

Countryside Stewardship payout is worth the work required in applying

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As the application deadline for the Countryside Stewardship (CSS) mid-tier rapidly approaches on September 30, those who are still umm-ing and ahh-ing about whether to complete their application forms should not be put off as, if successful, they could be a secure and maybe higher than expected source of income.

The CSS mid-tier agreement replaced the entry level stewardship agreement in 2015, with the first agreements starting on January 1, 2016.

The mid-tier applications are competitive, as opposed to the entry level, which only require that a certain number of points be met by the applicant for a successful agreement to be created.

The next agreement start date will be January 1, 2018, and the agreement will last for five years.

This has been confirmed by the Chancellor, and that it will be honoured post-Brexit. Payments for agreements are made in arrears in the autumn and the following spring of each year. It is not compulsory for all land registered with the RPA to be included with a mid-tier agreement; parcels can be removed prior to an agreement being offered.

The payment received for ELS was set at £30 per hectare, however, mid-tier is only limited by the options selected (with the highest paying between £600-£700 per hectare) and therefore the payment is only limited by the combination of options available and the applicant's farming practices. We have recently been undertaking mid-tier applications on behalf of clients and have found some of our clients have the potential to achieve an average of £90 per ha across a permanent grassland farm.

This was achieved using the options GS2: permanent grassland with very low inputs, GS1: take small areas out of management, BE3: management of hedgerows only and the supplement GS17: lenient grazing supplement.

There are a number of other options that may be suitable for different types of grassland



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as well as multiple options for arable land; applicants should consider using combinations of options to achieve a higher payment and not be limited by what they previously achieved on an ELS agreement.

Although in previous years there were not enough applications received for the funding available, and therefore the scheme was not actually competitive (ie everyone who successfully applied received the funding), Natural England has confirmed it has sent out an increased number of packs this year and expects the number returned to exceed

the funding available, making the agreements competitive for this year.

With this in mind, this year applicants may want to look more closely at the options they are selecting to ensure as much as possible that they are in line with the priorities for their area, to hopefully increase their chances of being selected.

Applicants should also pay particular attention to the newly introduced supplementary evidence pages which are included with all CSS packs, as not providing the correct or insufficient evidence for an

option may not invalidate an agreement, but at the minimum will slow the application process and may cause further complications in the future.

It is also worth remembering that all the field parcels must be registered with the RPA before they can be included in a CSS mid-tier application, including yards and buildings where options have been selected to enhance or maintain these features.

A completed RLE1 form and accompanying map must be submitted to the RPA by September 30 for the land parcel to be valid in a CSS mid-

tier application for this year.

Finally, Natural England has issued a statement saying that the initial checks carried out on the applications received to date have shown that over 50% of mid-tier applications are not completed correctly, so double-check your application or have it checked by your agent, before sending it to Natural England to avoid delays and complications.

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