

Scottish Organic Stakeholders Group
Subgroup on Developing Research, Advisory Services and Training
to Support the Expansion of Organics in Scotland
(May 2022)

Current contexts on research, advice and training

It is helpful to use the concept of AKIS (Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems) to describe the full range of research, advisory, knowledge exchange and training activities. Current EU Common Agricultural Policy arrangements place a strong emphasis on effective AKIS, and expect member states to include a description of their system in their national plans.

A recent report from the EU's standing committee on Agricultural Research notes:

Knowledge and innovation have a key role to play in helping farmers and rural communities meet substantial challenges. These include ensuring long-term food and nutrition security, bolstering environmental care and climate action and strengthening the socio-economic fabric of rural areas. Although agricultural research delivers new knowledge and there is already a substantial amount of knowledge available to answer these challenges, it tends to stay fragmented and insufficiently applied in practice. Moreover, the agricultural sector itself has considerable and under-used innovation capacity.

On average, twenty years separate the start of research from the mainstream application of its outcomes in agriculture. The insufficient or too slow uptake of new knowledge and innovative solutions in farming, in particular by small and medium-sized farms, hampers a smooth transition towards a more sustainable agriculture as well as the farm sector's competitiveness and sustainable development. [1, p17]

In other words, a well-connected system of research, advice, training and knowledge exchange is essential for the 'smooth transition to a more sustainable agriculture' through which we need to tackle the climate and nature emergencies.

About Research

Research plays a key role in underpinning policy and practice in any sector. Policy-makers and others (including financial institutions) want to know if the nature and climate benefits of organic farming are significant and reliable, and how they compare to other approaches. They also want to know about profitability and about what makes farmers convert (or not). Producers, producer organisations and advisors want to know how to farm well, what works, how to tackle specific problems, which inputs to buy.

A lot of this knowledge about organic farming exists, though not all of it is written down, and not all of it will be found under the heading of 'organic research'. It is part of broader research findings. The research is not gathered together in one place, with SEFARI, for example, not having a specific remit to provide a gateway to this knowledge.

There is also the additional real challenge of how to connect new and existing organic farmers with this knowledge, with some reporting that they felt they have 'nowhere to go' during and after conversion. Similarly, there is currently no obvious 'hub' through which farmers can identify specific research needs or co-develop research proposals.

The only specific reference to organics in the recent Scottish Government's [Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture Research: Strategy 2022 to 2027](#) is a subproject to compare it as an export brand with Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and Protected Designation of Origin (PDO). That is not to say that there will be no research on organics, but again that it may be embedded in other work. Additional effort would have to be made to make it readily accessible for people who want to know specifically about organic food and farming.

About Advice and Advisory Services

'Giving advice' is only one way of knowledge being shared by farmers, and formal advice provision is only one factor in this equation. We also know that farmers traditionally mostly learn from their peers, and are now able to do that more easily through online groups and forums. They also get their information from a range of other sources including from sales people, producer organisations and inspectors, for example.

The Scottish Government is planning to re-commission farm advisory services in a couple of years' time. The current model has focused on 'one-to-many' talks, courses and events on the one hand, along with 'one-to-one' advice on the other. There's a particular role also for 'one-to-few' models where a facilitator supports and encourages knowledge exchange between a group of people interested in a specific topic or location. Regional models have been popular, so the focus is on particular localised challenges and brings together people based in particular geographical areas. Some of this activity has already been supported through the Knowledge Transfer and Innovation Fund (KTIF).

About Training

Training is potentially another way for farmers and others to learn about organics. However, under 30% of farmers in Scotland have formal qualifications and the same study suggested only 1% of farmers undertook vocational training in the previous year [2].

In Scotland, there is currently no requirement for farmers to undertake continuing professional development. The MSc in Organic Farming run by Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) has played a valuable role in the development of farmers, advisors, inspectors and others. However, there is also a clear need for other training courses to meet different needs, from apprenticeships onwards – as well as making sure that organics is represented credibly in mainstream programmes. There is a wide range of potential customers and topics for training and it would be helpful to map current and future needs against existing provision.

There is a particular gap for organic market gardeners, who typically do not enter the sector through a traditional farming upbringing but look for a combination of challenging academic input and well-organised on-the-job learning. International examples (e.g. a New Zealand three-year programme with parallel on-farm learning, in this case starting your own business as part of the coursework) do not have an equivalent here.

More generally, while farmers are a primary audience for knowledge about organics, other supply chain actors also have key roles in supporting a thriving organic sector. Vets, relationship managers in banks, food manufacturers, procurement- and catering staff all play important parts in bringing organics into the mainstream.

Recommendations

1. We recommend that the Scottish Government commissions a short-term piece of work to collate, organise and review **research** relevant to Scotland on organic farming and food. It should update this material where needed; translate it into suitable formats using appropriate and engaging channels including online (quizzes, podcasts, video, webinars) and face-to-face options; and publicise its availability effectively to ensure that a wide range of key audiences (policy advisors, farmers, individuals/public, in different sectors, and at different educational levels), can access and engage with it.

This could be done through a combination of desk-based work and expert interviews. This work is likely to identify knowledge gaps that should inform future research priorities; but the focus would be on 'knowing what we know' and making it widely available in accessible forms.

2. In developing the specifications for the new **advisory service**, we recommend that the Scottish Government considers both how to provide specialist advice on organics, and ensure that organics is main-streamed within generic provision. The specifications should encourage synergy between research, advice and knowledge exchange. They should make the best use of existing practical examples of where research and advice add value; and promote a two-way exchange of ideas between practice and research /advice.
3. We recommend that multi-year organic knowledge transfer and exchange projects are funded. Consideration should be given to include 'organic conversion' monitor-, demo-farms and field labs that enable sharing of detailed, live, practical and hands-on learning around the processes of change to a wide range of audiences and in different formats to allow for accessing this learning in a wide range of ways.
4. As to the **provision of training**, we recommend that CPD modules in organics tailored to different audiences are developed by training providers and made available widely and in different forms. Professional coms people should be used to create websites that point to existing websites and platforms, build on existing networks, and use trusted

brands (e.g. Soil Association, Rural Payments website) and public events (e.g. The Royal Highland Show) to promote and training and support materials around organics.

5. Linked to the review of land-based learning, existing learning provision for organics should be mapped against current and future customers' needs.
6. A graduate-level programme for organic market gardeners should be developed and funded (e.g. as part of the Green Skills agenda).

This subgroup was chaired by Professor Christine Watson (The Scottish Rural College (SRUC)). A handful of discussions were held during March and April 2022 with contributions from SRUC Research, SRUC Skills & Lifelong Learning, SRUC Postgrad courses, Nourish Scotland, Garden Organic, the Soil Association, National Farmers Union Scotland, Pasture Fed Livestock Association, Organic Growers Alliance, Myreside Organics, SAC Consulting, the Scottish Government Agricultural Policy Department and other Scottish Government officials.

References

[1] EU SCAR AKIS (2019), Preparing for Future AKIS in Europe. Brussels, European Commission

https://scar-europe.org/images/AKIS/Documents/report-preparing-for-future-akis-in-europe_en.pdf

[2] 18 Scottish Survey of Farm Structure and Methods, 2016

<http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/11/4283>