

Landbridge Workshop: Setting an agenda for rural inter-professional working and exchange

Newcastle, 4th October 2012

Introduction

The Landbridge Network aims to improve linkages between rural professionals and between advisory and research communities. It has been set up in conjunction with active rural professionals and is guided by an advisory panel involving representatives from Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), the Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (IEEM), the Agricultural Industries Confederation (AIC) and the British Veterinary Association (BVA). The network is supported by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Living with Environmental Change Partnership (LWEC). The purpose of this first Landbridge workshop was to explore the issue of inter-professional working, learn from practitioner experiences and identify implications for training and professional development.

Feedback from the day:

- The majority of the participants' feedback has been very positive. Participants welcomed the opportunity to interact with a wide range of professionals and explore how they can work better together
- 95% of delegates rated the quality of the workshop as excellent or good
- One delegate noted, for example, "At a time when collaboration, cooperation, integration and landscape scale are all buzz words and aspirations of government, then this network is welcome"
- There was a commonly held view that the Landbridge Network could add value by moving beyond the single lens focus of individual rural professions to explore the key areas and interfaces where different professions overlap and interests might coalesce
- The workshop involved 44 participants with 60% of these advisors from the private sector including land agents, veterinarians, agronomists, lawyers, rural business consultants and energy consultants. 11% of delegates were advisors working in the public sector and a further 9% worked in third sector organisations. The remaining 20% of delegates included university researchers and research programme representatives

Session 1: Setting the context

Workshop Chair **Sue Steer** (Steer Ethelston Ltd and RICS Countryside Policy Panel) noted the timeliness of the workshop theme given recent policy interest in advisory service provision and increasingly complex land management issues linked to ecosystem services, environmental change and global food security. Sue outlined her role on the advisory panel for the Landbridge network in helping to advise on the direction of the project and introduced the other advisory panel members to the delegates.

Landbridge co-ordinator **Jeremy Phillipson** (Relu Assistant Director and LWEC Land Use Fellow) introduced the aims of the Landbridge Network:

- to provide a platform for inter-professional learning and debate among advisors from across the professions;

- to distil key messages for the professional development of the current or next generation of advisors;
- to provide opportunities for two way exchange with the research community and improve the relationship between the professions and research programmes and agendas at a strategic level

Jeremy explained that Landbridge is an experimental project which will run to February 2014 to test whether there is an appetite for such a knowledge exchange network. Landbridge originates from a Rural Economy and Land Use (Relu) funded project 'Science in the Field' which explored how advisors kept their knowledge up to date and to what extent they were acting as intermediaries bringing science to the farm. Jeremy outlined how Landbridge will operate, including an advisory panel of working practitioners, a workshop series, policy and practice publications and a website to encourage knowledge exchange, act as a signpost to key resources available to rural practitioners and be an interactive platform for discussion and debate.

Keynote speaker **Mark Reed** (Valuing Nature Network and National Ecosystem Assessment II) reflected on his experiences of working on the Relu Programme's 'Sustainable Uplands Research Project'. As a practical example of inter-disciplinary working, Mark drew out four key lessons for how to work successfully across disciplines which he felt were pertinent for inter-professional working:

- Build trust: take time and work with people you get on with
- Communicate: invest in internal communication, understand each others' language and approach, don't just talk at each other
- Facilitate: establish clear roles and manage power dynamics, expect conflict and failure and remember it's how you deal with it that matters
- Deliver tangible outcomes: different team members will want different outcomes – make room for as many as you can, securing quick wins is important but establishing a team and impacts that last is vital

Delegates discussed how to incorporate less dominant voices in inter-professional working and how to conduct effective stakeholder analysis. Mark recommended a systematic approach which is reflective and adaptive.

Session 2: Current and future demands for inter-professional working

Delegates heard from three rural practitioners regarding their experiences of inter-professional working.

Land agent **Louis Fell** (George F White) described his role and responsibilities as Partner at a large, multidisciplinary land agency which offers a wide range of services across five offices in the North. Louis and his colleagues work with a range of external professionals including accountants, solicitors, ecologists, architects, transport and noise assessors and insolvency practitioners. As a senior fee earner, Louis spends a lot of time networking and building these professional networks. He highlighted some key lessons for successful inter-professional working. The importance of working with individuals you enjoy working with and finding the right professional is vital, not only to match to the job but also the client. Louis saw the Landbridge network as an opportunity to get the latest research and knowledge to help grow their own and their clients' businesses.

Veterinarian **Jenny Hull** (Alnorthumbria Veterinary Group) qualified in 2007. Her role at Alnorthumbria, a multi-practice group with surgeries across the North of England involves mixed practice including farm work. Jenny explained that she works with a range of other professionals including farmers, nutritionists, feed reps, scourers, foot

trimmers, farm business consultants, artificial insemination specialists and academics at universities and laboratories. Jenny had built up these networks via colleague recommendations when first starting out. These inter-professional networks allow her to access expertise beyond her veterinary knowledge. She identified benefits to the client, the animal and the farm business from such working. Jenny also spoke about the challenges of inter-professional working including the risks of bringing in non-veterinary professionals to help on cases who sometimes then take business from them; the risks of clients viewing an advisors' need to bring in external expertise as a failure of their knowledge; and the difficulties of accessing professional networks due to the different work schedules of other professionals.

Agronomist **Mike Butcher** (Alnwick Farming Consultants) formerly worked for ADAS for 20 years before setting up a consultancy with two other advisors with specialisms in crop, livestock and conservation/organic work. Mike explained how he has built up his professional networks within the North East. He noted how he has established strong links with other agronomists in the region via regular meetings and how he has developed a fortnightly newsletter for his farmer clients. Mike was keen to emphasise that much of the knowledge he shared was experiential and he made the crucial point that "the more knowledge you share, the more you will benefit in return".

Delegates then discussed in small groups the following questions:

1. Who does inter-professional working? Why bother – what are the current or emerging agendas or issues that demand it?
2. What are the benefits and opportunities of inter-professional working?
3. What are the obstacles and challenges to interprofessional working and how might they be overcome?

Comments fed back from the groups:

The discussion highlighted the diverse range of inter-professional activity currently taking place between and across different rural advisory professions. Inter-professional working is about knowing the limits of your expertise and when to draw in others to help your business and that of your client.

The reasons for engaging in such activity included personal satisfaction (the aim of inter-professional working is to get the job done rather than purely to build knowledge but if this happens, it was considered a bonus). Others mentioned the financial benefits it brings personally, to clients and their businesses. There may be an even greater need to build inter-professional networks where advisors operate as sole traders but even multidisciplinary large practices were found to depend on external networks.

The potential rewards of inter-professional working include: commercial benefits from sharing costs; winning future business on the back of successful inter-professional working; seeing a client change their practices for the better as a result of inter-professional action; and access to funding schemes which require collaborative bids.

Barriers to inter-professional working include: the difficulties of finding professionals who will meet the needs of your client; the risk of a client being poached; sub-contractors pursuing their own agenda; competing egos, agendas and needs for outputs between different professionals; the professional risk of admitting you don't know something; overcoming language barriers across professions and with clients ("field-cred" and "speak farmer not textbook" were key messages); rewards systems can drive the "keep it to yourself" mentality.

The importance of trust and communication for successful inter-professional working was emphasised. Delegates noted that there is a need to demonstrate to clients that inter-professional working adds value to the service given and which they are paying for. The role of social networking and social media in helping to build professional networks was raised.

Session 3: Inter-professional working in action

Environment and farm adviser **Chloe Palmer** (Farm & Environment Consultancy Ltd) led this interactive session where small groups tackled different land management scenarios including a Higher Level Stewardship Scheme, a proposal for an anaerobic digester plant and the development of a Water Framework Directive action plan, to explore the practicalities of inter-professional working. The groups were asked to reflect on the following: how would they go about locating the expertise necessary to tackle the scenario; what were the roles and responsibilities of different advisors; how easy was it to communicate across professional boundaries and what was the client's role and experience in the process.

Comments fed back from the groups included:

- Different professionals have different languages and different motives for involvement
- Inter-professional working is not just between private sector professionals; it also includes professionals working at the public-private-NGO interface where conflict over different aims and timelines can arise
- It is vital to balance the number of people who should/need to be involved with the available time – advisors carry out an informal stakeholder analysis to identify who needs to be involved centrally from the outset and how others might be brought in later, or for specialist tasks
- The importance of securing an independent facilitator in controversial cases is paramount; particularly someone who is able to play the role of mediator and project manager
- Some delegates described the difficulties of identifying advisors with an established track record and experience of project management. Uncertainty around the quality and standard of sub-contractors employed was also mentioned
- Professional associations have member listings for accredited advisors – this was cited as one place to find particular experts
- Inter-professional working is as much about mediating the needs of various beneficiaries and competing client interests as it is about competing professional interests
- Where numerous stakeholders are involved, successful inter-professional working needs to have a clear division of labour
- Identifying a lead professional to coordinate a process can be a challenge
- The importance of relying on local networks rather than 'parachuting in' experts was emphasised
- "Listen first. Don't always be on transmit"

Session 4: Policy & Practice recommendations for inter-professional working

Consultants **Roger Turner** (Advocates for Rural Enterprise) and **Terry Carroll** (Centre for Rural Economy) acted as rapporteurs in this final session, providing some reflections on the theme of inter-professional working and on how to take the Landbridge Network forwards.

Roger Turner noted how advisory services, as key professional and business services in rural areas are central to the agenda for growth and saw the Landbridge network as a means to increase recognition of this within Government. Roger drew

out some key themes to emerge from the day with regards rural inter-professional working:

- Time emerged as a challenge; different timescales and timetables affecting different professionals and tasks; timeliness of access, engagement and decision-making so that clients can be helped; but these timelines differ by task, by profession, by role. If inter-professional networking is to be effective, it will need to co-ordinate delivery across these various timescales
- Networking, including at this event, illustrated a need and desire to learn about what many rural professionals and their bodies do. Whilst participants seemed to have a good idea about the work and role of some rural professionals such as rural surveyors, as the third session showed, as we worked down the list of groups to be involved in working towards outcomes, we all became less clear about which professional and other bodies to turn to
- Trust and confidence were clearly identified as important ingredients for successful inter-professional networking but several contributors illustrated too that such networking is also a means of building such trust and confidence between would-be collaborators. It was clear that trust, confidence and knowledge ultimately come down to individuals not groups - individuals you can trust or enjoy working with, not just any requisite professional. So networking that helps to introduce professionals to one another at a personal level, will also be an important route to improving knowledge, confidence and trust between professions

Terry Carroll reflected on lessons for the Landbridge Network from the day. He noted that inter-professional working has the potential to help advisors with their competitiveness, business growth and client satisfaction and that this type of network, where different professions are able to meet and interact is a key part of this. Discussion followed about key issues and activities which Landbridge could address.

Next Steps for Landbridge...

- **Future events/workshops:** A number of participants felt that running a second workshop which explores the relationship between professional and research communities would be valuable to improve knowledge exchange between them. There was an interest in future events or themes relevant to the professions which linked to latest research findings and initiatives. Tapping into knowledge being generated through universities and research programmes was felt to be important in helping clients to improve their businesses. Participants want better access to knowledge from researchers and research, but they want such information to be relevant to what they do. This requires a two way dialogue. Professionals themselves expressed an interest in contributing to research agenda setting.
- **Landbridge website:** There was broad agreement that advisors suffer from e-overload and that the Landbridge website needed to provide value-added beyond what professionals may get through their own individual professional association websites and mailing lists. The landbridge website should clearly focus on interprofessional activities and agendas and explore the key areas and interfaces where different professions overlap and interests might coalesce. Delegates suggested that the website could be a useful platform for hosting real examples of successful inter-professional working and a signposting/speed-dating site for professionals to find other professionals. The importance of using social media through the site was highlighted.
- **Potential topics/themes/issues to address:** Building trust and relationships between professional and policy communities; understanding the role and experience of the farmer in interprofessional working; exploring what other professionals do in order to break down unnecessary stereotyping across

professions; reflections on how different professions think their profession will change in 5/10 years time including the effect of new technology; climate change and impacts on the rural economy; delivery and payment for ecosystem services; what is the future of 'integrated' farm plans

- **Landbridge Network community:** It was noted that engagement with land managers and businesses was essential in order to fully understand processes of knowledge exchange. Broadening participation to include other professionals such as those involved in accountancy, tax and law was also emphasised as well as including representatives from government agencies and regulatory bodies.

And Finally...

Jonathan Abra, Knowledge Transfer Manager at the Environmental Sustainability Knowledge Transfer Network penned this missive in the spirit of national poetry day:

In order best to manage land
We work together hand-in-hand
With trusted others, people who we know
Will work together well
To do the best for farm and fell
And they, in turn, bring added value
Through knowledge networks (such as Relu!)
Outcomes of which are so much greater
When using a facilitator

Vets and agents agronomists
Farmers, lawyers, scientists of all persuasions
Scanners AI men and more
So many more than days of yore
All come together, talk and share
Experiences, knowledge and a sandwich
All power to your elbow Landbridge!

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