

Giles Wheeler-Bennett

CHARTERED SURVEYORS & LAND AGENTS

CSS UPDATE DECEMBER 2018

At the time of writing, we are advised that there will be Countryside Stewardship Schemes (Mid-Tier and Higher Tier) available next year for start dates 1st January 2020. Most of these schemes (particularly the Mid-Tier Schemes) would be for 5 years in length and would therefore terminate on 31st December 2024.

In September, the Government announced that Countryside Stewardship Agreements (potentially simplified) would actually remain available until 2024, though the number of agreements in each year from 2021 to 2024 would depend on the development of the new Environmental Land Management Scheme. Existing HLS Agreements coming to an end between 2019 and 2024 might also be extendable and our understanding is that the Government is very keen on this idea and they are now just at the stage of waiting for approval that this can be done.

Some agreement holders however may have already received contact from Natural England inviting a discussion about the possible extension to their HLS agreement and this is because Natural England is working on the assumption that consent will be given by the EU and is trying to make recommendations back to the RPA about which agreements should be offered extensions by the 7th December.

Current indications are that agreements will only be offered one year extensions at present but that these offers may be renewed each year. Each HLS agreement will be looked at on its own merits and whilst educational access options may continue to be offered, permissive access options (footpaths and bridleways) will not be continued.

The new Environmental Land Management Scheme (replacing BPS and Stewardship) would see tests and trials from 2019 onwards with pilots perhaps starting in 2021 and continuing into 2022 to 2024. At the moment, the suggestion is that the new Environmental Land Management Scheme is intended to be fully up and running for 2025.

Going forward, for 2019 BPS there is no change expected or thought to be realistic due to the short timeframe but 2020 may see some simplification to BPS and from 2021 we will see the first reductions in BPS payments which will continue reducing until 2027, which will be the last year for BPS.



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If existing HLS Agreements are able to be rolled forward for a further period pending the start of any new Environmental Land Management Scheme, this will mean that the process for dealing with expiring HLS Agreements next year should be relatively straightforward and could actually be completed by March/April. Each case will need assessing on its own merits though to make sure it remains the right thing for an applicant to do but by and large it may be the easiest and most financially straight forward option for the time being for applicants with expiring agreements.

Any new applications next year to the CSS Higher Tier Scheme or Mid-Tier Scheme will operate on the same deadlines as 2018, i.e. Higher Tier Schemes will need to be on the Natural England pipeline early in the new year with Expressions of Interest submitted to Natural England by the beginning of April 2019; Mid-Tier application forms will need to be ordered by the end of May with the applications submitted by the end of July; and Higher Tier Schemes will need to be worked up over the summer and submitted in accordance with Natural England requirements by July/August.

In consideration of this, every farm business is different and every ELS/HLS scheme is different and therefore there is no “one size fits all” answer to the questions: “Should I apply for a stewardship scheme next year?” and “what income could I get from a stewardship scheme?”

Bearing in mind as well that if accepted into a scheme next year, most contracts would run until 2024, i.e. would be ending as the proposed new Environmental Land Management Scheme is coming into being, this may prove to be useful to tide some businesses over the transition period as a CSS would potentially be a known scheme and income during this transition time.

The Scheme as it stands at the moment does not suit everybody and it is very difficult to assess what grants might be available for a particular farm without looking at the farm in greater detail and working up the outlines of a potential scheme. However, it can be a useful exercise to do and a good bit of “housekeeping” to assess what natural capital there is on the farm and what areas could be used for enhancing the environment and be rewarded for doing so under some scheme. This information will be unlikely to go to waste because if not used in any current CSS application, it will be there for the future ELM Scheme and will also give food for thought in a business going forward.

If you are considering Countryside Stewardship Scheme for next year, please do think ahead and do not leave an application until the last minute as they are not straight forward to complete and do require time to plan and investigate their viability. If you are looking at a new Higher Tier Scheme with an Expression of Interest to be submitted by April, then you really need to start thinking about an application after Christmas to allow sufficient time for preparation.