

Farmer-Led Innovation Network annual report 2020/2021

Introduction

Famer-led innovation initiatives (formal and informal) have had an increasing presence in the UK agricultural knowledge and innovation system (AKIS) since the privatisation of advisory services, responding to a shift towards more farmer-centred thinking and opportunities for support. Intermediary organisations facilitating such initiatives typically use participatory approaches and are funded through a variety of sources. These farmer-led initiatives can take different forms, all promoting bottom-up and joint learning amongst farmers and relevant actors, bringing together a diversity of knowledge to tackle real on-farm problems.

At the end of 2018, the Farmer-Led Innovation Network (FLIN) was established to share knowledge and experiences and provide a collective advocacy voice for farmers directly involved in these initiatives. Currently, 19 organisations involved in farmer-led innovation and research initiatives are part of the network, including governmental and non-governmental organisations, research institutes, the levy board, farmer organisations and advisory services. The network is collectively working through workshops, working papers and commissioned research on:

- Development of better, more structured and monetarised evaluation of the success and effectiveness of these types of initiatives to provide evidence for policymaking;
- Skill development for innovation facilitators and researchers to work effectively with farmer groups;
- Sharing and documenting best practices, drawing on the knowledge and experience of the organisations involved to develop working 'standards' or principles to ensure effective engagement with farmers and relevant actors.

The network brings together initiatives directly representing farmers involved in farmer-led innovation across the UK: an estimate of at least 1500 farmers directly involved and over 3000 farmers in initiatives engaging farmers in like-minded types of processes but with a less specific focus on innovation. Around £2 million of pilot funding from public, third sector and industry research and development (R&D) has been invested to date.

In the first year (2019) of the network, two network meetings took place, one face-to face and one virtual, and several workshops were organised to share experiences, including an Innovation Facilitation workshop. Initial work was commissioned on the development of better, more structured and monetised evaluation of the success and effectiveness of these types of initiatives, and a policy-influencing workshop was held to share experiences in designing farmer-led innovation funds and support services with policymakers.

FLIN network activities

The second year (2020) of the network was a challenging year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, network activities were limited, as network members were trying to adjust their day-to-day

work to continue to support farmers despite severe mobility restrictions. In the second half of the year, a virtual network meeting took place and a series of webinars was organised with and by FLIN members to continue the sharing between members and to expand the network. In total, six webinars were organised including one with Eelke Wielinga (LINK Consult) on mobilising networks to optimise health, energy and function; one with Heather Collins and Denise Bewsell from the New Zealand Red Meat Profit Partnership; and one on facilitating farmer-led innovation.



The limited opportunities for face-to-face interaction generated a need to increase the virtual presence of the network and a Twitter account (@FLINetwork) was opened and a FLIN [YouTube channel](#) initiated. At the end of 2020/beginning of 2021, the FLIN website was launched (www.FLIN.uk).

In spring 2021, the third year of the network, network activities picked up again and various FLIN members were able to attend conferences and events to share their work and promote the network. Most notable was the [Farmer-centric On-Farm Experimentation \(OFE\) 2021](#) conference, and FLIN members participated in the publication of an OFE paper in the *Nature Food* journal.

Several members of the FLIN network were part of the establishment of the [Centre for Effective Innovation in Agriculture \(CEIA\)](#), which was launched in April 2021. This centre brings together five of the most prestigious agricultural universities in the UK to address the gap between scientific research on innovation and real-life farming experience.



The centre focuses on how R&D investment can best support innovation with and by farmers. With £1.5m of charitable funding, including from the Elizabeth Creak Charitable Trust and from each University, the virtual centre is run by experts in agricultural innovation research from the University of Reading, Royal Agricultural University (RAU), Harper Adams University, Newcastle University and the University of Warwick. Tom MacMillan, the Elizabeth Creak Chair in Rural Policy and Strategy at the RAU and FLIN member, said: *“Farmers innovate under their own steam on everything from blackgrass control to mob grazing, often with scant support. The UK’s main research funders are*

cottoning onto this, with Defra¹ this week confirming its plans to invest in farmer-led innovation. This is great news but, as farmers know all too well, the devil will be in the detail – whether the funds are easy to access and exactly what they'll cover. This unique new centre pulls together expertise and experience from across the UK and around the world to help target research funds effectively.”

A virtual FLIN meeting was organised in June 2021 and, after almost two years, a face-to-face meeting took place on 8 December 2021 at [FarmEd](#), where 17 FLIN members were present from 14 different organisations. The members were keen to meet each other again in person and catch up. Discussion during this meeting revolved around upcoming new funding programmes supporting producer-centric approaches to agricultural R&D as well as the opportunities and challenges of digitalisation for farmer-led innovation. Two new members of the FLIN steering committee were also elected during this meeting.



Looking forward

Over the past years, FLIN members have worked very actively to promote producer-centric approaches to agricultural R&D, with increases in research funding requiring producer inclusion and co-design. Currently, public funding for these approaches is being piloted (Research Starter competition led by Innovate UK) and being developed (Projects to Accelerate Adoption fund led by Defra). In the coming year (2022), the network will continue to support and advocate for this type of funding opportunities and a face-to-face FLIN meeting is planned on 14 June to specifically look at the current and future needs for innovation support for the funding programmes mentioned above. These new funding opportunities create an urgent need to understand the current and near-term capacity for effective innovation support as well as a need to provide further support to funders to ensure they understand ‘what good looks like’ in terms of farmer-led research and innovation and how to effectively monitor and evaluate this type of projects. Apart from several virtual network activities, the second face-to-face meeting is planned for the autumn of 2022. Furthermore, several FLIN members will be present at the [European Farming Systems \(IFSA\)](#) conference in April 2022 and organise a FLIN workshop on ‘Farmer-led research and innovation: understanding the processes at the farmer and scientist interface?’.

¹ Defra: Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs