

Countryside Stewardship Scheme 2016 Factsheet

This scheme relates to England and arose out of the CAP reforms. Member states, including Scotland (Agri-Environment Climate Scheme) and Wales (Glastir) formulated their own individual schemes to suit local circumstances with, broadly, the same aims. The schemes run until 2020.

Countryside Stewardship (“the scheme”) provides incentives for land managers to look after their environment. The scheme is open to all eligible farmers, woodland owners, foresters and other land managers through a competitive application process.

Unlike previous rural development schemes, applications for most elements of Countryside Stewardship are competitive, which means that applications will be scored against criteria, and that not everyone who applies will be successful. Targeting and scoring will encourage applicants to choose options that help achieve the environmental priorities in their local area.

The main priority for Countryside Stewardship is to protect and enhance the natural environment, in particular, the diversity of wildlife (biodiversity) and water quality. Other outcomes include:

- flood management
- the historic environment
- landscape character
- genetic conservation
- educational access

The scheme is jointly run by Natural England, Forestry Commission England and the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) on behalf of Defra.

This single scheme supersedes the following schemes which are now closed to new applications:

- Environmental Stewardship (ES) including organic and upland strands;
- The English Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS); and
- Capital grants from the Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF) programme.

There are three main elements within Countryside Stewardship:

- **Mid-Tier:** mostly 5 year agreements for environmental improvements in the wider countryside, including multi-year management options and capital grants;
- **Higher Tier:** mostly 5 year agreements for environmentally significant sites, commons and woodlands where more complex management requires support from Natural England or the Forestry Commission, including management options and capital grants; and

- **Capital Grants:** a range of 1-2 year grants for hedgerows and boundaries, improving water quality, developing implementation plans, feasibility studies, woodland creation (establishment), woodland improvement and tree health.

The scheme also provides support for organic conversion and management and access to a Facilitation Fund for joint farmer/conservation group projects.

Countryside Stewardship offers a range of management options and one-off payments towards the costs of certain capital items or activities. Applicants are encouraged to select options and capital items that are closest to the environmental priorities for their area.

The scheme is competitive with Mid-Tier, Higher Tier and Capital Grant applications being scored and ranked according to their score. The highest scoring applications will, subject to the available budget, be offered agreements for the applicant's consideration and potential acceptance.

An exception to the competitive process is applications for organic conversion and management options. These are not scored and all eligible applications will be accepted subject to the availability of budget.

Mid-Tier agreements aim to address environmental issues in the wider countryside, such as:

- Reducing diffuse water pollution from agriculture; and
- Improving the farmed environment for farmland birds and pollinators.
- Mid-Tier agreements must have a total value of at least £5,000 in options over 5 years.

Higher Tier agreements are for the most environmentally significant sites and woodlands. These sites will usually need complex management such as:

- Habitat restoration and creation;
- Woodland improvement;
- Woodland creation and associated maintenance;
- Measures for priority species, and vegetation mosaics; and
- Measures for the historic environment.
- Land managers will need one-to-one advice and support from Natural England or Forestry Commission advisers to help them to build their application for Higher Tier.