

# Claims need not be complicated

In the second of three articles, land agent and surveyor expert **HUGH TOWNSEND** talks farmers through the process of applying for the Countryside Stewardship scheme and making claims



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Last week we discussed the variety of options available under the Countryside Stewardship (CS) scheme, which offers public money for environmentally beneficial land management. However, there is a complex administrative process behind these payments. This can be divided into two elements: applying for an agreement and, once accepted, making claims on an existing agreement. Both have a number of potential pitfalls.

## How do you apply for Countryside Stewardship?

At the application stage, the land manager must complete an application form explaining their status, the kind of agreement they are seeking and the options for which they wish to claim.

Option choice is particularly important: once an agreement is in place, new options cannot be added except in response to Rural Payments Agency (RPA) maladministration. Also, the choice of options on the application is a key determinant of whether the application will be assessed as valuable enough to justify granting an agreement.

Advice from an expert will be useful in putting together a selection of options to suit your holding and increase your chance of a successful application. Not all applications are successful. The mid-tier wildlife offers are an exception to this in that, provided guidelines are met as to which options are used, your application will always be accepted. Even these schemes however allow some choice of options so it is sensible to ensure that the application makes the best possible use of your land.

There is likely to be a variety of evidence which must also be provided. This can include anything from measurement of grassland soil chemistry, to self-assessments of the flight paths of barn owls in the case of option HS1 – historic building maintenance. The RPA may reject your application if you do not provide the correct supporting paperwork.

Additionally, the RPA operates from a number of different offices and it has been known for documents to get lost between them, so we recommend keeping copies of all documents sent and ensuring all post is sent recorded. Note also CS land is covered by the same mapping information as the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS), so it is important to ensure that all of your land is mapped correctly online if you are applying for CS but not the BPS.

If forms are filled out correctly with the correct documents attached

and your option choices meet RPA guidelines, an application under the Wildlife Offers system will be accepted automatically. For any other form of application, the RPA operates a scoring system to decide where to attribute their funding, with only the highest scoring applications ultimately succeeding.

Successful applications under all branches of the scheme will then receive an offer letter and an agreement document detailing, among other information, all of the options in the agreement and, where relevant, to which parcels they will be allocated. These need careful checking as the RPA has often made mistakes in the drafts sent out in the past.

## How do you claim on an existing Countryside Stewardship agreement?

Once an agreement is in place, before any claim can be made, it is vital that options are managed according to scheme rules. There are three different sources for how to manage your options. Firstly, the gov.uk website has a page for each option, with some management rules.

Secondly, each year of each scheme has an options management document which will include your options. For example, holders of mid-tier agreements beginning in 2019 must follow the guidance in the Countryside Stewardship Mid Tier Options, Supplements and Capital Items handbook which can be downloaded from [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk).

Thirdly, your agreement document will have a selection of 'management prescriptions' which you must follow for each option. You must comply with the guidance from all three sources; if you discover any conflict between the three, you should notify the RPA.

The RPA has in some cases not notified applicants that they have been successful until some time after the agreement's start date. In these circumstances, the agreement is still backdated to the beginning of the year, and this can place land managers in an awkward position in which they are penalised for not managing an agreement they did not know they were definitely going to be granted.

Therefore, even if the RPA has not yet confirmed whether you are offered an agreement, it is advisable to begin managing your holding as if you had been granted the agreement beginning from January 1 of the year after your application was submitted.

Properly managed options and capital items can be claimed upon for payment. Capital items in mid-tier agreements allow a two year period for implementation followed



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Jim McEwan

by a further three months in which to prepare and submit a claim, but this claim period can extend to a full year in some other types of agreement.

Capital claims can be submitted at any time of year, but remember that you can only usually only claim after the work is complete. Claims for options, however, must be submitted within an open period of each year. In 2019, this period ran from April 13 to May 15, but it has been known to vary – In 2018, for example, the claim deadline was extended to June 15.

If an annual claim for options (known as a 'revenue claim') is not submitted by the deadline, a penalty of 1% of the total payment will apply for each day for which the claim is late, up until a final deadline (in 2019, this was June 9) after which no payment whatsoever will be available.

Like applications, Countryside Stewardship claims can also require a variety of evidence. Generally the revenue options require little evidence for claims beyond the locations of rotational options although some, including the common GS2 low-input permanent grassland, require a declaration that no prohib-

ited actions have been undertaken in the course of the claim period. Additionally organic options in particular require up-to-date organic certification to be on the RPA's records with your claim.

Capital claims, by contrast, can require a variety of evidence such as photographs, invoices or specifications of particular items such as gates or cattle grids. It is particularly important to ensure that photographic evidence provided for capital claims is as thorough as possible. This means with any work that will not be visible on completion it is important that photographs are taken – for example the pipe itself in RP13 underground drainage pipe-work – before the work is complete. Multiple-stage options such as RP15 – concrete yard renewal – require photographs of each stage of the work.

Moreover, where multiple similar examples of the same option are being claimed – most often in woodland related options such as TE4 tree planting and supply, or various tree guards – it is important that the full extent of the work is visible in the photographs, including all individual items claimed. Additionally, most

options require that some further evidence is retained which the RPA may request before a claim is paid. This also varies from option to option. It is important that Countryside Stewardship claimants pay careful attention to both the relevant Countryside Stewardship manual and to the guidance for all of their options according to the RPA website so they can be certain that rules are being followed both on paper and on the ground.

Countryside Stewardship can be an excellent opportunity for land managers to earn extra income and gain funding towards capital works which can in some cases include referencing a whole holding and improving the hedgerows. However, the schemes can be complicated to understand and apply for, and therefore, professional help can be effective in maximising your benefit from the schemes.

Next week we discuss Stewardship inspections and penalties.

■ **Hugh Townsend, FRICS, FIAV, FCI Arb.** is the land agent/surveyor expert of the WMN Farming section and he may be contacted on 01392 823935 or [htownsend@townsend-chartered-surveyors.co.uk](mailto:htownsend@townsend-chartered-surveyors.co.uk)



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