

## Countryside Stewardship and Environmental Stewardship

Countryside Stewardship continues to provide farmers and land managers with the opportunity to deliver positive actions for the environment and be rewarded for it. We want to encourage farmers who are not currently delivering agri-environment and forestry agreements to apply.

From now until 2024, farmers whose agreements are already achieving positive environmental outcomes will be able to continue their agreements should they wish to.

This could either be through extending existing agreements or through a new Countryside Stewardship agreement.

Countryside Stewardship will remain open to new applications until 2023, with the final round of agreements starting in January 2024. After that, all new agreements will be through the three components of our Environmental Land Management scheme.

We will start enabling people in Countryside Stewardship schemes to move into our Environmental Land Management scheme from 2024.

### Scheme description

The scheme includes a range of offers:

- **Higher Tier:** 5-10 year (and in some cases 20-year) agreements with a range of options, supplements and capital items for environmentally-significant sites, commons and woodlands. These are largely focused on expiring Higher Level Stewardship agreements that require re-negotiation and new capital works, and on woodland management;
- **Mid-Tier:** 5-year agreements, providing a mixture of revenue payment options, supplements and capital items to achieve simple and effective environmental benefits.
- **Wildlife offers:** 5-year revenue-only agreements for specific farm types: lowland farming, mixed, upland and arable. These are quicker and simpler to apply for. They are not scored, meaning that you will get an agreement if you make a valid application.
- **Capital grants:** 2-year capital-only agreements to deliver specific environmental outcomes, including hedgerows and boundary improvements, delivery of water and air quality objectives and planning for more complex Higher Tier agreements. This also includes woodland creation grants, woodland tree health grants and the development of woodland management plans.

### What we have changed already

We opened a new round of Countryside Stewardship in February 2020 for agreements to start on 1 January 2021 under domestic legislation.

As part of the new offer, we expanded the scope of the Wildlife Offers to allow businesses with Scheduled Monuments on their land to be eligible to apply. The number of applications for these offers has increased since last year.

Farmers entering into new Countryside Stewardship agreements from 2021 will be able to:

- break those agreements at agreed points without penalty (through annual break clauses), once they have secured a place in our Environmental Land Management scheme. This includes, in a limited number of instances, the National Pilot
- remain on the same terms and conditions for the duration of their agreement if they want to

We have also put in place important changes to new Countryside Stewardship agreements starting from 2021. For these agreements, we have:

- **removed the application of additional penalties** for the over-declaration of land and scheme breaches; instead just adjusting the claim to the found area
- **changed our approach to inspection**, focusing on an on-site review that looks at whether or not the environmental outcomes have been achieved, and that doesn't disproportionately penalise farmers
- **developed a system of warnings** to give agreement holders a chance to put things right, where this is possible, and still get paid; and offering signposting to advice or guidance to help get things right
- **extended the application period for force majeure applications** to 8 weeks in line with the Basic Payment Scheme

### What is new for 2021

We intend to introduce further changes to support continued delivery of our 25 Year Environment Plan goals. We will:

- expand educational access provision to farmers in Mid-Tier agreements, to let school pupils visit farms for educational experiences and for care farming visits
- broaden the advice we provide as part of the Catchment Sensitive Farming scheme, so that it includes advice on air quality and flood mitigation, as well as on diffuse water pollution
- widen the scope of some of our current capital grants to cover air quality and introduce two new capital options specifically to address air quality issues
- increase the maximum level of funding available under capital-only grants to £20,000 for hedgerow and boundary, and water quality improvements. We will also expand the range of capital grants available in the standalone capital only offer, to better complement the Wildlife offers
- expand the eligibility of the upland option 'Management of rough grazing for birds', to allow it to be available in wider areas
- bring woodland creation and woodland maintenance options together, so that one automatically flows into the other
- look to run a further round of the Facilitation Fund, to help groups of farmers work together to improve the natural environment at a landscape scale and achieve greater improvements than individual holdings could on their own

### Eligibility

Each scheme has eligibility rules, and these apply to both the land and the farmer. Nearly all farmers will be eligible to apply for one or more Countryside Stewardship offers.

- **Higher Tier schemes:** are competitive and focused on the highest quality environmental sites. This means that not every applicant who meets the minimum criteria will be offered an agreement. The scheme funds restoration and management of habitats and offers capital and revenue payments supported by dedicated advisory support.
- **Mid-tier schemes:** are competitive. The scheme offers capital and revenue payments; farmers should be able to apply themselves or use a local adviser who understands the scheme and environmental issues.

- **Wildlife offers:** are not competitive. These are revenue-only agreements; farmers choose the area they want to put into the scheme and are provided with an agreement.
- **Capital grants:** are competitive and cover specific areas, such as hedgerow and boundary improvements, and water and air quality objectives.

Farmers might want to consider the combination of a Wildlife offer and standalone capital grants as these are simpler offers to apply for.

Please see further information on when the next round of the scheme launches in 2021.

## **Payments**

The guidance and handbooks published for each offer set out the payment offers.

## **Timings and process**

We will open a further round of Countryside Stewardship offers in early 2021 for agreements. Thereafter, we intend to continue to offer Countryside Stewardship during the next two to three years with the last agreements starting in 2024. Where appropriate, we are extending Higher Level Stewardship and Countryside Stewardship agreements into 2022, and we are looking at how best to extend these further over the agricultural transition period.