

2006 IOTA Conference

Creating Optimum Advice for Organic Farmers

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The 2006 IOTA Conference (Monday 11 December 2006) focused on the development of advisory services to meet the needs and demands of organic farmers and growers and others in the organic world. How have farmers' needs changed? What are the opportunities for group advice? What sort of advisory services can be offered? How can advice be made cost effective? How can it be linked to marketing companies and research? Do you have good (and bad experiences) to share? What services are attractive to clients; nutrient budgeting, soil analysis, financial and environmental budgeting? Where do we go next?

The conference used the Open Spaces technique; the delegates set the agenda and the topics for discussion and the day was spent exploring those issues which were considered to be a priority for those present. It threw up some interesting new ideas, as well as recycling some very old ones. Most usefully it drew together groups of advisers with a common interest and a determination and commitment to find solutions.

This paper summarises the key outcomes and endeavours to progress a number of priority issues which delegates committed themselves to on the day. The reports from all the 12 workshops together with priority list are attached; please feel free to discuss these with me or to use them in the development of your advisory services. I will be using them to develop the activities and role of IOTA in the future.

I have attempted to draw out some of the key issues and the recommendations or actions that came out of the discussions as well as remind everyone present of the activities which you have signed up to!

Inevitably, this has been a very selective process, and I would be very pleased to receive contributions, particularly commitment in areas that I have missed.

In doing this analysis I have tried to identify what it is that uniquely we as advisers need to do, both for the development of our businesses and for the support of organic farming.

Priority 1. The subject which scored the highest priority amongst participants was **Stimulating Arable Production**. Not surprising really given the current spectacular market failure and the very real threat to cereal supplies for the human market, constraints on the growth of the livestock sector and risk to animal welfare due to lack of grains to feed adequately. The main recommendations were to emphasise the need to link demand and supply, to better understand why farmers don't convert and to **link livestock and arable producers**, with the following people interested in following this up: **Michael Barker, Sally Bagenal, Peter Isaac, Gary Lightfoot, Stephen Briggs, Helen Russ, Ben Raskin, Mike Cottrell, and Alan Holley.**

I would welcome ideas on how to take this forward. In the meantime IOTA has commissioned 3 relevant research reviews on Stockless Systems, Pulses and Nitrogen Management and will provide a training workshop during the summer.

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Priority 2. How do we inspire farmers to want to improve practice? It is particularly encouraging to see that this issue is considered to be such a high priority and is closely linked to **Priority 11 (Organic Integrity)**. It is certainly a priority for the future for organic farming and particularly as it is felt that currently the standards do not reflect the organic ethos, nor public expectations. A CPD process for farmers was considered to be an important action, but curiously no one committed themselves to progressing this. The need for facilitation techniques for farmers, advisers and trainers was considered important and the following signed up to progressing this: **Richard Collyer, Gareth Davies, Joy Greenall, Ian Price, Alec Roberts and Mike Tame**. Development of facilitation techniques is clearly something which is very much in IOTA's remit and this is something which I look forward to pursuing, including techniques for groups and one-to-one advice.

I was disappointed to see that there was no mention of environmental benchmarking, which is something I have been developing and find a very useful technique for engaging farmers in understanding their current position and establishing a programme for development. This is bound to be a necessary progression in the new climate of "green payments."

Priority 3. Energy. This topic got off to a slow start on the day, but subsequently was identified as a really important issue and something which a number of delegates were keen to be engaged in.

A key recommendation was the development of energy auditing or benchmarking tools. I hope that IOTA will be able to pursue this with the support of those who signed up for it, including **Mike Cottrell, Gary Lightfoot, Ian Price, Mike Tame, Sally Bagenal, Tony Little, Ben Raskin, Nic Lampkin and Susanne Padel**.

Priority 4. Do we have appropriate structures in the animal feed industry? Many of the comments on this issue were closely related to the need to stimulate more arable production and discussions focussed very much on the failure of past attempts to establish good marketing links between producers, marketing organisations and purchasers, as well as the disruptive effects of imports, price instability and lack of commitment by all players in the market. The clear recommendation is that there should be better co-ordination between arable and livestock sectors. While advisers clearly have a role to play in supporting this, it is not clear whether advisers themselves should be taking a lead. I shall be contacting **Michael Barker, Sally Bagenal, Peter Isaac, Ben Raskin and Mike Cottrell** to see whether there is a need for action here, either by a group of advisers, or IOTA.

Priority 5. Colleges taking organic seriously. Clearly an important issue for the future, and something where advisers can have an important role, particularly in ensuring the standard of organic modules in conventional courses and identifying postgraduate courses for special interest groups. I believe that there is already an initiative for the development of an apprenticeship scheme. There is a need to demonstrate the career opportunities in organic farming and engage young people. I look forward to **Richard Collyer, Gareth Davies, Sally Bagenal, Alec Roberts and Nic Lampkin** identifying any clear activities which we as a group should be pursuing.

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Priority 6. Tailoring advice to build on farming families' experience and knowledge of their land. This issue was very much concerned with the social side of farming: families, communication, priorities, mentoring and demonstration. It emphasised the importance of advisory input to a farm, ensuring that it involved all the players, the development of understanding rather than lecturing, personal contact and making advice more accessible and user-friendly through different access mechanisms, mentoring and demonstration. This session had close links to the session **Understanding the Objectives of Farmers**, which as an issue was only in 9th place. However one of its recommendations, the **Need to understand the farmer's objectives and personalised advice**, was given a very high priority. This lies at the heart of much of our one-to-one advisory work and is something which cannot be delivered by group advice or training sessions. **Gareth Davies, Susanne Padel and Joy Greenall** signed up for this group of issues.

Priority 7. The issue of **Publicly Funded Advice** was clearly of interest to many and in the context of the review of OCIS and new conversion planning services in Wales this session provided an opportunity to discuss the importance of a mix of advisory services to get the best results: group training and discussion groups, comprehensive conversion planning and ongoing review. The importance of drawing on a wide range of expertise on one farm was emphasised. **Joy Greenall, Mike Tame, Tony Little and Ben Raskin** all signed up to this while **Gareth Davies and Nic Lampkin** also signed up to the closely related discussion groups and planning.

Priority 8. The role of **Research** was a major issue and identified the need for closer involvement by farmers and advisers at all levels of research and the importance of better dissemination mechanisms. This is of course a major part of IOTA's current activity and I will be in touch with **Gareth Davies, Mike Tame and Tony Little** to see how we should develop this in the future.

Addressing the Needs of Small Farmers did not score particularly highly but there is clearly an important issue here, given their greater contribution towards environmental and social output. It would probably have received greater attention if the grower advisers had not been attending another session in the Organic Inform Conference.

The above endeavours to summarise the outcome from the day. Please feel free to contribute, support or disagree. I will be using the suggestions to develop IOTA, I hope that you found the discussions and ideas useful in your work.

The open spaces format proved a really valuable technique and drew out a great deal of discussion and ideas. It has great potential for widespread use in all sorts of fora but to be effective it takes a great deal of organising and skill on behalf of the facilitator. Thanks to David Adams for providing that support.

We are particularly grateful to Triodos Bank for generously supporting the conference.

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