



# Scottish Land Matching Service (SLMS) Progress Review

This report presents a review of the Scottish Land Matching Service, contextualising progress to date against land matching services elsewhere in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland and providing feedback from participants.

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# Contents

<b>Acronyms</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background and Context.....	1
1.2 Method .....	2
1.2.1 Land Matching Service Interviews .....	2
1.2.2 Mapping of service users.....	2
1.2.3 Interviews with SLMS participants .....	2
<b>2 Comparison of Land Matching Services</b> .....	<b>4</b>
2.1 The development of Land Matching Services across the UK and Ireland .....	4
2.2 Service provision.....	6
2.3 Managing the service .....	7
2.4 Funding and Succession planning .....	7
2.5 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and measuring ‘success’ .....	8
2.6 Common observations across the services.....	9
<b>3 Map of Providers and Seekers</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>4 SLMS Participant Feedback</b> .....	<b>12</b>
4.1 Motivations for getting in touch with the land matching service.....	12
4.2 Interactions with SLMS in the decision-making process to develop a match ..	13
4.3 Types of agreements made and whether these met expectations of service users .....	13
4.4 How agreements are working out now .....	14
4.5 Independence and Confidentiality of the service .....	15
4.6 Other qualities that are important to service users .....	15
4.7 Service user suggestions for improvements to the service .....	17
4.8 Service user perceptions on barriers to land matching more widely .....	18
4.9 Service user advice to others .....	18
<b>5 Case Study: A successful match</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>6 Analysis</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>7 Recommendations</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>8 Further resources on land matching</b> .....	<b>24</b>

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## Acronyms

EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
FONE	Farming Opportunity for New Entrants
FTE	Full Time Equivalent
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GIS	Geographic Information Systems
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
SCF	Scottish Crofting Federation
SLMS	Scottish Land Matching Service
UK	United Kingdom

## Executive Summary

### What are we trying to achieve?

Generational renewal is critical to the sustainability of the Scottish agricultural sector. The June 2021 Agricultural Census demonstrated that 60% of female and 64% of male farmers in Scotland are over 55 years of age.<sup>1</sup> The Scottish Land Matching Service (SLMS) was established in October 2019 in response to industry concerns about the lack of opportunities to enter the industry. The SLMS supports the development of joint ventures between land holders (who are typically older and aiming to reduce their direct agricultural activities) and land seekers (who are typically younger and seeking to become farmers in their own right). This review was undertaken to assess the outcomes and orientation of the service, with a view to establishing the foundations for a formal evaluation in future.

### How does the SLMS compare to other land matching services?

Achievements of the SLMS to date are comparable to those elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The achievement of 26 matches within a 3-year period is in line with similarly staffed initiatives in Wales, England and Northern Ireland. All of the land matching service staff interviewed concurred that land matching is a medium-term process, often taking years between identification of an available asset, and a successful matching being formalised. A slow start to the service is therefore to be expected. The SLMS achieved 3 matches in year one, 8 in year two, and 15 in year three. It has had over 530 enquiries to date, primarily from seekers of access to land. This is also in line with experiences in Wales and England, although Northern Ireland has a more balanced portfolio of seekers and providers of land and associated opportunities.

### Is the SLMS successful?

The feedback on the SLMS is extremely positive, even amongst those for whom a successful match has yet to be developed. It is meeting a clear need and demonstrating a demand for land access which is much higher than the volume of land currently available. The costs per match are comparable to other land matching services. The service plays a key role in soliciting land offerings and bridging gaps between land holders and prospective farmers.

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<sup>1</sup> Results from the Scottish Agricultural Census: June 2021 - gov.scot ([www.gov.scot](http://www.gov.scot))

## How could the SLMS be improved?

As is characteristic of the other land matching services reviewed, the SLMS was developed organically, with structure forming to meet the emergent demands for function. Now that the service is well established, it would benefit from greater formalisation. Options include:

- Undertake medium term strategic planning, including succession planning. This should include the funding model.
  - Target and priorities are presently set on an annual basis.
  - At present, both staff members are above retirement age and hold considerable institutional knowledge. This is high risk.
  - Locating a new member of staff further north may spread geographic input; both staff members are located in southern Scotland
  - Long-term this will help to recruit high calibre members of staff.
- Develop the on-line registration system to enable ease of evaluation by staff and reviewers, in line with GDPR requirements (e.g. more detailed consents for information sharing).
  - Registration system should enable equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) to be measured.
- Implement a data logging and management system which tracks staff engagement with SLMS participants, new matches made and follow up-visits
  - Include an automatic feedback system, whereby participants provide feedback after being contacted by SLMS staff.
- Develop a clear service offering (e.g. initial consultation, matching, contract formation, follow-up).
  - Consider introducing eligibility requirements (e.g. UK residency, tax registration)
  - Further develop Key Performance Indicators in line with service offering
  - Establish clear policies and procedures
  - Service offering should be expanded to include follow-up of matches.
- Consider adding an element of fee-for-service, to reduce spurious contacts and increase perception of the value of the service. However, there is no evidence that land matching services can be self-funding.
- Focus promotional activities on target groups.
  - Potential providers of land: market the service as a support for existing farmers (rebalancing the current emphasis on new entrants).

- Ensure that crofters and agro-ecological farmers are aware the service offers opportunities for them
- Specifically aim to involve women new entrants
- Emphasize 'joint venture' as an entrepreneurial activity, rather than land matching *per se*. Opportunities do not necessarily involve land.

At present there is an unrealised opportunity to utilise the SLMS to increase the diversity of the farming and crofting sectors in Scotland. All of the land matching services reported that they primarily attract white men. The orientation of the services towards enabling newcomers to the sector should lead to greater diversity; how this could be better achieved requires further investigation and targeted action.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background and Context

This report comprises the findings of an evidence review to inform the further development of the Scottish Land Matching Service (SLMS). The Scottish Land Matching Service was established in 2019 as an initiative of Scottish Government's Farming Opportunity for New Entrants (FONE) Group. The SLMS mandate is to enable joint ventures in farming.

Questions addressed in the review include:

- Does it result in positive outcomes from those who engage with the service?
- Is it pitching at the right level?
- Is it providing unique support that is not being answered elsewhere?
- Is it value for money?
- Is it serving a useful function?
- What's the geography involved? Is it providing a service for people throughout Scotland?
- Is it matching the expectations of a land matching service? What does a successful service look like? What could be suitable evaluation criteria?
- A comparison of Scotland's Land Matching Service with the Joint Venture Hub.

At present, the SLMS has two part-time members of staff (total 1.2 full time equivalent positions). It has had over 530 requests for participation since its instigation in October 2019<sup>2</sup>, the majority of which have been individuals seeking (rather than offering) a joint venture. The staff divide their time between promoting the service (e.g. speaking at events, writing for the farming press), meeting with prospective participants in joint ventures, and negotiating the joint venture agreement. They also play a role in supporting the development of Scottish Government's policy for new entrants.

Both staff members of the SLMS were recruited following their retirement from employment within the agriculture sector in Scotland. Thus, they bring considerable networks and expertise to the SLMS but cannot be expected to remain with the service in the medium to long-term. Both have considerable personal investment in the service, which has been highly beneficial to its successful establishment.

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<sup>2</sup> To March 2023

## 1.2 Method

The review was conducted in three parts:

- interviews with the current staff and representatives of land matching services in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England
- GIS mapping of the locations of successful and prospective matches
- interviews with a subset of participants in the SLMS.

A light evidence review was also conducted of the published literature on land matching services. Standard qualitative research protocols were followed for the interviews, including ensuring informed consent. The research protocols were reviewed and approved by the James Hutton Institute's Ethical Review Panel.

### 1.2.1 Land Matching Service Interviews

Both staff members of the SLMS land matching service, as well as one representative per land matching service outside of Scotland were interviewed. Interviews with land matching service representatives addressed:

- the development of the service
- what the relevant service offers
- key performance indicators
- barriers to land matching
- demographic characteristics of participants
- funding structure
- lessons learned.

Both men and women were included in the land matching service interviews.

### 1.2.2 Mapping of service users

GIS Mapping was undertaken utilising the postal code data from the SLMS database. To preserve anonymity, the postal codes were reduced to the first four letters (e.g. AB15) and a dot located in the centre of the associated region. The map shows the broader district in which the seeker or (potential) provider is located.

### 1.2.3 Interviews with SLMS participants

The sample of users was selected from the SLMS database of people who have been in touch with the service. The sample included service users who had achieved a successful match through SLMS as well as those who had not yet achieved a successful match. The sample aimed to cover a range of experiences with SLMS (seeker/provider, successful match/unsuccessful match), geographical areas across Scotland, a variety of farming types where this could be discerned from the database, and gender.



Of the ten interviewees three were women and seven were men; six were providers and four were seekers; six had achieved a match through SLMS and four had not. Interviewees were resident in the following local authority areas: Aberdeenshire, Scottish Borders, Fife, Perth & Kinross, Stirlingshire.

**Table 1: Characteristics of SLMS Participants Interviewed**

Interviewee	Type of user		Matched?		Sex	
	Seeker	Provider	Yes	No	Male	Female
1	x		x		x	
2		x	x			x
3	x		x			x
4		x	x		x	
5		x	x		x	
6	x			x	x	
7 – land agent		x		x	x	
8		x		x		x
9	x			x	x	
10		x	x		x	

Forty service users were selected from the redacted SLMS database by the research team for potential inclusion in the research and then contacted by SLMS staff to gain consent for participating in the research. This included ten providers of opportunities who had made a match, twenty people seeking opportunities who had made a match, and ten service users who had not achieved a match through SLMS. Out of this sample a total of ten service users were interviewed. This reflects the willingness of the candidates to participate and selection by the researchers for diversity of experience, and the research budget. As the potential sample size for those who had not achieved a successful match was very large, the sample selection of those who had not gained a match focused on those who had been in touch with the service in the months of February and March 2022, giving a full year between their contact with SLMS and the research. Selected interviews were emailed a participant information sheet and consent form prior to their interview and given the opportunity to raise any questions or clarifications in advance.

The majority of interviews were conducted over the telephone in March 2023. One responded to questions by email. The interview questions addressed:

- Motivations for participation
- Experience of the SLMS (positive, negative)
- Nature of the agreement formed (if any)
  - How the agreement is working
- Anything they would change about the service
- Barriers to land matching
- Advice to others considering joint ventures.

## 2 Comparison of Land Matching Services

### 2.1 The development of Land Matching Services across the UK and Ireland

The first of the land matching services to start was in the Republic of Ireland in 2013. It was a four-year pilot test funded primarily by the FBD Trust with additional support from industry donors. The pilot was developed into a permanent service funded through a combination of government, industry and fee-for-service.

England, Northern Ireland and Wales all pursued pilot projects in 2015

- The Land Partnerships Service in England was supported by the Prince's Countryside Trust and The Frank Parkinson Agricultural Trust;
- Land Mobility in Northern Ireland also supported by the Princes Countryside Trust and industry groups;
- 'Venture' in Wales was supported by state funding, integrated into a six year 'Farming Connect' programme.

All three matching services were deemed successful, but despite widespread support in England, the service has failed to secure stable funding. *Ad hoc* initiatives take forward some of the services in various regions.

The potential for a Scottish Land Matching services was assessed by SAOS, involving consultation with industry partners and production of a business case. When the business case was agreed with Scottish Government, the service was established and governed by the Scottish Government's Farming Opportunities for New Entrants (FONE) group in 2019. The SLMS is primarily state funded, with in-kind support (office space, equipment etc.) from the National Farmers Union of Scotland.

A comparison of the history and features of the land matching services can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2: Comparison Table of Land Matching Services**

	Land Mobility Service	Land Mobility	Land Partnerships Service	'Venture'; part of 'Farming Connect'	Scottish Land Matching Service
<b>Country</b>	Republic of Ireland	Northern Ireland	England	Wales	Scotland
<b>Start date</b>	2013 +	2017 +	2015-2017	2015+	2019+
<b>Current staffing</b>	3 X 1 FTE	1 FTE	None	0.2 FTE oversight 0.6 FTE service support Also on the caseload of 18 farming connect development officers	2 X 0.6 FTE
<b>Key Performance Indicators</b>	Number of 'engagements' – people who get in touch and are followed up are tracked. No specific KPIs.	3 matches per month  4500 acres per year.  Geographic spread.  Number of people spoken to.	30-40 matches over a 3 year period  20 agreements over a 3 year period	12 matches per year	Number of matches.  15 matches in 2022.
<b>Matches to date</b>	~500+	20 000 acres		75	26
<b>Funding source</b>	State support, dairy and red meat sector organisations, fee for service	Northern Irish Government, Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster, Ulster Farmers' Union	The Prince's Countryside Fund, The Frank Parkinson Agricultural Trust	Welsh government: Farm Advisory Service	Scottish Government
<b>Fee for service</b>	Initial contact free; €150 - €200 for follow up; €5 – 600 for contract.	Free	'advertising fee' of £30 for seekers, £50 for providers (annually); other services priced on demand	Free up to £1500	Free

<b>Eligibility criteria</b>	Tax registration number in Ireland	Not needed	N/A	Residency in Wales.	Open
<b>Ratio of land providers to land seekers</b>	Far more land providers than seekers	About equal	More seekers than providers	Far more seekers than providers	Far more seekers than providers

## 2.2 Service provision

All of the services provide a means of establishing joint ventures, typically between older, established farmers and newcomers seeking joint ventures. Prospective collaborators can register on-line but often connect directly and are registered by phone. An initial interview is undertaken to explain what the service can offer, manage expectations, and determine what assets are available or desired, and therefore what kind of contract would be attractive. If the individual seeking a joint venture is keen to go ahead, a search of the database is undertaken. For providers, a profile is created. Multiple matches may be identified and offered. Getting to know the prospective partner is strongly recommended before entering an agreement. If no prospective matches are found, then participants remain in the system until a potential match emerges. Agreements are typically drafted by land matching staff, with legal advice either provided or recommended.

Example service offerings:

- Republic of Ireland
  - initial contact - 60 to 90 minute consult) (free)
  - follow up meeting to formalise an offering (€150 to €200)
  - contract development (€500 – €600)
  - mandatory follow up at 2-3 years (free).
  
- Wales
  - Registration by website or phone to complete profile (free)
  - 1 hour of solicitor time to identify tax issues, assets to consider (pre-agreement, free)
  - 1 day of consultant time to do a business assessment (e.g. talk through business model); report produced (free)
  - Staff identify potential matches and pass to providers (free)
  - Staff may attend meetings (free).

There was general agreement that some form of follow-up to the matches would be beneficial to maintaining their success. However, the Land Mobility Service in Ireland is the only service to have a follow-up protocol built into its service provision.

## 2.3 Managing the service

All of the services have public-facing websites which describe the services on offer.

- All of the services have an on-line registration system.
- The Republic of Ireland, Wales and the former English service have software to assist with matches and tracking participation; Scotland and Northern Ireland have developed Excel-based spreadsheets which are searched manually.
- There is wide variation in eligibility requirements, with some requiring residency or tax numbers.
- Ireland's staff are geographically distributed across the republic to ensure breadth of service.

Staff also play a critical role in advertising the service (e.g. through attending and speaking at industry events, writing articles for the farming press, posting on social media).

The Excel sheet used to support the provision of the SLMS was developed as a simple means of tracking the name, address and contact information and date of first contact of participants in the service. It also identifies whether a match has been made. The limitations of this approach became evident in this review process. At present there is no demographic information collected (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity), which makes it difficult to accurately evaluate the diversity of participants. The number of times individuals have been in contact with the service and the specific responses received are not systematically recorded; this may reflect a lack of agreed recording protocol. There is also a need for informed consent to be acquired for use of the dataset for evaluation purposes.

### **Box 1 Who is the land matching service for?**

All of the services seek to benefit both older farmers who are looking to reduce their farming and younger farmers who are seeking to enter the sector. Depending on how the service is funded and promoted, land matching services could be seen as primarily 'for new entrants' i.e. primarily oriented towards assisting new people to enter the industry, but not necessarily beneficial for potential 'providers'.

## 2.4 Funding and Succession planning

The services have a wide variety of funding models, ranging from completely state funded with some in kind industry support (Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales) through various combinations of industry, charitable, state and fee-for-service support (Republic of Ireland, England). There is agreement across the service providers that it would not be viable to offer the service purely on a fee-for-service basis. Thus, some degree of state support was deemed essential. However, some fee for service is recommended to ensure the commitment of the parties involved.

None of the services appear to have formal succession plans. This is least risky in Wales, where the service is fully integrated into the Farming Connect Programme and carried out by 20 members of staff as part of their broader advice provision remit. However, visibility of the service in Wales will reduce in the next iteration of funding, as the service is being absorbed into broader programmes of support for new entrants.

Succession is most risky in Northern Ireland, where there is a single individual operating the service. It is also a risk in Scotland, where both staff members are above standard retirement age, and indeed had formally retired prior to taking on their current positions.

Securing stable funding is key to succession planning. Reliance on short term funding agreements creates vulnerabilities; any incoming members of staff would rightly be concerned about the longevity of their employment, making it difficult to recruit and retain high quality candidates.

## **2.5 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and measuring 'success'**

The services track similar but distinctive performance indicators.

Most services track the number of matches; that is, the number of formal agreements such as joint ventures formed. However, there is concern that including targets for matches as a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) can create an incentive to rush negotiations or encourage risky matches. Therefore, the number of matches is not a KPI in the Republic of Ireland service.

Most of the services track the number of engagements: the number of people who are in touch with and followed up by the service. Target numbers for these engagements are included in their KPIs. Other KPIs include the acreage covered by agreements and the number of events attended by service staff.

None of the services actively track the number of matches which were unsuccessful after a period of time. This is a weakness, as it is inevitable that some matches will not be successful. Tracking the success of matches enables support to be offered to struggling matches, and for lessons to be learned for future joint venture agreements.

In terms of 'success', the Land Mobility Service in the Republic of Ireland has had the most evident success, with over 500 matches or arrangements to date, covering over 50 000 acres. The service had 1080 inquiries in 2022. The success of the services is partly a reflection of context: the service was established shortly before milk quotas were removed, and a tax incentive was introduced to encourage long term rental of land. Thus, there were strong incentives for older farmers to work with younger farmers to capitalise on the assets inherent in their farms.

The Irish service is the most highly staffed, with 3 full time equivalent positions, and has been in operation for the longest period of time. The Irish service is unusual amongst those reviewed for having far more farmers keen to develop partnerships, than they have suitable matches available. For this reason, the service does not actively solicit land. They are aiming to add another member of staff in the near future.

The operating context is more challenging in the United Kingdom, where concerns about future agricultural policy development post Brexit and associated access to subsidies can lead to reluctance to make land available. The services in Wales, England and Scotland reported that they were struggling to find appropriate land for those who seek it. In Scotland, the prevalence of tenancies and perceived threat of 'right to buy' also lead to reluctance or inability to participate in joint ventures.

### **Box 2: The role of profitability**

Land matching services seek to produce agreements where both parties can make a profit from the venture. This is quite challenging in a context where most farms struggle to make a profit. It is also challenging in contexts where there is fear that a new collaborator might gain the right to access resources on a permanent basis without the owner's control.

## **2.6 Common observations across the services**

There were a number of common 'lessons' learned across the services.

- Publicising the service is key – ensuring that farmers and seekers are well aware of what the service can provide. This takes a substantial investment of staff time.
- Match building is a slow process. It takes time to build the relationship between seeker and provider. It can take years from initial expression of interest to an agreement being successfully put in place. Short term programmes are therefore not likely to be successful.
- Personal chemistry between the partners is key; matches that look good on paper will not necessarily work in practice.
- 'Providers' are often older farmers who want to see their farms continue to flourish. They are typically keen to encourage a new generation, and somewhat less concerned about maximising their profit from the land<sup>3</sup>. They are more likely to have been new to the industry when they first established their farms.
- 'Seekers' can be quite diverse but the most successful are typically in their late 20s or early 30s, with some farming experience and equity behind them. People at that age are already likely to have some geographic ties (e.g. to

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<sup>3</sup> The most profitable and secure option is often to rent land to another local farmer. That is, to work through a land agent, rather than the land matching service.

workplaces, family supports), which may make it difficult for them to relocate to establish a farm.

- Confidentiality is key – particularly for providers. There can be stigma associated with the perception of not being able to farm.
- All of the services mostly interact with men; a couple of the services had seen more women coming through in recent years.
- Ethnic minority groups do engage to a limited degree as seekers. However, typically, they have insufficient skills to take on a joint venture.

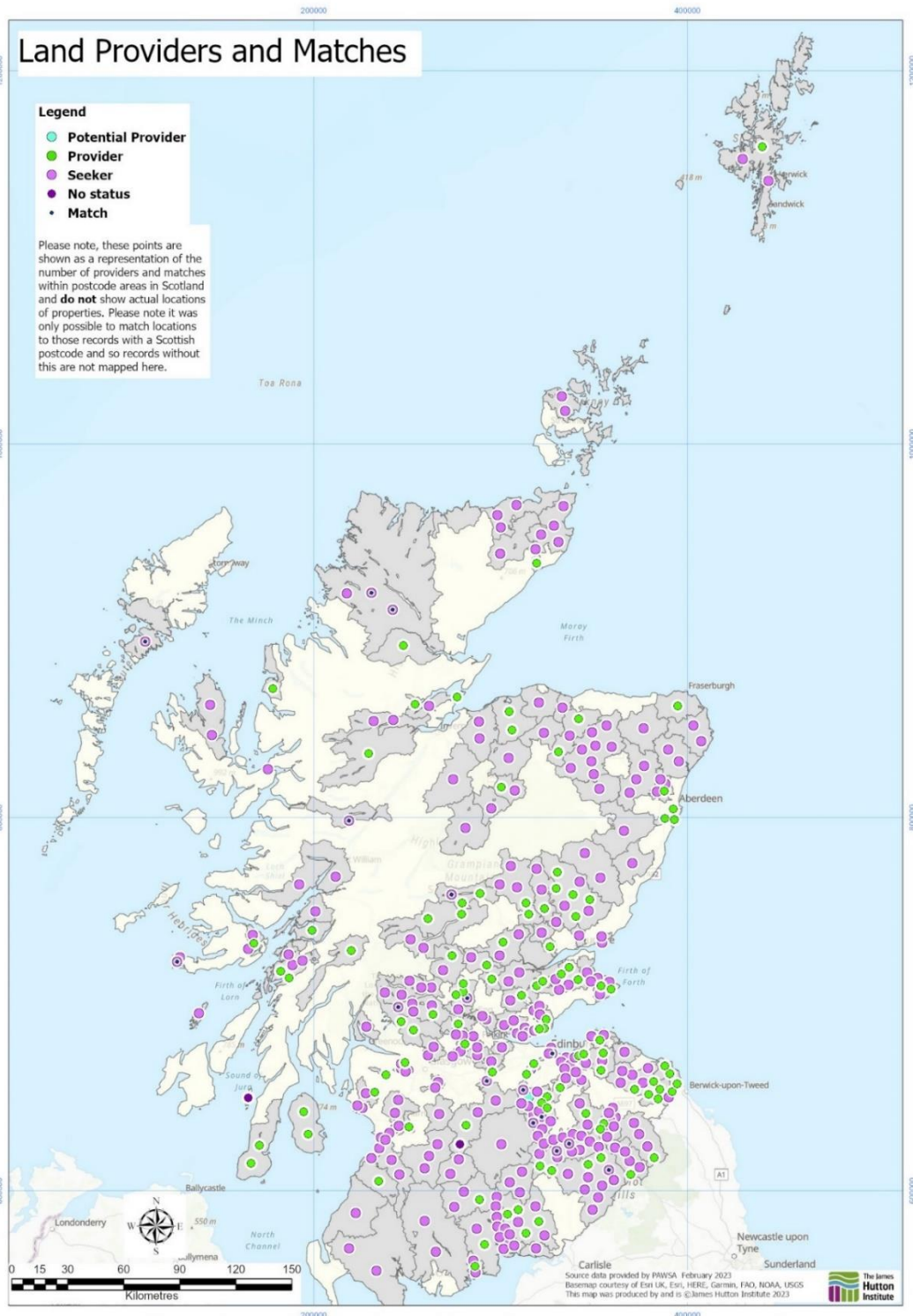
### **Box 3: A note on crofting**

Crofting represents a special case in Scottish agriculture. Crofters have specific 'duties' – including the requirement to cultivate the croft or put it to purposeful use. To admit to not doing so – implied in seeking a joint venture – is to risk losing access to the croft. There are also residency requirements and regulatory involvement which complicates the establishment of joint ventures. For example, the consent of the Crofting Commission is required for any change of tenancy. The Scottish Land Matching Service has always been open to crofters and is in the process of establishing a bespoke registration form which addresses the specific characteristics and issues associated with crofting. The form will also make it obvious to crofters that they are welcome to engage in the service. In parallel to the service, the Scottish Crofting Federation (SCF) has for some years enabled the registration of individuals interested in becoming crofters, who are then informed when a croft becomes available within their chosen area<sup>1</sup>. The SCF does not actively mediate these potential matches.



### 3 Map of Providers and Seekers

The geographic distribution of ‘seekers’ (newcomers seeking a joint venture) and ‘providers’ (offering joint ventures) is illustrated in Figure 1. The SLMS has clearly reached the breadth of Scotland’s regions, although participants are somewhat concentrated in southern and central Scotland.



**Figure 1.** Geographic distribution of ‘seekers’ (newcomers seeking a joint venture) and ‘providers’ (offering joint ventures)

## 4 SLMS Participant Feedback

As described in Section 1.2.3, ten participants in the SLMS provided feedback on their experiences.

### 4.1 Motivations for getting in touch with the land matching service

For providers of opportunities the key motivations were either the need for additional labour on the farm due to declining physical fitness of the farmer, with a view of eventually managing succession arrangements (2 providers), or large-scale farming enterprises seeking contract farmers and wanting to widen the pool of potential applicants (2 providers).

*“We’ve been involved in joint ventures for a while and we were looking to change contractor, and it’s a good central point really. Rather than trying to advertise individually” [4]*

One unmatched provider was not clear on their plans, which suggests the need for some pre-business support and development before seeking a match.

For seekers getting in touch with the service, the added value of the service - beyond finding the opportunity – included:

- support with navigating complexities of farming as a new entrant who has relatively recently moved to the UK
- seeking support to agree a legally sound agreement
- seeking support to find a longer-term agreement beyond seasonal grazing lets in order to build up the farming business:

*“I had tried some seasonal lets, but I wasn’t getting the stability that a farming business needs to really grow and develop... My business was in too an infant a state to secure lending for even buying one small field... the opportunity to rent or even buy small parcels of land adjacent to the house is impossible” [6]*

Most of the interviewees had heard about SLMS through word of mouth, while only one came across it through an internet search. Almost all interviewees had tried other avenues for finding a land match, including family, informal and local networks, young farmers clubs, adverts in local and farming press, and auction marts.

## 4.2 Interactions with SLMS in the decision-making process to develop a match

The majority of service users were very positive interactions with SLMS.

*“lots of good positive conversations... they made everyone feel at ease. Some of the mainstream consultants just bamboozle you, but [SLMS staff] were very good” [6]*

*“I had contacted them after seeing the place advertised on the website, and then I had a decent chat with the staff... they asked some questions to see if we would be a good fit or not. After that I thought it was done quite well, the Covid stuff was still going on and the couple offering the opportunity were quite elderly and so they were quite cautious, so we didn’t meet for a long time. But they were all fantastic” [1].*

Some service users had less contact with the SLMS, for example they had contacted the service to provide an advert, and they felt that the service could have been more proactive in trying to find matches for their advert, although most understood that the service was limited in its resources.

For those that had arranged an agreement through the service there was consistent feedback that the keeping in touch arrangement has been really beneficial where it has been provided, or would have been welcomed if it had not been provided.

There is some inconsistency in the level of service provision which could be clarified. Service users expressed opinions that an annual check-in to support development of the agreement and help to iron out any challenges would help with longevity of the agreements and relationships.

## 4.3 Types of agreements made and whether these met expectations of service users

The types of agreements negotiated through the service, and for those that made agreements outwith the service, were all for short-term contract farming. In some but not all instances, this was with a view to the agreement becoming longer-term (business partnership, longer term lease or tenancy assignation) should the short-term agreement prove successful. In this sense, the agreements made met the expectations of service users in that they took an approach to incremental relationship building through short-term agreements which could, potentially, lead to longer-term arrangements.

One provider had wanted to assign their 1991 tenancy to an existing contract farmer who is a cousin of the tenant, and so they got in touch with SLMS to support them with that process. However, the SLMS found it was not legally possible to do this and so the provider settled for a shorter-term contract agreement while they worked out a longer-term solution. In this instance they recognised this problem as reflecting recent reforms to Agricultural Tenancies.

## 4.4 How agreements are working out now

For two of the four matched cases studied, the agreement has come to an end. In both cases the interviewees attribute this to the personality of the parties to the agreement and did not find fault with SLMS itself:

*“They were great, even at the end of the contract [the staff] were very helpful” [3].*

Further information about why the agreements had ended include:

- not fulfilling verbally agreed infrastructure provision;
- different styles of communication;
- different farming practices and expectations around these;
- the difficulty of managing farm work while also carrying out two other part-time jobs meaning that the seeker was sometimes doing the farm work outside of expected hours.

In one case the agreement was not signed because the provider’s family, who were not party to the initial negotiations, did not agree with it. The ‘seeker’ continues to work on the farm but without any written agreement:

*“I cannot fault SLMS in the work they put in... but the family have worked out there wasn’t much profit for them, so they pulled out two months into the agreement... it’s ok I can still make money from it, but the cash flow isn’t as strong which means the business can’t establish itself... it’s not what the land matching service thought they were signing me up to either... but there should be more control over the givers [providers], because I’d made a financial investment in the agreement [required by the provider] and then had the rug taken out from under me” [6]*

Therefore, following up on matches can be quite useful for identifying lessons learned.

All of those where the agreement has not worked out stated that they would still get in touch with SLMS to help in the future.

## 4.5 Independence and Confidentiality of the service

All interviewees said they would rate the independence and confidentiality of the service very highly.

*“SLMS was a good middleman in that they’re not biased... it’s one of those things, the land agent is always going to look after the one that’s paying the bill. So, it was good to have them there, not necessarily to be completely on my side but to keep things fair for both parties, because, well... if it’s not fair it’s not going to work out in the long-term” [1]*

*“It’s great that it exists, it’s such a good opportunity for people in my situation. Because they knew both of us, I felt quite confident that the staff were there for both of you” [3]*

*“They were very fair, they weren’t leaning more to one way or the other” [5]*

The land agent provided an interesting perspective on the point of independence. While they felt that the service could be said to be independent, they held the perception that *“it is weighted towards those seeking opportunities rather than being genuinely a matching service serving both those offering and seeking opportunities” [7]*. When asked to elaborate on this they explained that it was because they believed that the land matching service selected the seeker for the provider, and that the provider did not have any input into selecting the best candidate for the opportunity that they were offering. They argued that as the provider is the bearer of most of the risk in the agreement then the provider should have more control over the selection process.

## 4.6 Other qualities that are important to service users

A number of other qualities were suggested as being evident or as something that it would be good for the service to strive towards:

User led metrics:

*“To me the evaluation should be how successful has it been for the people involved. Are the businesses still in place? Are the people thriving?” [2]*

Sector knowledge and experience:

*“Both [SLMS staff] were quite switched on and quite savvy with how ag policy is at the moment, so they’ve been more than helpful with that. I think they’re underselling themselves. Until we had a face-to-face meeting with them, we didn’t really appreciate how useful they were... once we sat round the kitchen table and realised what a wealth of knowledge they have.” [1]*

*“You got that feeling that because of the staff’s professional background, you trust that background of years and years of experience” [6]*

One provider, however, did not feel confident that their offer was valued by the service as the area of land available was quite small. However, it could provide a good opportunity for a new entrant or small scale farming operation such as market gardening, small scale poultry production etc., especially when linked with seasonal grazing opportunities in the local area:

*“I’m aware that what I’ve got to offer is pretty small compared to most. So if it was differentiated for different farming types that would be useful. I’m not sure if I’d had enough of an interaction with them to know... how my offer fell, how it sounded” [8]*

Bespoke service:

One service user thought it was very important that the service sought to establish personalised agreements: *“it’s definitely a tailor-made contract, which doesn’t happen very often in the professional world” [6]*

Professional advice:

*“It was very good having the staff backing the thing to start with because it gave you some concrete ground... and it’s going to be a done thing rather than just us making up an agreement in the middle of nowhere and thinking well is this OK or not OK? It felt much better doing it with them” [5]*

Communication and people skills:

*“Both [staff] seemed very approachable and down to earth” [1]*

*“You need that human assessment... I think there’s a temptation [for seekers] that they’re really ambitious, and quite often they’re not ready, but having someone else tell them that is really useful” [4]*

*“Understanding personalities and who is likely to be able to work with who” [4]*

*“A lot of the success about these things are the relationship, if you get that relationship right at the start, with a cup of coffee and some cake, then that helps a lot with business negotiations” [6]*

## 4.7 Service user suggestions for improvements to the service

Six interviewees suggested that the service should be publicised more widely, and that it would be good to *“get the stories through from people that have enjoyed it and are still gaining from it”* [2]. More specifically some interviewees felt that the service should target retiring farmers more strongly, while others felt that there should be more outreach to groups currently underrepresented in the demographics of the farming sector.

*“I think they could get more of the older generation on board because there’s always going to be more people like me looking for opportunities, so it’s important that the service can talk to the older generation of farmers”* [1]

*“Landowners generally are scared of it because they think it’s signing something over, but it’s not that really, you’re just enabling somebody the opportunity to get kick-started. It’s not a formal tenancy, or it doesn’t have to go that way, it’s just an opportunity for somebody”* [6]

*“It’s raised awareness of what’s possible. So if people see something about joint ventures people aren’t scared by it or mystified by it now, which is good”* [4]

One interviewee was reluctant to change the service significantly, and suggested that having a clear service function was useful to maintain: *“Sometimes with something successful, you end up wrecking it by adding more onto it”* [4]

Some interviewees noted that the website seemed out of date and that having more information about the opportunities available might be helpful, such as photographs of the land. Another seeker suggested that arranging more networking opportunities might be useful as this would create a good opportunity for seekers and providers to develop relationships.

A final theme brought out about service improvements relates to relationships with other actors in the sector, for example developing stronger relationships with a range of organisations which provide mentoring and advice to new entrants across different farming types and developing clearer remits between the role of SLMS and land agents. The Land Agent interviewed also suggested that there is a gap in supporting people who apply to contract tenders as many farmers struggle with the process and do not present well through the tendering process.

## 4.8 Service user perceptions on barriers to land matching more widely

Service users were asked what they thought were the biggest barriers to land matching at present, and more generally to their own experiences, in order to get a wider picture of current dynamics. The following themes raised are presented in order of most frequently raised.

- Lack of profitability in the sector
- Land use change: *“There’s forestry companies happy to knock on everyone’s door at the moment to offer them a nice cheque... If I was sitting on a place like the one I’m working on at the moment and I knew my son or someone else related wasn’t going to take on the business, it would be very hard to turn down the value of that money for a hill farm at the minute” [1]*
- Lack of capital support and grant criteria not being well aligned to the agreements. The New Entrants Capital Grant Scheme was very popular with new entrants but closed in 2018 (i.e. before the SLMS was established). Eligibility for this and other grants typically requires secure access to land, which was not usually achievable through the type of joint venture established by the SLMS.
- Uncertainty in future agricultural payments: *“because farmers are coming to the end of their life, they don’t want to make big commitments while they work things out” [6]*
- Cultural barriers: *“bringing someone else in is seen as a failure” [4]*

One respondent explained how the combination of these factors creates a very challenging environment:

*“Working capital, the cost of land and the cost of financing a farm operation combined with the future of policy means for somebody wanting to invest in a new enterprise today, with a lot of uncertainty from 2025 onwards... for joint ventures, that lack of certainty, and competition from alternative land use for natural capital, woodlands, carbon markets, is another pressure and competition for land use.” [7]*

## 4.9 Service user advice to others

Despite the challenges raised above, nearly all interviewees would encourage others to engage in land matching, and were positive that it can work and is worthwhile.

*“Go for it! But manage your expectations because things don’t happen overnight. I’ve been here over eighteen months now and there’s still a lot of things I thought*



*I'd get done that are still a long way off. But I would definitely encourage anyone to go for it!" [1]*

*"Have a plan in your head about where you want to be and what you want to do. Have a business plan and think about cash flow... don't let the desperation of the dream be the deciding factor that makes you take on a farming business, the numbers have got to add up otherwise you'll just lose the dream" [6]*

*"Commit to it fully, and be open... if you're bringing someone else in new, it can be difficult to let go of control... if you want the benefit, then you've got to lose a bit of control, and that's on both sides... You've got to see the bigger picture sometimes" [4]*

*"We're facing a climate and biodiversity crisis and everything that you can do to move away from industrial monocultures helps... small parcels like mine to loan out, I just think we owe it to future generations to do what we can" [8]*

## **5 Case Study: A successful match**

The following case study is from both a seeker and provider who have agreed a successful match which is still ongoing. They both contacted SLMS in the Spring of 2021:

*Provider: "My father is in his 70s and had been gradually winding down the stock levels on the farm. I do not intend to take over and farm the land myself directly... we decided the best way forward was to identify someone who may be able to support my father on a more permanent basis".*

*Seeker: "I had been looking at another job (where) I would have been going in as like a shepherd... bits of it didn't sit easy with me and then this opportunity came up. I had contacted [SLMS] after seeing the place advertised on the website, and then I had a decent chat with the staff... they asked some questions to see if we would be a good fit or not. After that I thought it was done quite well, the Covid stuff was still going on and the couple offering the opportunity were quite elderly and so they were quite cautious so we didn't meet for a long time. But they were all fantastic".*

*Provider: "We felt that setting up a contract farming agreement would be best way forward but we also had in mind to potentially consider the possibility of a partnership to look to expand and grow the business again with the right person... SLMS were very helpful from the outset. We were unsure initially how a contract farming set up would look in practice or a partnership and we were given excellent advice by the SLMS on what the framework could look like, how complex or simple it could be and how we needed to set up to fulfil our goals and to be fair to the incoming contractor."*

SLMS then supported the provider to find a range of candidates suitable for their offer, from which the provider selected the best candidate.

*Provider: "SLMS were instrumental as the go between and provided advice to both us and the contractor to ensure what we set up was fair on both sides. We set up a simple contract farming agreement for one year to see how the contractor and my father would get on working together, which is of course a critical piece in going forward with an operation of this kind so needed to ensure the contractor and my father shared similar goals, understanding of the situation and vision for where things could move towards as well as being compatible on a personal level. We have completed that first year and we are now in a position where we are looking to possibly set up a partnership agreement and allow him much more operational input and potential for growth."*

*Seeker: "The first year we came to the arrangement that I would get a contractor's fee which basically works out the same as like a salary, and then a percentage of the total lamb sales. And then after that first year we decided then that I could own a percentage of the flock. We're weighing up our options to do it and we hope over the next twelve months we'll decide how to do it"*

*Provider: "They have made every effort to support us in what we are trying to achieve. Their understanding of the industry, of the challenges faced by farmers as they get older and consider succession planning and next steps with a farming enterprise has been critical and they are able to communicate in an open, honest and up-front manner and speak with authority to both parties which gains the respect and trust of both sides... I think many farmers and new entrants to the industry could benefit very much from this service".*

*Seeker: "Both [staff] seemed very approachable and down to earth. They were quite switched on and quite savvy with how ag policy is at the moment, so they've been more than helpful with that. I think they're underselling themselves. Until we had a face-to-face meeting with them, we didn't really appreciate how useful they were... once we sat round the kitchen table and realised what a wealth of knowledge they have." [1]*

## **6 Analysis**

The analysis is organised under the headings proposed in the review tender.

*Does it result in positive outcomes from those who engage with the service?*

Yes. In Scotland and across all of the cases, matches were made which would not otherwise have existed. The users of the service in Scotland were very positive about the service and their experience of it, even if they were as-yet unmatched, or their match had not worked out in the medium term.

*Is it pitching at the right level?*

The Scottish service has a good balance of promotion and time spent in producing matches. More time could be spent soliciting land, as this is the key limiting factor in

the matching process to date. There may be a perception that the service is primarily to benefit new entrants; promotion of the service as an opportunity and service for older, retiring farmers could increase up-take.

*Is it providing unique support that is not being answered elsewhere?*

Yes. Participants particularly value the independent facilitation of joint ventures – the SLMS is a neutral arbiter with no vested interest in either side. Land agents typically represent the landowner.

*Is it value for money?*

This is difficult to accurately evaluate, as it takes several months to a year for a service to start generating results. It can be noted that the current resourcing is in line with investment made elsewhere in the UK. The £100 000 per annum budget is modest in comparison to recent new entrant supports offered in Scotland<sup>4</sup>.

*Is it serving some useful function?*

The SLMS is providing a critical function in enabling newcomers to enter the farming and crofting sector. This represents both an economic benefit to the industry and addresses a social justice issue associated with access to land.

*What's the geography involved? Is it providing a service for people throughout Scotland?*

As indicated in Figure 1, the seekers and providers of land to the service are distributed throughout Scotland, although somewhat more concentrated in southern and central Scotland, where both of the members of staff are located. In future, it may be appropriate to recruit a member of staff located further north.

*Is it matching the expectations of a land matching service? What does a successful service look like? What could be suitable evaluation criteria?*

The Scottish Land Matching Service operates in a very similar manner to other land matching services. Key Performance Indicators identified by the services include:

- Number of people spoken to (at events)
- Number of inquiries
- Number of consultations (one-to-one interviews)
- Number of 'matches' made (formalised joint ventures)
- Acreage associated with the matches made
- Geographic spread of inquiries, consultations and matches made.

Other standard performance criteria not identified by the services could include website hits, demographic characteristics of participants (age, gender etc).

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<sup>4</sup> The Young Farmers Start-Up Grant Scheme had a budget of £10.8 million, or €13.0 million. The New Entrants Start-Up Grant had a budget of £0.8 million, or €0.9 million.

### *Comparison of the Scotland's Land Matching Service with the Joint Venture Hub*

This topic was not addressed in any depth. The Joint Venture Hub appears to be largely a data base of interested parties which is not actively mediated. The database was provided to SLMS but was not really suited to the needs of the service, as it primarily comprised large-scale farms looking to expand.

## **7 Recommendations**

A number of potential recommendations emerge from the data analysis.

- Undertake medium term strategic planning, including succession planning. This should include the funding model.
  - Target and priorities are presently set on an annual basis. While this is appropriate in the early stages of development, a longer-term perspective is important for strategic direction.
  - At present, both staff members are above retirement age and hold considerable institutional knowledge. This is high risk.
  - Short-term funding is problematic for securing quality, long-term members of staff in future.
- Develop the on-line registration system to enable evaluation of the system, in line with GDPR requirements (e.g. automatic permission to analyse content for review purposes). This step will set the stage for a future formal evaluation.
  - Registration system should enable equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) to be measured. Some of these characteristics are not currently collected in the registration system.
- Implement a data logging and management system which tracks staff engagement with SLMS participants, new matches made and follow up-visits
  - The current database is unwieldy and data entry is not consistent. It is important for staff to be able to plan and monitor engagement with participants. The English, Welsh and Irish services all have bespoke software to assist with data capture and monitoring.
- Include an automatic feedback system, whereby participants provide feedback after being contacted by SLMS staff. Feedback is crucial to identifying lessons learned.
- Develop a clear service offering (e.g. initial consultation, matching, contract formation, follow-up). This will benefit both participants in the service – to know what is and is not on offer - and for staff, to manage expectations.
  - Consider introducing limits on service (e.g. UK residency, tax registration). At present there are number of spurious contacts (e.g. from

out of country seeking employment) which occupy staff time but are unlikely to lead to matches in the short to medium term.

- Further develop Key Performance Indicators in line with service offering.
  - The current emphasis on 'matches' does not appear to be problematic but may become so with different staffing in future.
- Service offering should be expanded to include the follow-up of matches. This was clearly identified as important by all of the land matching services. It helps facilitators address any emergent problems and enables lessons to be learned.
- Establish clear policies and procedures. These will be important for any future members of staff.
- Consider adding an element of fee-for-service, to reduce spurious contacts and increase perception of the value of the service. Note that there is no evidence that land matching services can be self-funding.
- Locating a new member of staff further north may spread geographic input; both staff members are located in southern Scotland.
- Target advertising and efforts towards potential providers of land, i.e. market the service as a support for existing farmers (rebalancing the current emphasis on new entrants).
  - Broaden advertising to ensure that crofters and agro-ecological farmers (e.g. organic, short food supply chain) are aware these opportunities are relevant to them.

## 8 Further resources on land matching

Further details about the services are available on their respective websites

England: [Land Partnerships Service](#) | [Fresh Start Land Enterprise](#)

Wales - [Venture](#) | [Farming Connect \(gov.wales\)](#)

Ireland: [Land Mobility Service](#)

Northern Ireland: [Land Mobility Scheme](#) | [Young Farmers' Clubs \(yfcu.org\)](#)

Scotland [Scottish Land Matching Service](#) | [Opportunities in Scottish Farming \(slms.scot\)](#)

In addition, a Defra sponsored Agricultural Productivity Task Force produced a resource which outlines the steps to developing a successful partnership between new entrants and 'farming entrepreneurs':

[Business Models to unlock future farming potential • CLA](#)

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The content of this report does not reflect the official opinion of the Scottish Government. Responsibility for the information and views expressed therein lies entirely with the author(s).

A two page visual summary of this report is available here: <https://sefari.scot/document/scottish-land-matching-service-visual-summary>

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