

# Assessing the impact of advice and support on the outcomes of Higher Level Stewardship agreements

Agri-environment monitoring theme: Higher Level Stewardship outcomes

## What are the issues?

Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) was introduced in 2005, to provide support to farmers and other land managers in managing land for important environmental benefits. It is run under the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) and contributes to strategic priorities for biodiversity, natural resource protection, sustainable farming and food and sustainable rural communities. HLS agreements are developed by the land manager with support from Natural England (NE) project officers and input from other organisations that give advice to farmers. The scheme closed to new entrants in 2014, but existing agreements will continue for their ten year lifespan.

Although the importance of providing good quality advice and support in the achievement of outcomes from agri-environment scheme agreements is widely recognised, the evidence base is largely anecdotal. This project was set up to generate more substantive evidence of the impact of advice and support on the achievement of HLS agreements and scheme outcomes, in order to inform delivery of agri-environment schemes under the next Rural Development Programme. This project was run in parallel with another project (ref LM0433), which complemented an NE desk-based QA exercise and compared with results of a field survey. Whilst both projects studied the impact of advice and support, LM0433 covered agreements established in 2013 under new Natural England (NE) guidance, whereas LM0432 was concerned with the impacts of agreement set-up and subsequent management, advice and support on progress towards agreement outcomes, for agreements established pre-2009.

## What were the aims of the project?

The project objectives were:

- to assess progress towards the achievement of intended HLS agreement outcomes, including the assessment of feature condition in relation to agreement Indicators of Success (IoS);
- to assess observed results of management in relation to agreement management prescriptions (MPs);
- to gather and analyse information on advice and support provision in order to assess its quality and appropriateness, including information from agreement holders, NE staff and third parties;
- to evaluate the relationship between quality, appropriateness and timing of advice provision and progress towards or achievement of agreement outcomes.

These objectives were achieved through a combination of interviews with agreement holders, interviews with those providing advice and support and field assessments, and field assessments to evaluate the condition of habitats and features being managed under the scheme and hence the progress towards achieving the intended outcomes of the agreement. A total of 100 agreements initiated before 2009 were assessed, sampled at random across the English regions.

The study began in September 2013 ended in January 2015.



Figure 1: (Source: Fera/Tim Milsom)

## Which policy areas did the research inform?

The work described here informed the delivery of Countryside Stewardship, the successor to Environmental Stewardship, in particular relating agreement holder understanding and likely environmental outcomes to the provision of advice and support.



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# Assessing the role of advice and support in the establishment of Higher Level Stewardship agreements

## What did the results show?

### Agreement set-up

Correct set-up of the agreement is crucial for achievement of desired outcomes. Most options were appropriate for the habitat and parcel concerned, but 12% were assessed as inappropriate. In a few cases this was due to the FEP code being incorrect. 3% of IoS were considered to be of an inappropriate type and there was some concern about a further 7%. 5% were set at an inappropriate level with concern about a further 19%. A range of problems with IoS setting were reported. 97% of MPs were assessed as appropriate for the option and parcel concerned.

### Agreement outcomes

61% of IoS had been achieved, with a further 18% on target, but 21% were thought unlikely to be achieved. Of this 21%, 41% were due to failure to follow MPs, 44% due to problems with setting of IoS, and 15% due to other aspects of agreement set-up.

89% of MPs were being followed correctly. 72% of capital items had been completed by the due date, 84% of which had been completed to a high standard. 9% were partly complete, and 19% had not been started.

### Agreement holder views on HLS and their agreements

99% of agreement holders felt able to deliver the changes required by their agreement. 25% consulted agreement documentation regularly, but a fifth looked at it less than once a year. Management would have been similar in the absence of an HLS agreement for only 14% of options, showing a high level of scheme additionality, and also highlighting the risk to the managed habitats and features in the absence of the scheme.

### Agreement holder views on advice and support

IoS had been clearly explained in the majority of cases, but in 15% they were considered unclear. Management required was unclear in less than 10% of cases however. 71% felt that advice had been important in delivery of the agreement. There was concern about the number of changes in advisers; only 24% of agreements had experienced no change, with 23% seeing 3 or more changes. Lack of follow-up support was also highlighted as an issue.

### Views of advisers

Advisers thought advice had been crucial to agreement success in 39% of cases, and important in a further 27%. They indicated that 86% understood the advice well and 81% had a good grasp of environmental outcomes of options.

It was acknowledged that more frequent visits would have been desirable, but limitation of resources prevented these in many cases.



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Figure 3: (Source: Countryside Agency/C. Hedley)

### Factors affecting outcomes

Results were analysed to test relationships between 'input indicators' of agreement holder characteristics, advice metrics and agreement complexity, and 'output indicators' covering agreement set-up and outcomes.

A positive correlation was found between the quality of the agreement set up and outcomes. Complex agreements had lower levels of appropriate options and MPs that were correctly followed, and complexity also negatively affected delivery of outcomes. Agreement holder knowledge had a significant impact on outcomes (as well as agreement set-up) for complex agreements, indicating the importance of ensuring that managers of such agreements are sufficiently well informed.

### Conclusions

Performance was good for most of the metrics examined, with the majority of agreements working well. For the minority where this was not the case, agreement set-up was identified as a key issue, with more problems arising from this than from incorrect implementation of MPs by agreement holders. Particular attention needs to be paid to setting of IoS. Lack of follow-up visits and changes in adviser personnel were also issues that need to be addressed.

## Where can I find further information about this and related research?

Please contact the Natural England Project Officer:  
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Further information can be found on the [Defra Science Search website](#)

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