

Countryside Stewardship applications – final checks

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The deadline to submit a Mid Tier/Wildlife Offer Countryside Stewardship (CS) application is only seven working days away.

With this in mind there are a number of matters that all applicants should consider before posting their application to Natural England.

Reading the guidance

It is important when submitting a CS application that one has read all the guidance available for the agreement and not just the information for the selected options. For example it does not state on the capital items, but it does in the Mid Tier manual, that if you are applying for more than £50,000 worth of capital items then you must provide a letter from a Chartered Accountant. The letter must confirm that the business or SBI has the resources from trading profits, reserves or loans to undertake the works and pay for them before receiving any payment from Natural England.

It is also worth remembering that some options will state they require evidence without stating exactly which form this evidence should take. For example Option OT2: Organic land management – unimproved permanent grassland, the option information states that Natural England require evidence that the grassland is unimproved but does not explain what evidence they require to prove this to allow an application to be progressed.

Choosing the right options

It is essential when compiling an application that you choose the correct options for your farming enterprise and, if it is a Mid Tier application, that they meet the priorities for your area to give you a competitive application. Check the option guidelines carefully and ensure that you can meet all the requirements before submitting. Applications for permanent grassland options on land parcels identified as an arable crop or temporary grass on the RPA online system will not be accepted and vice versa.

Supporting evidence

A number of options for both the Mid Tier and Wildlife Offers require supporting evidence. Option GS2: Permanent grassland with very low inputs (outside SDAs) requires the submission of a permanent grassland assessment form which, depending on your application, may require a professional to inspect your holding and identify the type of grassland. A common type of evidence is photographs. These have to be presented in a particular way which is detailed on page 48 of the Mid Tier manual.

Checking your RPA data and application

Always check the RPA online data to make sure it is up to date and accurate. If you are applying for capital items on a farm yard, check the yard is registered as a parcel to your holding and if it isn't submit an RLE1 to the RPA. It is also worth enclosing a copy of the form and plan with your application to assist Natural England when they are processing your application.

If possible, have someone else check your application to make sure you have ticked all the boxes and included all the



Applications for permanent grassland options may require supporting evidence, such as a photograph

necessary supporting evidence. Natural England are becoming less lenient with regard to mistakes in applications and supporting evidence being submitted after a deadline.

Planning for Next Year

It is also a good idea to consider next year's cropping and Basic Payment Scheme application, this will prevent complication and further costs.

If one is selecting a spring sown option like AB9: Winter bird food it may be prudent to leave the field designated for the option as fallow or allocate a spring crop so that winter crops do not have to be ploughed out if the application

is successful and the land can still be utilised as Ecological Focus Areas (EFA) or a spring crop if unsuccessful. In previous years it was possible to utilise certain CS options as EFA and take a reduction in the option payment.

It has been announced recently that 18 Countryside Stewardship options can no longer be used as EFA under the Basic Payment Scheme although hedges included in a CS agreement can still be used as EFA without incurring a payment reduction.

Signing the form and submitting

The forms must be signed by applicants or agents with an

appropriate "submit" level of permission for Countryside Stewardship on the RPA online system. The address to return the forms to will depend on your location and applicants should check carefully that they are returning the forms to the correct location. When posting it is worth using a special delivery service which is tracked or signed for to ensure you have proof that your application arrived with Natural England in time.

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