

A photograph of three people working in a field. In the foreground, a person with long red hair is bent over, working with green plants near a wooden post. In the middle ground, another person with dark hair in a white t-shirt is walking. In the background, a third person with long red hair in blue overalls is walking. The field is filled with green plants and tall grass, with trees in the background.

Reflections for Funders Considering a Field- Building Approach



**Farming
the Future**

April 2026



Contents

3	Introduction
4	How it worked
5	Programme Highlights
6	Recommendations
11	Final Questions
13	Contact

COVER PHOTO CREDIT: JASON TAYLOR
PHOTO CREDIT: JASON TAYLOR

This report shares key insights from the Farming the Future (FtF) Field Building Programme (FBP), which ran from Spring 2024 to Spring 2026. This experimental programme distributed funding to 20 partner organisations working across the UK food, farming and land movements, with the aim of strengthening their work and enabling greater collaboration in the movement across three broad fields of activity.

The programme generated significant learning in relation to funding design, structure, communication, and engagement. While not without its challenges, partners consistently valued the approach, and many expressed a desire to see similar models adopted more widely in place of traditional, competitive grant-making processes.

Drawing on these reflections, this report sets out key insights and recommendations for funders considering a field-building approach. These focus on how to better support participation, strengthen trust and clarity, and enable more effective collaboration across diverse organisations.



Ultimately, we hope this learning contributes to future approaches that better resource movements, enabling organisations to work more cohesively, build collective capacity, and contribute to a more just and sustainable food and farming system.

How it worked

Thanks to a larger operational grant from The National Lottery Community Fund, Farming the Future allocated £435,500 to grow, strengthen, and connect the agroecology movement through a time-limited Field Building Programme. Because this funding could not be distributed via the usual semi-open grant round, it was channelled through Partnership Agreements, creating an opportunity to test a more relational, proactive approach to resourcing the sector beyond conventional applications and reporting.

A Field Building Circle of Ambassadors and staff shaped the programme, agreeing key workstreams, budgets, and decision-making processes by November 2023. Four strands were prioritised based on partner feedback and Ambassador insight: Progression Pathways for New Agroecological Producers, Just Access to Land, Networks of Supply, and Movement Capacity Building.

Rather than issuing an open call, Ambassadors worked in pairs across strands to identify organisations and clusters with the relationships, knowledge, and reach to strengthen these fields. Detailed strand budgets were set, and Shared Assets joined as convening and learning partner, managing the Convening Support budget, mentoring partners, and enabling cross-strand collaboration and learning.

Partnership Agreements (£5k+) and Event Support agreements (<£5k) were developed in line with Lottery requirements. Ambassadors reviewed budgets over time, identifying opportunities for additional agreements where they could add value.

For Farming the Future, field-building meant strengthening networks, alignment, and collective capacity across the system — not scaling individual organisations. In under-resourced areas, this also meant creating space for organisations to build their capacity to connect and collaborate.

This report draws together reflections from partners, staff, Ambassadors, and Shared Assets to capture the learning from this iteration of the Field Building Programme.

Huge thanks to Kim Graham (Shared Assets) for compiling the programme learnings.

May–Nov
2023

PROGRAMME TIMELINE

A Field Building Circle of Ambassadors and staff was formed to identify sector needs and shape the field-building approach.

Key workstreams, budgets, and decision-making processes were agreed by November 2023.

Jan–Feb
2024

Partnership Agreements (£5k+) and Event Support agreements (<£5k) were developed in line with Lottery requirements.

Detailed strand budgets were set, and Shared Assets joined to manage the Convening Support budget and support cross-strand learning.

Feb–Mar
2024

The programme was launched externally via our and Shared Assets' websites. Ambassadors worked in pairs across strands to identify organisations and partner clusters building their fields.

Mar–June
2024

Ambassadors reviewed budgets and identified opportunities for new Partnership Agreements.

Shared Assets managed strand support budgets, connected with partners, provided mentoring, and facilitated learning and collaboration across strands and the wider programme.



Field Programme

Highlights in Figures

WHAT WE DISTRIBUTED

57

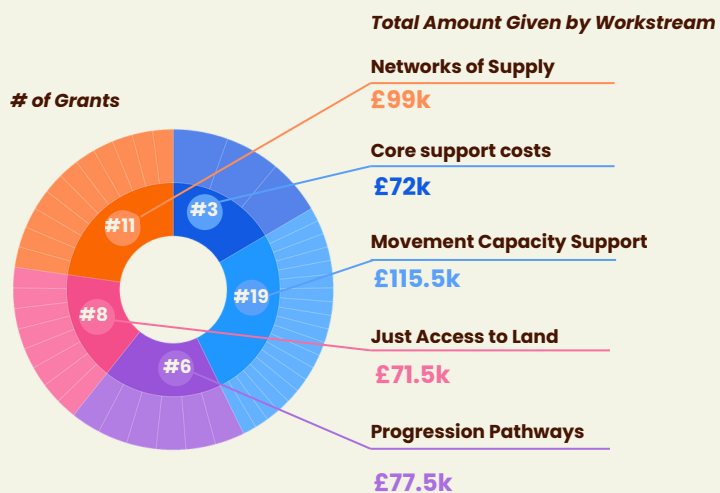
agreements issued

73

partner organisations involved. 23 were new to Farming the Future.

£435,500

distributed to Field Building Partners, many of whom then used this to support their own networks and peers:



WHAT WE DID

50

events and talks were held by partners on themes ranging from public procurement to community care for BPOC landworkers.

63

individual coaching calls held by Shared Assets.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

<11

New collaborations emerged from the Programme (others are still emerging)

2

In person whole person meetups (Feb 2025 in Lancaster and Nov 2025 in Leeds).

3

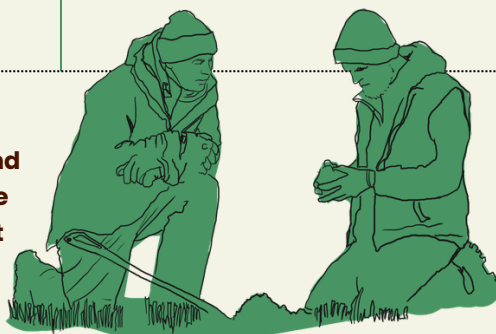
online programme calls.

7

Partnerships secured new grant funding from Farming the Future or other funders to take their work forward:

8

organisations supported to attend events through the additional support pot funds

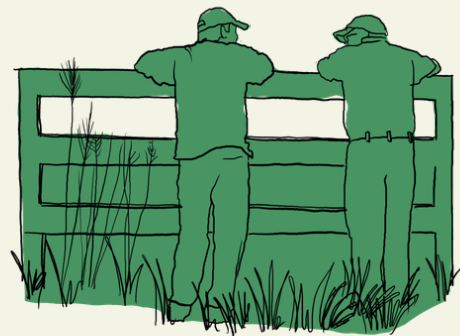


The Agroecology Learning Collective (TALC)
The Agroecology Research Collaboration
Shared Assets
Landmatch England
Cooperative Alternatives (Northern Ireland)
Better Food Traders
UK Grain Lab

Recommendations

The following recommendations are framed as guiding questions for funders designing or strengthening Field Building programmes — to support approaches that better enable collaboration, equity, and long-term field development.

Not all of these actions will be feasible for every funder or organisation; they represent a range of practical considerations that, taken together or in part, can strengthen the effectiveness and equity of field-building programmes.



01

Addressing financial precarity through more stable and flexible funding

Financial insecurity across the sector continues to shape how organisations engage with funding, often driving overwork, short-termism, and the over-design of activities to secure resources.

Can you:

- Offer more unrestricted or core funding, allowing organisations to focus on their existing priorities?
- Provide longer-term commitments, reducing the need for constant reapplication?
- Fund reflection, relationship building, and coordination, not just delivery?

Without addressing this underlying instability, field-building or capacity support programmes risk placing additional demands on already stretched organisations, limiting both participation and impact. Our field building sought to experiment on how to develop this third approach.

02

Starting with relationships and shared purpose, not predefined structures

While thematic structures can help organise communities of practice or field building, they do not in themselves generate collaboration. In practice, collaboration emerges from trust, shared understanding, and alignment over time.

Can you:

- Begin with a smaller, intentionally selected cohort?
- Invest early in relationship-building and understanding each organisation's work?
- Allow priorities and collaborations to emerge organically over time, rather than being tightly pre-defined or limited to short-term programmes?

This could be supported by establishing a shared or flexible funding pot, which participants help shape and allocate over time. Such an approach may better reflect the realities of how fields evolve and where energy for collaboration exists.

“ Regular online meetings to explore opportunities for collaboration...resulted in some work being undertaken... and plans to collaborate on further projects in the future.



03

Resourcing the infrastructure of collaboration and learning

Field-building depends on functions that are often underfunded, including convening, facilitation, and synthesis of learning across organisations.

Can you:

- Maintain a dedicated “convening and learning” role or partner?
- Ensure this function is sufficiently resourced to connect work, support reflection, and identify opportunities for alignment?
- Fully fund partners' time to participate in reflection, learning, and convening activities?

This is critical for both effectiveness and equity—ensuring that organisations with less capacity are not excluded from the relational aspects of the programme.

“ Having space to think, sit and share...without immediately ‘producing’ anything was crucial...

04

Being intentional and transparent in cohort selection and expectations

Not all organisations are equally positioned to engage in a collaborative, relationship-driven programme. Where expectations are unclear or ways to engage are too rigid, this can lead to uneven participation or disengagement over time.

Can you:

- Clearly communicate the purpose, expectations, and time commitment involved?
- Allow potential partners time to assess whether participation is feasible and valuable for them?
- Select a cohort that is both diverse and realistically able to engage, while offering alternative funding routes for others?

This supports the development of a more cohesive and committed group, while reducing the risk of exclusion later.

05

Providing clarity on programme parameters while maintaining flexibility

A balance is needed between openness and clarity. While flexibility enables adaptation, insufficient definition at the outset can create confusion around roles, decision-making, and use of funds.

Can you:

- Clearly articulate what the programme is—and what it is not?
- Define roles, governance structures, and decision-making processes early on?
- Co-develop aspects of the programme with partners where appropriate?

Clarity in these areas supports smoother delivery, more transparent decision-making, and stronger alignment across participants.



“

The project has enabled me to develop two outputs...that directly respond to the needs expressed by people actively working in these sectors, rather than being driven by top-down funding priorities that often lack practical, context-specific application

06

Developing participatory approaches to funding with clear governance

The Field Building Programme demonstrated the potential of more distributed and participatory approaches to funding, including faster allocation of resources and stronger alignment with sector needs. This style of funding showed deep trust in organisations and the value they bring to the movement.

To build on this, funders could:

- *Experiment with participatory budgeting or shared decision-making models*
- *Co-design governance frameworks with participants to ensure legitimacy and clarity*
- *Establish clear boundaries for accountability and oversight, particularly where external funders are involved*

This represents an opportunity to shift traditional funder–grantee dynamics, but requires careful design to balance trust, transparency, and responsibility.

07

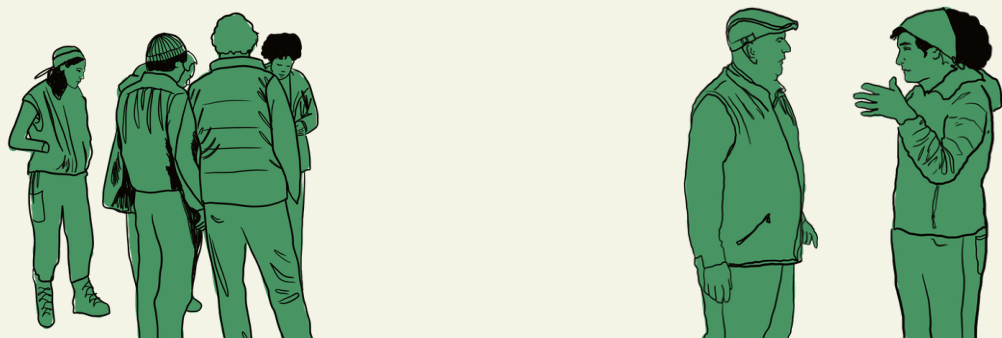
Strengthening transparency and communication across all levels

Clarity about how information flows—particularly between delivery partners, funders, and upstream funders—is essential to building trust and enabling honest reflection.

Can you:

- *Be explicit about what information will be shared, with whom, and for what purpose?*
- *Establish clear communication channels between all parties involved in delivery and oversight?*
- *Ensure partners feel able to share challenges and learning openly, without concern about how this will be interpreted?*

Transparency in these areas supports a stronger culture of learning and reduces the need for partners to manage perceptions.



08

Designing for accessibility and real-world participation

While convening is central to field-building, participation is shaped by practical constraints such as geography, caring responsibilities, and limited organisational capacity.

Can you:

- Consider geographically clustered cohorts where appropriate, to enable more regular and accessible in-person connection?
- Balance larger central gatherings with smaller, local or informal meet-ups?
- Ensure participation is resourced and accessible, including covering time and associated costs?

The value of convening is clear when it works:

“ I think the most valuable part of this were the in-person days and then the further in-person meetings that were funded. Importantly, they were valuable because they led to real outcomes and activities. It was good to have the free space to make connections, but I'm also glad there were tangible things to come out of it otherwise these movement-building things can feel very nebulous and inward-looking.

However, accessibility must be designed in from the outset to ensure this value is shared more equitably, without this, participation will continue to be shaped by existing inequalities in capacity

09

Committing to longer time horizons and ongoing support

Field-building is inherently long-term. Relationships, trust, and collaboration take time to develop (three years is barely enough to scratch the surface), and many outcomes will be emergent rather than predefined.

Can you:

- Plan for longer durations (ideally five years or more)?
- Recognise that impact may be indirect, relational, and not immediately visible?
- Consider how to support continuity or transition beyond the life of the programme?

Short-term programmes risk initiating connections without allowing sufficient time for them to mature into meaningful collaboration.

Final Questions

Before implementing a field-building programme, funders may wish to reflect on:

Money and Organisational Burden

- What forms of stable, flexible, or longer-term funding are you prepared to offer?
- How will the programme avoid placing additional demands on already stretched organisations?
- How will you select and support a cohort that can meaningfully and realistically engage?
- How will accessibility and participation barriers be addressed from the outset?



Power, Governance & Communication

- How much decision-making power are you prepared to share, and how will accountability and governance be maintained?
- What is the programme—and what is it not—and how will roles, expectations, and decision-making be clearly communicated?
- How will transparency and communication be maintained across funders, partners, and participants?

Relationships, Learning and Time

- How will you invest in relationship-building and allow collaboration and priorities to emerge over time?
- How will convening, facilitation, reflection, and shared learning be properly resourced?
- How will success be understood, given that outcomes may be emergent, relational, and long-term?
- How will continuity or transition be supported beyond the life of the programme?





Conclusion

The Field Building Programme (2024–2026) demonstrates the potential of a field-building approach to strengthen relationships, enable more coordinated action, and build collective capacity across a sector. By creating space for reflection, connection, and collaboration, it supported partners to deepen existing work and begin to align around shared challenges and opportunities.

At the same time, the programme highlights that field-building is not a light-touch or short-term intervention. Its effectiveness is shaped by wider systemic conditions—particularly financial precarity, uneven capacity, and entrenched funding dynamics—which can limit participation and constrain openness, even within more flexible programmes.

For funders, this points to a clear opportunity: to move beyond supporting individual projects, and instead invest in the relational and organisational infrastructure that underpins long-term change. Doing so requires a willingness to work differently—through longer time horizons, more flexible and participatory funding approaches, and greater attention to equity and power.

Where these conditions are in place, field-building can play a significant role in strengthening not just what organisations do, but how they work together, supporting more connected, resilient, and effective movements over time.



PHOTO CREDIT: JASON TAYLOR

Contact

Bonnie Hewson, Director



Bonnie@farmingthefuture.uk



farmingthefuture.uk