

## **Claire Wolstencroft**

Claire and her husband Graham moved into Lane Head Farm near Longnor in 2005. They farmed their smallholding under Higher Level Stewardship, an agreement which ends in 2019. As part of this agreement Claire has worked with parties of schoolchildren helping them to build a connection to and understanding of the countryside. Claire first spoke to us in 2015.

### **Part 3. Nitrate Vulnerable Zone (NVZ)**

CW: I had an NVZ inspection.

CG: Can you explain what that is?

CW: We're not at the moment, but we were in a Nitrate Vulnerable Zone. It controls the amount of nitrogen that you put on the land. And I'm sort of in a very fortunate position, because just after it came in, we had to revise for an exam at college and one of the topics we had to revise for was Nitrate Vulnerable Zones. And I looked at it and I thought, I don't know much about Nitrate Vulnerable Zones, I probably should because we're in one. I had some paperwork somewhere, and I went online and I started reading everything that'd come through the door. And as part of my revision, I decided I'm gonna fill in my records and I'm gonna do them properly. So, I did them. And I worked out how to do them, and it took me quite a long time, and it was great, because when it came to the exam I got ninety-something percent on that particular question. Shortly after that, I got a phone call. 'We're going to come and inspect your NVZ records'. So, I said 'that's fine, that's fine'. Just total coincidence, I said 'I've got them, here'. Pulled them out, went through them. When I was outside, I saw two ducks and I said 'yeah, I've got two ducks'. He says 'you haven't put them down on your nitrogen calculations'. This person is from DEFRA, I think. He said 'you need to do your nitrogen calculations for your ducks'. So, we had to add the ducks. Now I've since been told that the reason that he asked me to add the ducks in is because everybody was going to make mistakes. And if he logged that there wasn't a mistake, they'd have said that he hadn't inspected me, 'cos it was impossible for somebody to do it perfectly. Actually, it's not impossible for someone to do it perfectly, but I tackled it like I would homework at school. And I've got time.

CW: We went for a walk round the farm as part of this, inspecting my muck storage facilities. This is to do with water catchment sensitivity. Went down the field and he said 'ah, your stream's fenced. It's fenced quite broadly, 'cos the stream isn't totally straight and there's some trees. He said 'we're going to have to take that out of your eligible land'. I said 'you lot told the previous occupants to put that fence up to protect the land. Now you're telling me that we're gonna lose that land because it's not agricultural land'. I said 'If you look at it, that's of high conservation value. We have got so many flowers in it'.

CG: The thing is, everyone is desperate to do that, to protect water courses.

CW: 'I'm sorry that doesn't count as part of your agricultural land anymore and you can protect your watercourse and we are going to take that out of your agricultural land'. And I said 'fine, the sheep get in and graze'. So, he says 'well take some photographs'. So, I've taken photographs of the sheep grazing it.

CW: I then start getting phone calls. 'We've got an NVZ inspection, can you come and do my NVZ records for me?' So, I've gone round locally and I have done seven other farms' NVZ records. I sort of estimate and guess. And I went round to two lovely old gentlemen who were terrified that they were gonna get an inspection. Had never done their records. Didn't know what to do. They'd kept muck spreading records, which they used to years ago and they were really good and they'd coloured in the maps and everything. But they had no idea. And I said 'you have to calculate how much nitrogen there is in the poo of your animals'. 'How do I do that?' 'Well there's a table that you can do it'. 'Where's the table?' 'It's in this booklet', which actually was about that thick. That was fine. All of a sudden, they went to my neighbours, I'd done my neighbours, and 'now you have to do a four step plan'. 'What's a four step plan?' 'A four step plan is to work out how much nitrogen, how much fertiliser you can then apply to your land'. Basically, a four step plan, you're working out how much nitrogen there is in the land, in the soil, how much nitrogen's gonna come naturally, which leaves how much nitrogen you can add to it. And you have to either get your soil analysed or you can use tables. To get your soil analysed it costs. When you're a smallholder and you're working to a tight budget, which some of the smaller farmers are, you don't want to fork out for someone to come and do your soil testing. Or you can use these tables. 'Where are these tables?' 'They are on page two hundred and seventy-three of your Grassland Fertiliser and something, something Handbook'. Which of course everybody's printed off and read as bedtime reading. So, a two hundred and seventy-three page manual. Now, how do you expect eighty year old guys to sort this out? Makes me really angry. It's bureaucracy gone totally insane. Don't know how you do it though, it's a lack of the wholeness, it's people not seeing the whole story. Too many different departments all deciding and making their own inter-departmental rules.

CW: The bigger farmers can pay a land agent to do it. They can pay two hundred and fifty quid. To the two old local guys, I phoned up the local NFU branch and I got them to go round and help them. I said 'They need help' and I said 'I can't do it' I said 'because actually, if I was doing it properly, I'd be charging them two hundred and fifty quid'. There's a lot of work involved.

CW: And someone said 'well why don't you get paid to do it?' And I said 'because I don't want to, I don't enjoy doing it'. But I do it for friends, I do their pre-movement paperwork, I do all sorts of things. 'Oh, can you just print off, can you just look at this. Can you just do that?' But I won't be doing it for myself anymore. There is too much to do, it's not worth it. It's not worth it.

CW: I phoned up DEFRA and I offered - we've come out of an NVZ now - and I actually said 'I can write you a handbook, a colouring-in book that you can send out to farmers that they will just be able to fill in the right boxes and it will do the calculations they

want, that will be at the most ten sides long and it will be their record book. It will be like a colouring book. It will be that simple. A really simple workbook. You know, I'll aim it at sort of seven-year-old level. And they will be able to do it and I said 'and that's what you need, you don't want to know that you need to refer to page two hundred and seventy-three of manual such and such, because you've got a book shelf up there with that much paperwork in, that changes nearly every year, and it is impossible to read all of that paperwork ever, even if that's all you did. And act on it. And yeah, NFU have meetings and they tell you stuff, but you forget that and you write notes down. It's when you actually sit down and you think, 'Oh God, what have I got to do?'

CG: Who does help you?

CW: NFU will help. I've had a couple of local farmers phone several times and say, some of the quite big farmers, 'We've got an inspection tomorrow, what do I need to do and what do I need to get out and what do you need to do about that?' Actually, it's quite nice that they're phoning me and asking me. So, there's sort of some self-help but it bugs me, because I sort of know that they're gonna go, because it's the small people like us that do it. Actually, we're gonna go and then I don't know who's gonna do it.