

landbridge:

A knowledge exchange network
for rural professionals

Professional Development Resources: Inter-professional working



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These resources are designed to support the continuing professional development of land advisers. They draw on research findings from the Science in the Field project (RES 229-25-0025) that explored the role of rural experts (veterinarians, ecological advisers, land agents) in knowledge exchange. It has been prepared through the ESRC Landbridge project (ES/J01057X/1) and with funding from the Rural Economy and Land Use Programme and Living With Environmental Change partnership.

Theme 1



The new context for inter-professional working

Inter-professional working in rural areas is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, the dispersed nature of clients in rural areas and the traditionally small nature of rural service providers have meant that inter-professional working has been both commonplace and necessary. However, various changes and emerging issues in recent times throw up both new challenges and new opportunities. Among the new challenges facing rural professionals and impacting upon inter-professional working are:

- An increasingly complex statutory and regulatory environment.
- Shifts between the roles and responsibilities of public, private and third sector (e.g. charities) organisations.
- An increasingly diverse economic base in rural areas away from purely agriculture (i.e. an increased diversity of service needs in rural areas).
- An increasing emphasis on the role of rural areas in environmental protection and the delivery of multiple 'ecosystem services' from land management.
- The increasing availability of information and advice through the internet and digital media.
- Demands for an efficient and more joined up advisory system.
- Economic and environmental uncertainty.

The increasing complexity of this operational environment means that rural professionals are much more likely to come into contact with one another and be required to work together to meet a wider range of needs from a wider range of clients. It can also have a range of consequences that increase the tensions between and among different professions:

- There is a role for a new breed of professional within rural areas (such as expert ecologists), which may have a critical role in the provision of services but have less experience of working alongside more traditional rural professions (such as land agents), and vice versa.
- There is the emergence of larger service providers that are able to offer a range of integrated services to the client in-house but that may not have the same personal approach.
- There is blurring of the boundaries between traditional professions as service providers try to provide added-value to their principal areas of expertise:

There's always a big overlap between vets trying to be nutritionists ... and nutritionists trying to be vets. (Vet)

These factors raise issues about business competition but also questions regarding the exclusivity of expertise. Moreover, they also ensure a range of options to clients – which might be seen as a welcome increase in choice, but also as adding to the befuddlement that land managers face, and complain of, when required to employ expert services. It is the challenge for rural professionals, therefore, to navigate this increasingly complex and diverse operational environment, whilst at the same time ensuring the viability of their businesses and maximising the service provided to the client.

Theme 2

Addressing the issue of competition



Traditionally, competition might be thought of in terms of rival organisations from the same profession that are operating in the same area. This is straightforward business competition and unless there is a need to work together to increase capacity (e.g. to complete a large job that a single firm might not have the resources to complete) it is less likely that such organisations would cooperate. Organisations from the same profession, but operating in different areas or specialisms, however, might well work together by sharing information and redirecting clients to each other. Firms from the same profession might have formal or informal agreements not to ingress upon one another's patch.

With inter-professional working, however, the issue of competition between, rather than within, professions becomes relevant. This is particularly the case given the increasingly complex operational environment for rural firms and the blurring of the boundaries between different professions that this has led to [\[Click here to view Theme 1\]](#). This means that there is not only competition in terms of a territorial patch but also in terms of an expertise patch. Successful inter-professional working might take place where firms work together whilst respecting the expertise patch of other professions.

If, however, in the course of working together, different professions learn from one another and then go on to start offering new services to clients that are outside of their traditional profession, then there are not only issues of increased business competition at stake, but also competition over professional reputations.

Valuers are valuers, that's what we do, that is our profession. [...] Sometimes a lawyer will do a valuation because they think they can. Sometimes an accountant will because they think they can. But they don't do valuations; they just put a figure in. So that can be really annoying, and they do pinch, and they have got quite a lot of control because they advise the client sometimes whether they need to have a valuation, and sometimes they'll say, 'Well, you don't.' And that takes work away from us.[...] There is competition, we do stake and mark our territory and make it known what we do. (Land Agent)

"On technical areas relating to the environment and ecology, land agents can be reluctant to hand work over to other groups who are more appropriately professionally qualified. One of the issues is that Government does not help with this attitude as it does not like to say that some work is defined to any group or profession. Farm Environment Plans are a good example of this issue". (Ecologist)

Rural inter-professional working may thus be seen as increasing the potential for the exclusivity of expertise to be challenged. Such challenges from across professional boundaries may actually bring firms from within a profession together, as they seek to consolidate and reinforce their expertise and right to offer a particular service to a client.

It can also be argued, however, that by working together advisors across professions increase their business competitiveness by making themselves more attractive to clients. There is clearly a balance to be struck, therefore, between the potential risks and benefits. Striking such a balance requires an ability on the part of rural professionals to carefully manage and negotiate their relationships during interactions with other professions. How they might do this is the subject of Themes 3-5.

Theme 3



Reciprocity in inter-professional working

For rural inter-professional working to succeed rural professionals need to be not only experts in their own field, but also experts at navigating the challenges and maximising the opportunities that may arise. An important way of achieving this is through the nurturing and management of relationships with other professions, or what we might call 'strategies of rural inter-professional working'. The objective of such strategies is to maximise the benefits and minimise the risks. Two important strategies are reciprocity and acknowledging the expertise of other professions, or 'the art of deference'. The first of these is considered here, whilst deference is considered in [\[Click here to view Theme 4.\]](#)

For inter-professional working to be sustained it is important that the benefits and risks are seen to be equitable and fair amongst those involved. This is achieved through the establishment of reciprocal relationships and ideas of give and take. This may take the form of:

(1) Sharing knowledge between professions. For instance one professional may give up some knowledge/information in return for some knowledge/information that they did not previously possess. That knowledge/information might include knowledge of a technical nature (such as scientific expertise) or information that would be of business interest (for instance details of a new policy which might provide additional work opportunities).

So good networking is crucial to broaden your experience ... you recognise a face and you think, 'Well, okay,' and have such and such a word with such and such. 'I know him, I met him there,' ring him up and be capable and confident to ask a question, and don't be frightened to answer a question. They can easily turn round and say, 'Well, sorry, I can't help you in this instance, I've got a conflict of interest.' 'Oh, thank you very much, I'm sorry to bother you.' There's never a problem, I've never had that. 'Oh, yeah, no problem, I'll help you.' (Land Agent)

(2) Distributing business opportunities. For instance one professional may direct a client to another profession if he or she is unable to help the client. In return, they would expect the recipient to repay the favour.

(3) Combinations of (1) and (2) above:

There's quite a synergy between land agents, lawyers and accountants as to asking a question. And I have relationships with various lawyers that I can ring up and say, 'Look, I've got this problem, what the hell do I do here?' And they'll say, 'Well, we've come across this before and you need to do this.' I'll say, 'Fine, if it comes to anything I'll give you a nudge and you can do the job.' And that's the way it works. (Land Agent)

(4) Respecting each other's territorial and expertise patch, which reduces the likelihood of problems over competition [\[Click here to view Theme 2\]](#) arising. This technique has to be carefully balanced with (1) and (2) above:

So I think some of it is relation-based. If you've got that good relation with these other professionals, you're less likely to find them encroaching on your patch, basically, is what I'm saying. (Land Agent)

Given the fine line between the benefits and risks of inter-professional working, managing these relationships is not always straightforward and needs discretion and judgement on the part of the professionals involved. It also requires being able quickly to put past issues aside when new opportunities arise.

It is important to note that acts of reciprocity are not necessarily immediate and it is perhaps more likely that a favour given will be returned when the opportunity to do so arises. This means that trust is essential in successfully maintaining reciprocal relationships and requires the nurturing and maintenance of strong personal relationships [\[Click here to view Theme 6\]](#). Where trust is broken, or not established in the first place, then relationships can break down and the full opportunities and benefits of inter-professional working are not realised by either party. Equally, where give and take are not perceived to be balanced it is unlikely that a good working relationship can be sustained. Maintaining successful relationships therefore may depend on unwritten rules of engagement or a 'moral economy' of inter-professional working.

Theme 4



Acknowledging the expertise of other professions

Becoming an expert requires not only the specialist knowledge of your own field but also knowing how to position yourself in wider networks of practice. Expertise is often negotiated at the interface of inter-professional working. Being aware of different expertises is important for the successful functioning of inter-professional working but acknowledging them is also an important strategy. This often takes place through the art of deference: whereby the expertise of another profession in a particular area is acknowledged and endorsed through recourse to one's own lack of expertise in that particular area:

We can't provide all the advice we need so we'll point them to other specialist advisers, if there are specialist planning issues then we'll point them towards specialist planners and specialist agricultural legal advice and this sort of thing, because you've got to realise what your limitations are to your abilities. Whilst you're good at some things there are other things where it's better to hand over to a specialist in that area. (Land Agent)

...for Higher Level Stewardship, you need a Farm Environmental Plan, and ecologists do that, or what they term as FEP-ers. You've got to have a good eye, I haven't got the expertise to go out and identify plant species and suchlike, so I contract an ecologist in to do that work, and we work closely. I basically get the farm and she does the ecology work, and then we sort the bill out thereafter, and it works very well. (Land Agent)

Deference in this way might be considered an 'art' and as 'strategic' because it not only serves to demonstrate the very genuine differences in skills between professionals and individuals, but because it also implicitly includes a range of social endorsements that benefit working relationships and the reputational standing of those involved:

- It provides reputational endorsement to another profession (improving relationships and making future reciprocations more likely);
- It endorses the expertise of the speaker in a different area (i.e. by saying 'this is not my expertise' implicitly suggests that the speaker possesses some other type of expertise, without appearing immodest);
- It underlines the importance of working together and maintaining strong working relationships.

Deferring expertise in this way is an important responsibility of those looking to coordinate rural inter-professional working **[Click here to view Theme 5]**. It demonstrates inter-professional acumen and an ability to see the wider benefits of engaging with others. This is particularly true when such deference is shown in front of a third party, such as a client, since it simultaneously endorses both parties' expertise as well as their working relationship.

Theme 5



Coordinating the contributions of different professions



Themes 3 and 4 outlined the importance of strategies of inter-professional working in managing the relationships necessary for success. Along with managerial skills and good client relationships, the ability to employ these strategies effectively is important for those acting as coordinators of rural inter-professional working: Coordinators need to demonstrate and exercise inter-professional acumen.

One asset of the coordinator role in inter-professional working is the ability to assimilate different expertises, whilst not losing sight of the overall objectives for which the work is being undertaken:

I think that the vets key strength is our ability to assimilate all of these things and relate it back to the overall health and well being, and therefore, productivity of the individual animal of the herd, so the lameness, the foot trimming, the feed adviser, the business consultant and ourselves. So I think not to do that the vet will be missing out on the key strength that means that we'll always hopefully have a job, and being that translator and facilitator in support of the farmer, you know starting from the cow as we do, making more so perhaps as advisors, our overall perspective. (Vet)

Knowing the unwritten rules of inter-professional working (such as those relating to reciprocity [[Click here to view Theme 3](#)] and deference [[Click here to view Theme 4](#)]), and how to use them in different circumstances is also an important skill, and a form of expertise in itself. This type of expertise often goes unrecognised and is nurtured in relationships between professions over long periods of time. Where professionals, or particular professions, do not possess this type of expertise they can attract criticism: not only for not sharing their own knowledge/information/contacts, but also for not engaging in reciprocal relationships which would be to their own benefit as well as to others:

I think, to some extent, agents can be narrow as well, but they are more broad-minded. I do find that some of these specialists just think about their own business, and they must have what they need to do their job. They can't compromise, or they're not willing to compromise, and it takes a while to drip feed them what they need to realise is the bigger picture. That's frustrating. I think it's a new profession, or professional area, and they haven't amassed the skills or the confidence within themselves to be able to treat... they're very good, they know their own stuff, but in getting a multi-disciplinary together, I think they're a bit behind a lot of professions. (Land Agent)

An ecologist, working in a multidisciplinary setting, also acknowledged this deficiency within his own professional field:

You tend to find that a lot of ecologists are self-employed and their knowledge is their... business, so they don't want to pass it on to other people, and when I originally first started here we subcontracted some of our work to an ecologist and one of the things I wanted to do was go out with her and learn a bit about stuff and she just wouldn't do it, she basically said, 'I'm not transferring my knowledge to you, why should I?' sort of thing. It was like, 'Well, okay then.' And I think that's generally a bit of a problem, I mean, quite a lot of ecologists, they're generally nice people and easy to talk to, but if you want to get into trying to extract some knowledge from them they're very reluctant to pass that on, which I think is a shame in a way. (Ecologist)

Equally, an important role of the coordinator is to understand their own expertise and limitations, as well as the expertise and limitations of other professions and to manage the inter-professional interface in such a way as to maximise the client benefits whilst militating against potential conflicts. Again, newer professions might be seen as too rigid and protective of their own expertise, which is not in their long term interest if the strategic benefits of deference are taken into consideration. This was identified by one ecologist when talking about the need to acknowledge the expertise of others (in this case land managers):

Why is that happening, and just generally about their day-to-day life and running a farm really and the different aspects of it. I think it's critical. I think if you don't understand that you can't begin to give good advice if you don't understand and talk to them and I think that's where we've probably gone wrong a bit in the past, posing this quite rigid management sometimes on them without really understanding. (Ecologist)

Those that are unable to see the wider benefits of inter-professional working, and who do not engage in strategies of reciprocity and deference, are unlikely to possess the necessary inter-professional acumen to act as co-ordinators. The same strategies of maintaining good relationships in inter-professional working are also important in maintaining good and lasting client relationships. And since co-ordination requires both, the ability to exercise them is essential for those wishing to act as an interface between the client and multiple professions.



Theme 6



Personal benefits to be gained from inter-professional working

In Themes 3-5 some of the strategies of rural inter-professional working are explored through relationship management. It is important to point out, however, that building relationships between professions is not only a strategic exercise with the objective of maximising one's own benefit. Instead, many rural professionals emphasise the benefits of working with other people in itself. Rural professionals can often find themselves working alone, or working alone with a client and they express a personal enjoyment from the opportunity to work alongside other people that inter-professional working can provide:

Most nutritionists, etc, are probably very receptive to doing joint visits or getting involved when we flag something up, partly because obviously they want to look after the client, and partly because it makes a difference, and it's more enjoyable to work with some of the other people. (Vet)

For that enjoyment to be realised, however, it was stressed that other professionals must also have the right attitude and be experiencing the working relationship in a similar way:

I quite enjoy it most of the time, provided that the other advisors have the same mindset, and want to, because they can also be defensive and if you're within a team if you feel things aren't going well... so it is really important and I do it quite a lot. (Vet)

Many working relationships are preceded by friendships, familiarity and trust and the opportunities of working with one another are also opportunities for maintaining those friendships and of realising personal benefits outwith of the actual matter of business.

Despite the increased availability of information through the internet and other digital media rural professionals also emphasise the continued importance of personal face-to-face interaction with other professionals. This suggests not only that the sharing of information is important but that:

- Reciprocal relationships, and the associated rules of engagement, are easier to maintain through close proximal working. If professionals are getting their information online, rather than from one another, then there are fewer opportunities to trade in other areas (such as directing clients to one another).
- There are personal benefits to be derived from the opportunities to engage with others and share ideas and experiences.

Theme 7



The multiple advantages of inter-professional working

Inter-professional working can take a number of forms. Some approaches (such as networking) might simply involve the sharing of information that is of business interest to the parties involved. Many instances of rural inter-professional working, however, take place in order to meet the needs of a client. Where a client requires multiple services they can either: approach a firm with the in-house skills to deliver all of the services, or, rely on a network of smaller firms working together to fulfil the requirements.

More often than not a client may not be aware of the multiple services they require but focus instead on the objectives that they wish to achieve. A farmer wanting to install an anaerobic digestion plant, or apply for a Higher Level Stewardship agreement, for instance, might not be aware of all of the individual professional elements needed to meet his or her objectives. The chances are, therefore, that in the first instance they will approach an individual professional service provider, who will then need to draw on the expertise of a range of other professionals if they are to meet the needs of the client.

How a client selects a service provider is likely to be influenced by prior experience, familiarity and trust. Hence a farmer is often more likely to engage with someone they already know. Without the ability to work inter-professionally, and call upon a range of other professions, a business opportunity for all of the different providers is potentially lost. There is a clear business incentive, therefore, for rural professionals to work together in servicing the needs of the client.

In some instances a client may want to be kept abreast of all the different service providers that are working on their behalf and to work with them directly. Alternatively a service provider might redirect the client to someone better able to help:

Some [clients] are quite sort of controlling I suppose and private, and they don't like all their advisors getting together and teaming up on them and bullying them. But again, the ones which we tend to think are more enjoyable to work with, we would have, some of the visits we do would be with their nutritionist or maybe they'll have another type of agricultural advisor or production advisor or something. (Vet)

In many cases, however, much of the inter-professional working takes place behind the scenes, with a single service provider sub-contracting, or drawing in other professions, whilst acting to manage the overall delivery and be the main point of contact for the client:

There'll be situations where we haven't got the specialism within the firm, and for instance, planning type work, some mineral work, we might go to a specialist planning operative, or mineral surveyor and would embrace that part of the team. Sometimes they will work as sub-contractors to us, in which case, from a client's point of view they wouldn't necessarily be made aware of the fact that they're involved. Other times, because of the level of their involvement often we would make it quite clear to the client that we are bringing alongside whoever it may be to assist us with this. And in situations like that often we will end up effectively managing the job rather than necessarily providing the advice. So we act as the sort of interface between the client and job, and specialist adviser, and we sort of make sure it all happens, and then we can feed through to the client, and obviously be there to talk it through with the client, but without necessarily having provided the specialist advice. (Land Agent)

The benefits of this approach for the client, is that the hassle of managing a plethora of different professionals is avoided whilst they retain a personal and familiar point of contact.

Successful rural inter-professional working should seek to achieve triple-wins. That means that working together benefits the client as well as two or more service providers. The client will be satisfied if their needs are met, they view the costs to be reasonable, and they enjoyed a good working relationship with the professional service providers. The professionals will benefit if they would not have secured the work, and the business benefits, without working collaboratively. Moreover, through the interaction that the collaborative working allows, the rural professionals also have the opportunity to benefit from the enjoyment of working with others, the opportunity to exchange information and learn from another, and to maintain and develop strong working relationships with those with whom their business is intimately tied.

*It happened to be a farm that myself and Lara, one of the vets, were in charge of, and we talked about the problem with cysts and how we were going to resolve it, and the farmer said how he was getting his nutritionist to come in. Now on the particular day that the nutritionist was coming, I couldn't attend, so I said to Lara, 'He's got the nutritionist coming. We should be there because it's a team effort to try and get this problem resolved. So the farmer is going to be there, the nutritionist is going to be there, and the vet should be there.' Lara was quite alarmed, because we did nutrition in first and second year. She's been eight years qualified, so it's ten years ago, eleven years ago, and she didn't feel confident to be involved in that discussion with the nutritionist. I said, 'Well, you don't need to know about nutrition. You just need to know about the physiology of the cyst. If you don't know about it, we've still got tonight to read up about it, so you can turn up tomorrow morning and you're going to know all about cysts. You'll have something to contribute. Not only that, you'll absorb some of the nutritional information from the nutritionist. The farmer can see that we're keen to work as a team with his other advisors, we'll learn something from it, the nutritionist will probably learn something from us, and **everybody is better off**.' So she came back. 'How did you get on?' 'It was marvellous.' Now she knows that the next time the same thing happens with another farm, at least she can go in with a knowledge about the physiology of a cyst, plus a little bit of nutrition. (Vet)*

But then it's just, I mean, nowadays most of the professional solicitors, planning advisors, they're drumming up business and they put on little seminars, so you attend those, you network, you meet people. I think the profession as a whole is a group of professionals that like to share information, because they know sharing knowledge keeps them abreast, and they then deliver the service that the clients need and want, and they'll come back if they can show that professionalism. So I think everybody is out there helping each other. (Land Agent)

Could advisers of farm managers work more effectively across professions? LWEC Policy and Practice Note forthcoming

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