



Changes to Agri-environment Access Options concerning ELIGIBILITY and SPECIAL PROJECTS

ELIGIBILITY

Natural England has agreed with Defra that eligibility for access payments in Environmental Stewardship be extended to cover:

- all voluntary bodies (including the National Trust, RSPB and the Wildlife Trusts) and
- Local Authorities

This decision covers both permissive access and educational access elements of Environmental Stewardship and applies to new HLS and to existing HLS and Countryside Stewardship agreements (by amendment).

Voluntary bodies and Local Authorities are now eligible for Environmental Stewardship and, exceptionally, Countryside Stewardship Scheme, Access options. These bodies must meet the same criteria as all other applicants for these options and, in some instances, will need to exceed them given their existing public roles.

There have been increasing demands on the Environmental Stewardship access elements in recent months, notably Educational Access. Normal workflow management processes will be used to manage demand in the regions.

CRITERIA TO BE CONSIDERED

- **Proven demand** There should be proven demand for the access and an assessment of how many people are likely to use the site.
- **Target priority** A site should be within an HLS target area where access is identified as a top priority or, where there is opportunity to address the access theme outside of target areas.
- **The remaining length of the agreement** In general only sites which are target priorities should be funded. We would not enter into access commitments on existing agreements where the agreement is unlikely to continue when it expires.

- **Current access arrangements** If existing access provision meets actual and potential demand, there is no justification for paying for increased access. We can provide funding to local authorities and wildlife trusts for existing permissive access where there is evidence of a potential *increase* in demand or where the existing access does not meet existing demand. This is in line with the criteria in the Environmental Stewardship handbooks for permissive access, which state that, where there is a proven unsatisfied demand, we may fund existing access in addition to the new access being provided. As with other applicants it is envisaged that where we fund existing access, it is only as part of a comprehensive increase in the access offered.
- **Charges for access** If there is an existing access arrangement that the public pay for, this would have to cease on any area paid for in an agri-environment scheme. Parking also has to be free. If there is paid access, and the payments cease, we can then consider agri-environment access options. If there is a charge for parking then we cannot fund the permissive access, but this would change if the car park charges cease.
- **Car parking charge** As regards who receives the car parking charge, our objective would be to provide free access for the public, including free parking. If there is a car park fee, but it does not go to the Agreement Holder, there may be circumstances where we may fund access. This would be dependent on the particular circumstances and the benefits that would be achieved by providing such funding.
- **Organisations with multiple sites** Payments are based on individual agreements. Each separate agreement is eligible for all access options (subject to them being target priorities).
- **Access-only agreements** We do not normally fund these and expect the agreement to include other objectives.
- **Capital works and special projects** These are available to all applicants. Standard capital items to enhance access provision are included in the Higher Level Stewardship and Countryside Stewardship. In some cases special projects will be available to fund items outside the standard menu to provide significant additional outcomes for visitors to the site. Special projects are granted on a case by case basis to meet local needs, requirements and access priorities. **Note:** as we cannot offer capital-only agreements, there must be at least one land management item.
- **Educational access sites only** For these sites Natural England requires that agreement holders host at least four free visits per year. We would pay for existing free visits, and for charged visits on condition that these become free. The site can continue to charge for other visits providing they host the minimum of at least four free visits. Natural England would expect to see more free visits offered. The reason for this is to encourage increased numbers of visits by allowing the agreement holder to host free visits.

This listing will be updated periodically to reflect best practice. Last updated April 2010.

SPECIAL PROJECT ELIGIBILITY AND ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

There is a need to ensure that these special projects are used strategically to deliver the best outcomes for potential users whilst offering value for public money.

The following criteria are suggested to ensure equity whilst maintaining spend and, in light of the recent decision to allow Voluntary and Community Organisations to have access payments, that all agreement holders have equal opportunity to provide educational access.

Access options under agri-environment are subject to non-agricultural *de minimis* state aid that limits funding up to €200,000 per enterprise over a 3- year period. This means that for each agreement the total spend on access, including Educational Access special projects, in a 3-year period cannot exceed this amount.

CRITERIA TO BE CONSIDERED

- Expenditure on special projects will result in increased numbers of visits or improved quality of visits which in turn should encourage further visits.
- Priority will be given to those agreements with a proven track record or new applicants who have good evidence of demand from potential group leaders/teachers.
- All educational access special projects, regardless of spend, will comply with the eligibility and assessment criteria guidance.
- All new access should be part of a targeted approach using the HAT(Holdings Assessment Toolkit) to decide on evidence-based priorities.
- 80% maximum funding on all Educational Access facilities.
- The rate will be subject to a ceiling of £50K for classroom facilities (including supporting items such as tables and learning equipment) and £25K for toilets/washing facilities (to a maximum of £75K per agreement) – all facilities should be accessible for less able bodied users.
- Exceptional facilities which offer major public benefit and meet multiple outcomes (to be decided) could be funded to a higher level but not percentage. However, this must comply with the *de minimis* state aid regulations.
- CEVAS accreditation can be paid for using the management plan PAH option offering £400.
- All special projects must comply with the Disability Discrimination Act.
- Under EU regulations we cannot pay for the agreement holders own labour costs.
- Countryside Stewardship agreements will not normally have new permissive or educational access added to them. Requests should be deferred until the agreement is renewed.

Eligible Items

| All items 80% maximum except where stated | CLASSROOM FACILITIES | WASHING/TOILET FACILITIES |
|---|----------------------|---------------------------|
| New build | Y | Y |
| Building conversion | Y | Y |
| Mobile structure/shelter | Y | Y |
| Heating/frost protection | Y | Y |
| Water supply | N | Y |
| Drainage/septic tank | N | Y |
| Biodigester | N | N |
| Solar panels, wind turbines, photovoltaics | N | N |
| Electricity supply/fittings | Y | Y |
| Toilets/sinks inc portable but not hire | N | Y |
| Windows/walls/doors | Y | Y |
| Accessibility items – ramps, handles (100%) | Y | Y |
| Showers | N | N |
| Decoration – magnolia/white | Y | Y |
| Kitchen appliances/fittings | N | N |
| Cookery equipment | N | N |
| Kitchen worktops/units | N | N |
| Tables and chairs | Y | N |
| Projector | Y | N |
| Laptop/computer | N | N |
| Webcam/nest box camera | Y | N |
| Website design for educational use only | Y | N/A |
| Wellies and waterproofs | Y | N/A |
| Picnic tables | N | N/A |
| ID books | Y | N/A |
| Portable toilet hire | N/A | N |
| Changing Places toilet | N/A | Y |
| Portable hand washing facilities | N | Y |
| Mobimat – mobile access | N | N |
| Portable seats | N | N |
| Digital cameras/sound recorders | N | N |
| Trampers | N | N |
| Accessible farm trailers – see also assessment criteria below | Y | N/A |
| Interpretation boards (100%) – max £1000 per board | Y | N/A |
| Tactile/sensory boards | Y | N/A |
| Leaflets | N | N/A |

NB – only in exceptional circumstances will funding for classrooms and associated items exceed £50,000. Funding for washing/toilet facilities and associated items should not exceed £25,000. Together funding should not exceed £75,000.

Assessment Criteria

Having determined eligibility, the following criteria should be used to decide whether the item is appropriate or not. All of this criterion should be covered in the justification section of the HLS Special Project template, include actual figures and values where necessary:

1. How much longer does the agreement have to run? Special Projects are unlikely to be appropriate if there is less than two years left to run.
2. Where there are three or more years left to run then Special Projects are appropriate providing the agreement is in the Pipeline(when implemented).
3. In the case of new agreements, is the site in an educational access target area or regional Outcome 2 priority area?
4. For projects over £50,000, the project must deliver more than one Environmental Stewardship objective.
5. All Educational Access special projects must be expected to increase visitor numbers and /or satisfaction rates. Value for money must be taken into account.
6. All special projects must comply with the Disability Discrimination Act
7. In the case of new agreements there must be evidence that the site will be well used, over and above that required before agreeing to the Educational Access option in the first place.
8. Proposal for facilities for those with special needs will require evidence of demand from potential visitors

Farm trailers

1. How far away from the farmstead are the features of interest? A trailer is not appropriate if they are within easy walking distance.
2. What is the target age group? Primary age children cannot walk as far as older children/visitors.
3. They must comply with the Disability Discrimination Act ie be accessible (via ramps or lifts) to wheelchairs.
4. Must comply with health and safety regulations.
5. Must have fixed seats and safety rails.
6. Must not be intended for use for other purposes such as shooting parties. A reduced rate of grant may be appropriate in such cases.
7. How many visits are to be/being hosted? It is likely that at least 10 visits should be expected. Consider value for money.
8. Can it be shared with other Educational Access providers in the vicinity?