

South West: Higher Level Stewardship Theme Statement



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Natural England is seeking **Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) applications** outside of Target Areas (area shown in green). Despite falling outside of Target areas, **high quality / multi-objective applications** will continue to be accepted. To help you determine whether you qualify for HLS in these areas Natural England has, in conjunction with partners, identified a number of **specific themes** as set out below. Each theme relates to a particular HLS feature(s) at risk and in particular need of HLS management. Applications should look to address more than one theme wherever possible.*

**Please note: If you think you might qualify please follow the link provided at the bottom of the page or contact Natural England using the number provided below.*

What do I need to do to get an agreement?

Applications outside of target areas **MUST** contribute to at least one of the following themes:

Theme 1: Improving the resilience of Nationally Important (UK Biodiversity Action Plan) habitats to climate change: Natural England will consider applications offering to maintain and/or restore/link/buffer 'significant'¹ areas of the following habitats: **culm grassland** of north Devon and north Cornwall; **lowland meadows** particularly in Braydon Forest, Chew Valley, Marshwood and Blackmoor Vale and Wye Valley and Forest of Dean; **lowland heathland and acid grassland** north of Bournemouth and Poole and the Halden ridge and south west of Exeter; **grazing marsh** of the Severn and Avon Vale, north Somerset Levels and Moors, Cotswold Water Park and Exe estuary; **ancient semi-natural woodland, wood pasture and parkland, fen and limestone grassland** throughout the region; and **traditional orchards** throughout the region, but particularly in Gloucestershire, Somerset and Devon.

Theme 2: Reversing the decline of farmland birds: Natural England will consider applications that will provide a package of ELS/HLS options² capable of delivering the most appropriate management possible within **Nationally Important Farmland Bird Hotspots**³ defined as areas supporting (a) 3 or more of the following range restricted arable birds: **grey partridge; corn bunting; lapwing; turtle dove; tree sparrow; yellow wagtail** OR (b) 3 or more of the following breeding range-restricted wet grassland species: **lapwing, redshank, curlew, snipe, yellow wagtail** OR (c) (with strong supporting evidence) important regional breeding populations for any of the above species OR (d) priority sites for any of the following individual species: **cirl bunting, chough and stone curlew.**

Theme 3 : Securing the recovery of Nationally Important (UK Biodiversity Action Plan) Species Natural England will consider applications offering appropriate management for the following rare & rapidly declining species outside of areas of important habitats (listed above): **greater horseshoe bat; carder (brown-banded) and large garden bumblebees;** and **Important Arable Plant Areas.**

Theme 4: Improving the quality of nationally important water bodies and/or habitats adversely affected by diffuse water pollution from agriculture⁴ Natural England will consider applications offering management and/or capital items to tackle soil erosion and run-off issues. This will focus on applications where vulnerable soils occur on: the **River Tone**, headwaters of the **River Parrett** including the **Lopen Brook**, middle reaches of the **Stour**, headwaters of the **Clyst**, middle reaches of the Exe, middle reaches of the **Tamar, Till and Chitterne Brook**, and the **River Leadon**

Theme 5: Reducing risk to nationally designated assets identified by the Heritage At Risk Survey⁵ Natural England will consider applications that maintain low risk assets in their present circumstances or provide the most appropriate options for addressing the source of high or medium risk to Scheduled Monuments, such as addressing imminent collapse or further deterioration. Applications that significantly address the condition of **Registered Historic Parks and Gardens** should make a major contribution to the design intentions or feel of the parkland and provide for their biodiversity and amenity value. Applications on **Registered Historic Battlefields & World Heritage Sites** should seek to maximise opportunities for their protection, enhancement and amenity value.

Theme 6: Securing positive management of prioritised historic buildings. Natural England will consider applications offering to maintain or restore historic buildings that are assessed as a priority in the region⁶

Theme 7: Reducing the damage caused to undesignated below-ground archaeological sites by cultivation and protecting and enhancing visible undesignated historic environment features⁷ Natural England will consider applications offering to take the most vulnerable archaeological sites out of

cultivation, and to reduce the depth of damaging cultivations through minimum tillage or direct drilling where this offers a suitable level of protection, in accordance with advice from Natural England and local authority archaeologists⁸. Natural England will also consider applications offering to maintain below-ground archaeology under permanent uncultivated vegetation or offering to provide positive management of historic features such as earthworks, standing stones and structures that have been assessed as a priority in the region⁸. Natural England will also consider applications making a significant contribution to the maintenance of historic landscape character⁹.

Theme 8: Improving people’s enjoyment & understanding of the farmed environment: Natural England will consider applications offering to enhance or improve access and recreation¹⁰ (where it can be shown that (a) there is identified demand or need and (b) where it will link people with place or (c) where it will enhance existing networks and/or provide opportunity to improve the public’s understanding of the farmed environment through educational access visits.¹¹

Theme Statement Notes – additional information for applicants

¹. ‘Significant’ areas of Nationally Important (UK Biodiversity Action Plan) habitat are defined as below:

a) all areas of Nationally Important (UK Biodiversity Action Plan) habitat (listed under theme 1) occurring on sites designated as **Sites of Special Scientific Interest** (see www.natureonthemap.org.uk)

b) all areas of Nationally Important (UK Biodiversity Action Plan) habitat (listed under theme 1) occurring on sites notified as **County Wildlife Sites**

c) all areas of Nationally Important (UK Biodiversity Action Plan) habitat (listed under theme 1) occurring on non-statutory/un-notified land supported by recent records for key **Nationally Important** (UK Biodiversity Action Plan Species) identified as priorities for HLS management

d) all areas of Nationally Important (UK Biodiversity Action Plan) habitat (listed under theme 1) occurring on non-statutory/un-notified land present in quantities over the **size thresholds** provided below:

| Habitat | Size* |
|--|-------|
| ancient semi-natural woodland | 1ha |
| acid grassland (lowland dry acid grassland) | 5ha |
| fen | 1ha |
| grazing marsh (coastal and floodplain grazing marsh) | 5ha |
| heathland (lowland heathland) | 5ha |
| limestone grassland (lowland calcareous grassland) | 2 ha |
| lowland meadows | 1ha |
| culm grasslands (purple moor grass and rush pastures) | 2ha |
| traditional orchards | n/a |
| wood pastures and parkland | 15ha |

* in exceptional circumstances applications containing habitat (named above) may be considered where supported by firm evidence relating to the significance of the site within its landscape context.

². The package of ELS/HLS options deemed capable of achieving the most appropriate management for farmland birds will vary from agreement to agreement and can be selected at Natural England’s discretion. A typical package of options for farmland birds would look to deliver: provision of nesting habitats, summer food and winter food. For arable birds this will typically include a combination of the following management : field corner management; provision of beetle banks, wildlife seed mixtures (both wild bird food and pollen & nectar mixes), fallow nesting plots; conservation headlands; uncropped/cultivated margins, sowing of low-input spring cereals and hedgerow management. For wetland birds this will typically require specific management/restoration of existing wet grassland and management of water levels which would provide the right sward height and conditions for this assemblage of

species.

³ National farmland bird hotspots are defined as 2km tetrads containing breeding records of three or more of the range-restricted species listed above AND important 2km tetrads containing important populations of rare single species (also listed above). These hotspots can be seen on at the following address: www.natureonthemap.org.uk

⁴ HLS applications will be targeted at soils that are at moderate to very high risk of soil erosion. This can be assessed by using guidance available from www.defra.gov.uk/erdp/pdfs/es/guidance/soilerosion-lowlandmanual.pdf

Key areas include:

- Somerset Levels and Moors - River Tone west of Taunton, headwaters of the River Parrett around South Petherton, including the catchment of the Lopen Brook
 - Middle reaches of the River Stour
 - Headwaters of the River Clyst extending east of the M5 from Willand in the north to Lymptone on the south
 - Exe Catchment around Credition - area south of the B317, NE of Credition and running from Morchard in the north to Newton St Cyres, area south of A377 from Credition to Itton and South to Taw Green and east to Tedburn St Mary including the area around Cheriton Bishop
 - Middle reaches of the Tamar
 - River Brue catchment - area around Bruton running north as far as Shepton Mallet
 - Within the Avon catchment - River Till -extending from the River Wywyle at Stapleford to Orcheston and the Chitterne Brook from where it joins the River Wylve at Codford St Mary to Chitterne
 - The River Leadon between M50 and towards the A449 in the NW and an area Hartbury northwards to Kings Green on the M50
- ⁵ The Heritage at Risk Survey is an annual condition survey of all nationally designated heritage assets, undertaken by English Heritage. In the context of this theme, 'Nationally designated assets' are Scheduled Monuments, Registered Historic Parks and Gardens and Registered Battlefields. You can find out if you have a designated site on your holding by visiting <http://www.magic.gov.uk/> or by looking at the map provided as part of your ELS application. If you have a designated site on your holding, Natural England will be able to advise you on its 'risk rating' and, where appropriate, the major threats to the asset.
- ⁶ Natural England has a method of prioritising historic buildings by assessing them for their significance, vulnerability and value for money. To check the eligibility of your building, and to find out if your building is a priority for action, please contact Natural England.
- ⁷ The terms used above have the following meanings: 'Undesignated features' are those which are not statutorily designated as Scheduled Monuments, Registered Historic Parks and Gardens or Registered Battlefields -the primary source of information on the location and nature of these sites is held by your local authority Historic Environment Record; 'Below-ground archaeological sites' means features that can only be identified by soil or crop marks on aerial photographs, and underground structures such as souterrains and 'Visible features' are those which can be seen 'above the ground' as humps and bumps or structures.
- ⁸ Natural England will seek advice from local authority archaeological officers to identify the most appropriate management for features and their priority for action.
- ⁹ Natural England will liaise with local authority archaeological officers to identify the contribution that would be made to the maintenance of historic landscape character of an area by any proposals. This might include, for example, the positive management of traditional orchards, field boundary systems or undesignated parklands where their survival makes a good, visible contribution to historic landscape character.
- ¹⁰ Opportunities to enhance or improve access through HLS will be defined by local teams, in liaison primarily with Local Authorities, but also with others including National Park Authorities, AONBs and National Trail Teams.

Such opportunities will meet the criteria listed and be based upon demonstrable evidence. Although the availability of relevant data is expected to vary from county to county the primary sources for this information are likely to be:

1. Rights of Way Improvement Plans
2. Green Infrastructure Plans
3. Expiring Classic Scheme Agreements

National Park / AONB management plans may also provide useful information

¹¹. Applications that include **educational access** will necessitate the hosting of educational access visits to the farm by schools, colleges, clubs, youth groups, adult study centres and other special interest groups for formal or informal study, or guided walks to learn about the relationship between farming, conservation, and food production. Land managers are required to produce a Farm Facts Leaflet for all visits and a Teachers Information Pack if carrying out school visits.

If you think that you can help Natural England achieve any of the above objectives please contact your local office using the number below. Natural England currently hold additional information about environment features on your holding which will be used to identify priority holdings, as a result of this, please note that you may be contacted directly by us.

Please note:

HLS remains a competitive scheme. Successful applications will generally (though not exclusively) be those addressing the most themes within a single agreement. Successful applications should focus on management relating to the key themes under which they qualify with any additional management proposals being at the discretion of the Natural England advisor.

For more information on Higher Level Stewardship please see our website: www.naturalengland.org.uk

Before applying for HLS you are required to discuss your proposals with a Natural England adviser.

To contact an adviser please telephone phoning 0300 060 1118