

Agroforestry in the UK: perceptions and experiences of farmers and land managers

Agroforestry, or the integration of farming systems and woody perennials, is a multifunctional form of land use which has gained increased policy attention in the UK. Agroforestry has the potential to enhance food production, whilst delivering a range of other Sustainable Development goals. However, it is still considered a niche practice. This study examines the perceptions and experiences of agroforestry among early adopters in England and Scotland.

Findings reported in this briefing are based on a dissertation presented in fulfilment of the MSc Food Security, University of Edinburgh, 2023.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with farmers and land managers to determine 1) their understanding of agroforestry, 2) their motivations to practice agroforestry, 3) the challenges and/or barriers they experience in implementing agroforestry, and 4) the support mechanisms they believe are needed.

Main Findings

🌳 Farmers in this study practiced a wide variety of agroforestry systems.

🌳 Whilst broadly defining agroforestry as integrated and purposeful tree planting on farms, they were somewhat divided over which practices they believed counted as 'agroforestry'.

🌳 A common understanding of the term is vital to increase awareness of agroforestry among the wider farming community. Governments in the UK must address this through the development of definitions, incentives and targets for a wide variety of agroforestry systems, whilst retaining this united focus on integration and purpose.

🌳 Personal values and interests surrounding animal welfare and biodiversity were the most prevalent motivations to practise agroforestry among these early adopters.

🌳 However, some were particularly driven to enhance productivity in their farming enterprises and to diversify their income streams.

🌳 Climate change, soil degradation and the Agricultural Transition increasingly threaten the suitability of conventional farming practices to achieve these aims. Therefore, these are the benefits which should be highlighted in future efforts to promote agroforestry, to unite farmers under these common goals and concerns.

🌳 Further research is urgently needed to increase evidence, particularly of productivity benefits, within existing pioneers' commercial fields, in order to increase wider confidence in their delivery.

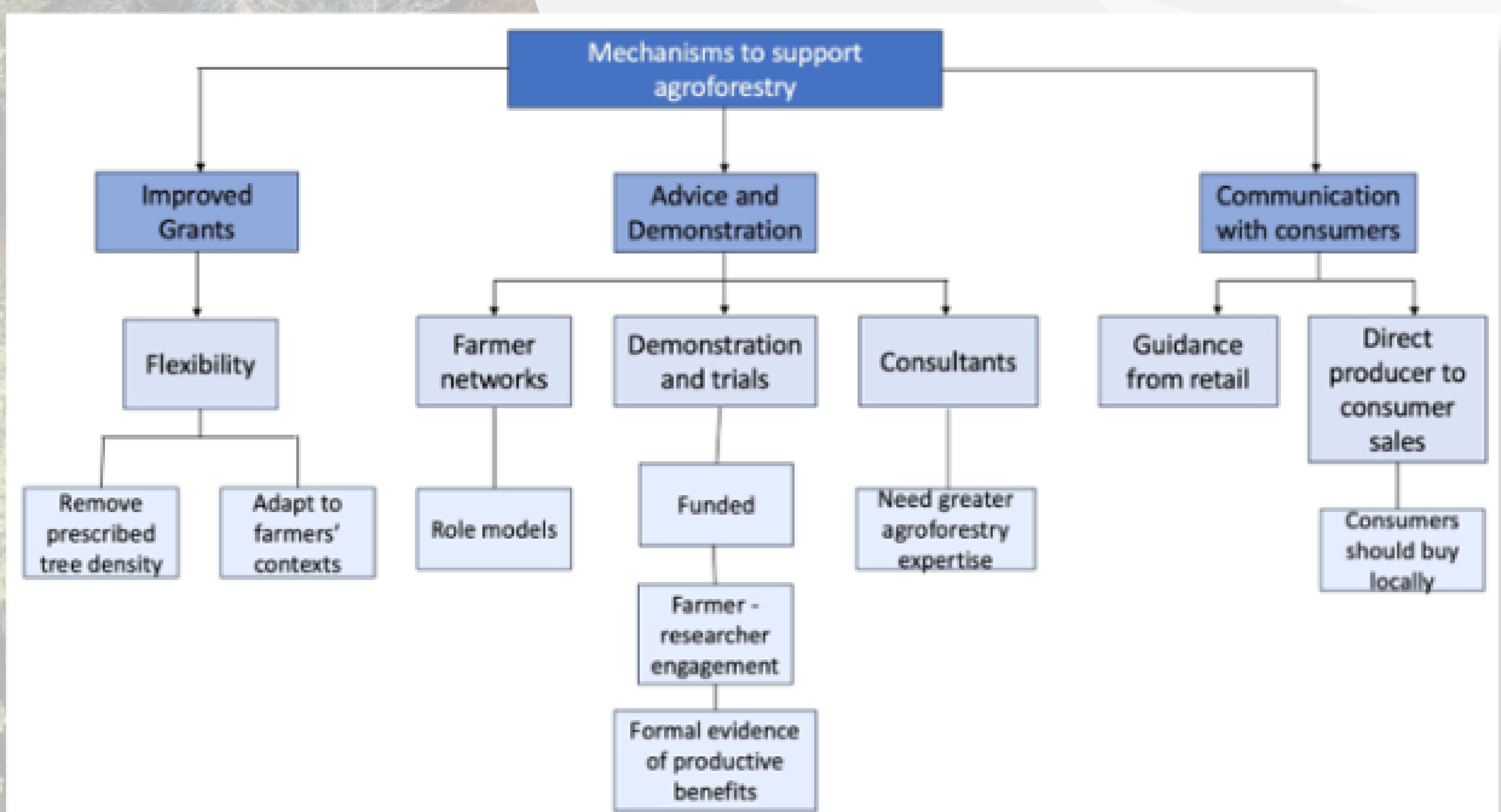
Policy Implications

Several challenges remain for agroforestry practitioners in the UK. Starting an agroforestry system incurs high capital and opportunity costs, with long timeframes for returns on investment. In addition, the delineation of farming and forestry has resulted in a lack of appropriate advice, financial support and land use classification for agroforestry systems. Future adoption of agroforestry will thus depend on government support and critically, collaboration with existing agroforestry practitioners.

🌳 Grant provision should be more flexible to facilitate the diversity of agroforestry systems suited to different farming contexts.

🌳 Governments should recognise and financially support the importance of pioneers in overcoming the operational challenges associated with agroforestry and sharing their learnings to create communities of practice across the UK.

🌳 Finally, further research is needed to determine effective ways to communicate the value of agroforestry systems with consumers. This will enhance the market demand for agroforestry products, thus both rewarding existing agroforestry producers and incentivising future adoption.



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