CASE STUDY

"'HOPE FARM' AND THE CAMBRIDGESHIRE CLAYLANDS" (UNITED KINGDOM)

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1 Introduction: What is the case study about?

Hope Farm is a 181-hectare arable farm which was purchased by the NGO the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) in 2000, after a large-scale public appeal to raise funds. In buying the farm, the RSPB’s goal was to use it to test and demonstrate management practices to support and enhance farmland bird populations, to inform national policy. It also aimed to show that these practices could be combined with profitable commercial farming. The farm was chosen because it was typical of arable farms in central and eastern England, producing on good quality, clay-based soils. There was thought to be nothing particularly special about the farm, or its location, which is just west of Cambridge in the east of England.

Fifteen years later, the farm has scientifically tested and demonstrated positive results for biodiversity. Its findings were used to design and promote a suite of bird-friendly management options which were added to those offered in the all-England ‘Entry-Level’ (broad and shallow) Agri-Environment Scheme, Environmental Stewardship (ELS), run by Defra, the government Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. However, despite RSPB data suggesting that these options were affordable and did not compromise farm performance, they proved unpopular with the 60% of English farmers who joined the ELS and very few farms adopted them. The RSPB is now considering new ways of trying to use the farm and its achievements to promote more lasting and widespread changes in arable farming. It is seeking external advice to help increase the influence of its research and demonstration work.

Pegasus became involved in this initiative in order to analyse and consider how a change of tactics might work by focusing upon the Social-Ecological-System within which Hope farm is embedded. It is located in the Cambridgeshire Claylands, part of the National Character Area1 ‘Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Claylands’, to the south-east of the valley of the Great Ouse river. It covers around 40 km² of flat or gently sloping arable farmland, retaining some linear features – hedges, ditches and tracks – in between fields cultivated mostly with wheat, barley and oilseeds. Ditches and small streams run north and west into the Great Ouse, draining into the Ouse Washes: internationally-important wetlands rich in biodiversity.

Reflecting its origins, this case study focuses upon the ESBO2 of biodiversity, but with growing interest also in respect of water (quality and quantity/flood management), soil management (improving soil quality, soil carbon, functionality and structure) and climate change (via the potential to benefit from soil carbon enrichment and reduced dependence on N-fertiliser). Across the S-E-S, biodiversity has declined over 50 years or so as the landscape has changed, and local water resources require ecological improvement. Reducing or preventing soil erosion after heavy rain – more frequent due to climate change – may be a future concern, also flood prevention and mitigation through enhanced soil and water management.

Actors and activities central to the case study include the farmers in this wider landscape – mainly owner-occupier arable farmers, also some who contract-farm other people’s holdings – as well as environmental and community interests and organisations, notably government

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1 In England, the government has adopted a landscape typology for environmental policy targeting called the National Character Framework and the whole rural territory is divided into distinct biogeographic Areas (NCA).

2 Environmentally and Socially Beneficial Outcome – as defined in the Pegasus conceptual framework
agencies the Environment Agency and Natural England, and local environmental NGOs. Technical agronomic advisers and farmer innovators are also locally influential, as well as the main buyers of the crops that are grown, e.g. grain trading companies and some individual farmer merchants. The RSPB is a key actor for Hope farm itself and through it, there is the opportunity to harness public interest and increase public understanding – as this NGO has a substantial membership and strong supporter base as well as an effective UK media presence. Future government policy will also be critical in shaping the wider context.

To undertake the case study we defined the geographical boundary of the S-E-S in a first discussion with the RSPB farm team, using maps. A literature review of relevant published papers, policy documents, leaflets and online sources was made, to characterise the S-E-S ESBOs and examine their state and trends in recent years. Analysis of farm structure survey data and farm business survey (FADN) data since 2000 assisted our understanding of farm business trends and challenges in the S-E-S. This was followed by a series of interviews with stakeholder individuals and groups, including:

- 12 local farmers (in 3 meetings)
- 2 government environmental agencies (3 meetings with different specialist officers)
- 2 local farm advisers – one environmental, the other agronomic
- 1 specialist grain merchant
- 3 meetings with RSPB Policy and scientific officers and its Hope Farm Steering Group
- 3 further meetings with RSPB’s core team on the farm.

In this report, all our information has come from these interviews, unless cited otherwise.

Figure 1: Boundary of the S-E-S and location of Hope Farm (S-E-S boundary in red)
2 Definition of the social-ecological system (SES)

2.1 Figure of the SES, using the SES Framework

Figure 2: Case Study Social-Ecological System (after McGinness and Ostrom, 2014)

The ‘Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Claylands’ is a gently undulating lowland plateau divided by shallow river valleys. The Great Ouse and Nene rivers and the Grand Union canal are key water features in the landscape. Restoration of sand and gravel workings has left a series of flooded and restored waterbodies in the river. There is some woodland cover with ancient woodland in particular on higher ground. It is a mainly arable landscape of planned and regular fields bounded by open ditches and managed, species-poor hedgerows. A wide variety of fragmented semi-natural habitats support a range of species, some of which are rare. Fossils suggest a rich geological and archaeological history and there are several historic parklands. Settlements are clustered around major road and rail routes – with smaller settlements dispersed through the area (Natural England, 2016). The population is quite significantly expanding outwards from London.

2.2 Short characterisation of key drivers

Agriculture in the S-E-S

The Cambridgeshire Claylands is an area dominated by crop farming – mainly cereals, which has been the case for over 30 years. However, before that there would have been a predominance of smaller-scale, mixed farms keeping dairy cows, beef and sheep and pigs and poultry
as well as growing smaller areas of crops. Orchards would also have been much more common in the landscape. The advent of new arable machinery capable of working heavy soils, and high prices for cereals in the 1970s and early 80s, led many farms to enlarge fields and switch to just cropping. Since that period, the rate of landscape change has slowed.

Table 1: Agricultural land use change 2000-2013, Bedfordshire and Cambs Claylands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source: Defra, 2016</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>% change</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>% change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cereals</td>
<td>100 902</td>
<td>84 992</td>
<td>-15.8</td>
<td>87 342</td>
<td>80 776</td>
<td>-7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash roots</td>
<td>1 734</td>
<td>1 422</td>
<td>-18.0</td>
<td>1 278</td>
<td>1 715</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oilseeds</td>
<td>18 908</td>
<td>27 717</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>31 211</td>
<td>36 434</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stock feed</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>559.8</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other arable crops</td>
<td>11 063</td>
<td>12 643</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>11 020</td>
<td>7 895</td>
<td>-28.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables</td>
<td>1 652</td>
<td>775</td>
<td>-53.1</td>
<td>821</td>
<td>752</td>
<td>-8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>-44.8</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HNS</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>-55.6</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glasshouses</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>-35.3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grass and uncropped</td>
<td>54 880</td>
<td>45 045</td>
<td>-17.9</td>
<td>41 886</td>
<td>47 396</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: the basis of calculation changed after 2009, so the dataset is not continuous. Data is based upon a sample survey as used for the national/Eurostat farm structures survey, so totals are estimates for this NCA. Very small farms are excluded.

Since 2000 there has been a reduction in the number of commercial holdings in the Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Claylands. Although arable farming is clearly the major farm type, there are a fair number of commercial livestock holdings, but very few mixed farming enterprises. The majority of commercial holdings in the area specialise in production of cereals. Since 2000, despite significant reforms and changes in the CAP and a global economic crisis, the composition of farm types in this area has only seen minor change (Defra, 2016).
Over the period since 2000, farm sizes have increased and the number of holdings in all size categories has reduced. Larger farms (above 100ha) have increased their area at the expense of medium-sized holdings. However, in discussion with local farmers and the RSPB team it was explained that among the medium-sized businesses there was also a significant degree of contract-farming, where larger operators carry out most of the farming on the holding on behalf of the owner, under an annual management contract. In these situations, management and operations may be planned across multiple holdings covering many hundreds or thousands of hectares. The farm labour force has reduced since 2000, in this area (Table 2). Interviewees told us that change has been gradual, but that there are young people still keen to farm and that the younger generation, in particular, is interested in new farming techniques and approaches.

Table 2: Farm labour force changes, Bedfordshire and Cambs Claylands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source: Defra, 2016</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>% change</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>% change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal farmers</td>
<td>2970</td>
<td>2553</td>
<td>-14.0</td>
<td>2696</td>
<td>2671</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salaried managers</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time workers</td>
<td>1024</td>
<td>679</td>
<td>-33.7</td>
<td>737</td>
<td>673</td>
<td>-8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time workers</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>-6.8</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>-7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual / gang workers</td>
<td>672</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>-5.2</td>
<td>675</td>
<td>813</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>5278</strong></td>
<td><strong>4504</strong></td>
<td><strong>-14.7</strong></td>
<td><strong>4705</strong></td>
<td><strong>4732</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In respect of farm business incomes, whilst 2010 and 2015 incomes were similar, there was an increase from 2010 to 2012 and then declines annually since 2012. Cereal farms tend to
achieve a greater business income than the average UK farm, however lowland grazing livestock (25% of farms in the Claylands are of this type), consistently fall well below average. The exceptionally wet year in 2012-13 led to significant decline in cereal farm incomes and triggered a widespread move to spring cropping (RBR, 2014).

Interviewees report that recent years have seen growing interest among arable farmers working these clay soils, in new techniques that offer savings and/or ways to deal more effectively with persistent problems like blackgrass infestation, as well as the increasing frequency of extreme weather events (too much rain, warmer winters, summer flooding). In addition, a fear of future regulation or sanctions restricting arable farmers’ access to crop protection products (such as metaldehyde and glyphosate), has grown, in response to recent changes and debates in Brussels. Interviews revealed that many farmers in the area are well-networked, practising benchmarking, meeting regularly to discuss issues of common interest and keen to learn. The existence of one of the UK’s national crop husbandry research centres (NIAB-TAG) on the edge of Cambridge has been a relevant influence within these networks.

Climate change is increasingly recognised as a driver – with persistent rain which makes winter crops more difficult to establish and manage, warmer winters encouraging mollusc populations and fungal diseases, and droughty periods in spring and early summer which can check crop growth. In these conditions, heavy soils become very expensive to manage and farmers have tried reduced tillage and other practices to reduce soil damage and save costs.

Other drivers in the S-E-S

Government agencies and policies have been influential to an extent – the ‘broad and shallow’ ELS scheme engaged many arable farmers in agri-environment contracts for the first time, in the period between 2005 and 2014, but this has now ended. Evaluation of the scheme (Boatman et al, 2010) concluded that it had delivered very low additionality as a whole because farmers tended to choose management options which involved the least change from previous practice. A national voluntary initiative led by farming and landowning organisations but with government-supported advice, called the ‘Campaign for the Farmed Environment’ (CFE), has also had some influence. The CAP Single Farm Payment / Basic Payment Scheme has been a significant contributor to farm business income (FBI) in this locality, estimated at around 60% of FBI, while agri-environment schemes contributed an average of 10% of FBI, in 2012-13 (RBR, 2014). Since 2010, fixed costs on these farms show minimal change in real terms, while variable costs have declined as fuel prices have fallen (they are currently increasing again), even though seed prices have risen over the period. The new agri-environment scheme Countryside Stewardship, launched in 2014, will attract fewer farms than its predecessor as it is targeting more ambitious management on smaller areas of land, although a so-called ‘mid-tier’ may offer some funding for others.

Natural England (NE) reports that uptake of the high-tier Countryside Stewardship (CS) agri-environment scheme is good in Cambridgeshire as a whole, with most farmers with expiring former (higher tier) schemes willing to renew contracts and new businesses entering as well. The uptake of the mid-tier CS is ‘less certain’; this may be more relevant to Clayland farms.

Water policy, driven by the targets of the Water Framework Directive, has been a recent influence upon farming standards and the area falls within a Nitrate Vulnerable Zone under the Nitrates Directive. A dedicated ‘Catchment Sensitive Farming’ officer (NE-funded) thus works
with farmers in this area to encourage the adoption of practices to reduce diffuse water pollution, including better management of dirty water around farm buildings, adoption of soil-conserving practices, and more careful management of nutrients and pesticides. Until a few years ago, the CSF initiative was also able to offer capital grants for on-farm investment in water quality improvement (e.g. to resurface yards, capture run-off from buildings and improve manure storage and management, also fence off streamsides to livestock).

The UK government’s 2015 ‘Agri-Tech Strategy’ has stimulated the formation of a local group of farmers and experts looking to promote and encourage bids into its available funding for technical innovation. This group meets regularly but we were not able to pursue contact.

**Markets:** On the western edge of the area, a local farming company and miller, Jordans, built a successful cereal processing business in the 1980s producing a wide range of breakfast cereals and related products using a bespoke ‘Conservation Grade’ label created in 1989, under which farmer suppliers agree to follow a code of practice similar to Integrated Crop Management principles, designed to enhance arable farmland biodiversity. Farmers can choose to pay an annual subscription of £65 and a small fee to cover the costs of independent audit of their CG practices, in return for using the label and selling produce through CG.

In 2010 Jordans was taken over by a multinational food company ABF and because Conservation Grade was a separate trading company owned by Bill Jordan, the Conservation Grade (CG) label split away from Jordans and started to trade CG-certified grain independently. CG, located at the western limit of the S-E-S, now sources and buys a range of grains produced by farmers using CG principles, which it supplies to 20 different processor brands across the country. In May 2016, CG and the RSPB signed an agreement designed to ensure that in future, all RSPB-branded wild bird food (which is sold online and via mail order from the RSPB, to households all over Britain) will contain certified CG ingredients. At present, the only local farm within the Claylands supplying to CG is Hope Farm – other suppliers lie further afield across England, but if CG were able to contract to supply more processed food brands they would be seeking new farmer suppliers, and their ambition is for significant growth, looking ahead. CG standards have recently been re-named ‘nature-friendly farming’ to make the concept easier for consumers to understand. CG is now targeting a major cereal brand for involvement, and exploring possible links with major producers across the country.

Jordans/ABF continues producing and processing Jordan’s branded ‘nature-friendly’ cereal products (now separately endorsed by the Wildlife Trusts, another major UK environmental NGO, and following a simpler set of production conditions) at its nearby factory in Biggleswade, Bedfordshire. Jordans has been a highly successful brand, selling into all major supermarkets across the UK and Europe. It sources some grain from Clayland farms.

Further north, outside the Claylands area, two major grain stores, buyers and traders are located (Camgrain and Fengrain); who also buy cereals from this area and further afield. Some of the larger farms within the Claylands area store and market their own grains, too, and some occasionally market stored grain on behalf of their neighbours. Many local farmers forward-contract with grain traders at the start of each season, to supply agreed quantities of grain to a fixed price-and-standards formula (price per tonne linked to specific standards). Virtually all such grain is grown to UK Farm Assurance standards which incorporate minimum environmental conditions on production (mostly reinforcing environmental regulations).
Other environmental NGOs, the local population and public appreciation: Also within the west Cambridgeshire area, the largest landowning environmental NGO in the UK, the National Trust, owns and farms the Wimpole estate and park farm, which is managed according to organic principles and produces arable crops and beef and sheep. Wimpole includes both clay and chalk soils, and has a large country house and landscaped gardens which attract 150,000 visitors a year (ALVA, 2015). Its popular restaurant and tea-rooms source food ingredients from local and organic producers, as far as possible, including from its own farm. The professional farm manager employed at Wimpole is currently the elected Chairman of the local branch of the National Farmers Union (NFU), which holds regular meetings during the winter on issues of farming policy and practice, often with invited expert speakers. The NT has a membership of over 2 million people and produces newsletters, organises public events and campaigns on landscape, cultural heritage, nature conservation and amenity.

On the western edge of the Claylands, an individual farmer has developed his own innovative approach to conserving rare species on his farm. He promotes his work as the ‘Red list revival’ initiative. And to the south of Cambridge, another initiative of maverick farmer Robin Page, who used to write a regular and often controversial column in a national newspaper, promotes conservation practices via his ‘Countryside Restoration Trust’, founded 20 years ago, a small NGO with farmer members managing 1,500 hectares of land across 8 UK counties.

The increasing population of west Cambridgeshire (where commuting time into central London is only just over one hour) has led to much pressure on local planners to designate land for new housing, on the edge of Cambridge and Huntingdon and along main routes between these settlements. If farmers are enabled by changes in land-use zoning to sell parcels or strips of land for development, the value of such sales can be considerable. Some farmers in the Claylands have already benefited from such sales and others hope to do so in future.

The growing population of Cambridgeshire means that there are many schools and colleges nearby, and education about farming and where food comes from is quite a popular theme of interest. Hope Farm has participated in the annual national event sponsored by another environmental NGO called LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming), ‘Open Farm Sunday’ which aims to get many thousands of members of the public, including adults and children, onto farms to learn about contemporary agriculture. The PR team in the RSPB expresses interest in how Hope Farm might become more involved in this sort of activity, in future.

Discussion of the SES

Actors are key to understanding the drivers, motivations and governance mechanisms that will shape potential actions/adaptations and outcomes/impacts in this S-E-S. Whilst the RSPB is an important actor, it is the commercial farmers in this area and the networks of advisers, suppliers and buyers supporting them who hold the key to enabling successful outreach and diffusion of knowledge from the RSBP’s work at Hope Farm. We identify these, therefore, as the starting point to consider the potential to increase ESBO provision within the system.

Considerable uncertainty in government policy and public expenditure exists, notably due to the wide-reaching ‘austerity’ principles induced following the economic crisis of 2007-8 and a change of government in 2010, now extended with the 2016 UK referendum vote to leave the

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The UK’s statutory list of rare and endangered species is commonly known as the ‘red list’.
EU. In brief, this means that in most sectors except health and education, public funding has been cut back successively and the common tactic of policymakers now is to ask: ‘if it needs to be done, which private or corporate actors can be persuaded to resource it?’ rather than government taking on new financial commitments. Thus, the onus is increasingly upon local actors to seek to achieve change through non-governmental means. Notwithstanding this, CAP Pillar 2 funding is available for agri-environment contracts, as mentioned, targeting around 30% of farmland of highest priority for biodiversity or water quality.

Given this situation, the RSPB is both an enabler and a potential obstacle to enhanced ESBO provision within the S-E-S area. As enabler, it owns Hope farm and is able to farm it without having to make a living from it (even though it wishes to demonstrate a system that is commercially viable), and it has a dedicated resource of scientists and advisers with research and practical knowledge concerning how best to foster biodiversity in lowland England, as well as the resources to monitor and analyse the ecological consequences of management. Furthermore, it has the opportunity to connect Hope Farm and its development with its significant membership, helping to inform many people across the UK of the benefits of actions taken on this farm or elsewhere, to enhance ESBOs from arable farming.

On the less positive side, the RSPB is reported to have a negative reputation among many farmers, being regarded as adversarial and ‘high-handed’ in its agri-focused campaigning work, and not being ‘balanced’ in the way that it promotes its own achievements and interests to the public and to government. To some extent this may simply reflect what could be seen as indicators of success for an environmental NGO, in that the RSPB has been very effective influencing government agri-environmental policy and raising public awareness about significant declines in farmland bird species in recent decades and the evidence linking these declines to changes in farming. Nevertheless, this creates challenges for more collaborative working with farmers, in future.

As one technical adviser put it ‘the RSPB has a serious image problem, around here: there’s a lot of ill-feeling against them’. And as a farmer in one group meeting said: ‘changing the name of the farm was bad: Grange farm was one of the best farms in the area, in the past. The unrealistic financial power of the RSPB is hugely irritating, and the name is condescending – it implies that the rest of us are hopeless.’ Another adviser said that lots of farmers refer to the farm as ‘Hopeless Farm’. The new name of ‘Hope farm’ was chosen by the RSPB following a nationwide open invitation to its membership to suggest appropriate names. Both farmers and local advisers commented that it might have been better to stick with ‘Grange farm’, to show respect for the local context and community.

In the words of another advisor: ‘farmers really like it when people are clearly ‘on their side’ – that is what the RSPB will need to take on board, if it wants to spread new practices effectively’. A farmer suggested: ‘there could be good synergies locally between RSPB and other agencies and advisors, if they are willing to work more closely together’. Another adviser commented: ‘it’s hard to work with the RSPB – they are quite arrogant and assume that they are perfect in what they do… the RSPB are difficult – not team players. They are very strong in their own agenda, but they do have excellent people on the ground. They can be quite blinkered. They have had a reasonably positive influence on agri-environment schemes, but the single-issue agenda [birds] can be a problem… If they do too much, they will be seen as pushy: that is the current reputation that the RSPB, as an organisation, has’.
It is recognised that the RSPB knows a lot about the science – one adviser commented that farmers liked it when RSPB offered free bird monitoring on their farms, in the past – but ‘they need to work with others more’. So-called ‘monitor farms’ supported by the AHDB (an industry-levy-funded technical advice body) were suggested as a good comparator by one interviewee. These farms invite neighbouring farmers to come and look at how to improve their yields, and include environmental issues on the agenda – this is seen as a successful method to encourage changes in practice. Another group of farmers commended the environmental and agronomic work of the Allerton project run by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT), another NGO located further north in Eastern England, which is ‘more farmer-friendly’ and has been undertaking farmer outreach and demonstrations for decades. Centrally, RSPB and GWCT’s relationship is challenged by the latter’s support for shooting as a sport, which the RSPB does not support.

2.3 Common aims, conflicting interests and goals

All interviewees noted how local farmers recognise a new need to plan differently for the future, as changing and sometimes very challenging natural conditions, linked to climate change, have ‘freed up’ farmer thinking and willingness to experiment with new practices and systems. To that extent, they have common aims with the RSPB and the environmental agencies working for soil and water enhancement. As one local farmer put it, the RSPB ‘needs to explain the science better – farmers want to know why certain things are good and bad’. Another interviewee noted that at present, the way that Hope farm is managed doesn’t really enable the research scientists to have direct contact with local farmers and that perhaps such contact would be useful in promoting more informed discussion of potential changes in arable farming practice, improving bilateral communication and trust.

All the farmers and advisers to whom we spoke differentiated their very positive opinion of the RSPB’s manager at Hope Farm, with their more negative view of the organisation for which he works. He was variously described as open, respectful, well-regarded and someone that they ‘could do business with’; in contrast to (un-named) previous holders of the same position and other (named) personalities within the RSPB. We suggest this is an important factor for finding and building more common ground between RSPB and the other land managers within the Claylands S-E-S.

Common aims and aspirations are also evident between RSPB and the environmental agencies (Natural England, Environment Agency and the Catchment-Sensitive Farming initiative, in particular), also with the advisory community, in the context of being willing and interested to trial novel cropping and farm management practices and to assess their potential to bring environmental benefits to soils, water, wildlife and climate change mitigation. In Natural England’s local officer’s opinion, the most effective way to reach out to new people and engage more farmers is to offer peer-to-peer advice, e.g. a group focusing on problem solving at the farm or explaining trial plots results to other farmers, etc. There should also be better communication on how to balance farming and nature conservation.

Finally, there could be market synergies. Common aims exist between local grain purchasers offering conservation branding, the RSPB, and ESBO enhancement in the local area. Also, through its large visitor base, shop and restaurant, the National Trust at Wimpole could offer marketing, public-promotional or income-generation opportunities linked to any outputs or practices tested at Hope Farm and across the S-E-S.
The conflicts within the S-E-S concern power, authority and money to act, and many arise through lack of mutual understanding as well as insensitivity in decision-making and communications. Limits to the adoption of new practices on arable farms in the Claylands relate to their impacts upon output levels and farm profits; however, these could be explored and tested further through a programme of learning and experimentation. Some conflicts or tensions arise in respect of the local-level opportunities for influence perceived by Hope farm’s core team and the decisions and actions of the RSPB’s policy and promotional/campaign teams which may discourage these. Finally there may be conflicts of interest and/or engagement within the RSPB’s internal governance structure for Hope farm, which hamper its potential. We return to these points later in this report.

3 Status of the SES and potentials

3.1 Description of the SES

There are current tensions between the RSPB and many farmers in the S-E-S, as well as potential synergies between environmental, social and economic subsystems and goals. These were described in section 2.3.

3.2 Relationships between farming and forestry, and the quantity and quality of ESBOs

Farming over the last 50 years has led to a decline in the quantity and quality of ESBOs (including environmental, social and socio-economic aspects) in this system. Key aspects of that change have been a loss of mixed farms from this area, the enlargement of holdings and the removal of field boundaries and small woodlands during the main period of arable farming expansion in the 1970s and 80s. Crop diversity has reduced, grassland habitats have been lost, and thus farmland biodiversity has suffered. At the same time, soils will have suffered from conversion to continuous cropping and the use of successively heavier machinery, leading to compaction and loss of soil organic matter (SOM).

Water quality has declined through the steady growth in use of plant protection products and chemical fertilisers, leading to nutrient enrichment and some contamination by persistent chemicals like metaldehyde. The S-E-S area is designated as a Nitrate Vulnerable Zone and is therefore a target for government-funded Catchment-Sensitive Farming (CSF) advice and capital grants. Priorities for CSF in this area are to safeguard the zone upstream of the Offord intake for Graftham Water (a Water Framework Directive Drinking Water Protected Area); to reduce the amount of phosphate and sediments from agricultural sources in surface waters at Portholme Meadows (Site of Special Scientific Interest) and the Ouse Washes (European Community Special Area of Conservation, Special Protected Area, and Ramsar site – Environment Agency, 2016). Although Hope Farm itself is not in a flood zone, areas immediately adjacent to it are prone to flooding. Thus actions on the farm and in the surrounding area which could slow water run-off and promote percolation through the soil would be beneficial to flood management and promote climate change adaptation.

The soil types in this area are typically slowly permeable with slight seasonal waterlogging and low storage capacity. In some areas this is over slowly permeable substrates with negligible storage capacity, and in other areas it is over impermeable clay substrates with no storage capacity. The underlying geology of the soil is a mixture of Jurassic and cretaceous material.
and chalky till. The fertility of the soil is in the high category. This means the soils are naturally productive and able to support base-rich pastures. For the Hope Farm area, they are considered ‘soils of intermediate leaching potential which have a moderate ability to attenuate a wide range of diffuse source pollutants but in which it is possible that some non-adopted diffuse source pollutants and liquid discharges could penetrate the soil layer’. Having been monitored by the RSPB, it has been found that the amount of phosphorous in the soil is probably on the high side, on this site.

At Hope Farm the emphasis of RSPB management has been to increase the diversity of habitat types and structures in order to provide more niches for farmland bird species, as well as growing a greater diversity of crops including those specifically designed to provide over-winter bird food. The number of territorial species recorded each year increased from 35 to 44 at the farm from 2000 to 2015. 15 years’ worth of monitoring data suggest significant increases in bird populations – both breeding birds and food for summer migrants to the area. The floristic diversity of field margins also increased with a total of 168 species in 2009, compared with 103 in 2000. Monitoring data also exists for butterflies, moths, dragon and damselflies on the farm, as well as baseline surveys for mammals, including bats. However, there has been only limited monitoring of ‘control’ sites in the area for practical reasons, so the results are not fully ‘net of the counterfactual’, although for a limited period (2001-2009) at a suitable control site, bird populations were stable while at Hope farm they saw year-on-year increases. The RSPB also compares its results to the national figures showing farmland bird declines across England as a whole, as a way of demonstrating the benefits of what it has been doing at Hope Farm.

The mix of agricultural strategies used includes better margin management, using wildflower mixes and leaving hedgerows uncut as well as in-field actions such as skylark plots and cover cropping. The RSPB funds independent economic analysis of its work by a land agency firm, which has indicated that the management regime does not significantly compromise farm performance. However, one local farmer claims that these budgets are partial and distorted by the fact that the RSPB pays no rent on its land and uses a very low-cost contractor for farming operations, compared to his own costs; meaning that the analysis is not robust.
Like other farms in the SES, Hope Farm has adjusted its cropping in recent years, in response to agronomic concerns and adverse weather, as well as in pursuit of its biodiversity goals. Spring crops have been grown including spring barley and wheat and other, more unusual crops. This year, the manager agreed a forward contract with Conservation Grade to grow Millet which will be processed and sold as wild bird feed, through various outlets including the RSPB. Linseed is also being grown this year, as the guaranteed price is very competitive: it has already been sold through a forward contract. He has considered other options, is very interested in soil and agricultural strategy, and wants to increase resilience and sustainability in Hope Farm’s management. Cover crops are currently being trialled on the farm in 2 fields. In interviews, the following issues and opinions were discussed by the farm manager.

- There is much investigation needed into the links between soil quality and biodiversity. Management has so far focused on above-ground conservation – below-ground must also have a major influence but knowledge is probably 15 years behind the above-ground work. Commercial farmers cannot do many experiments because they have to guarantee a certain yield; Hope Farm has the freedom to do a little more. Its options are discussed and agreed with the farm’s contractor, so the outcomes are perhaps more conservative than they would be if the work was not dependent upon this relationship. Initially this tactic (working with an established contractor) was seen as an important way to ensure that their operations were ‘typical’ of most arable farms on clay soils. However they now have a second contract with a neighbouring farmer who is very interested in conservation and he manages their ‘special’ areas on the farm, such as strips sown for wildlife and other features which the main contractor cannot offer to provide. This neighbouring farmer comes from a local, longstanding family farm business but has adopted a new approach on his own farm, stimulated by a personal interest in wildlife.

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The FBI is a compound index using data on 19 farmland bird species which includes 12 “specialist” and seven “generalist” bird species and is considered representative of the UK birds dependent on lowland farmland. It monitors populations recorded in the national Common Bird Census, relative to levels in 1970 (indexed at 1.0).
- The pests, weeds and plants on Hope farm are the same as on other farms. The cost of agrochemicals has increased in recent years, and key chemicals have stopped working – there is lots of resistance among weed populations. There is growing acceptance by many farmers that chemicals don’t work but people still pile them on. It should be possible to test alternative approaches that are less reliant on chemicals, here.

- Bringing about change in the area is going to be increasingly difficult in future because there is diminished experience of people doing it differently. For example, there’s a limited number of people with livestock, to experiment with. Widespread farming change in this part of the country happened some time ago: there would have been significant areas of livestock which disappeared in the 70s and 80s. Within a 10-mile radius of Hope farm, there’s now only one major livestock holding. Cattle are an integral part of the organic system at Wimpole, for soil organic matter. Last year at Hope farm they imported green compost (garden waste) for the first time, and will see if it’s cost-effective. There are small areas of permanent pasture on the farm – there were no animals on there for 30 or 40 years, until this year. They have used glyphosate to get rid of cover crops in 3 of the 4 fields, but used livestock in the other one: the field was grazed by the stock of a neighbouring farmer.

- There may be human health problems with glyphosate: by association, this must extend to wildlife. If glyphosate were restricted, the way the whole UK farming industry operates would have to change. Local farmers are aware of the potential risk of this.

- Water from the farm flows towards an RSPB wetland reserve and so anything they can do on the farm to help reduce diffuse pollution and flooding, they will try. Because of changes in farming and lots of housebuilding locally, there is a need to protect towns and farms need to be more able to absorb water and slow its flow. The area seems now prone to more flooding. Storing water in the soil depends on the type of soil and whether it is under-drained. Heavy clay will be under-drained since Victorian times, with major works in the 1960s and 70s; people repair drains on a case by case basis. In the last 5 years Hope farm has worked to understand the water implications of its management: it’s not a good farm to gather specific evidence on, because they don’t have control over the water – it starts outside the farm and flows through it. There is recognition of the need to do something that will help the problem, but options are not yet decided. 2 PhD students have been working on these issues, on the farm, to clarify its hydrology.

The Natural England (NE) interviewee explained NE’s specific goals and initiatives in Cambridgeshire. In West Cambridgeshire, where Hope Farm is located, the objective is to give more space for nature. This area was targeted because it has interesting woodland on heavy clay soils and a lot of initiatives going on. For instance, the National Trust at Wimpole manages woodland and is a habitat for bat populations. There is also a West Cambridgeshire ‘Living Landscape’ scheme supported by the Wildlife Trust which restores and promotes access to green space, protection of species and habitats (woodlands, hedgerows) and reconnecting ecological corridors across this intensive agricultural landscape.

From a science perspective, RSPB aspirations for Hope farm and the surrounding area include further work on biodiversity but also sustainable agriculture, embracing soil and water management. The value of collaborating across the landscape increases when there is an interest
in more multifunctional experimental work and it is therefore important that Hope farm could become part of a wider collaborative initiative, to realise these aspirations. It would give ecological variety and social understanding to what they do. Since 2000 the work at Hope farm has been part of wider national experimentation by the RSPB as it requires a degree of replication at different sites, for scientific robustness. Working at the scale of the S-E-S would give them valuable new insights into the potential for enhanced ESBO provision in intensive arable landscapes. In this area, the potential to do much for water is limited because they have so little of the catchment but in respect of soils and sustainability they are keen to explore the influences of cropping, husbandry and rotation on soil functioning in ways which benefit both agronomy and biodiversity. They would set up trials on Hope farm and maybe nearby farms would do likewise, working with wider industry and academic/technical partners to make the best use of the results. Hope farm could fit into a wider programme of scientific work in partnership, e.g. with NIAB-TAG, other NGOs and experts. An expert workshop is being considered to identify the most promising practical options to trial here, as part of a wider funded project with scientists at Cambridge University. The scientists in the RSPB would like more ability to engage directly with farm-level discussions and debates on this whole topic, and Hope farm and its neighbours could help achieve this.

3.3 Key motivational, institutional and socio-economic factors

Farm business motivations are key to achieving more sustainable systems in this landscape. Finding a better, more effective way to link these to the kinds of management being trialled and evaluated at Hope Farm could be key to enabling its work to spread among the wider farming community, thereby transforming it from an isolated exemplar which is not trusted or looked to, to one which can be part of a valued network for learning, actively used by all. A general shift in approach from pursuing enhanced wildlife management on a conventional farm, towards a more holistic sustainable farming vision has been accepted by the Policy team at RSPB’s Headquarters, but details of what should be done, and how, remains to be agreed. The Policy team is also very interested in helping the RSPB membership to understand the cost of growing food, and choices they can make to affect how food is produced.

As one independent adviser suggested, the key to increasing environmental enhancement is to seize the current mood, to integrate with local farming more and to learn from the work that others outside this area have done, on ‘best practice’ agriculture that is designed to benefit the environment as well as the bank balance. Through a stronger partnership approach, the RSPB and neighbouring farmers and stakeholders could learn together about what is feasible and beneficial. For instance, the Hope farm manager might seek to join the farmers’ informal benchmarking group, as a first step. Engaging actively with the Claylands arable group and organising reciprocal visits to encourage more dialogue and understanding between Hope farm and neighbours has begun, and this could be extended.

To do this would require the RSPB being willing to ‘open up’ its agenda for Hope Farm to a wider range of local interests and actors, rather than seeking to determine it through internal discussion or dialogue only with national policymakers. The current internal governance structure for the farm is perhaps not ideal, in that context, as much decision-making appears to be ‘by Committee’, among a steering group which represents different parts of the RSPB’s organisation, with quite diverse views about the value and purpose of the farm. The team that is managing the farm on a daily basis may thus feel constrained by a lack of clarity higher up the
reporting chain in RSPB, concerning who actually decides on the farm’s role and governance, and their room for manoeuvre in developing a more open agenda with their farm neighbours (which it seems clear that they would be keen to do).

We suggest that if those working at the farm had more ability to initiate action, and a clear mandate from the RSPB for building stronger local collaboration, actions could be implemented not only on Hope farm but also on neighbouring or close-by farms, providing a much richer base from which to learn and promote enhanced ESBO provision. With time, that strategy could also develop a ‘public outreach’ and education element, but for local credibility in view of the tensions discussed earlier, it would be very important for this to happen after a shared vision is built for the S-E-S, involving many local farms and sources of expertise, rather than just the RSPB’s own strategy or vision.

3.4 Levels of provision, trends and determinants

Hope Farm is situated in the Anglian river basement. More specifically it falls into the Lower Great Ouse water catchment, a part of the Upper and Bedford Ouse Catchment Partnership. Ecological water quality in this area is largely ‘moderate’, reflecting declines in the past, and the WFD target is to restore quality to ‘good’ by 2021. Chemical quality is assessed as already good. Main sources of pollution include phosphates from domestic sewage and diffuse pollution of nutrients and pesticides from agriculture.

Whilst Hope Farm itself has seen increases in monitored biodiversity, it is thought that the surrounding farmland will be relatively low in biodiversity. However, changes in farming in recent years, particularly in response to weather events as well as cross-compliance and initiatives such as CFE, may have stimulated some beneficial changes – particularly more spring cropping, reduced tillage and greater diversity in crop types. The spread of blackgrass as an arable weed may have led to a diversity of management practices designed to limit this and in some areas, resistance to herbicides is a significant concern leading some farmers to experiment with alternative techniques. However, there is no widespread monitoring of these kinds of change nor their environmental impact. As such, it could be inappropriate for RSPB to conclude that all the beneficial trends observed on its own farm are due to its own management practices. Perhaps more importantly, the phenomenon of greater experimentation and diversity now suggests an important and growing opportunity for discussion and collective learning focused upon the multiple impacts of these experiments – economic, social and environmental – which could benefit the interests of both RSPB and commercial farmers.

As regards the public knowledge and appreciation of sustainable arable farming, Hope Farm already represents a potential asset for this purpose but as yet, that asset has been realised only partially, via online information to RSPB members and others who choose to access the website, and ‘Open Farm Sunday’ as mentioned earlier. Relatively few public information or educational events are held at the farm, but it is recognised that there could be more of this in future. In particular, RSPB policy officers noted that the campaign to raise funds to buy Hope Farm was one of their two most successful recent appeals, suggesting that the public’s appetite for more work to improve farmland biodiversity is particularly strong. This is one important reason why the RSPB has stated that its intention is to hold on to the farm for the long-term.
The main determinants of improvements in ESBO provision and key limiting factors for the S-E-S as a whole centre around farming practices which are themselves influenced by a variety of inter-linked drivers and characteristics. Farm profitability and resilience are the strongest motivational factors for farmers, influenced by strong market pressure to reduce costs, concerns among farmers to minimise the economic cost of management challenges such as extreme weather events, market price fluctuations and policy and regulatory changes (especially limits on fertilisers and pesticides). Recent extreme weather events have triggered more interest in seeking to understand and manage soils and water for medium-term resilience, and there is reportedly a greater openness in the farming community to more radical or novel approaches to basic farming systems and cropping practices than might have been the case a decade ago. Pressure to cut costs has also increased interest in reduced tillage, which itself requires re-thinking of traditional cropping practices and exploration of alternatives to ploughing.

Social and learning networks among local farmers are a key factor helping to determine its potential to enhance ESBO provision. The Arable Claylands group is one such network, also the NFU and the informal benchmarking that operates among a group of proximal farming families, representing a collective and inter-generational initiative for learning and improving farm viability and performance. The closeness of this S-E-S to a major national technical centre for crop farming – NIAB-TAG’s research station on the edge of Cambridge – is an important factor for farmer learning, uptake of new ideas and innovative techniques.

Interviews revealed more detail on these groups and networks. The Claylands group involves 25-30 active members and was established about 70 years ago by NIAB agronomists in order to engage growers and encourage sharing of new equipment. It meets for discussions in five meetings each winter period, plus 1 or 2 summer visits. Membership includes both farmers and NIAB staff and retired staff, and members pay a subscription of only £10 per year. They often invite external speakers to their meetings. Cambridgeshire Farm Machinery club meets at the Camgrain site and farmers pay £2 per meeting to enable them to keep up to date with farm technology. This group has a steering committee led by a retired farmer and contractor who has innovated with reduced-tillage and various cover crops.

These are positive social ESBOs which could help to enhance environmental ESBOs in the system. Their potential influence must be considered alongside the negative image among many farmers in the locality, of the RSPB, its motivations and knowledge of farming. Many interviewees reported a widespread view that the NGO is ‘anti-farming’. Notwithstanding the robustness of data upon which the RSPB campaigns are based, farmers express a view that what they perceive as highly adversarial tactics will not help to make things better. As a result, the existence of Hope Farm is itself seen as negative by some: and the RSPB is accused of ill-informed or naive use of its farm to present an unrealistic view of farming to the public, in which reversal of biodiversity decline is suggested to be easy. This attitude leads some local farmers to characterise the Farm’s work as unrealisitic or irrelevant; although not all farmer interviewees shared this view and it may be more an expression of lack of trust and poor communication than anything more profound. We have also noted how the current RSPB farm manager commands widespread respect among his farming peers, presenting a potentially valuable opportunity for the RSPB to turn around its local reputation.
As previously noted, the RSPB uses one contractor to undertake most of its farming operations, and a second contract has been agreed with a neighbouring farmer in order to manage the specific ‘conservation’ elements that it undertakes. In discussion with other farmers, it was claimed that the main contractor enables the RSPB to gain a cost advantage because his business has made enough money from outside agriculture to do the RSPB’s work at extremely low cost. It was suggested that ‘if it wants to play fair’, Hope Farm might better forge a stronger partnership with one or more neighbouring farmers in order to pool resources to plan and manage farming operations together, which would ensure that the RSPB gained a more realistic appreciation of commercial farming fortunes. In a separate interview, the local farmer who already undertakes the conservation management work on Hope Farm expressed strong identification with RSPB goals for environmental enhancement, and confirmed that he is keen to work more closely with Hope Farm in future, although the practicalities have not been discussed. His long-established family farm has good standing and respect in the wider farming community, making him a valuable potential partner.

The existing range and level of farmer learning networks in the area, with which the RSPB’s team could engage, is notable. Pooling knowledge at farm level to increase impact, rather than (or in addition to) seeking to change the policy climate at a national level, is strongly favoured by current policy and market conditions. However, given past relations, we suggest such engagement has to be understood as respectful and open to challenge and discussion, rather than a one-way knowledge transfer. Farmers acknowledge that the RSPB’s farm could represent a useful asset to them, in that it has freedom to experiment with novel approaches and innovations in ways that they could not afford to, as well as having the means and knowledge to help them monitor and understand the impacts of any changes on their farms upon birds and other species, as well as soils, water and agronomy. But their know-how and insights would also be valuable, in any closer collaboration.

4 Conclusions derived from analysis in Steps 1 and 2

4.1 Key findings on the particular SES and its potentials

Policy, markets and ecological factors are together leading arable farmers to re-think traditional crop management strategies, systems and practices so as to increase their future resilience. This provides an important opportunity to seek to increase the orientation of their farming systems towards greater ESBO provision. The strong public support for RSPB to buy an arable farm to test and promote more biodiverse management indicates demand from wider society for these goals, but there are sensitivities in translating this demand into open and equitable practice at a local level.

Our investigation and analysis suggests that awareness and provision of ESBOs can be increased in this particular case not by significant new public funding nor stronger government intervention through regulation: the key is for much enhanced partnership and collaborative working which places farmers on an equal footing with RSPB and a number of other active agents, advisers, NGOs and experts within the local area who are interested in promoting more sustainable and resilient ‘future-proof farming’ for the Cambridgeshire Claylands. Drawing upon successful experiences elsewhere, and combining the RSPB’s expertise in birds and
ecological science with the agronomic science expertise at NIAB-TAG and elsewhere in Cambridge, also the broader knowledge and experience of FWAG, the CSF officer, Natural England and even the water company Anglian Water (which has fostered partnership working arrangements with farmers in other locations around Eastern England), local farmers could become leaders and innovators for sustainable and profitable farming, in the future. Links with local conservation-minded grain traders and development of a stronger public outreach agenda could add further value and sustainability to this collective initiative.

If it could be fostered effectively, a ‘community of practice’ for sustainable Claylands agriculture could provide valuable information to inform future policy on ESBO provision, as well as seeking to enhance the local provision of ESBOs under current, and shifting, economic circumstances. Hope Farm has an opportunity to set up research and to test things that others couldn’t risk doing: but ideally its agenda and its experiments need to be agreed in collaboration with other farmers in the area, so that they begin to develop some ownership of the agenda for the farm and its local area. That way, lessons from this work are more likely to be recognised as practical, relevant and useful to other farms. Existing local advisers should be involved in discussions and developments – applying ideas from cutting-edge work done at NIAB-TAG, and drawing upon other local knowledge. For example, by involving the CSF adviser, water goals and management options could be discussed and agreed for Hope Farm and neighbouring farms in a more co-ordinated way.

The way forward which offers most prospect of enhanced ESBO provision appears to be through closer, more trusting and more equal dialogue and exchange between the RSPB and a range of other local actors, but with farmers at the centre of the network and feeling that they are valued and respected, within it. It is important that the RSPB should not see this as a recipe for trade-offs and compromise, but an opportunity to achieve more whilst still remaining focused upon its key goals, freeing up ideas about how best they could be achieved and asking farmers and others to work with them more closely, to develop practices and test ideas.

4.2 Governance arrangements and institutional frameworks

To date, governance has not played a particularly strong role in this S-E-S and in some ways it could be seen as a negative factor, in that few actors have sought to build any formal institutional structures to bring different interests together. As a result, basically positive and potentially synergistic interests, motivations and opportunities are not recognised or well-developed. Nevertheless, the existing informal farmer groups, events and networking activities indicate some potential to develop more collaborative forms of governance.

The new suite of EU-level, national, regional, and local policies implemented following the latest CAP modifications offer limited but potentially useful aids and conditions (carrots and sticks) for promoting the kinds of initiative suggested for Hope Farm and its surrounding S-E-S, in future. Pillar 2 aid for co-operation and Pillar 1 greening conditions could provide stimuli to encourage collective learning and thinking about different management strategies on arable farms. The fact that in England all Pillar 1 aid is now fully decoupled means that farming systems are free to evolve without financial penalty from that source; and market instability favours different and more diverse strategies than have been seen for several decades, in farmed landscapes such as this. Other rural development aids including support for diversification, adding value, tourism and heritage activities could help to stimulate some aspects of the development of a collective farmer-led initiative of the kind discussed here.
In the light of the recent EU referendum vote in the UK, we envisage much uncertainty concerning the future policy and market conditions for all farms in the UK, beyond 2020. This could therefore be an important time for the RSPB to be working positively to increase its standing and influence with farming neighbours and to use the insights from that experience to inform its future campaigning and influencing work.

4.3 Other enabling or limiting factors

The Pegasus WP3 report and workshop highlighted the value of a mix of public and private drivers for successful and sustainable ESBO provision from EU farming and forestry. In this Case Study, we can identify a suite of private and natural-environment drivers among NGOs, commercial farmers and their advisory networks, also grain traders, as well as public-supported science establishments who can support knowledge exchange and the early adoption of new ideas. New policy drivers would be needed probably more to create a degree of stability in the policy framework, giving farmer-entrepreneurs and the social networks through which they learn more confidence to make changes, than directly regulating or incentivising them through payments.

The resources available to RSPB through its large membership and influence in government are an asset that could enable a new, successful landscape-scale approach in the Cambridgeshire claylands to stimulate more radical experiments in sustainable agriculture across the whole of the East of England. Such trends could also inform the future shape of UK policy.

4.4 Reflections on the case study methodology used and potential improvements

The conceptualisation of the S-E-S has helped the research team to scope its work reasonably well – the core team at Hope farm found identification and analysis of the System useful and the RSPB Steering group also, although we didn’t explicitly use it for other purposes. Local maps also helped to focus our discussions and the participatory and iterative approach enabled us to gain knowledge rapidly.

The interviews and literature review/secondary data analysis both added significantly to our understanding of the system and key ESBO and agricultural issues, as well as helping to identify the greatest potential for ESBO enhancement through social change.

There was insufficient time to complete the review of actors and opportunities – every interviewee told us more and suggested new avenues for exploring and people to speak to: we could not follow all these leads in the time available to us. We also had insufficient resource to really understand the ESBOs properly – we weren’t able to fully investigate climate, water and soils potential and had no time to examine others.

Our experience in sharing our emerging ideas with RSPB was that there may be a risk of differing expectations: our work has identified points that may be judged insufficiently innovative, but from previous experience we believe that ‘the obvious’ – in this case, focusing on local farmer opinions and being more open to partnerships - is too often overlooked, when it could actually be transformative. There are also political sensitivities – how to successfully combine the RSPB’s key campaigning work for the environment, with more farmer-friendly and multi-partner working in local areas? Within a large organisation, this can be challenging as different internal groups will have different views about the desirability of such actions. However, there is clear policy support for this approach within the organisation’s HQ. Taken
together, these considerations suggest a possible need for some changes in RSPB governance of the Hope Farm agenda: enabling more initiative and joined-up working on the ground and providing a clear mandate for this, higher up within the organisation, by clarifying leadership and working to an agreed medium-term strategy for the farm.

5 Research and potential action mandate for Steps 3 and 4

5.1 Agreed objectives of activities to be undertaken with initiative/stakeholders

Objectives and planned activities – the RSPB is planning a key meeting later this year to launch the new strategy for Hope Farm to an audience of local and national stakeholders. It is hoped that this report can help to shape and/or underpin that process, particularly by providing ideas to help ‘prepare the ground’ for such an event so that it can be made more inclusive and attractive to local stakeholders (- maybe even part-owned by them, if some prior discussions could take place at local level).

Beyond that point, we suggest that the various links and networks discussed in this report, through which RSPB can build stronger knowledge and rapport with local farmers and partners, should be explored more fully by its key field staff and scientists, to enable them to recognise the potential of this approach. We believe that it will be important for RSPB to get the main agencies and local extension agents on board with this initiative and to develop a new and enhanced style of communication with local farmers, farm managers and others in the supply chains, including processors and retailers to whom farmers sell their products.

We have also made some tentative suggestions for review and modification of some aspects of internal governance of this ‘initiative for sustainable agriculture’ with Hope Farm at its heart, within the RSPB. These also might merit further discussion and refinement in the months ahead.

Key questions for further analysis would include:

- Can the RSPB adopt a more open, two-way communication with local farmers, offering them support and seeking their input into the future farm strategy?
- How best could networks help to build farmers’ readiness to experiment and learn with the RSPB and other environmental agencies and advisers?
- Would the RSPB do well to build a closer working partnership with one or more trusted local farmers, instead of relying on its current contractor?
- What specific new practices for soils and water enhancement could bring the greatest agronomic and economic benefit for the farms in this area?
- What might a set of common goals and vision look like, if it were brokered with all the main land-holders and key stakeholders in this area?
- What protocols regarding the costs of testing and/or adopting new crop management approaches could be needed between the RSPB and neighbouring farmers?
- How would local farmers advise the RSPB to analyse and present its farm business performance data, to increase its credibility?
What priorities would local farmers see, for future crop and livestock innovation in this particular landscape?

How can the RSPB develop a respected and effective PR and public engagement strategy in order to enable greater appreciation of the challenges of achieving more sustainable agriculture and the work underway with the farmers of the Cambridgeshire Claylands, to promote this?

As the Project will not have the resources to enable us to pursue this case study further at the present time, we hope that these questions might be taken forward in future work supported by the RSPB and its partners, as part of an evolving strategy to promote sustainable agriculture in the UK.

5.2 Innovations, impact, transferability, potential risks and research bias

Any ‘innovation’ inherent in the findings of this report would be firstly social – investing in new communication and ways of working, to unlock synergies – but in turn it could become environmental through that process, as more land, more farmers and different farming systems become involved in experimenting and learning together. Through such a process, the potential impact should be greater than that which has yet been achieved by Hope Farm and the RSPB’s work there.

The main messages and lessons in the case study are clearly transferable, in the sense that they are consistent with a wider move in policy to encourage more significant change through collective action, in environmental land management, and they build upon a substantial body of literature and experience in seeking to encourage positive environmental management by farmers and other land managers (e.g. Dwyer et al, 2007; Mills et al, 2011; Sutherland et al., 2013; Mills et al, 2016). The rural development ‘toolkit’ now offered to Member States in the EAFRD Regulation governing the CAP’s second pillar provides funding to help establish new co-operation between actors in the agri-food and agri-environmental arena, which could serve to increase the transferability of the situation examined here. Potential risks to the initiative would lie mainly in the need to ensure quality and consistency of communications and developing relationships (and trust) between the RSPB and its local partners. These will need to be built and then maintained over a longer time-period than much of the surrounding institutional policy and governance arrangements, in which change seems to come every few years.

In reflecting on possible research bias, we are aware as a team that our work draws upon a rich literature in farmer behaviour, knowledge exchange and innovation which we have not had time or space to review in depth, here. Thus, our conclusion that synergies could be increased by a more pro-active local communication and partnership approach is supported by much of this previous research, also by a variety of other practical examples in which we are currently engaged as researchers (e.g. WILD initiative, PEGASUS UK Case Study 1). However we are also well aware that in a study of such short duration, which has limited the range of interviews and interactive sessions with both RSPB and the variety of other stakeholders in this case, we have no doubt simplified and assumed in places where more robust interrogation would have been preferable, given more time. For instance, it is possible that there are as-yet unidentified obstacles to stronger collaboration between RSPB and other NGO and agency partners, or that ongoing change in farming markets and policy could trigger significant
changes in farm structures in the area, which might threaten the sorts of development suggested here. Nonetheless, we believe that the RSPB has relatively little to lose and potentially much to gain, if it can succeed in working openly with local farmers and others to enhance the environmental quality of the Cambridgeshire Claylands.

6 References


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