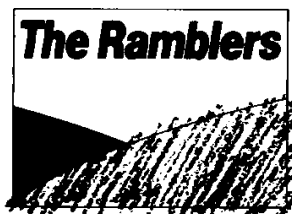


Wildlife and  
Countryside



## Agri-environment Schemes: Framework Document

### Wildlife and Countryside Link's response to DEFRA's consultation on the future of Agri-environment Schemes



## 1.0 Introduction

Wildlife and Countryside Link welcomes the opportunity to comment upon the future of agri-environment schemes. Link brings together 33 voluntary organisations concerned with the conservation and protection of wildlife and the countryside. Our members practice and advocate environmentally sensitive land management and food production practices and encourage respect for and enjoyment of natural landscapes and features, the historic environment and biodiversity. Taken together, our members have the support of over 6 million people in the UK. Our members are also lead partners for nearly half of UK BAP species action plans.

This statement is supported by the following organisations:

Bat Conservation Trust  
Buglife: The Invertebrate Conservation Trust  
Butterfly Conservation  
Council for British Archaeology  
National Federation for Badger Groups  
Open Spaces Society  
Plantlife  
Ramblers' Association  
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds  
The Wildlife Trusts  
Woodland Trust

WCL's response to this consultation is in two parts. Firstly we have identified several important overarching issues that are common concerns from across the membership of Link. The further sections present our joint views on specific issues within the consultation document.

## 2.0 General Issues

We support the proposed integration of schemes outlined in this consultation and hope that it will pave the way to more joined-up thinking in the wider land management of our countryside. The integrated management of issues such as biodiversity, food production, forestry, non-food crops, carbon management, water management, waste management, access, recreation and education must be addressed if we are to achieve a truly sustainable land use system.

We would like to see more emphasis on integrated environmental management as a core objective and on using management prescriptions to achieve multiple environmental outcomes. Overall we are concerned that the proposals within the Framework document have not yet been progressed sufficiently to deliver holistic policies. Overall we believe that agri-environment schemes should be based upon national and regional environmental targets that should be integrated into land use strategies at all levels of administration.

The agri-environment schemes have an important role to play in delivering the government's biodiversity targets and integrating biodiversity within landscape-scale schemes. We believe there should be greater emphasis on creating large-scale joined-up applications that have regard to biodiversity and resource management. The higher tier scheme should aim to maintain and enhance existing features, including priority habitats and species. The creation of new features should concentrate on buffering, linking and extending existing features. Schemes

can also help farmers meet the objective of improved resource protection, however new regulatory powers, combined with improved farm advice and the use of appropriate fiscal instruments should ultimately be the main methods for addressing the problem of diffuse pollution.

We welcome the more open thinking in terms of integration of woodland in both the ELS and the higher tiers, and therefore the message this will convey to landowners and farmers about joined-up thinking on land use policies. However we are concerned that the current proposals regarding woodland grants in the higher tier will confuse landowners. We believe that the grants for woodland creation up to 3 hectares per holding will help to increase the cover of woodland on farms, however this new woodland needs to be targeted properly on the farm to buffer and extend existing features and not simply create more small isolated fragments of woodland in poor field corners.

We have serious concerns that the access part of agri-environment schemes review is becoming increasingly isolated from the rest of the process. Access must remain an integral part of both ELS and higher tier schemes. This can be achieved by ensuring that even if, regrettably, there are no specific access options available to Entry Level Scheme participants the ELS can still play an important role in improving access by ensuring that no public money is provided to those who break the law by obstructing public rights of way.

The CRoW Act will only provide access to areas of certain types of landscape. There is still a role for higher tier schemes to provide access to countryside that is not targeted by the CRoW Act, and to provide new links between areas of open country that are opened up to the public through the CRoW Act, even if these are permissive ones. There are further opportunities for access options in agri-environment schemes to enhance the existing network of rights of way and thus increase the benefits of public access as a way of re-connecting consumers with farming practices, as an educational tool and to enable the public to enjoy the public benefits of schemes, including environmental improvements and landscape protection.

The term “income foregone plus costs incurred” should be replaced by a term that includes the concept of the environmental value that is being bought. This is a shift in concept towards paying for the commercial cost of habitat creation and/or management, including recognition of the short and long-term economic consequences to the farmer or landowner for doing so.

### **3.0 Objectives**

- i. The multi objective nature of the scheme should not compromise its ability to produce single objective agreements where these are appropriate (3.2.3). Equally, single objective agreements should not substantially detract from general good management and should take account of broader needs to rectify rather than reinforce existing areas of relative neglect, and be focussed on the higher tier schemes.
- ii. Agri-environment schemes should be based on national and regional environmental targets that should be integrated into land use strategies at all levels of administration (3.2.5).
- iii. UK BAP, SSSI and PSA targets should inform decisions relating to biodiversity objectives, but should not be pursued to the detriment of other, less quantifiable, or less well

developed objectives; for example landscape enhancement and protection of the historic environment for which the need for better provision is helpfully recognised;

- iv. There is a fundamental need to invest in developing clearer historic environment and landscape objectives and targets, recognising DEFRA's statutory obligation under the Agriculture Act, and building on international obligations and ERDP key priorities;
- v. Agri-environment schemes have a role to play in helping farmers meet the objective of improving resource protection however new regulatory powers, combined with improved farm advice and the use of appropriate fiscal instruments, should ultimately be the main methods for addressing the problem of diffuse pollution (3.2.7).
- vi. Resource protection should be an objective but agri-environment schemes should only support enhanced resource protection that goes beyond good practice standards. It is vital that a clear base-line standard is established and this is articulated to farmers. Resource protection measures should also be proactive rather than passive and should complement and enhance biodiversity, landscape and historic environment objectives, and the majority of cases should be financed via the ELS leaving the higher tiers to tackle particular problem areas and other objectives;
- vii. Better integration both of national policies and mechanisms at a catchment level will be required to capitalise on the potential that exists to link flood water storage, habitat creation to benefit biodiversity, coastal flood management and resource protection (3.2.9).
- viii. There is a need for much greater sign of integration with woodland schemes rather than simply overlap, which the consultation document suggests. Paragraph 3.2.9 quotes the Curry Commission suggestion for inclusion of flood management within a 'new single stewardship scheme'. The same sentence from Curry included woodland schemes within this new scheme. While we are pleased to see woodland included in the AES framework, we believe more could be done in terms of joined up thinking across departments. The relationship with woodland schemes also needs to be reflected within the "Relationships" section (5.1.2).
- ix. Link does not believe that genetic conservation of farming breeds of crops and livestock should be a scheme objective within the new agri-environment framework unless necessary for habitat maintenance for biodiversity. (3.2.8)

#### **4.0 Broad Structure**

- i. Link supports the combining of 2 tiers (ESA and CSS) to form a single higher tier scheme and the establishment of the lower tier ELS;
- ii. Link supports the principle of additional capital payments for specific management activities - these should, since it would involve additional payment, be assessed for appropriateness and desirability through an environmental management scheme or accredited adviser. Funding for an environmental management plan should be available through the capital grants scheme.

## 5.0 Relationships

- i. Link urges the UK Government to vigorously pursue more and tougher environmental standards as the basis of cross compliance conditions in the latest reform negotiations of the CAP (5.2.9).
- ii. Link agrees with the proposal that the ELS scheme should make available higher payments to organic farmers only in return for additional contributions to the scheme's environmental objectives (5.2.6).
- iii. Link urges the Government to take a more proactive and joined up approach in order to address the problems in uplands. (5.2.12)
- iv. Link seeks more clarity about the integration of woodland into Agri-Environment Schemes. It is not currently clear what is meant by "integration". The occasional reference to woodland schemes is not integration. On this point the framework is rather weak.
- v. There appears to be some confusion between FWPS and woodland creation within the higher tiers. FWPS supports woodland creation on farms. As far as we are aware there are no proposals from the Forestry Commission to redefine FWPS (5.2.8)

## 6.0 Design Brief for Entry Level Scheme

- i. Link agrees that self-assessment is currently the most practical way of administering the ELS, but are keen that entrants have the opportunity to complete an environmental management plan at some stage during their agreement. This could be triggered by, for example, application for capital works payments, renewal of agreement or entry into the higher tiers. Funding for the environmental management plan should be made available through the capital grants scheme;
- ii. Link is disappointed that access is not included in Entry Level Scheme. Para 7.2.2 states that higher tiers will enhance the ELS where more complex or demanding management is needed. We do not believe access is particularly complex or demanding and we do not see how any enhancement of access will be possible if it is not part of the ELS.
- iii. Payment of any public money should be withheld in cases where an applicant for either tier of the schemes obstructs public rights of way.

## 7.0 Design Brief for Higher Tier

- i. The value of high quality areas is an important factor in the design of the scheme however it is also important that the new scheme should not focus on priority *areas* at the expense of priority *features* in the wider countryside (7.2.3)
- ii. While existing designations are one indication of existing value they do not cover all environmental characteristics and do not necessarily reflect the level of environmental pressure. We believe a more sophisticated approach is needed making use of the growing multi-stranded data now available for mapping environmental risk or pressure as a third key strand.

- iii. Link welcomes the merger of ESA and CSS if the combination of these means access is given more prominence in the higher tier as a result of being excluded from the ELS.
- iv. Link would like to see access mentioned in the five broad categories of measures for higher tier schemes (para 7.2.15) as it is at the beginning of the document.
- v. Link welcomes proposals in 7.2.5 to link additional agreed target frameworks such as landscape to scheme targeting, but this paragraph is rather vague and is unclear about what this actually means or how this would actually happen. Furthermore the basis for such targeting needs very careful assessment to avoid bias between environmental objectives – especially where these are under-developed.
- vi. Link supports the proposal for ascending tiers for high priority areas. This is a key area for development of landscape scale proposals to expand and buffer existing high value habitats on farms - we suggest that the third tier would be the landscape scale activity tier and would see this as linked to the idea of incentives for grouped applications.
- vii. Although implicit within the document we seek an assurance that entry to the higher tiers would normally be via the Entry Level first- this is not explicit. We seek an assurance that a farmer needs to meet the requirements of the ELS before progressing further up tiers, unless there are exceptional circumstances that mean that entry to the ELS would not be possible but there are clear public benefits from a Higher-level agreement.
- viii. Link believes that further work is needed on the relationship between the entry-level scheme and higher tiers. Especially with regard to the ELS points system where on some holdings this may not have been sufficient to deliver all the baseline ELS measures warranted on an environmentally complex holding.
- ix. Link believes that grants for woodland creation up to 3 ha per holding will help to increase the cover of woodland on farms and give a means of diversification. ELS and woodland integration seems to have worked well in the pre-pilot trials, however we are concerned about overlap with other woodland grant schemes in the higher tiers. We are also concerned that the AES framework “picks up” all woodland on farms in the entry level, when account is taken of environmental assets. While we fully support this we are concerned that above ELS this farm woodland is simply “dropped out” of the AES framework, if woodland is over 3ha.
- x. Paragraph 7.2.12 addresses woodland creation, however it is not clear how this would work with regard to relationships and responsibilities of the Forestry Commission. We have concerns about overlap. Fundamentally we are concerned about confusion for the applicant- Link have previously proposed rationalising the number of schemes.
- xi. Link seeks confirmation about who will be eligible for higher tier woodland grants. Will all landowners be eligible, or simply farmers? Again, a need for closer integration between DEFRA and FC to examine AES and woodland scheme delivery.
- xii. On farms with little or no existing woodland Link would prefer the scheme to enable the creation of a single 3ha block of woodland rather than 3 separate 1 ha blocks, which the framework currently implies. We consider that larger blocks of woodland are more likely to deliver biodiversity and rural development outcomes.
- xiii. Link would wish to see this new woodland targeted on the farm as appropriate for maximum benefit, i.e. against existing woodland, rather than simply making up small

isolated fragments of woodland in poor field corners. There is a need to avoid damage to archaeological sites

- xiv. The woodland situation is confused when considered in the context of 7.2.15 (i) & (ii), as this would suggest that in some parts of the country, where maintenance of high environmental and landscape features should be the priority, higher tiers would support woodland as the priority habitat as in some areas this is undoubtedly the most important biodiversity and landscape feature- again a need for more integrated thinking both regionally and nationally between DEFRA and FC.
- xv. Care also needs to be taken to ensure that Agri Environment Schemes do not support measures that are legislated for under Habitats Directive and or WFD (7.2.15 iii).
- xvi. Link does not agree that it is possible to offer "modest bonus payments" (7.2.17) based on monitoring individual agreements without being very subjective and potentially unfair as well as administratively costly. But we believe that bonuses or incentives linked to generic issues that need encouragement would be beneficial. We would commend incentives for a) long-term commitment and renewal of unbroken involvement in agri-environment schemes and b) groups of farmers collaborating to achieve larger scale coverage. In both cases, the level of any incentive or bonus payments could in part reflect the likelihood of reduced administrative costs in dealing with renewals and jointly submitted proposals, as well as the added environmental value that such arrangements would deliver.

## **8.0 Payments system and agreement terms**

- i. The weighting of the payment scheme should be recalibrated to allow five to ten percent of the 20% allowable incentive payment should be used to compensate farmers for the 'hassle' factor (8.2.2). The remaining incentive allowance should be used to link options to their environmental value (8.2.2-4). The payment floor for agri-environment schemes should be 100% of the starting payment (8.2.9)
- ii. The term 'income forgone plus costs incurred' should be replaced by a term that includes the concept of the environmental value that is being bought. This is a shift in concept towards paying for the commercial cost of environmental management and/or enhancement, including recognition of the short and long-term economic consequences to the payee of doing so.
- iii. Link agrees that ELS should be five-year schemes in the first instance 8.2.6. However we consider that the 10-year agreement term offers better continuity for wildlife enhancement than 5-year agreements. On this basis we would especially welcome the revised item (8.2.11 v.) for even longer terms for certain features such as conservation of archaeological sites and other historic features or woodland creation.

## **9.0 Self Assessment, farm plans and audits**

- i. Link supports the option of a payment for the production of a detailed environmental stock-take and management plan.

## 10.0 Regionalisation

- i. Strategic Land Management Plans at a regional level to help target AES schemes could be very useful, through this we could begin to achieve joined up land management. However we would welcome further opportunities to explore this area and discuss the best way forward as not all areas currently address these issues, for instance National Parks work to a different set of objectives to most local authorities. However there needs to be regard for Catchment Area Management Plans to reflect WFD implementation and regard to biodiversity as outlined in England's Biodiversity Strategy.
- ii. Link agrees there is a need for a co-ordinating mechanism (10.2.7) for local government to be able to regionally co-ordinate BAPS etc. We would certainly like to see Local Access Forums included in any co-ordinating mechanism as a way of ensuring that access is based on public need rather than where land managers decide to supply it.
- iii. Link believes that allowing more regional and local variation would increase effectiveness of schemes, allow them to support management of locally distinctive features, and help engage local communities. This need not complicate the scheme but would be a way of reflecting local priorities which would make the scheme more meaningful to both farmers and the public. We welcome DEFRA's decision that applicants will be provided with regionally tailored guidance and believe this should be produced at a regional level and include descriptions of Joint Character Areas and measures particularly appropriate to those areas, which farmers could then use to inform their decisions.

## 11.0 Advice Support and Training

- i. We would like to see greater recognition that information and advice represents an investment in good stewardship that a) has longer term benefits than just the life of a particular agreement, and b) is of value for general cross compliance, voluntary action and support of other strands of the ERDP, reaching well beyond the scope of the AE schemes.
- ii. Effective advisory support will be crucial in underpinning the success of the scheme (11.2.1-15). Environmental audits of existing assets and sound farm planning for soil nutrient and biodiversity management should form the basis of the agri-environment framework (9.2.2-7)
- iii. Environmental management planning should be built around the consideration of a range of management options and how these can be applied and integrated to achieve multiple environmental objectives in ways that best suit the environmental assets and characteristics of the holding, and the farming regime. A sequential approach starting with maintenance of existing assets and moving to opportunities for enhancement should be considered. (9.2.6)
- iv. Investment in demonstration farms and training representatives from the farmer community who could act as advocates would be an effective way to engage the



farming community in environmental management (11.2.15). We also support supplementary payments for group applications.

- v. The integration of advice will be more effective at meeting the needs of the end user however woodland proposals within the higher tiers will require consistency between RDS and FC advice. (11.2.4)
- vi. Link is concerned about the current relative lack of resources for dedicated historic environment information and advisory services.

## **12.0 Administration Systems and IT**

- i. Link welcomes the development of common IT systems such as Genesis and MAGIC. We believe that if these include mapped details relating to rights of way and access there will be better opportunities for DEFRA to monitor cross compliance and enable the public to learn where access is available. Rights of way should be shown on farm plans and on databases when these are developed.
- ii. Link is unclear about which "simpler measures" would be moved from the higher tiers to the ELS to theoretically enable technical advice resources to focus on more complex options (Para 12.2.3), thus allowing the simpler measures to be dealt with in a more hands off way, (preceding paragraph). From our experience with access in CSS a hands off approach is not always preferable and can mean the quality of a scheme component can suffer if it is not monitored.

## **13.0 Timetable for change and transitional arrangements**

- i. The transition between the two schemes should be managed in such a way that ERDP funding is not lost and that existing AE agreement-holders are not penalised or excluded. If the scheme is closed in 2004 then the resulting funds should to be used for a combination of farm audits to allow prospective entrants to join the new higher tier scheme quickly in 2005 and targeted capital grants to address infrastructure problems to help farms achieve minimum environmental standards (13.2.11-12).

## **14.0 Monitoring**

- i. The new agri-environment monitoring strategy should have clear objectives. The monitoring of farmland birds should act as a useful barometer for general ecosystem health (14.2.2). The effectiveness of the schemes in conserving biodiversity should be more fully assessed by monitoring sensitive groups such as plants, butterflies and bumblebees.
- ii. Feedback and scheme development should be ongoing to ensure the schemes evolve.