



Agri-environment scheme in England

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Natural England stated¹ that 2012 marks the 25th anniversary of agri-environment schemes in England. As of November 2012, almost 6.35 million hectares of farmland (68% of the available farmland in England) are under one of the agri-environment schemes managed by Natural England and produce a wide range of benefits. Natural England has developed an online interactive map to showcase examples of how farms are producing food, providing valuable natural services and supporting the local economy through their involvement in Environmental Stewardship and Catchment Sensitive Farming.

Evolution of Agri-Environment Schemes in England

The evolutionary timeline shows the context for the birth of agri-environment schemes in the mid 1980s. Post war intensification and increased mechanisation had led to a loss of habitats and a degradation of landscapes. This triggered a growth in ecology and conservation movements keen to halt the decline. The mid-1980s saw campaigns to save grazing marsh in The Broads and to protect the South Downs chalk grassland.

The first Environmental Sensitive Areas (ESA) Schemes were launched in five areas: The Broads, Pennine Dales, South Downs, Somerset Levels and Moors and West Penwith. This was a new and bold way of providing practical support to farmers to retain and protect valuable and threatened landscape, wildlife and archaeology. Conserving hedgerows and field margins, reducing fertiliser use and supporting extensive grazing were among the early priorities.

From the experiences learnt in the early ESAs came the development of more targeted schemes and agreements to conserve and enhance the countryside, which have helped to bring about and respond to environmental changes. Today, Environmental Stewardship is the main mechanism for agri-environment delivery, with varying levels of support available through Higher Level Stewardship and Entry Level Stewardship. The focus is on maximising the environmental benefits delivered by the agreements. There are also organic and uplands variants of the scheme.

1950s

- Regulations/schemes to protect Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)
- Mainstream agri-environment schemes
- Schemes to support organic conversion and management
- Income support schemes (not agri-environment)
- Voluntary initiatives

1960s

- Government grants (and subsequently European grants) to increase production, including drainage grants and hedgerow removal grants. Use of fertilisers & pesticides encouraged.
- SSSI management agreements under s15, Countryside Act 1968

1970s

- 1976 Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance: Compensation for extra cost of hill farming and to help maintain the social fabric of the uplands.

1980s

- 1981 Wildlife & Countryside Act: Income foregone payments to prevent damaging operations.

¹ <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/farming/funding/es/default.aspx>

- 1985 Broads Grazing Marsh Conservation Scheme to encourage farmers not to drain or plough Halvergate Marshes.
- Local farm schemes within individual National Parks from mid 1980s.
- 1987 Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs) to safeguard & enhance 5 geographical areas of landscape, biodiversity & cultural importance.
- 1988 Five Year Set-Aside scheme to reduce production. ESA Stage 2: 5 more geographical areas.
- 1989 Countryside Premium Scheme Pilot to deliver environmental benefits on top of setaside.

1990s

- 1991 Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) to improve natural beauty & diversity of countryside through management of landscape, wildlife habitats, historical features and public access.
- 1993 Integrated Administration & Control System (IACS). Subsidy payments dependent on production replaced by area/headage payments underpinned by quotas. Included: Arable Area Payments, Beef Special Premium, Suckler Cow Premium, Sheep Annual Premium. ESA Stage 3: 6 more geographical areas.
- 1994 Wildlife Enhancement Scheme - Introduced payments for positive SSSI management, including land adjacent to SSSIs. ESA Stage 4: 1994 6 more geographical areas
- 1994/1995 Habitat Scheme, Countryside Access Scheme, Moorland Scheme, and other small specialist schemes.
- 1995 Organic Aid Scheme to help cost of conversion & management.
- 1998 Arable Stewardship Pilots for development of CSS & ES.
- 1999 Organic Farming Scheme to aid conversion & management.

2000s

- CROW 2000 - Presumption in favour of conserving SSSIs
- 2001 Hill Farm Allowance Upland support to maintain landscapes & rural communities.
- 2003 Review of schemes
- 2005 Single Payment Scheme For maintaining land & environment in Good Agricultural & Environmental Condition (GAEC) and meeting Statutory Management Requirements (SMRs). Environmental Stewardship (ES) comprehensive national scheme with 2 tiers: • Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) including SSSI land; and Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) 'broad & shallow'. Also Organic ELS / HLS variants. Multiple objectives including: biodiversity, historic environment, resource protection, access, climate change.
- 2007 ES Review of Progress. HLS more tightly targetted: increased ELS advice and focus on priority options.
- 2008 Conservation and Enhancement Scheme For management of SSSI's and other land where ES is not appropriate.
- 2009 Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE) Industry initiative to retain and exceed benefits of set-aside.

2010s

- 2010 Uplands ELS Introduction of ELS variant for hill farmers.
- 2013 Making Environmental Stewardship More Effective (MESME): changes & new options to increase environmental outcomes.

Entry Level Stewardship (ELS)

Entry Level Stewardship (ELS)² provides a straightforward approach to supporting the good stewardship of the countryside. This is done through simple and effective land management that goes beyond the Single Payment Scheme requirement to maintain land in good agricultural and environmental condition. Nearly 60% of England's agricultural land is in Entry Level Stewardship. ELS agreements are for five years.

Points are established for the range of environmental management options farmers can agree to provide over the course of the agreement. There are over 65 management options to choose from, suitable for most farm types such as hedgerow management, providing wild bird cover and creating buffer strips. In general one must achieve a total of 30 points per ha, and in return will receive funding of £30 per hectare, per year, for the whole farm (a lower rate applies to larger parcels of land above the Moorland Line).

For example: A 100 ha lowland holding would need 3,000 (30 x 100) points to qualify for ELS, and would receive an annual payment of £3,000. One could achieve those 3,000 points through ELS in many ways such as the following.

| Option description | Points available | Measurement | Earned points |
|--|------------------|-------------|---------------|
| Enhanced hedgerow management | 42 per 100m | 500m | 210 |
| Permanent grassland with low inputs | 85 per ha | 8 ha | 680 |
| Ditch management | 24 per 100m | 750m | 180 |
| Management of field corners | 400 per ha | 1 ha | 400 |
| Wild bird seed mixture | 450 per ha | 2 ha | 900 |
| 12m buffer strips for water courses on cultivated land | 400 per ha | 1.5 ha | 600 |
| Skylark plots | 5 per plot | 18 plots | 90 |
| Total | | | 3,060 |

For another example: Nearly 40% of all England's dairy farms are now in Entry Level Stewardship, demonstrating the ways in which good environmental land management is being successfully married with intensively managed grassland systems. David has a 150-head Holstein/Friesian dairy herd - which produces 1.2 million litres of milk per year - 250 breeding ewes, and an intensive beef enterprise. The 600 acre farm also produces milling wheat, forage maize and barley.

David has chosen ELS options which complement his existing farming practices, such as ditch management, overwintered stubbles and just under 2 miles of woodland fence maintenance. He also has mixed stocking, low input grassland and maintenance of in-field tree options on the farm. David has been in Entry Level Stewardship since April 2006. As a result of his environmental management, David has seen an increased number and variety of species in his farm.

Organic Entry Level Stewardship (OELS)

Organic Entry Level Stewardship (OELS) is the organic strand of ELS. It is geared to organic and organic/conventional mixed farming systems and is open to all farmers not receiving Organic Farming Scheme aid.

² Natural England (2013). Entry Level Stewardship: Environmental Stewardship Handbook, Fourth Edition – January 2013 (NE349)

Organic Entry Level Stewardship (OELS) is open to all farmers, including those in the uplands, who manage all or part of their land organically, to deliver simple yet effective environmental management. OELS agreements are for 5 years.

To apply for funding, the land to put into OELS must be registered as ‘fully organic’ or ‘in conversion to organic farming’ with an Organic Inspection Body (i.e., copies of valid certificates of registration and accompanying schedules must be submitted with application). One will receive a fixed payment – of £60 per ha, per year – for all organic land that enters into the scheme. In return for these payments, one will be required to deliver 60 points worth of management options, per ha of the organic land.

Aid for converting conventionally farmed improved land and established top-fruit orchards to organic farming is also available through OELS at rates of £175 per hectare per year for the first two years of the OELS agreement on improved land.

The OELS points are calculated in two ways:

- Automatically receive 30 points per ha for the organic land that enters into the scheme, to reflect the inherent environmental benefits delivered through organic farming.
- The remaining 30 points will be made up from the chosen management options.

Organic land in parcels of 15ha or more, within the Moorland Line is NOT eligible for OELS – it must be in ELS, for which the payment rate is £8 per ha per year.

For example: A 100 ha lowland holding would need 6,000 (60 x 100) points to qualify for OELS, and would receive an annual payment of £6,000. One could achieve those 6,000 points in many ways, including:

| Option description | Points available | Measurement | Earned points |
|--|------------------|-------------|---------------|
| Automatic points achieved for organic land | 30 points per ha | 100 ha | 3,000 |
| Enhanced hedgerow management | 42 per 100m | 500m | 210 |
| Permanent grassland with low inputs | 115 per ha | 8 ha | 920 |
| Stonewall protection and maintenance | 15 per 100m | 8 ha | 120 |
| Management of field corners | 500 per ha | 1 ha | 500 |
| Wild bird seed mixture | 550 per ha | 1.5 ha | 825 |
| 4m buffer strips on intensive grassland | 500 per ha | 1.5 ha | 750 |
| Skylark plots | 5 per plot | 18 plots | 90 |
| Total | | | 6,415 |

Case example: Piercebridge Farm in County Durham, run by tenant farmers Chris and Liz Hodgson, is a 122 hectare organic grassland farm situated on the estate of Lord Barnard. The Hodgsons rear organic beef cattle, sheep, pigs and chickens on the farm and have a flock of 500 laying hens. Organic produce from their farm is also sold in their successful on-site farm.

A lot of the farmland has been reclaimed from gravel extraction, and a priority has been to improve biodiversity by extensive planting and restoration of hedgerows. The farm was originally entered into an

Organic Entry Level Stewardship agreement in October 2005. Chris and Liz have chosen a selection of ES options, such as low input grassland and management of hedges and stone walls, which complement their organic farming practice and help to protect the historic features on the farm. These options also help to support wildlife, and Chris has noticed an increase in a huge variety of species, especially in our riverside meadows, including otters, bumblebees, yellowhammers, lapwings, grey partridge and orchids.

Uplands Entry Level Stewardship (Uplands ELS)

Uplands Entry Level Stewardship (Uplands ELS) was launched in February 2010 to support hill farmers with payments for environmental management. This strand of Environmental Stewardship succeeds the Hill Farm Allowance which had its final payments to farmers in 2010. It is open to all farmers with land in Severely Disadvantaged Areas, regardless of the size of the holding.

Uplands ELS is open to all eligible farmers with land in Severely Disadvantaged Areas (SDA), regardless of the size of the holding. There are many management options to choose from, such as cattle grazing and maintenance of traditional farm buildings – ensuring that there is the flexibility to select the right options for farm business.

The standard payment rate is £62 per ha per year (£23/ha on moorland parcels of 15ha or more) – this provides a secure, regular payment. One can also choose from a range of capital works such as stone wall restoration and woodland/watercourse fencing.

In addition to a set of compulsory requirements applied to all SDA land (moorland, commons and grassland/arable categories), agreement holders will also need to deliver one or more options to meet the points target for the holding. Options can be selected from the existing suite of ELS options and/or from Uplands ELS options. They include a limited number of capital items in recognition of the importance of the upland landscape, for example, the restoration of stone walls, stone hedge banks and earth banks.

| Options for Uplands ELS | Moorland parcels 15ha or larger | Moorland parcels smaller than 15 ha | Grassland and arable below the Moorland Line |
|--|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| Stone-faced hedge bank management 24 points per 100m (both sides of the bank) 12 points per 100m (one side of the bank) | Yes | Yes | |
| Stone wall protection and maintenance 32 points per 100m | Yes | Yes | |
| Earth bank management 18 points per 100m(both sides of the bank) 9 points per 100m(one side of the bank) | Yes | Yes | |
| Hedgerow restoration Maximum 40m per year, 10 points per metre | Yes | Yes | Yes |

| | | | |
|--|-----|-----|-----|
| Stone-faced hedge bank restoration Maximum 40m per year, 55 points per metre | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Earth bank restoration Maximum 40m per year, 12.5 points per metre | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Stonewall restoration Maximum 40m per year, 30 points per metre | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Sheep fencing around small woods Maximum 900m erected in year one 50 points per 100m per year | | | Yes |

Higher Level Stewardship (HLS)

Higher Level Stewardship (HLS)³ involves more complex types of management and agreements are tailored to local circumstances. HLS applications will be assessed against specific local targets and agreements will be offered where they meet these targets and represent good value for money.

HLS aims to deliver significant environmental benefits in priority areas. It involves more complex environmental management requiring support and advice from local advisers, to develop a comprehensive agreement that achieves a wide range of environmental benefits over a longer period of time. HLS agreements last for ten years.

HLS is being targeted in 110 areas across England. These target areas are where Natural England are seeking the most environmental benefits from HLS agreements for wildlife, landscape, the historic environment and resource protection. Outside these areas, all other applications depend upon the current national priorities and features present on the particular holding.

Depending on the features on a farm, there are a variety of HLS management options and capital items which may be suitable to deliver the best environmental outcomes. But, unlike ELS, the level of payments one will receive depends on the number of options one is able to deliver. HLS is a targeted and competitive scheme that is only available to farmers and land managers in particular areas of the country or with particular high priority features on the holding.

From 1 July 2011, a 3-Tier application process is in place for HLS, which was introduced following a review of HLS delivery and feedback from customers to allow the delivery of the right level of advice/support to applicants in line with the complexity of the application. It ensures quicker application preparation and processing timescales. Holdings that meet the 'Fast-track' criteria will benefit from an earlier start date and contact with a Natural England adviser throughout the application process.

All HLS applications will be assigned to one of three tiers depending on the complexity of application. The three tiers are:

- Fast track – Suitable for holdings where only one Natural England visit is required. The Farm Environment Plan (FEP) is produced by Natural England.

³ Natural England (2013). Higher Level Stewardship: Environmental Stewardship Handbook, Fourth Edition – January 2013 (NE350)

- Standard – Suitable for all other holdings and where a maximum of two visits by a Natural England adviser is required. The FEP is produced by FEP surveyors and/or third party agents.
- Complex – Suitable for the most complex holdings. Complex cases may require up to four Natural England adviser visits. The FEP is produced by FEP surveyors and/or third party agents.

Natural England has produced a set of targeting maps to increase the environmental benefits delivered through Higher Level Stewardship. These maps will help secure the most appropriate management in geographic areas where environmental outcomes are likely to be greatest. The targeting maps are the first systematic joining together of information on biodiversity, landscape, natural resource protection, public access and historic interests. In addition a range of themes have been identified which provide an opportunity for all farmers and managers to enter into, or continue with, Environmental Stewardship schemes, irrespective of geography, providing they are delivering management options that support the themes.

Case example: Sir Richard Sutton's Settled Estates in Lincolnshire entered into an Organic Entry Level/Higher Level Stewardship agreement in February 2008. Chris Dowse, manager of the 3,000 hectare arable estate, felt that the application process for both OELS and HLS was made very much easier by the help and support of the Natural England advisers. The agreement will provide environmental and historical benefits on the estate, such as the protection and preservation of nine scheduled monuments. Funding will also help the local community and visitors, with plans to restore parkland benefiting those using existing footpaths, and further proposed access routes across the estate allowing groups to visit and gain a greater understanding of a mixed organic farming system.

Habitat restoration across the estate will provide huge biodiversity benefits for farmland bird species such as lapwing, barn owls and grey partridge, with options such as fallow plots, wild bird seed mix and pollen and nectar mix widely distributed throughout the landscape. The farm is an excellent example of how modern farming methods can happily sit alongside the delivery of environmental and historic objectives.