

Assessing the role of advice and support in the establishment 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 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.

It is widely recognised that the provision of good quality advice and support can help to ensure that option choices are appropriate, and improve the agreement holder's understanding of what is required, potentially improving achievement of outcomes. In response to recommendations from the Making Environmental Stewardship More Effective (MESME) project, NE has developed new guidance for the development and operational delivery of HLS agreements. This has been in place since February 2013 and NE carried out a desk based quality assurance (QA) exercise on new agreements to test its implementation. This project was set up to complement and support the NE internal QA exercise, providing information on the quality of agreement set up and the agreement holders' understanding of their agreement in order to inform delivery of agri-environment schemes under the next Rural Development Programme. The work was carried out by the Food and Environment Research Agency, Countryside and Community Research Institute, ADAS UK Ltd and Environment Systems Ltd.

What were the aims of the project?

The project objectives were to provide an assessment of:

- the appropriateness of option placement, intended agreement outcomes and management prescriptions, given the physical assets of the holding and the local targeting objectives,
- agreement holder understanding of, engagement with and attitude towards agreement requirements, intended outcomes and prescriptions,
- the quality of agreement establishment as a foundation for future delivery,
- the impact of agreement holder understanding and engagement and quality of agreement establishment on the potential to achieve agreement outcomes.

These objectives were achieved through a combination of interviews with agreement holders, field assessments and a remote sensing activity to evaluate the quality of agreement set-up. A total of 102 agreements initiated in 2013 were assessed, sampled from across the English regions.

Specific elements of the results were compared with results from the NE QA exercise to establish the degree of complementarity between desk-based and field approaches.



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Which policy areas has the research informed?

A new Environmental Land Management Scheme, known as Countryside Stewardship (CS) will be launched during 2015. The work described here has informed the delivery of CS, in particular evaluating the quality of agreement set-up and relating agreement holder understanding and likely potential outcomes to the provision of advice and support.



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What did the results show?

Generally, HLS agreements were found to be well set-up. Suitable options were usually selected for the habitats present, no significant areas of habitat had been missed from the Farm Environment Plan and, where they existed, a high proportion of options were listed in the target statements. Similarly, most agreement holders had received appropriate advice and support through the agreement set-up phase. However, many agreements had at least some elements that could have been improved.

On over half the agreements surveyed, all habitats assessed in this study had been accurately identified in the Farm Environment Plan (FEP). Overall 16% of features assessed were considered to be different to FEP habitats recorded in the agreement documentation. The most common reasons for the difference were the inflation of habitat quality or species diversity (particularly for species-rich grasslands) in the agreement and difficulties with identifying and mapping large land parcels with multiple habitats.

Field surveyors judged that most (84%) options were suitable for the habitats they were applied to. Only 4% were considered inappropriate. Where options were considered inappropriate or doubtful, concerns related to the selection of the appropriate level of intervention (maintenance, restoration or creation) or that a more cost-effective approach could have been chosen.

There was some concern about the quality of Indicators of Success (IoS) which measure outcomes. Most IoS addressed an appropriate subject (84%), but targets were not always set at an appropriate level (68%). IoS were criticised because they were subjective assessments or lacked clarity. Others had not been sufficiently adapted for the specific feature, resulting in targets that were both overambitious and too easy to achieve.

Agreement holders valued the advice and support received from NE and other advisers, particularly site visits. At least 85% were satisfied with the advice that they received from the NE adviser at each stages of agreement set-up. The advice was seen as appropriate for the farm as well as the agreement itself. 94% of agreement holders thought the package of advice had a significant influence on the preparation of the agreement and 89% felt that the advice had a significant influence on the choice of options.

Agreement holders entered HLS for both environmental and financial reasons, but the majority (73%) identified success of the agreement against environmental objectives. Two thirds had been made more aware of features and management through

the advice and support delivered as part of the HLS. Agreement holders who were more dependent on agriculture (as opposed to other agreement holders like wildlife trusts or local authorities) were more likely to value the advice and support that they received.



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There was no relationship between the assessment of the quality of agreement set-up made by the NE QA desk exercise and the field assessments undertaken in this project, reflecting a different emphasis in the two assessments. However, where the field survey rated the set-up as poor, NE also assessed the agreement as poor. Although a desk-based exercise is no substitute for field monitoring, it will identify some agreements with issues.

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

Alternatively please contact:
The Food and Environment Research Agency
Sand Hutton, York
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