

RNAA/NISD Scholarship 2025: Georgia Oliver

Working title: Are environmental schemes working for Norfolk farmers? Understanding barriers and opportunities for sustainable practice adoption

Project overview:

This research explores whether current environmental schemes, such as the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) and the wider Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS), are working effectively for farmers in Norfolk. It focuses on whether agri-environmental policies support or constrain the uptake of sustainable and regenerative practices, including crop diversification.

The UK food system is under increasing pressure to reduce emissions, improve soil health, and support healthier diets. However, current and continuing changes to environmental schemes like SFI have created confusion and concern among farmers, raising questions about whether current policy tools are fit for purpose.

Aims and objectives:

- To understand how Norfolk farmers are experiencing current environmental schemes, including how accessible, clear, and practically useful they find them in relation to their day-to-day farm decisions.
- To identify barriers (practical, administrative, or economic) to adopting sustainable practices, including issues such as scheme complexity or overlap, reporting burdens or pressure from multiple stakeholders.
- To understand farmers' perspectives on their reliance on government grants through environmental schemes, including whether they see this as sustainable long-term, and to explore their vision of an ideal agricultural landscape and pathways to achieve it.
- To examine how policy frameworks influence on-farm decisions around regenerative practices and sustainable crop choices, such as cover crops, buffer strips and reduced-input systems, and whether schemes currently provide adequate incentives or support for these transitions.
- To explore opportunities for improving coordination and communication between farmers, policymakers, and supply chain actors (standardised approaches, shared frameworks).
- To provide clear, accessible summaries for the farming community of the research, disseminated through the RNAA and other channels.

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Methods and activities:

- Semi-structured interviews with respondents, including farmers, landowners, farm advisors and wider sector participants, will provide in-depth insights.
- A review of relevant policy documents and wider data analysis will contextualise the findings.
- Engagement at local farming and environmental events will provide wider understanding of current perceptions.

This work will support ongoing interdisciplinary research at the NISD related to sustainable food systems and environmental policy.

International component:

I will build on my placement research by exploring how other countries are supporting sustainable farming through their environmental schemes. I am particularly interested in how policy design and delivery vary internationally, especially in places like the Netherlands, known for its innovative approach to environmental land use.

International fieldwork will allow me to compare different models of farmer support, data collection, and regenerative agriculture, with the aim of identifying lessons that could inform practice in Norfolk. I will use the opportunity to broaden my understanding of sustainable food systems and bring back insights that will be shared with the Royal Norfolk Agricultural Association members and to benefit local policy conversations and support future research at the NISD.

Outcomes:

This project offers a timely opportunity to explore how environmental schemes are working for Norfolk farmers during a period of rapid policy change. I hope to contribute to a better understanding of how sustainable farming can be more effectively supported. I am particularly interested in how policy design can be improved to work better for farmers on the ground while also meeting wider environmental, nutritional, and food security goals.

Research period: June - October 2025

*Georgia Oliver is a current MSc student in Environment and Global Development at the **School of Global Development** at the University of East Anglia.*

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*This project is linked to the ongoing wider work of the Royal Norfolk Agricultural Association and its partners towards supporting voices of the food and farming community to building **Sustainable Farming Futures for Norfolk**.*

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