goals to goals established and monitoring by individuals or groups of participants.

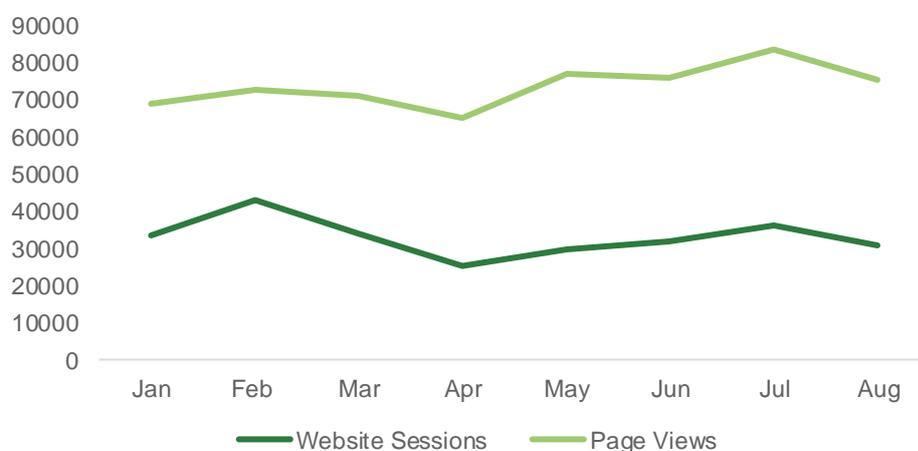
cannot therefore analyse the extent of coverage in this group. To address this going forward, see **Recommendation 2**.

**Recommendation 2: Review Data Strategy.** Consider potential mechanisms for regular, representation farm data collection to determine the extent to which FAS is used within the farming population as a whole and how the service is viewed. Consider opportunities for integrating monitoring of farm environments within a broader environmental monitoring strategy. Consider the possibility of a specific farm data strategy for monitoring and benchmarking environmental impacts.

### 3.7 Web Metrics

Measuring use of the FAS website over the period is unfortunately not possible. FAS noted that, during 2019/20, they became aware that the website metrics were not accurately capturing traffic. Following a rectification of this, website traffic increased substantially at this point, but this analysis cannot be retrospectively applied. However, Figure 3.7 reports the use of the website across 2020.

Figure 3.7: Website sessions and Page Views During 2020

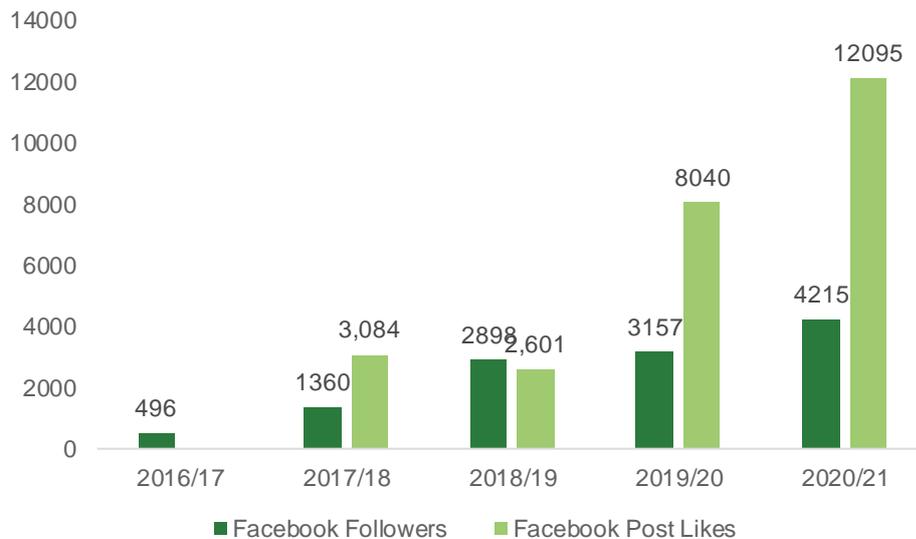


This indicates between 25,000 and 43,000 website sessions per month, which suggests that the website provides a valuable service. Further to above, implementing **Recommendation 2** could help address questions of how widespread use of the website is within the farming population and where coverage should be expanded.

### 3.8 Social Media and Video Content

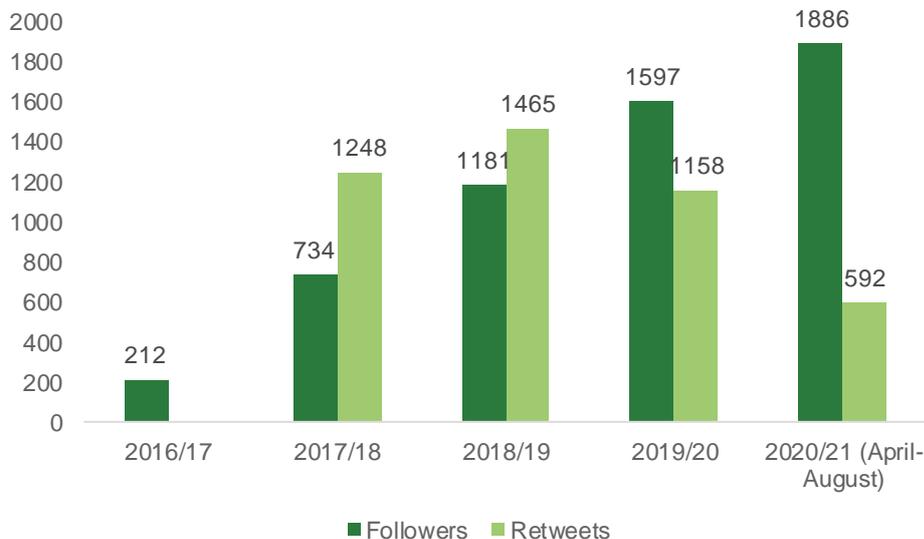
The One to Many service has also increased its social media presence over time. As of August 2020, they have 4,215 Facebook followers. The development of this over the five years can be seen in Figure 3.8.

Figure 3.8: Facebook Followers and Post-Likes, 2016/17-2020/21 (April to August)



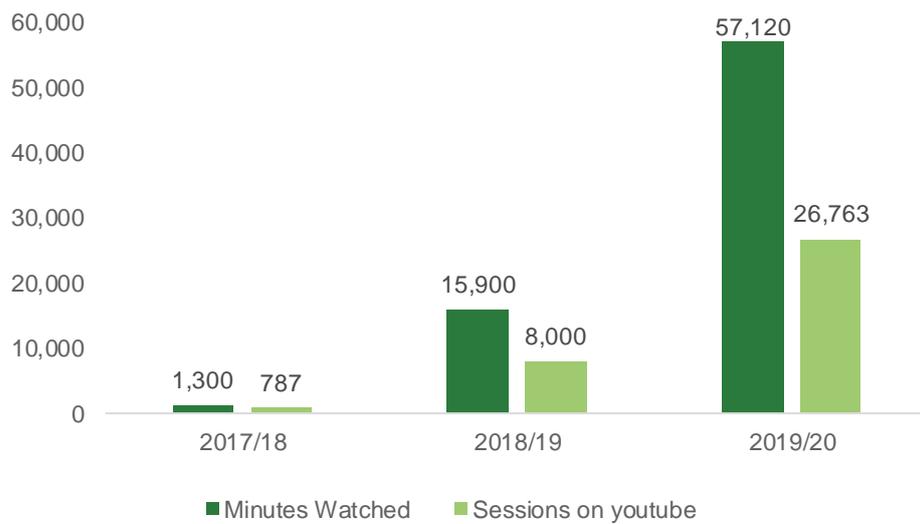
On Twitter, presence has similarly increased, from 212 followers in 2016/17 to 1, 579 in 2019/20, and 1, 886 by August 2020. During 2020, FAS tweets have been retweeted an average of 122 times a month.

Figure 3.9: Twitter Followers and Retweets, 2016/17-2020/21(April-August)



FAS began producing video content in 2017/18. The graph below measures this in terms of the number of sessions on YouTube and the number of minutes watched. This has also increased substantially over the reporting period, with 57,120 minutes watched in 2019/20. FAS videos were also viewed 70,497 times in 2018/19 and 50, 508 times in 2019/20.

Figure 3.10: Youtube sessions and minutes watched, 2017/18-2019/20



In 2019, the top five videos were: ‘New Entrants Case Study: Stephen Withers and Neil Sandilands’ (6,880 views), ‘New Entrant Case Study: John Warnock and Iain Baillie’ (4,794 views), ‘Calf scour prevention’ (2,010 views), Resilience workshops (1,172 views) and ‘Intra Peritoneal injections to treat hypothermia in lambs’ (1,157 views).

The growth of the FAS social media profile indicates that, over time, demand and awareness are slowly being achieved. It is also encouraging to see ongoing engagement with diverse formats.

### 3.9 Publications and Downloads

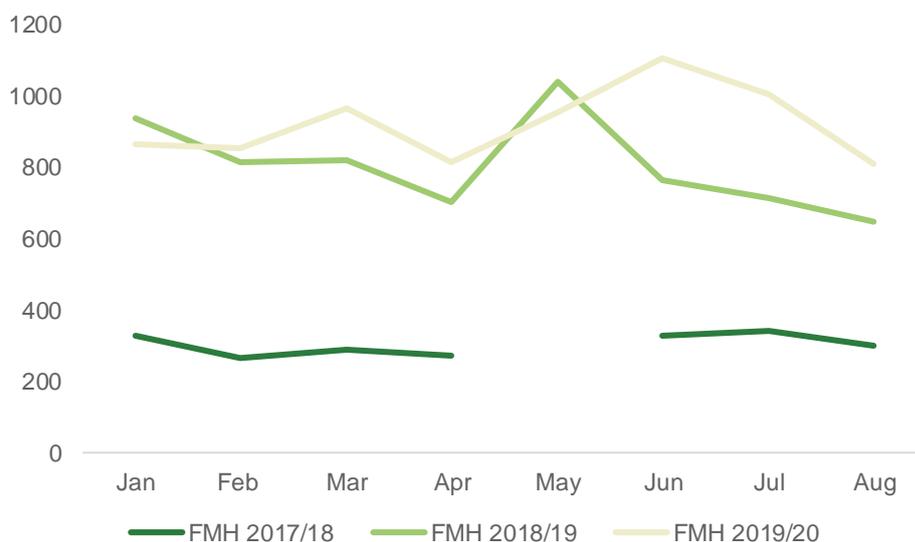
The FAS are responsible for publishing a wide range of guidance to inform farmers. The data available indicates that 292 publications were published online in 2019/20 and 258 in 2018/19. As noted in section 3.7, however, web metrics from prior to November 2019 are likely to be inaccurate and an underestimate of how many times these have been downloaded. However, the cumulative numbers from January to August 2020 indicate that, in this period, documents were downloaded 108,674 times. The monthly downloads in 2020 can be seen in Figure 3.11:

Figure 3.11. Total monthly downloads, 2020



With over 10,000 downloads of technical information per month, these figures indicate that this is a valuable component of the service (although establishing the impacts of this information remains challenging). Among these downloads, the Farm Management Handbooks continue to rank highly within the top 10 monthly downloads (although, as a proportion of the whole, they do not appear to exceed 10%). This can be seen in Figure 3.12.

Figure 3.12. Monthly Downloads of Farm Management Handbooks 2017-19, in 2020.



Given this consistent use of FAS resources, we can infer that, at least for some farmers, the presence of high quality downloads on the FAS website has been beneficial.

### 3.10 Podcasts

Over the course of the contract, FAS have started producing podcasts. In 2018/19, 22 podcasts were produced, and 34 were produced in 2019/20. In 2018/19, these podcasts were listened to 2,305 times and in 2019/20 they were listened to a total of 6,411 times. The most popular podcasts in 2018/19 and 2019/20 are reported below.

Top five podcasts in 2018/19:

- Finishing Lambs - dealing with the challenges (244 listens)
- Fodder beet: alternative feeding for sheep (241 listens)
- Practical grassland: making the most of your forage (211 listens)
- Moray Soil & Nutrient Network - Using organic manures to save on artificial fertilisers (194 listens)
- Growing crofting and smallholding (185 listens)

Top five podcasts in 2019/20:

- Women in Agriculture: Baddingsill Farm, West Linton (337 listens)
- Women in Agriculture: Lynbreck Croft, Grantown-on-Spey (324 listens)
- Grant funding for woodland creation (276 listens)

- Women in Agriculture: Primrose Beaton of Lawrie & Symington (256 listens)
- Woodland Creation & Management - Frequently Asked Questions (240 listens)

While the audience for these podcasts appears to remain small, it is nonetheless encouraging that FAS have not only expanded their engagement into an additional medium, but that the audience appears to have grown over the period they have been producing them.

### 3.11 Croft and Small Farm Advisory Service

FAS also provides a small farm and crofter advisory service. This is a subscription based service, which entitles crofters and small farmers to access two hours of remotely delivered advice from SAC Consulting, alongside a magazine and a subsidised consultancy service. In 2019/20 FAS reported that there were 2,188 crofter subscribers, compared to a target of 1,900, and 287 small farm subscribers, from a target of 235.

A survey of subscribers was undertaken by SAC Consulting in August 2019. It received 247 responses – an 11% response rate. The survey found that 12% of the sample contact their staff as often as 10-12 times a year, 51% make contact more than four times per year, and 39% are in contact two or three times, with 12% not contacting them at all. 87% of respondents rated the subscription as ‘very good’ or ‘good’, with only 2% rating it as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’.

### 3.12 Newsletter

In May 2018, FAS started providing a monthly newsletter to subscribers. As this has only recently become available, it is not helpful to look at longer term trends. At commencement, this had just under 3,000 subscribers and, as of August 2020, is at 5,299, which is a substantial increase over the period. The ‘open rate’ of the newsletter at this time was 49%.

### 3.13 Online Tools

In 2018, FAS started producing online tools, and have produced ten to date. These provide assistance in addressing issues such as soil management and nutrients, treating hypothermia in lambs, business management, resilience and women in agriculture. In 2019, FAS launched their first app, focused on soil nutrient advice.

### 3.14 Conclusion

Based on the reported activities of FAS, relative to the contract specification and with regard to the KPIs, it appears that SAC Consulting have fulfilled the contract and delivered the components of the Farm Advisory Service as required. There is also considerable evidence of effective delivery. The delivery of events has been well received and the consistent increases in FAS activity on social media, at events, online and the addition of new deliverables such as podcasts are indicative of a well delivered advice service. At the same time, as we can see from the accompanying

recommendations, future delivery may seek to develop a more impact oriented monitoring framework, as well as considering the use of more robust data to determine the extent of FAS use among farmers.

## 4 Findings: Views of Service Users

### 4.1 Summary Findings

- The survey indicates high levels of satisfaction with the service and use of the diverse services provided.
- The survey finds that many, but not all, respondents used the service for engaging on environmental improvements and business improvements. However, there was also evidence that participants may face barriers to implementing the advice they have received.
- The survey also provides several examples of clear, tangible benefits that followed the receipt of advice, including financial savings.

### 4.2 The Survey

To support this evaluation, we undertook a small survey of those who had engaged with the service. The survey sought to understand farmer's views of the service and the extent to which advice from FAS translated into on-farm improvements. The survey had 148 respondents. A web-link to the survey was distributed via FAS, using their website and mailing list, and boosted with the assistance of the SRN, who mentioned it in social media and their monthly newsletter.

It is important to emphasise that this is not a survey of the farming population, or indeed all those who had used the FAS service. Overall, the 2020 June Agriculture census indicates approximately 66, 800 agricultural workers in Scotland. By contrast, the combined total of those participating in FAS events is 16,183 across all five years (assuming that all attendants are unique, which is unlikely). While it would not be expected that all representatives from each holding would attend FAS events, this nonetheless indicates that there is likely to be a substantial number of farmers who do not participate in FAS events, a point reiterated within stakeholder conversations. At present, we do not have a representative survey of farmers that asks about their use of the Farm Advisory Service, which informs **Recommendation 2**, as above.

### 4.3 The Survey Sample

Given the above, we face the challenge of the sample being both non-representative of the farming population generally, but also potentially non-representative of the FAS using subset of this population. In this context, the survey is best thought of as indicative, in relation to a group who use the service, both in terms of which sorts of farmers are participating and the benefits they obtain. 145 respondents noted their primary farming enterprises. Of these:

- 60% reported that they farmed sheep
- 50% reported farming beef

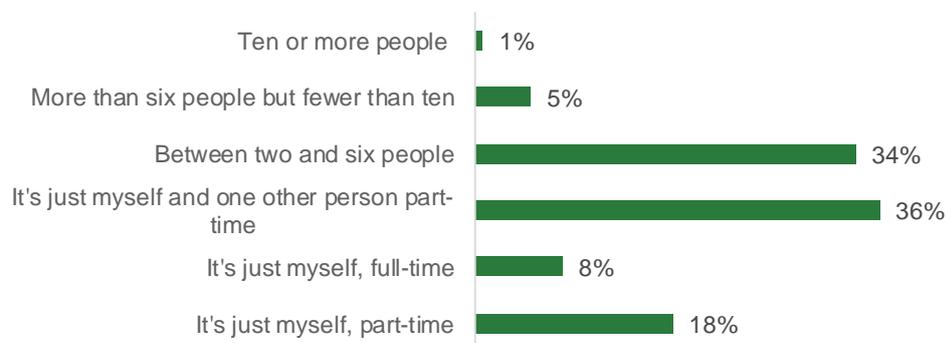
- 26% reported arable farming
- 14% reported crofting.

In the 2020 June Agricultural Census, it was reported that 34% of Scottish farmers were either Less Favoured Area (LFA) or non-LFA cattle and sheep. Therefore, it appears that livestock farmers are somewhat overrepresented in this sample. Similarly, arable farmers appear to be under-represented in the survey, given that 42% of the 2020 census report general cropping as their primary activity and a further 8% report general cropping and cereal as their primary activities. Determining whether this imbalance reflects the survey sample, or whether it reflects uneven use of the FAS will be a key goal of **Recommendation 2**.

In terms of gender, of 144 participants who provided this information, 70 % were men and 30% were women. In the June Agricultural Census from 2020, 32% of the total farming workforce (where gender information is available) are female. Therefore, while women remain under-represented in the sector as a whole, the survey reflects the gender balance in farming reasonably well. For context, the FAS annual report for 2019/20 indicated that men were slightly over-represented as participants, at 63%, although this has decreased from 70% in 2018/19.

In terms of farm tenure, 13% reported having operated their farm for less than two years, with approximately 29% in each of the remaining categories (3-9 years, 10-25 years, and over 25 years). The survey also asked about the number of employees, including family labour, that respondents had on their farms, to provide an indication of the size of their enterprise. The results are shown below:

Figure 4.1: Number of farm employees in sample (n = 143)



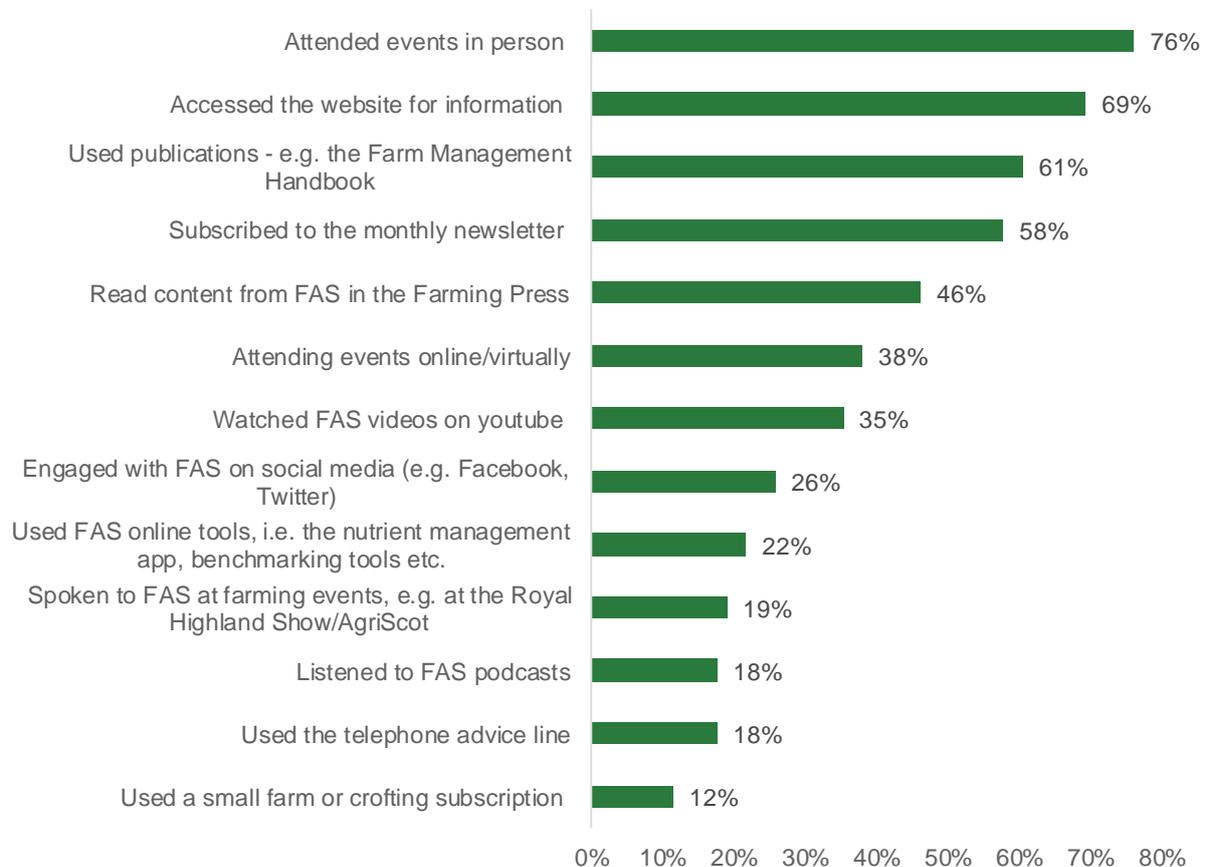
As these results show, just over a third of the respondents had *at least* one employee, with a total of 39% having full-time employees, and a further 36% having a part-time employee. By contrast, the June agricultural census from 2020 indicates that only 18% of farms in Scotland have employees, and that only 11% of these have full-time employees. This suggests that our sample under-represents sole operator farmers and raises the possibility that this group are underrepresented in usage of the FAS. Provided that **Recommendation 2** is considered and data on FAS users can be generated, this in turn could facilitate a strategy to ensure that those currently under-represented with the service are engaged. This underpins **Recommendation 3**.

**Recommendation 3: Review Engagement Strategy.** Consider contractual mechanisms that support the goal of engaging with those who are under-represented in FAS, and the possibility of requiring a detailed engagement strategy that examines subjective and structural barriers. Review whether future farm advice should develop an appropriate customer management system that reports customer characteristics, allows monitoring that tracks additional advice and engagement from customers, to monitor crossover between the different components of the service (the latter in the event that delivery continues to be split into FAS: One to Many and FAS: One to One).

#### 4.4 What did the sample use the FAS for?

As indicated in the previous chapter, a particularly impressive element of FAS delivery has been the development of a wide-ranging offering that provides multiple formats in which information is available, while at the same time ensuring that people throughout Scotland have access to in-person events. Respondent levels of participation in FAS services can be seen in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2: The Services Used by Survey Respondents (n = 147)



This indicates the range of services provided by FAS that are in use, albeit to differing degrees. In-person events were ranked as the most important feature of delivery by 64% of respondents.<sup>5</sup>

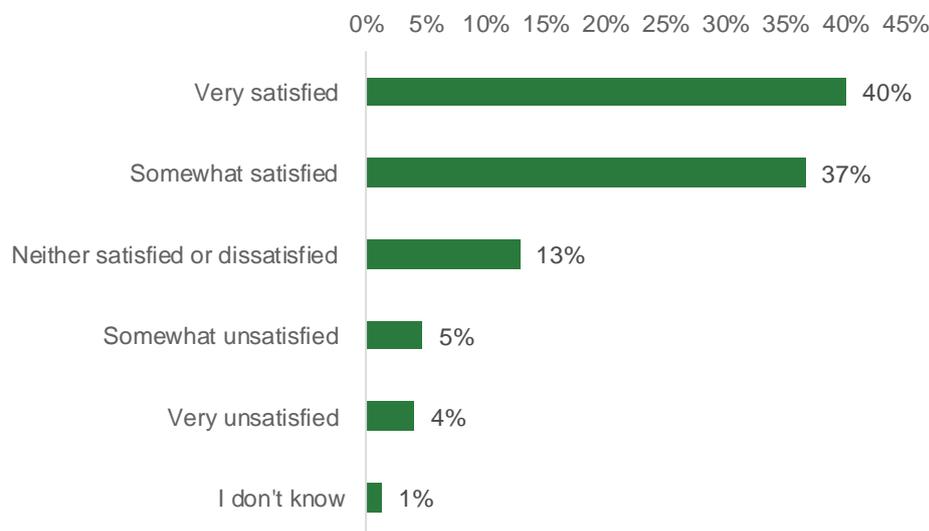
We also asked whether engagement with FAS OtM supported additional use of the FAS one-to-one service. Within the sample, however, 39% of the respondents (n = 123) had not used any additional services in the one-to-one offering as a result of interacting with the one-to-many service. The fact that the majority had used both is encouraging but suggests there is scope for greater integration. See **Recommendation 3**, above, for further discussion of this.

Participants were given the option of filling in a free text box asking “Are there any topics you are interested in getting advice from FAS about that are not currently provided for?”. While only 18 participants filled in this part, common themes included: how to make a living from farming at a small scale, more detailed and specific advice that is tailored, innovation and development, succession, technology and greater technical detail.

## 4.5 Overall Sentiments

Several of the survey questions requested overall impressions of the service. On the question of overall satisfaction, over 75% of the respondents were either very or somewhat satisfied with the FAS, with a further breakdown in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3: Satisfaction with FAS services (n = 147)

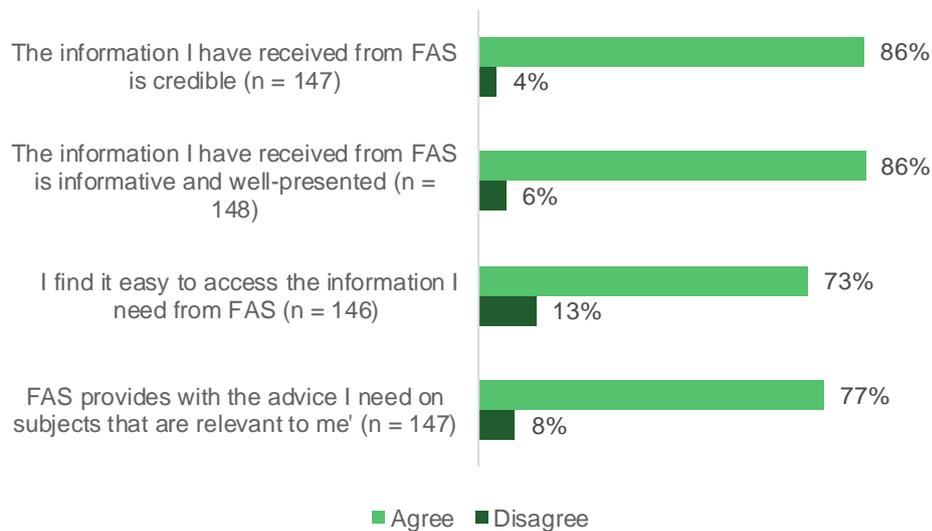


Participants were also asked how likely they were to continue using the service in the future. Here, 59% reported that they were ‘very likely’ to do so, 25% were somewhat likely, while only 5% in total were either somewhat or very unlikely to continue using it. The survey also asked for specific sentiments on how the quality and accessibility of information was perceived (see Figure 4.4). While satisfaction is high throughout, it is worth highlighting that over one in ten of the respondents disagreed that they find it easy to access the information they needed from FAS. It

<sup>5</sup> (of the 101 who responded to this question)

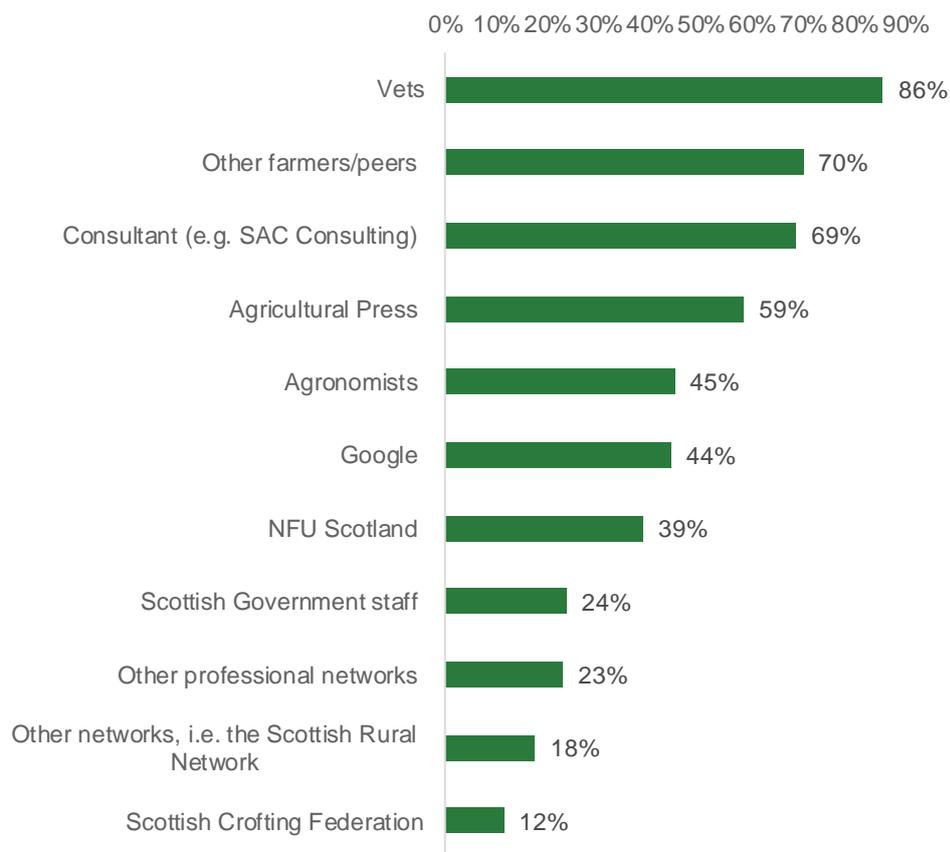
will be important going forward to ensure emphasis is placed on making information easily accessible and understanding customer journeys.

Figure 4.4: Agreement with Statements About FAS



The survey also found that the sample drew on a wide range of information, in addition to FAS, to support their farm businesses. While vets are the most important source of information (see Figure 4.5), nearly 70% of the respondents here also engage with agricultural consultants and 45% engage with Agronomists. As this shows, FAS is one of many sources of information for farmers.

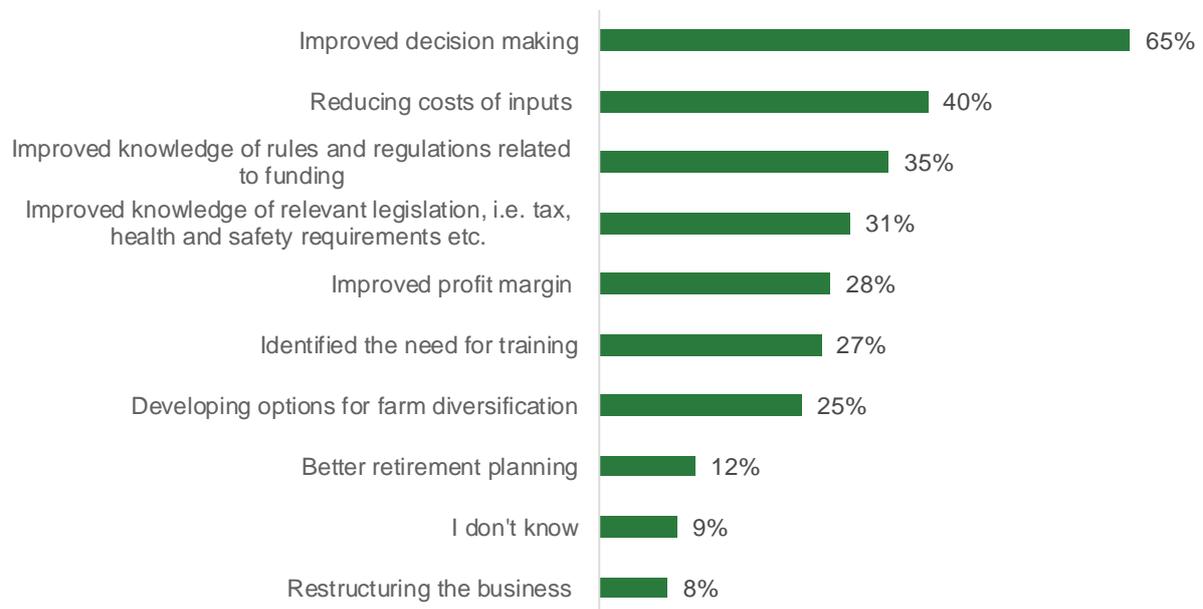
Figure 4.5: Non-FAS Sources of Information and Advice (n = 147)



## 4.6 Business Impacts

The survey also queried the benefits participants had obtained from using the service. Within the sample, 61% had used FAS to access information on improving the performance of their farm business, and 40% had not. Of those (n = 89) that had, 71% agreed it had made them more confident in their business abilities, and 70% said that the information had been financially valuable. The specific benefits received can be seen in Figure 4.6.

Figure 4.6: Business Benefits Obtained from FAS Participation to Improve Business Performance (n = 85)



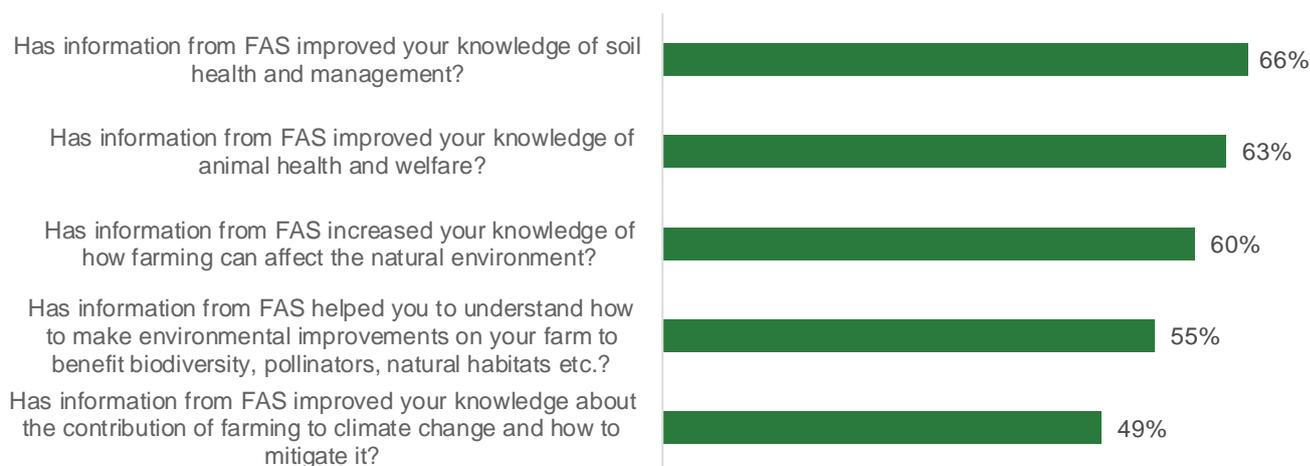
While ‘Improved Decision Making’ is the most common, 40% (‘reducing costs of inputs’) and 28% of participants (‘improved profit margin’) report clear financial benefits from their engagement. It is challenging to interpret these numbers. The high incidence of ‘improved decision making’ may reflect that this is applicable to a wide range of events, as compared to some of the more specific benefits. For example, while the 12% who report ‘Better Retirement planning’ may represent a fraction of those who have attended these events, it may also represent all those within the sample who attended events on this, but in a context where overall participation was relatively low. It is also worth noting that over half - 52% - of those who had used the service in this way had saved money as a result (although 35% did not know if they had saved money).

However, this section also found numerous barriers perceived by participants to improving their farm businesses. Of the 80 participants who answered our question regarding whether they had wanted to make changes but been unable to, 84% reported some barriers. The most common reason given was that changes were too expensive - reported by 23% of the respondents - while others cited a lack of time, (13%). In addition, 5% cited being unconvinced of the benefits, 5% cited a lack of time, while 20% and 18%, respectively, cited a combination of the above reasons and other reasons for not implementing changes. The barriers to adopting advice are discussed in chapter 5.

## 4.7 Environmental benefits

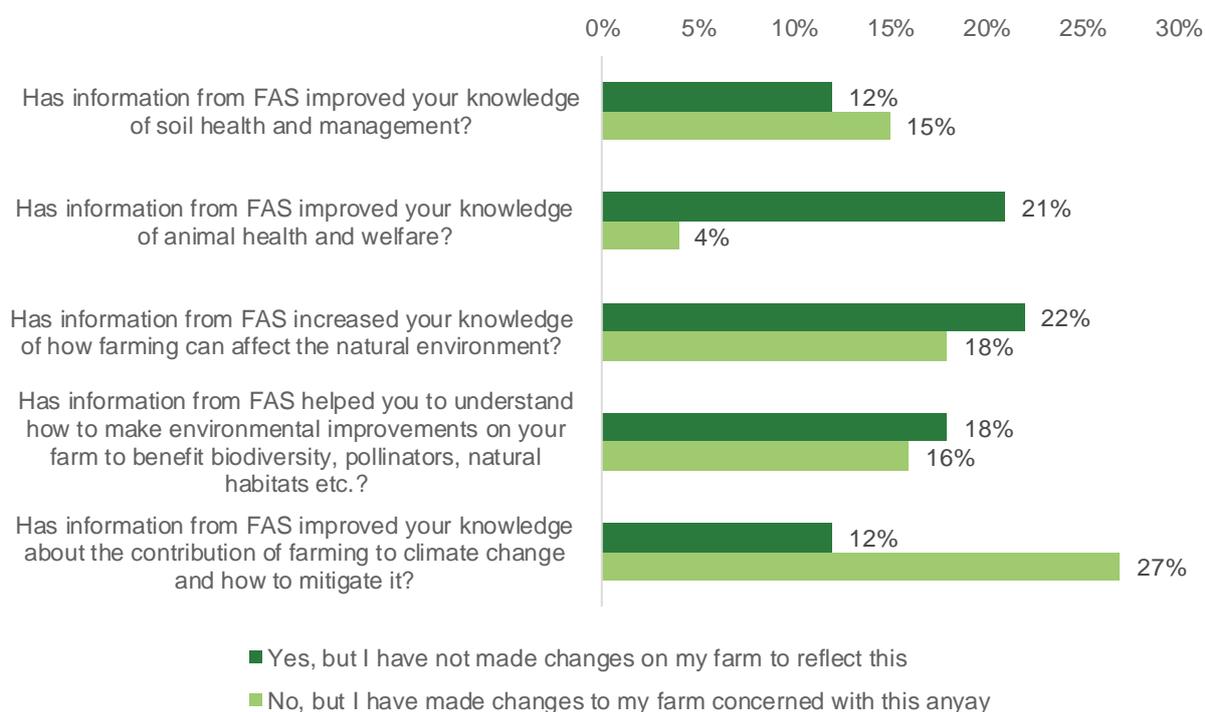
The survey also asked whether participants had sought information on improving the natural environment on their farm, of which 47% of respondents had. We further asked this group about whether they had learned about specific areas and if, in turn, this had resulted in them making changes on their farm. Figure 4.7 shows the subset of those who had used the service to improve their farms’ natural environments and the impacts this had had.

Figure 4.7: Has knowledge been improved and resulted in changes? (n = 67)<sup>6</sup>



In Figure 4.8, by contrast, we can see alternative responses among this group, i.e. not learning from FAS but making changes anyway, or learning from FAS but not making changes.

Figure 4.8: Alternative Responses Regarding the Implementation of Changes Following FAS Information (n = 67)<sup>7</sup>



<sup>6</sup> On the question of knowledge about animal health and welfare, there were 68 respondents.

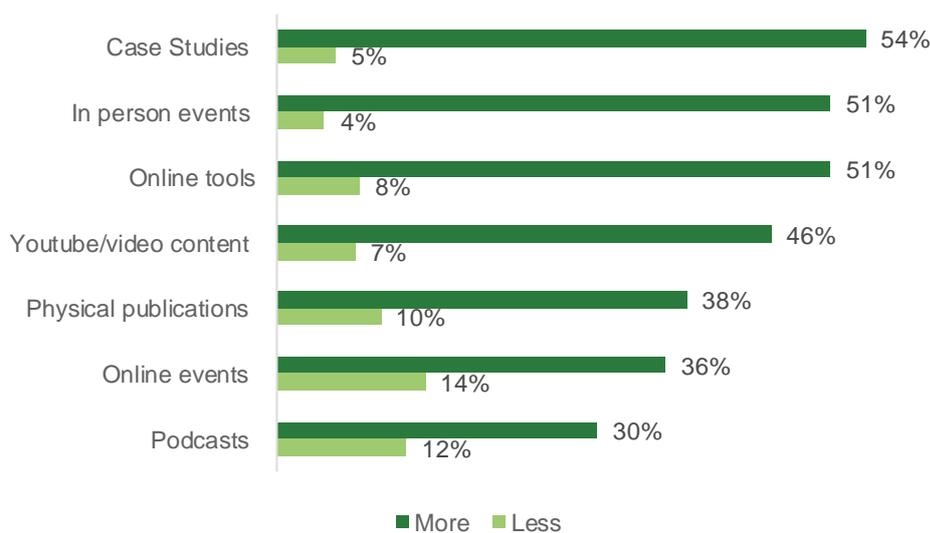
<sup>7</sup> On the question of knowledge about animal health and welfare, there were 68 respondents.

This indicates both that participants are making changes, albeit ones that are difficult to monitor, as a result of their engagement, but also that there are contexts where they may be convinced of benefits but unable to implement changes.

## 4.8 Views on Future Delivery

Finally, the participants were asked for views on future delivery (n = 147). We were curious to understand whether some participants were opposed to virtual meetings. While 50% indicated that they had no strong preference, and 14% actually preferred these meetings, 15% reported that they disliked these sorts of meetings, while a further 16% reported that they struggled with this format owing to connectivity issues. When asked what they wanted more of, 'in person' meetings received the highest endorsement, with 51% wanting either 'a bit more' or 'a lot more', with only 4% wanting less. Conversely, 14% wanted either a bit or much less online meetings, with 36% wanting more. Further responses regarding their preferences can be seen in Figure 4.9.

Figure 4.9: Preferences on Future Delivery - Percentage of Respondents wanting 'more' or 'less' of listed content (n varied, ranging between 125 and 135)



## 4.9 Conclusions

This survey suggests that the sample were satisfied with FAS, used a wide range of services and that many had made changes to their farming enterprises as a result of their engagement. However, it also underlines the need for robust data on FAS use, and indicates that, even for those who are actively seeking to improve their farm in terms of its environment or competitiveness, there may be important barriers to achieving this. The question of how we might address these barriers is discussed in chapter 5.

## 5 What are the Challenges? Stakeholder Perspectives

### 5.1 Summary Findings

- There was a perception among some respondents that the service would benefit from an updated primary focus emphasising climate change and environmental sustainability.
- Questions were raised about the effective use of expertise, the scope for greater training integration and how best to ensure that advice is inclusive.
- Barriers to engaging with and following advice were discussed, with participants emphasising the benefits of facilitating small groups of farmers to achieve long-term change.

This section reports the findings of the qualitative components of the research. This comprised of, as stated above, ten stakeholder interviews. Eight of these were with key external agricultural and environmentalist stakeholders, while two were with SAC Consulting personnel.

### 5.2 What Should the Goal of the Service Be?

In the interviews, participants were first asked what they regarded as high priority areas for FAS going forward. Responses emphasised that sustainability, ecology and climate change were key concerns going forward, and should play a central role in farm advice. For instance:

“To me the big ones are climate change and wildlife. The climate emergency and the ecological crisis. So I think everything should stem from that. And everything would come under that.”

Participant 1

“The Farm Advisory Service in general needs to tackle and find ways to support the climate emergency...that’s obviously going to drive a lot of business decisions moving forward”

Participant 2

As another participant put it, in contrast to uncertain areas like post-EU agricultural policy:

“...at the same time, there are things that aren’t affected by Brexit...I think with things like climate change, succession planning, and competing land uses, that’s going to continue regardless of what the future looks like in terms of the economics. There are those culture change elements that might be

useful to push a bit more. That can be challenging, but I think it's something the industry needs to tackle head on. I think framing advice around those kind of ongoing challenges that are totally outwith our control is something we could possibly do a bit more of."

Participant 3

However, while there was widespread emphasis on the climate and environmental emergencies, there was also an acknowledgment that this view was not necessarily shared within the sector:

"I can see the ways things are going, but there are a lot of farmers who are absolutely sticking their heels in – "we are not going down this environmental sustainability route" – but to me that's not a question any more, that's what's happening. And the sooner we can get people to see that that's what happening, whether they agree with it or not...there are a lot of forward thinking farmers who are embracing it but if we could get the majority..."

Participant 5

As this participant went on to note, farmers were not always convinced of what they were being asked to do:

"I think people don't understand why they're doing these things and they just see it as another bit of red tape that they've got to go through...it's maybe this explaining bit that as an industry we're missing. People are being told to do this and do that but they don't really understand what the point of it is, they just see it as another obstacle that they have to get over."

Participant 5

These findings indicate some tension between the policy priorities as perceived by the stakeholder group – i.e. climate change and biodiversity – and a potential lack of 'buy in' among the sector. This tension, and the urgency of the policy challenge posed by climate change, suggests that the next iteration of the service could consider updating its mission statement, and develop a participatory mechanism to ensure industry buy in to this. The importance of capturing the urgency of the situation and orientating the sector towards substantial change in a short period was emphasised in one of the interviews with SAC Consulting:

"Right now our mission is to make Scottish agriculture more sustainable, financially and environmentally. It's OK. But, maybe it's too broad. I mull this one over. There are agricultural economies like the Netherlands, New Zealand...where they have made very conscious choices about what they want to focus on. Ireland would be another one...and that's allowed them to make significant change happen in a relatively short period of time...Having a very clear purpose is good for galvanising."

SAC Consulting Participant 1

Another sense in which an updated 'mission' may benefit the Farm Advisory Service would be in helping to cultivate an optimistic, can-do attitude, in contexts that might otherwise appear precarious. As one participant put it, a key benefit of the New

Entrants work done by FAS is that the atmosphere of these meetings is *positive*, and concerned with taking advantage of future opportunities. The need for a change in mindsets to ensure that key opportunities are exploited was also emphasised by another participant:

“We’ll never get people in a position where they’re able to deal with change that’s coming, or seize the opportunities if we simply talk to them about improving the technical performance of sheep, or dairy, or soil health. Those are hugely important subjects, but if people’s heads aren’t in the right place, or they’re simply trying to flog their land harder and not necessarily smarter, then that’s a problem...We shouldn’t just be here to tell people how to lose less money. We’ve gotta help them get their heads in a position where they can understand their situation in the round, they can make rational choices, and seize the opportunities and ride out the change that’s coming. It’s a significant change because advisory services in the past were all about technical performance.”

SAC Consulting Participant 1

The sense, captured in this quote, that there is a need to move from technical performance to wide ranging changes, is also emphasised within the recent ‘Farming 1.5’ report developed by the NFUS and Nourish. This report notes that, historically, the “Farm Advisory Service was never designed or funded to produce large scale change” and subsequently suggest that the FAS is replaced with a “new model focused on transformation in terms of resource use, carbon and nature across farming”<sup>8</sup>. While this evaluation does not take a position on this finding, it is worth noting that the emphasis on the need for a service more focused on change has been identified elsewhere. The findings here are reflected in **Recommendation 4**, below.

**Recommendation 4: Review the ‘mission’ of the service.** Consider the value of establishing an updated ‘mission’ for the service, using a participatory mechanism to ensure wide cross sectoral buy in. This should be cognisant of the climate emergency and the need to support nature in farming.

### 5.3 Training, Information and Inclusion

Participants were also asked about their views on the use of information by FAS. Here, sentiments were generally positive, but numerous participants emphasised that there was scope for the greater incorporation of a range of advice into the service. For example, one stakeholder noted that expertise was not always used effectively in the context of, in this example, understanding biodiversity:

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<sup>8</sup> NFUS Scotland and Nourish (2020) Farming for 1.5: A Transformation Pathway. pp. 17-18. [Available here](#).

“It [FAS] does a pretty reasonable job of covering lots of bases. I think generally from a biodiversity side of things...it’s not quite as strong as it could be... they don’t always get the right experts involved at the right times, in terms of developing materials for instance...We’re not always getting the best value for money...and we’re not always using the expertise across Scotland in the best way possible...There is room for more opportunities to bring in expertise from across a wider range of people than they currently do.”

Participant 2

Another stakeholder emphasised that, given the emphasis on environmentally sustainable farming going forward, an emphasis on improved efficiency could partially be supported by incorporating more specific, technical advice for farmers, which could in turn draw on the broader ecology of expert advice:

“I think there is going to be an increased need for advice provided by a range of advisers including those involved in specialist areas such as livestock and crop nutrition. Many of the new support schemes, if they are more individualised to the farms individual circumstances will require specialist advice on how they’re going to achieve those options...it is going to become increasingly technical when it comes to marginal gains, emissions reductions, resource efficiency use, when it comes to things like fertiliser, livestock nutrition and soil health.”

Participant 4

Ensuring that all farm types are engaged with is also critical. As one participant noted, traditional FAS engagement designed for large, productive farming units was simply not relevant to smaller farmers and crofters. While this situation was generally perceived to have improved over the course of the programme, future work must be suitably inclusive if the whole sector is to be involved.

**Recommendation 5: Review Knowledge Integration:** Review mechanisms for knowledge exchange to ensure there is a consistent approach to climate change and environmental practice both on and off farm, potentially incorporating knowledge exchange initiatives like SEFARI, the website that hosts the outputs from publicly funded research into food and agriculture. Similarly, consider the mechanisms for greater integration of FAS in relation to the broader farming advice context, and ensure specialist knowledge is available and integrated into service provision.

Participants also emphasised the challenges of the current arrangement, and the need for more holistic thinking. One participant, for example, emphasised the need for a more holistic approach to training that made the landscape less confusing:

“When we look at the next phase of what we’re going to be doing in upping the skills of farmers, crofters, fisher folk etc...it would be good if the Scottish Government look at this more holistically and decide on how we’re going to do this...”

Participant 7

In this context, participants, including those from SAC Consulting, spoke about the importance of highly practical and specific advice as being popular and useful:

“The kind of basic technical skills that they might learn in college or that they’ve learned from their parents...some of that knowledge is maybe out of date, or some of those practices have moved on...back to doing the basics of farming well is not a bad thing, and there are many farmers who find it useful to be reminded of the basics in order to manage their activities better, their productivity should go up and their emissions should go down.”

SAC Consulting Participant 2

This popularity was also said to be reflected in the viewing figures, as well as being popular with non-FAS SAC Consulting customers. Another participant observed that the format of the current advice service did not always reflect this emphasis on practical applications with events, in their view, too often being hosted in hotels as opposed to farms themselves:

“I think in terms of numbers and engagement you would get a different crowd if it was a practical on farm event. The crowd who are willing to give up a day or half a day to sit in a hotel are maybe not the people making the business decisions.”

Participant 6

It should be noted that, during the SAC Consulting interviews, it was clarified that this was also their view, while an emphasis on other venues usually reflected the attendance numbers or the subject matter.

**Recommendation 6: Consider Options for More Holistic Training Integration.** This should consider whether there is scope for more holistic integration of training with advice provision. Taking a long-term view, consider the scope for FAS to engage with longer-term training and advice mechanisms.

Another aspect of training emphasised within the interviews related to the perceived success of FAS events related to Women in Agriculture. Here, multiple participants observed that, while they had in some circumstances been apprehensive about having women only events, they had quickly seen that there was a large unmet demand for this within the farming population. As an illustrative example, one participant reported that:

“We were not that enthusiastic about doing women only things at first...until we asked! And women said ‘I would love to do a women only course on such and such because when I’ve tried to attend a course before, it gets dominated by the men...Fencing is a good example, it’s considered quite a macho thing...we had a very good trainer, and he showed women all these techniques on how to use leverage, etc, how a women can put a fence up perfectly well, without damaging herself in the process. And the feedback was absolutely over the top.”

Participant 7

More specifically, the participants who discussed this emphasised that women may be anxious about making mistakes in front of male farming colleagues, potentially reflecting their concern that they were not ‘real’ farmers or should not be doing practical tasks. The possibility of meetings being dominated by a small number of loud, male voices was also emphasised, and the importance of ensuring supportive contexts for traditionally ‘macho’ elements of farm work were discussed. In this context, it is also worth considering additional barriers that farmers may face in accessing training, i.e. language barriers among migrant labourers, or supporting farmers who for various reasons have limited scope to travel for events.

The participants also noted various topics which were challenging to engage with and may require slightly different approaches. One example of this was succession planning:

“Particularly when you’re looking at things like succession planning: ultimately no one likes to envisage their own death! So it’s a difficult conversation. Particularly where you’ve got a farmer whose children aren’t interested in taking on the farm, it’s still their life’s work, but how do you approach that discussion with a potential successor you-may never have met before?”

Participant 3

As this participant observed, there were considerable difficulties in engaging with this issue, and it may be more amenable to efforts focused on small groups – discussed below - than in the context of large events. In a similar vein, participants also mentioned the need to approach wellbeing among farmers with sensitivity and in appropriate contexts. While it was observed generally that mental health and resilience were critical topics in supporting the community, this raised challenges of its own, as such topics required an appropriate level of sensitivity to be effective.

Another topic that was emphasised was business resilience and mindset, given the current and future complexities of the role, and the multiple demands on farmers. Here, however, it was observed that a particular challenge in the One to Many context was providing specific and tailored, as opposed to general, advice. As they note:

“Those that are engaging, I think are looking for more specific advice, rather than being told ‘make sure this is as resilient as possible’ and they come away going ‘but what am I actually meant to do here?’”

Participant 6

With regard to each of these topics, there is reason to suspect that they might benefit from a more focused, smaller scale form of engagement. As has been discussed throughout, most participants emphasised the benefits of a 'one-to-few' approach, and this may be another instance in which the service can offer a useful approach to providing advice.

**Recommendation 7: Ensure advice is inclusive.** Consider the best mechanisms to mainstream the lessons of women-only training techniques, how best to ensure they are available and review barriers to participation that may exist for other equalities groups. Review options whereby potentially emotionally charged topics can be discussed in appropriate forums..

## 5.4 Barriers to Seeking and Following Advice

When discussing FAS, we can describe barriers to initial engagement – why farmers do not seek advice in the first instance – and barriers to following advice once obtained. These are described in turn.

The stakeholder interviews suggest that, as indicated in previous chapters, a considerable number of farmers simply do not engage with the service. One participant emphasised that, in their estimation, around 60% of farmers simply did not engage with the service, and in another context concern was expressed that those engaging with FAS were simply the 'top 20%'. As noted previously, more robust data collection about FAS use going forward can help to clarify the extent of non-engagement.

Participants emphasised a range of factors that could limit farmer engagement with FAS. Many of these related to a combination of availability and interest, but also tapped into the sense in which seeking advice can be understood as a shortcoming in some cases. This was further reflected by a stakeholder who emphasised the extent to which farmers may perceive 'advice' as criticism about the way they, and by extension those who preceded them, have maintained the farm. As they observe:

“Someone said to me once when you try to tell a farmer they're doing something wrong, often, you're not telling him that it's just him, it's probably his dad and his grandad, his whole history is wrong.”

Participant 5

This participant also observed that, in some cases, farmers may be apprehensive that, by exposing themselves to advice, they risk finding out that they may not be as skilled as they had perceived themselves to be.

Clearly, the need for an engagement strategy for underrepresented groups may be beneficial, as recommended previously, and it may be the case that a broader 'mission' for the service can address the perception that engagement with the

service reflects poorly on farmers themselves. This is captured in **Recommendation 4: Review Engagement Strategy**.

Once individuals are engaged, further, participants observed that inertia provides a large barrier to undertaking costly and potentially risky changes to their business:

“Any course you go on, unless you make the change the day after you got back from the course, then there is a risk it becomes only an interesting set of notes, ideally you need to do it the day after and that takes having the time and space to do so.....”

SAC Consulting Participant 2

It was also observed that participants may face considerable barriers in having to persuade others within the business, or if the person attending the event is not the person solely responsible for day-to-day management decisions. Following on from this, assuming that change is able to happen quickly and the participant has the capacity to enact change, they may still face difficulties. As one participant observed, there can be a genuine fear of being the first to do something new on the farm, as well as a concern about taking risks. By comparison, many participants highlighted the benefits of contexts where advice was provided within the context of a small group of farmers, who were then able to collaboratively develop solutions with each other. As one participant put it:

“Where we hear truly positive responses, where people are really appreciative of the support they’ve been given, that’s through the networks that have been established. Quite often that is Women in Ag[riculture], but also, new entrants in particular have really appreciated the peer to peer support...”

Participant 6

Another participant expressed a similar sentiment:

“When it comes down to the in person meetings...if you can create a community I think you’d get further with people. Because instead of just listening they start to bounce ideas of each other and that’s when things really start to work...it would be good to have...a reasonably small group that got to know each other, and could trust each other, and could bounce ideas off each other. This doesn’t necessarily take a long time, it doesn’t need the whole five years...if you can get the bond going, the group will continue by itself probably.”

Participant 5

Clearly, stakeholders perceived benefits from peer supported processes. Another perceived benefit regarding smaller groups and a sense of shared mission was that this could have the effect of creating a positive atmosphere, as emphasised as a key feature of the new entrants group’s collaborative work. It was notable that a similar sentiment on how to ensure more effective ongoing engagement was shared by the delivery partners, SAC Consulting, who observed:

“It’s verging on one to few...it’s not one to many, it’s not one to one...so you get the efficiencies and the shared learning of the one to many, but you have enough focus and enough confidentiality and enough sense of shared purpose...and a safe space. If you’ve got 12 to 15 people, they will talk about more stuff than if you’ve got 25, 30, 40 people. We’re running multiple events each year with essentially the same groups, so they get to know each other, and in some cases we’re running those groups year in year out, so we’ve really built up a relationship.”

SAC Consulting Participant 1

In addition to this emphasis on small, mutually supportive and accountable groups, another participant suggested the offering could be improved by providing a more structured environment for long-term learning.

“What I think people would prefer is to sign up to not necessarily a ‘course’ – but rather than an afternoon in a hotel, a progressive series of events on this specific issue. That would be more beneficial in terms of measuring progress, but also how the service is engaged with. So if someone comes to the first event and doesn’t go anything else then coming to one event is not a success.”

Participant 6

Longer-term engagement, with the capacity to measure progress, could substantially improve our understanding of the achievements of the advisory service, as well as allowing the service to develop more ambitious goals for upskilling and supporting farmers through challenges.

However, there is also a broader point here, given the emerging challenges in agriculture at present. While certain skills might be best addressed in one off events, there may be broader changes that FAS wishes to cultivate going forward, given the opportunities for high nature value farming, renewable energy, diversification and other forms of transition. In this context, it is worth considering the range of outcomes FAS might support and the appropriate timescales/mechanisms that could underpin this. This was well captured by a participant from SAC Consulting, considering the potential future roles of farmers:

“The FAS should be an instrument that moves farmers and land managers forward. So whether it’s their ability to diversify, their ability to open up a new enterprise, their ability to shut one down if it doesn’t function where they are...Scotland has this amazing geography which will have some of the best carbon sinks in the world and have some of the most productive, intensive cattle in the world. So we can have both...We can help all land managers and farmers go down the track which is right for them. Are they going to be a high nature value farmer, a carbon farmer, are they going to be an intensive farmer? How do we transfer the skills so that land managers can adapt as they see fit?...FAS will help you adapt to your new path when that is needed.”

SAC Consulting Participant 2

### **Recommendation 8: Engage with Barriers to Following Advice.**

Consider developing mechanisms to cultivate small, facilitated groups of farmers which can collaboratively develop change over time. A common challenge noted among respondents was that change can be more achievable in the context of facilitated groups of farmers, rather than individually, and this should be considered as a mechanism for improving the take-up of advice. Consider longer term mechanisms with an explicit emphasis on transition.

## **5.5 How Should Change be Monitored?**

Following on from this, participants had a range of views about how change might be monitored. As one participant noted, current monitoring is largely focused on engagement as distinct from the 'impacts' of advice. As another participant observed, capturing the outcomes of receiving advice could provide a more useful guide to the effects of the service:

"It's about giving people options that they can take home and consider and then action...I think that is something that's not being measured through the service at all: how many people are taking something away that they can action at home, but then are actually doing it? To me that would be the real success of the service. And at this point I don't think we're seeing that fundamental change in farming practices."

Participant 6

A challenging dimension of monitoring is that it requires integration within environmental monitoring generally. The challenges and opportunities of centralised monitoring were emphasised by some participants. For example, as one observed:

"I think there has to be some form of monitoring. It comes back to the data question. There is so much unknown in terms of our baseline at the moment...in terms of the economic side of things there are things like the Farm business survey, the June agricultural census, all those kinds of things are definitely useful for looking at the health of the businesses...the big gap is that we don't have many other baselines to measure from which to measure success or otherwise at the moment, other than the economic side of things..."

Participant 3

As this participant observes, there are considerable challenges around environmental monitoring owing to a lack of baselines and the data collection challenges monitoring involves. Among some participants, there was clearly support for a more broadly integrated approach to environmental monitoring, which could include farms. As one participant noted, environmental monitoring is generally poor

in Scotland, and it follows that a better data strategy for this could improve monitoring of outcomes elsewhere.

While we can certainly imagine an approach to FAS that would seek to monitor performance in terms of national priorities, such as carbon emissions, participants also emphasised the importance of farmers, or groups of farmers, establishing their own KPIs for change and these being monitored. Developing an appropriate mechanism for 'blending' these levels, i.e. ensuring farmer-led innovation – thus supporting 'buy in' – while ensuring national goals are prioritised will be an important challenge here.

While measuring impact is important, this does raise the possibility of goals being set in less prescriptive ways and being more connected to the specific aspirations of farmers or, indeed, groups. There was certainly the possibility, noted by some participants, of allowing groups to set their own goals and to be measured against these. While this might not correspond as neatly to the central policy goals alluded to above, there could potentially be scope to have an approval process in relation to these goals, or develop them in consultation with FAS. A strong benefit here would be buy in from participants, who would be pursuing outcomes they have selected and are invested in. These aspects should inform the interpretation of the recommendations pertaining to monitoring, as above.

## 6 Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, this evaluation has found that, from 2016 to 2020, SAC Consulting have effectively delivered on the specification they have been given. During this time, we have seen consistent increases in the use of the FAS service as provided, as well as innovation and development in the delivery, including experimentation with additional formats like podcasts. While changes are unlikely to be uniform, the high incidence of stated 'intention to change' by FAS event participants and the activity taken in response to advice, as captured in our survey, indicates that impacts are taking place. However, it remains challenging to demonstrate the extent to which the provision of farming advice has changed practices on the ground and this can be partly understood as reflecting limits within our data collection mechanisms. Going forward, more focused and detailed monitoring of impacts should be able to address this.

Farming advice may be able to play a key role in supporting farmers to take advantage of the opportunities facing the Scottish agricultural sector, as well as addressing the challenges. The following recommendations, reproduced from the report above, outline several ways in which farming advice can help to facilitate long-term improvement for the sector and meet the demands associated with the current climate emergency.

### 6.1 Recommendations

In the main report, the recommendations below are restated in the main text in greater context. However, a summary of the eight main recommendations is provided here:

**Recommendation 1: Review Monitoring Framework.** Review the KPI arrangements for a future service, and consider the possibility of developing outcome based KPIs. Review the options for establishing effective monitoring of farm improvements, ranging from centrally set and monitored goals to goals established and monitored by individuals or groups of participants.

**Recommendation 2: Review Data Strategy.** Consider potential mechanisms for regular, representation farm data collection to determine the extent to which FAS is used within the farming population as a whole and how the service is viewed. Consider opportunities for integrating monitoring of farm environments within a broader environmental monitoring strategy. Consider the possibility of a specific farm data strategy for monitoring and benchmarking environmental impacts.

**Recommendation 3: Review Engagement Strategy.** Consider contractual mechanisms that support the goal of engaging with those who are under-represented in FAS, and the possibility of requiring a detailed engagement strategy that examines subjective and structural barriers. Review whether future farm advice should develop an appropriate customer management system that allows monitoring that tracks additional advice and engagement from customers, to monitor crossover between the different components of the service (in the event that delivery continues to be separated into 'one to one' and 'one to many' components).

**Recommendation 4: Review the ‘mission’ of the service.** Consider the value of establishing an updated ‘mission’ for the service, using a participatory mechanism to ensure wide cross-sectoral buy in. This should be cognisant of the climate emergency and the need to support nature in farming.

**Recommendation 5: Review Knowledge Integration:** Review mechanisms for knowledge exchange to ensure there is a consistent approach to climate change and environmental practice both on and off farm, potentially incorporating knowledge exchange initiatives like [SEFARI](#), the website that hosts the outputs from publicly funded research into food and agriculture. Similarly, consider the mechanisms for greater integration of FAS in relation to the broader farming advice context, and ensuring specialists knowledge is available and integrated into service provision.

**Recommendation 6: Consider Scope for More Holistic Training Integration.** Consider whether there is scope for more holistic integration of training with advice provision. Taking a long-term view, consider the scope for FAS to engage with longer-term training and advice mechanisms.

**Recommendation 7: Ensure advice is inclusive.** Consider the best mechanisms to mainstream the lessons of women-only training techniques, how best to ensure they are available and review barriers to participation that may exist for other equalities groups. For sensitive topics, for example, succession planning and mental health, ensure that FAS can provide an appropriate forum for discussing these sensitively.

**Recommendation 8: Engage with Barriers to Following Advice.** Consider developing mechanisms to cultivate small, facilitated groups of farmers which can collaboratively develop change over time. A common view among interview respondents was that achieving change is easier in the context of small groups of farmers, rather than individuals, and this should be considered as a mechanism for improving the take-up of advice.



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