



## Introduction

The Upper Rother and Dudwell Farm Cluster is located in the heart of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty: one of the best preserved medieval landscapes in Northern Europe. It is a small-scale, structurally diverse landscape, rich in public goods: extensive woodland; numerous streams and rivers; a high proportion of semi-natural habitat; and an extensive footpath network. The Cluster's purpose is to achieve environmental benefits alongside profitable farming in the Upper Rother and Dudwell using a facilitator to enable networking and training and help secure financial and other support for Cluster activities.

## Membership

At its launch on 1 October 2016 the Cluster had 23 members, by 31 March 2018 there were 40 members and on 31 March 2019 there were 57. The Group has grown organically, with most new members making contact following recommendations. A letter was sent to all landowners with a holding of greater than 50ha in January 2019. This led to six new members. The area of land covered by the Cluster members at 31 March 2019 was 4800 hectares.

## Advisory Group and the Facilitators

An advisory group was established to steer the Cluster's activities and the facilitators' focus. The group of five members, who represent the Cluster's farm types, set an objective to recruit new members and redefined and prioritised the objectives for the Group. Ross Wingfield and Christine Meadows continue to be the Facilitators, organising topical events and supporting joint projects that meet these objectives.

## Member priorities

The Group's priorities were consolidated into four objectives: productive and profitable farming, deer control, improving soil health and educating and managing visitors. Priorities will be reviewed again in October 2019.

## Meetings and events

In the last year Group members have built their knowledge in deer control, grassland management, invasive species and regenerative agriculture through 18 events, led by national and local experts. All events have promoted best practice management and simple techniques and actions that members can take to understand, maintain and improve the environmental value of their holding.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Partners</b>	<b>Members attending</b>	<b>Others attending</b>
<b>Deer stalkers workshop</b>	18.5.18	Hendall Manor Barns	Jamie Cordery, Deer Initiative; Glen Poland, Ashdown Forest	1 member, 3 member representatives	31
<b>Meadow management best practice</b>	6.6.18	Millennium Green, Rotherfield	Iain Parkinson	2 members	6
<b>Rootwave demonstration</b>	13.6.18	WEC	Stephen Jelly, Rootwave	3 members, 2 representatives	4
<b>Creating and managing wildflower meadows</b>	4.7.18	Bunces Barn	Dawn Brickwood & Iain Parkinson	3 members, 1 representative	13 (2 of which became members)
<b>Basic principles of grassland creation and restoration</b>	18.7.18	Wakehurst Park	Iain Parkinson	4 members	24
<b>Meadows scything workshop</b>	15.8.18	Wadhurst Park	Chris Riley	1 members, 2 representatives	5 (2 of which became members)
<b>Advisory Group meeting #1</b>	10.9.18	The Bear Inn	None	4 members	1
<b>High Weald fungi walk and talk</b>	11.10.18	Strawberry Hill Farm	Martin Allison	4 members, 2 representatives	7 (2 of which became members)
<b>Advisory Group meeting #2</b>	17.10.18	The Bear Inn	None	2 members	1
<b>Stonegate Deer neighbourhood liaison #1</b>	12.11.18	The Bear Inn	Matt Moss	4 members	13 (1 of which became a member)
<b>Soil Health principles</b>	6.12.18	WEC	Niels Corfield	2 members	2
<b>Dallington deer neighbourhood liaison</b>	17.1.19	The Swan	Matt Moss	2 members, 1 representative	29 (3 of which became members)
<b>AGM</b>	31.1.19	The Bell Inn	Colin Headley	10	16
<b>Stonegate Deer neighbourhood liaison #2</b>	4.2.19	The Bear Inn	None	3	2
<b>Making you soils work better for you</b>	19.1.19	Plumpton College	Andy Howard, Joe Collins	2	8
<b>Agroforestry, mob grazing and hedges</b>	12.2.19	Lomas Farm	Stephen Briggs	2	5
<b>Agroforestry walk &amp; talk</b>	13.2.19	The Bear Inn	Stephen Briggs	12	8 (1 of which became a member)
<b>Meadows Survey 2018 landowner feedback</b>	27.2.19	The Bear Inn	Janet Whitman, NE	4	10
<b>Introduction to Mid-Tier Countryside Stewardship</b>	11.3.19	The Bear Inn	Owen Thompson, NE	2	3

## Other communication

A spring newsletter was published in April and from October newsletters (electronic and hard copy versions) were produced monthly rather than quarterly and sent to all members and other interested parties. Interim emails were sent as required about relevant topics or funding opportunities.

## Joint working

### Deer management

Following on from last year's deer management events, a project working with the Woodland Trust was devised to develop deer management groups in and around the Facilitation Fund area. These groups have been designed to get local landowners to work together across the landscape and their boundaries to have greater impact on deer numbers. The meetings brought together 13 members and over 85 non-members to discuss deer issues and collective action. The 6-month pilot has led to the creation of 4 neighbourhood deer groups and more land being stalked. The plan is to continue the project in 2019 with the continued support of Woodland Trust, Forestry Commission and Deer Initiative.

### Non-native invasive species

The Giant Hogweed Control Project (supported by EA) surveyed and mapped 10km of river and associated tributaries and ditches. All of the Giant Hogweed (except on the organic land) was treated with glyphosate. The project involved 6 members and 6 non-members working with a local contractor. As a result of the project's success, the entire Rother catchment was surveyed for invasive non-native plants. A management plan was produced and further treatment planned for spring 2019.

### Species-rich grasslands

The Weald Meadows Survey 2018 built on the success of 2017 surveys and assessed the condition of known species-rich grasslands, as well as others with the potential for improvement or linkage to existing species-rich grasslands.

The Weald Meadows Survey 2018 built on the success of 2017 surveys and assessed the condition of known species-rich grasslands as well as others with the potential for improvement or linkage to existing species-rich grasslands.

There was a particular focus on holdings with expiring Countryside Stewardship (CS) agreements to provide guidance on future CS applications. Over 12 days 63 meadows were surveyed by the AONB team, Natural England (NE), Kew and Buglife. Eighteen fields belonged to two existing members and two new members (9 fields) joined the Group having been involved in the survey.

### Waxcap fungi surveys

We surveyed some of the Weald Meadow Survey sites and other well-known Waxcap sites working with NE and Sussex Biological Records Centre. The surveys have suggested a link between species-rich grassland and rare Waxcap fungi.

## Securing resources

### Countryside Stewardship

We ran another CS Mid-tier drop in session for members considering applying to Mid-tier in July 2019. Two members and two member representatives attended. There was great collaboration between the members as one had started the process last year and was able to explain and encourage the other member with the help of the NE adviser also present.

## Other

Using funds secured from the Environment Agency for Giant Hogweed control was easier and more successful as a result of the Farm Cluster's existence. The project engaged non-cluster members, resulting in many subsequently joining the Group. Other grant schemes were promoted by the Facilitator with telephone advice provided as required. One member submitted an application to Sussex Lund 2018 (a grant scheme established by a local philanthropist) and was successful in securing support for removal of non-native trees from the landscape.

## **Engaging others**

We have continued to help the Group build relationships with other organisations, in particular: national and local agencies - Natural England including its National Field Unit, the Environment Agency and Forestry Commission; NGOs – The Pasture-Fed Livestock Association, RSPB, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, Buglife, National Trust, Woodland Trust, Sussex Wildlife Trust, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, River Restoration Centre, Southern Water and the Deer Initiative; as well as local groups like the High Weald Deer Network. They also continue to be involved with land agents: CLM, Batcheller Monkhouse, Cluttons, and Strutt and Parker; and the landlords for the Group's tenant farmers, the National Trust and Glynde Estate.

## **Priorities for 2019/20**

### Meetings and events

- Events around the following topics are planned: deer management, grassland management, non-native species control, CS applications, soil health and regenerative agriculture.

### Other communication

- Monthly eNewsletter to Members and website updates.
- Development of Group case studies to show use of Countryside Stewardship options.

### Deer management

- Continued establishment of Deer Management Groups.
  - Maintaining a deer management stalker coverage map for the Facilitation Fund area.
  - Continued training and education in deer impact assessment and how to control deer.
- Production of a deer in the High Weald short video for social media

### Non-native invasive species

- Further survey and control of Giant Hogweed involving 11 landowners including 5 group members.
- Where possible use of non-chemical means of Giant Hogweed control to address proliferation around organic farms.
- Encouraging landowners to continue to control Giant Hogweed.

### Species-rich grasslands

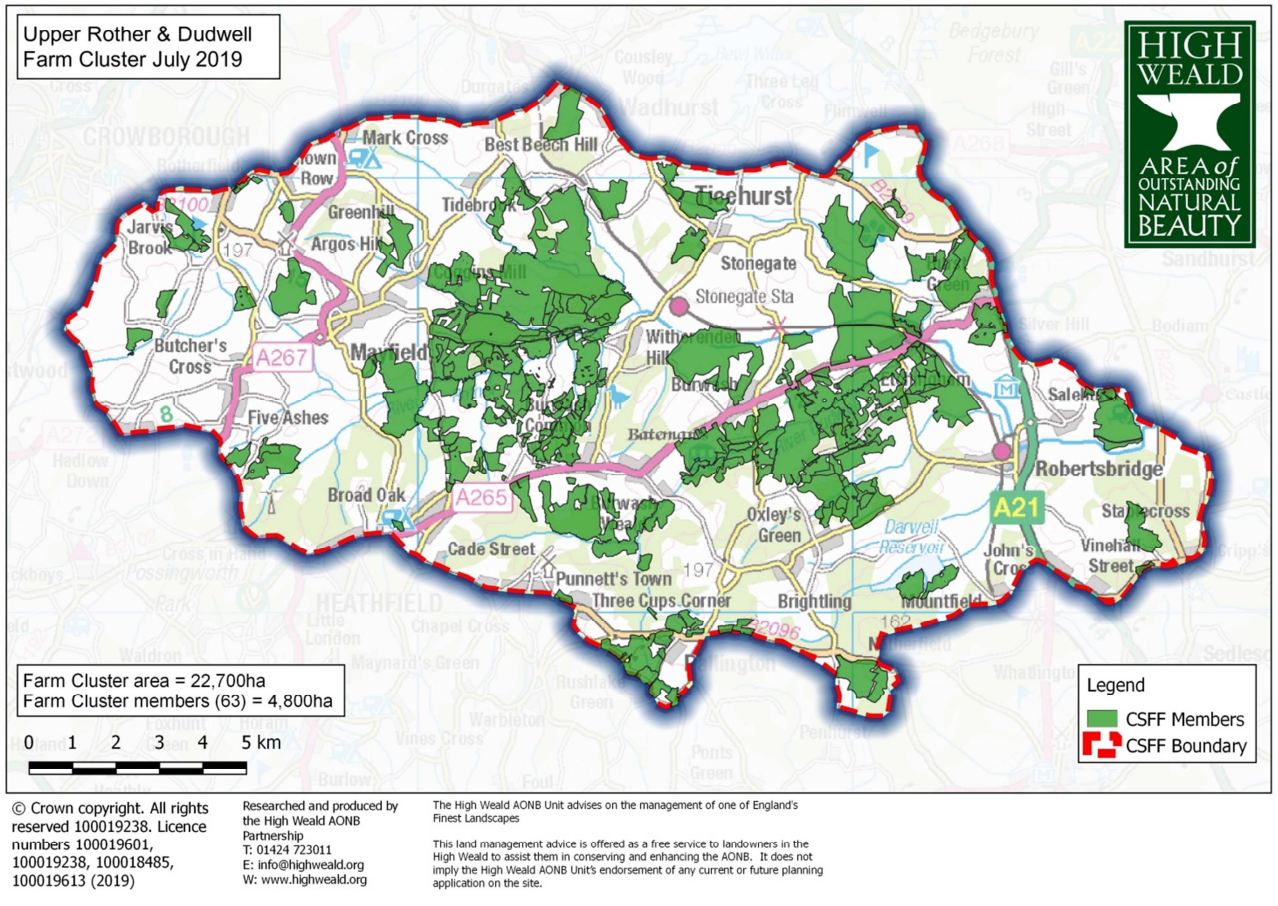
- Weald Meadows Survey 2019 - 55 species-rich and possible species-rich grasslands to be surveyed, including fields due to exit HLS and ELS in 2019 working with Natural England.
- Running of a range of meadow establishment and management events, assisted by local and national meadow experts to give the best advice possible.

### Securing resources

- Help Group Members source information required to enter into the next round of Countryside Stewardship.
- Work with other advisors to increase the focus on Group member landholdings and the achievement of Stewardship aims.
- Facilitate access to other funds for environmental projects.

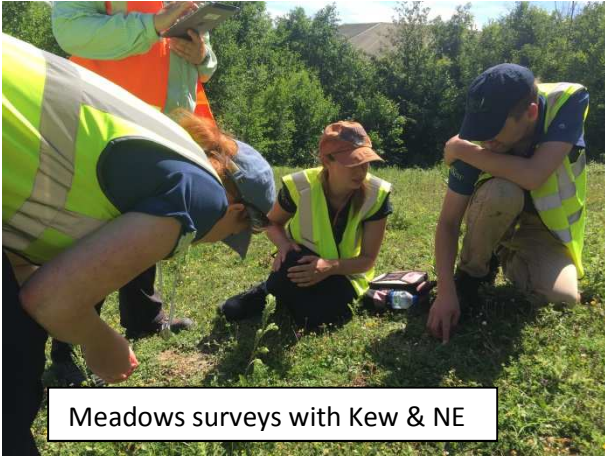
### Other

- Recruit new members to fill in gaps in the Cluster coverage.



In Images





Meadows surveys with Kew & NE



Best practice grassland management event



Rootwave – technical demo



Fungi ID walk and talk



Browse line and deer rack showing deer pressure in Cluster area



Regenerative Agriculture – Mob grazing in action

The Upper Rother and Dudwell Farm Cluster brings farmers, foresters and other land managers together to improve the natural environment of the Upper Rother and Dudwell at a landscape scale. The Cluster is assisted by the High Weald AONB Partnership with financial support from the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund which is administered by Natural England.



**EUROPEAN UNION**  
European Regional Development Fund



## Lessons learnt

### **Group aspirations**

The Group now has 63 members. Of these 21 have large holdings of 92-615 hectares and 42 members have smaller holdings ranging from 5-90 hectares. The average landholding for Group members (72ha) is still well above the High Weald average farm size of 35ha. Motivations for land management are diverse: some members have been managing their land for decades, others are new owners. Some members are supported by farm managers and land agents, others have no external support. Priorities and needs are consequently varied; therefore supporting the Group requires a knowledgeable and flexible Facilitator.

### **Meetings and events**

Training events have been well attended by Members. Where there is capacity, other local landowners and farmers are invited to maximise the networking and training opportunity. This year we have put more emphasis on inviting external speakers to our events and have been using feedback from the landowners to help influence the events calendar. Some events had limited interest due to their more specialist focus. Events focused on soil health, regenerative agriculture and deer control were very well received and stimulated farmer-led conversations amongst existing members, as well as with landowners from outside the Facilitation Fund area.

We have noticed that there is a huge benefit from the events to social wellbeing. Farmers have advised that they have few opportunities to talk to each other and, as farming can be a lonely job, the Cluster events are a great opportunity to get together.

### **Communication**

Communicating with Group members is still, and will continue to be, challenging. Many do not respond to emails or phone messages. However our shorter monthly eNews, with a new "I-spy" section is proving to be a good communication tool.

### **Landscape-scale delivery**

Countryside Stewardship continues to be the key driver for delivery of the Group members aspirations but there is still uncertainty and scepticism around the application process. Many members have chosen to extend their agreements by a year to see what Brexit brings, maintaining activities they are familiar with rather than branching out into new activities. This has limited the opportunity for members to sign-up to new options that may fit with Cluster objectives.

### **Representative form**

A number of members signed up to the Facilitation Fund would rather send their farm managers, deer stalker or similar to an event in their place. This has prompted the creation of the Facilitation Fund Representative Form which is used to record the landowner's agreement that a representative can attend in their place. The representative signs the attendee list in place of the CSFF member, thus allowing us to register them as having attended the event.

### **General scheme – criteria, reporting, claiming and communication**

The Facilitation Fund is focused on one-to-many exchanges between the Facilitator and Group members but some one-to-one communication is often essential, for example to engage new members in the Scheme, understand the public goods on the member's holdings, identify collaboration opportunities and undertake endorsements.

The reporting and claiming process remains bureaucratic and costly given the scale of investment and relative to other contracts/grant schemes.