

Why wouldn't you apply for Stewardship grant?

With the Countryside Stewardship (CS) window now open, land agent and surveyor expert **Hugh Townsend** has some key developments to share with farmers and land managers looking to apply



AS in previous years, Countryside Stewardship (CS) offers a selection of payments to landowners or tenants for carrying out actions viewed as environmentally beneficial.

This includes ongoing annual payments for "options", such as maintaining wildflower margins or taking areas out of production, and for one-time "capital items" such as hedge laying and new covers for slurry pits.

We have already written about how payment rates for options have improved since last year, with popular options such as buffer strips on arable land and reducing fertiliser inputs on permanent pasture increasing in value by an average of 30%.

Since this, there have been several key new developments:

GRANTS NOW AVAILABLE FOR METAL FENCING

One popular capital item, "FG1", pays farmers up to £4.00/m for new fences where there is a demonstrable environmental benefit to this. This benefit could be something as simple as making sure low-input grassland is grazed to the correct height. In previous years, this option has only permitted wooden fence posts. This has long led to complaints by farmers concerned about the durability of wooden fencing given modern restrictions on wood preservatives. Therefore, metal fence posts are now also permitted for payment, widening the item's appeal.

WATER QUALITY CAPITAL ITEM EXTENSION

In previous years, capital items related to water quality were only available to farmers in areas deemed at "high risk" of watercourse contamination. From this year, this has expanded to "medium risk" areas. This means that many more farmers will have access to a variety of capital items.

Chief among these is "RP14 - concrete yard renewal", which offers £27.14/m² for restoration of concrete yards where this would reduce runoff. This has in the past been used to fund significant restorative works to qualifying farmyards. Now many more farmers can consider this option. However, this option does require input from a Catchment Sensitive Farming Officer, who must have been contacted by May 20.

LOCAL NATURE RECOVERY AND THE SUSTAINABLE FARMING INCENTIVE

Whereas the Sustainable Farming Incentive pilot could not share land with an existing Stewardship scheme, we are now aware that this is not the case for the wider scheme to be introduced later this year. This means that farmers planning to maximise grant funding, perhaps while also reducing input costs by



> As part of changes to the Countryside Stewardship scheme, more farmers will have access to funding for the restoration of concrete yards
Matt Cardy / Getty Images

de-intensification, will be able to claim these two tranches of grant funding together.

Defra has also advised that further SFI actions to be introduced, as well as Local Nature Recovery where relevant, will be most accessible for farmers already in Stewardship schemes. CS may therefore be a useful preparatory step.

BIODIVERSITY NET GAIN

Important developments are also happening outside the scheme's immediate rules. Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is an upcoming requirement for property developers, who will soon need to show at least a 10% biodiversity improvement from all of their developments or they will not be able to go ahead. If they cannot provide this on site, they will be able to meet this requirement by paying a farmer to carry out habitat improvements on their land.

We now know that these payments from developers can stack with ELMS payments. Although uncon-

firmed, it would be strange on this principle if they could not also stack with Stewardship payments, given both schemes have similar objectives and are both managed directly under UK legislation. We also now know BNG rules allow "habitat banking" of improvements already in place after January 2020. This means that Stewardship could be a method, right now, of creating habitats such as ponds or new hedgerows with a view on eventually selling the resultant habitat improvements to developers.

Even if the scheme does not permit CS funding directly for habitat creation for BNG, CS could still be helpful in this regard. New fencing could be used to help control stock access to relevant parcels. Payments, for example, for reducing inputs and stocking on pasture could be used to prepare the land and the business for a full transition into a lowland meadow.

In short, we can now see that environmental benefit will soon be the

main source of grant funding for agriculture, with those farms most geared towards this taking in the most funding both from the private and public sector. Stewardship should be seen as a way to move towards this in exchange for a payment now, so that as BPS tapers off farmers are able to claim as much of the new funding as possible. Otherwise, they risk being "caught out" in a place where the highest payments would require a sudden change to the business which cannot be completed on time.

Given that the scheme is now both wider and better paying than in previous years, this year we believe farmers need a very good reason not to apply.

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