**Comment from Amy Jackson delegate on 18th course January 2014**

**Leadership delegates describe 18th course as ‘life-changing’**

Delegates attending the 18th Challenge of Rural Leadership course emerged from an intensive two weeks describing the experience as both ‘life-changing’ and ‘unique’.

The fourteen delegates from across Britain, plus two from Australia and one each from Romania and Poland, admitted they weren’t expecting insights into military decision-making and the principles of running a busy A&E department as part of the course, but gained precious insights into how these learnings could be applied to their farming-related businesses.

Other aspects on the course – which is run by the Worshipful Company of Farmers and Duchy College, Cornwall – included strategic thinking, creativity, personal development and debates about wider industry issues. Emily Norton from a dairy and arable farm in Norfolk said she had come out of the experience with a clearer idea of how she could contribute strategic planning to the future of the family farm – as well as ideas to develop her cheese enterprise.

“I was surprised at the areas farming could take a lead from,” she said.  “It reinforces that farming is a business or profession like any other, but that it does still face unique challenges. And while the course content was designed to take us out of our comfort areas, the other delegates were very high achievers so there was plenty of questioning and challenging within the group itself.”

Mark Riches, a land agent from United Utilities who manages 16,000 hectares of predominantly upland in and around the Peak District, added that the strategic thinking lectures helped him think about longer term goals. “It became clear that it’s easy to get wedded to short term objectives because they are important stepping stones along the route, but being clear about what the end game is very important.”

The input from overseas delegates was welcomed, with the Eastern European attendees having responsibility for thousands of hectares of arable and dairy land in Romania and Poland.  Łukasz Krechowiecki from Głubczyce in Poland manages 11,000ha of arable land on a mixed cropping and dairy farm. “For me, it was time management skills that were most valuable. Giving yourself more time for thinking and planning means you can make better decisions for you, the team and the business.”

Amy Jackson, an agricultural communications consultant from Oxford, added that models to take forward and test ideas were invaluable. “So often, we have great ideas but they never see the light of day. The course taught techniques to help us stress-test ideas, look at positive and negative impacts from our own and others’ points of view, and pull out the immediate tasks that could move that idea forward.”

Throughout the two weeks, the delegates attended sessions held by Baroness Hazel Byford, outgoing NFU president Peter Kendall, Farmers Weekly editor Jane King, and specialists on CAP reform, GM technology, ecosystem services and climate change. The campaigns director from animal welfare charity Compassion in World Farming also gave an overview of his organisation’s aims.

Duchy College’s Richard Soffe, who oversees the course, said the course had been adapted over its 18 years to radically change the outlook and approach of its attendees.

“We don’t just teach people to go home with some very positive ideas about how they will change and develop their business; we make sure they are fully aware of how they should introduce changes and ways in which they can take people with them. People management is one of the most important parts of the course.”

He adds: “I was overwhelmed by the messages I had from former participants this January, wishing this year’s course well and letting me know how their lives were progressing. A huge bond develops between course attendees, and we know many groups meet annually for anything from social events to week-long farm tours. It’s undoubted that attending the course has been the springboard for many into a more successful career and business, and that’s something we’re incredibly proud of.”

Richard and his team are already planning the 19th course, starting Sunday 11th January 2015, and are currently accepting applications. Aside from their own contributions, delegates were generously supported by a combination of sponsors including the Worshipful Company of Farmers, The Perry Foundation, RDPE funds, a number of the levy boards and commercial businesses.