

Farming through Brexit: a vision for the future

England

A vision statement produced
by the Game & Wildlife
Conservation Trust



Game & Wildlife
CONSERVATION TRUST



Our vision

“To deliver a simple, voluntary scheme with a light regulatory touch to achieve the widest possible farmer participation which rewards 'better, bigger, more and joined' outcomes for nature, the environment and society”

Dr Alastair Leake, GWCT Director of Policy, 2018

Our proposals

Foundation Scheme

- Voluntary Foundation Scheme available to all farmers and land managers
- Requires adherence to statutory requirements and good agricultural practice to deliver basic ecosystem services
- Annual contracts
- Additional payments for less favoured areas recognising greater delivery of basic ecosystem services

Universally Accessible Scheme

- Voluntary Enhanced Scheme available to all farmers and land managers
- To support species, biodiversity or other environmental public goods

Farmer Cluster Scheme

- Collaborative, large scale working
- Supports landscape and catchment scale benefits to soil, water & wildlife
- Ten-year contract with five-year break



Developing our proposals

As well as drawing on our wealth of experience in farming and conservation, the GWCT proposals are guided by two important and influential reports, the Curry Report and the Lawton Review.

Farming & Food - a sustainable future (The Curry Report), published in 2002, concludes that there should be a broad and shallow agri-environment scheme open to all, and farmers would be rewarded for looking after their land and for providing an attractive countryside.

Making Space for Nature (The Lawton Review), published in 2010, concludes that land for nature should be “bigger, better and more joined”.

The proposals we have developed are in line with the recommendations in these reports, while considering practical implications, Britain outside the Common Agricultural Policy with our own environment and farming policies set out in the 25 Year Environment Plan, the Industrial Strategy and the Agriculture Bill.

For a full explanation of these proposals, please see pages 18-19.



"Private landowners, land managers and farmers have a crucial role to play in delivering a more coherent and resilient wildlife network"



Key points

- The GWCT proposes that, as a minimum, all the funding that currently supports agriculture and the environment should be retained
- Improving environmental outcomes should be at the heart of the schemes. Those that give public benefit should be valued and supported
- Highest level of funding for large scale, collaborative or long-term approaches
- The scheme should be farmer-led, with a bottom-up approach to maximise engagement
- Increased support for Less Favoured Areas
- Maintenance of a Rural Development/Capital Grants pot of money
- Light touch regulation, with a single independent Annual Review (not managed by a government body)
- Builds on best practice and existing initiatives

Introduction - what will Brexit mean?

Implications of Brexit for farming

Leaving the EU will mean the UK is no longer bound by its Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which provides an extensive framework upon which many things in the agricultural industry are based. This gives the opportunity to shape a UK-focused farming industry, but also carries a risk that environmental support could wane. Much of the environmental protection legislation in the UK derives from EU directives, and there are concerns in some quarters that this protection may be lost post-CAP.

The future of the UK agricultural industry and health of our wider natural environment will depend on the shape of UK law when it is independent of EU legislation. The GWCT views this as an opportunity to encourage a thriving and sustainable farming sector, beneficial to both agriculture and wildlife simultaneously. The government's recently published 25-year environment plan suggests a framework of aspirations for the direction in which environment policy may head. We welcome the tone and broad approach of this environment plan, which mirrors many aspects of our own proposals. We comment on particular aspects of the 25-year plan at the end of this document.

Financial support for farming outside CAP will not have the same structure as we recognise now. Many farms across the UK are viable only because of the payments that are received in return for adhering to good farming practices. In future, financial support for the act of farming itself is unlikely, however the GWCT suggests that this money be kept in the countryside and made available to farmers still, through environmental support. This document explains current UK farming structure, a brief summary of how we got here, and our vision for a future containing profitable farms, a healthy environment and thriving wildlife.



Much of the environmental protection legislation in the UK derives from EU directives.

Freedom from CAP provides the UK with the opportunity to shape its farming industry, but also carries a risk that environmental support could wane.

What will happen after Brexit?

When the UK leaves the EU, CAP will no longer define farming policy, although many of the present structures will remain in place until 2024. At the point of leaving the EU, the UK governments will transcribe all EU directives into UK law, and then gradually review and rewrite these. The devolved administrations can then determine their own priorities for farming and the environment. This provides an exciting opportunity to shape our future priorities. The GWCT advocates the protection of funds to support farmers and the environment, with an easing of the administrative process.

Why give financial support to farming?

There is no requirement for farming to receive financial support; in fact some think that farming should no longer receive any payments, and that a free market should be allowed to define prices for produce, with farms having to be profitable as in most other industries.

The GWCT believes that without financial support for environmentally responsible farming, marketplace pressures would lead farmers and land managers away from prioritising environmental concerns. In all likelihood, without payments to support environmental measures, the need to maximise production to make farming profitable would have severely negative effects on our countryside. If we value the beauty of our countryside, nature and wildlife as well as the services they provide, it is essential to provide financial support to preserve them.

72%
of the UK is
managed for
agriculture





The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)

A brief history

Following the Second World War, the British government introduced the Agriculture Act of 1947, to increase the level of production and decrease the level of dependence on imported food. Prices were guaranteed for agricultural products, with grants for increased productivity. The Agricultural Development and Advisory Service (ADAS) was also established to provide free advice to farmers on how to improve productivity. When the UK joined the predecessor to the EU in 1973, these grants were phased out as UK farmers came under the authority of CAP.

At this time, CAP payments were made based on units of production, which was good for encouraging food production but was not beneficial to the environment. In the mid-1990s, the World Trade Organisation stepped in and decreed that CAP payments could not directly subsidise farmers for production, to even the market between Europe and the developing world. This led to reforms, with payments linked to acreage (often called “pillar one”), whilst requiring farmers to observe environmental regulations, e.g. the Nitrates Directive and “Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions”.

A percentage of the acreage payment was ring-fenced for an Environmental Stewardship Scheme (often called “pillar two”). The balance between agricultural production and environmental benefit shifted gradually, and a refocusing of the payment structure introduced “greening measures”. This requires farmers to grow a minimum of three crops in any one year and to designate 5% of their land to Ecological Focus Areas.

**In 2015, UK farmers received almost £2.4bn in direct payments.
In future, GWCT wants farmers to be rewarded for land stewardship.**



Benefits

- CAP has increased production and provided food security in Europe by smoothing market variation
- It has encouraged and produced a successful farming sector

Challenges and issues

Relating to the Basic Payment Scheme

- Detailed process of application and administration, and heavy burden of evidence required at inspection
- CAP tends to give greater reward to larger landowners, rather than smaller operations. 80% of funding for the basic payment scheme goes to only 20% of producers
- Set-aside. Despite the potential for environmental gain from leaving land unfarmed, some of the regulations around managing this land led to harm for wildlife

Relating to Agri-environment Schemes

- Complicated process of application and administration, and heavy burden of detail for those farms that are inspected
- Extremely prescriptive
- Funding restrictions have led to recent schemes being more targeted to fewer participants, resulting in a less inclusive framework and lower levels of participation
- Perceived over-regulation and administrative burden reduce participation



The current situation

The term agri-environment scheme (AES) refers to payments that farmers and other land managers can apply for, to support land management that is beneficial to wildlife or the natural environment. There are many different options available, depending on which species/habitat/environmental system is being supported. This is centralised in the EU, through CAP, which determines payments, what is rewarded, and how much is available.

The EU determines the amount of financial support each member state receives under the CAP. That state then elects what proportion it wishes to channel into pillar two (up to 15%), and ring-fences this in a Rural Development Fund. Each country can determine how this is used, within guidelines from the EU.

The structure of agri-environment schemes varies considerably from country to country within the UK. Devolved governments in Scotland and Wales have responsibility for administering CAP farming support, and the differing physical and political environments in the different countries has resulted in different schemes and different levels of funding.

Basic Payment Scheme

In England, support is provided through a Basic Payment Scheme (BPS), sometimes called the Basic Farm Payment, for which the farm must adhere to certain criteria. These consist mainly of environmental factors, and include two main categories that must be satisfied: “**cross-compliance**” and “**greening measures**”. Assessments of whether farms have reached these standards are performed retrospectively, and if it is considered that the criteria have been breached, some of the Basic Farm Payment must be repaid. Although this is the lowest level scheme, it has the most participants and therefore accounts for the majority of funding.



1. Cross-Compliance

In order to receive the Basic Payment Scheme payment, farms must be “cross-compliant”, which means adhering to the following strict requirements:

- **Statutory Management Requirements:** These requirements refer to 13 legal standards covering the environment, food safety, animal and plant health, and animal welfare.
- **Good agricultural and environmental conditions:** The obligation to keep land in good agricultural and environmental condition refers to a range of standards related to soil protection, maintenance of soil organic matter and structure, avoiding the deterioration of habitats, and water management.

2. Greening Measures

Furthermore, farms must now also adhere to greening measures to receive the full Basic Farm Payment. There are three basic principles to greening measures, being:

- **Crop diversity on arable land:** Farms 10-30 hectares must grow at least two different crops; farms that are over 30 hectares must grow at least three different crops. The main crop must cover less than 75% of the total arable land.
- **Permanent pasture:** The amount of permanent grassland across England is monitored, and if it falls by 5% or more, farmers who have ploughed permanent grassland may have to reinstate it.
- **Ecological Focus Areas:** 5% of the farm must be managed to benefit the climate and environment. For example, hedges, buffer strips, fallow land and growing leguminous crops (but excluding the use of crop protection products) can count towards this.

30% of the Direct Payment is made through greening, but these measures are currently failing to meet environmental objectives.

3. Agri-Environment Schemes

While the Basic Farm Payment supports general good farming principles and environmental practice, agri-environment schemes encourage land management techniques that include an increased level of financial support, often supporting specific species or habitats. These have evolved over the years, were most recently called Entry Level and Higher Level Stewardship schemes, but as of 2015 are called Countryside Stewardship. Some existing Entry Level and Higher Level Stewardship schemes are still running, and will continue until 2024.

Countryside Stewardship is one overall scheme with three strands: the capital grant scheme, middle tier stewardship and higher tier stewardship. It is a competitive application process, and as the environmental benefits of the specific AES packages increase, they fall into one of these three, and payments reflect this tier classification.

Countryside Stewardship aims to protect and enhance the natural environment, in particular biodiversity and water quality, but also:

- Woodland improvement
- Flood management
- The historic environment
- Landscape character
- Genetic conservation
- Educational access

GWCT influence on agri-environment schemes

Many of the features included in Countryside Stewardship schemes today were designed and pioneered by the GWCT. For example, the conservation headland and beetle bank are well known to improve biodiversity on farmland, are supported in these schemes, and are integrated into many farms across the country, providing benefits to both wildlife and farmers.

Entirely developed by GWCT:

- Conservation headlands (harvested and unharvested)
- Beetle banks
- Wild bird seed mixtures
- Under-sowing of legume-rich grass
- Supplementary feeding of farmland birds
- Cultivated, uncropped margins for arable flora

Developed with GWCT contribution:

- Pollen and nectar mixes
- Grass margins

The GWCT developed beetle banks in the mid-1980s. Agri-environmental support for the establishment of beetle banks began in Britain with set-aside in the early 1990s, continuing through to the current Mid and Higher Tier of the English Countryside Stewardship funding scheme.



The GWCT vision for farming support payments

Farmers and land managers are stewards of the landscape, being responsible for the management of three quarters of the land in the UK. This role comes with responsibilities towards wildlife, the environment and ecosystem services, which should be recognised and supported. As with any business, adjustments to benefit the environment will be more readily made if these are financially supported, and if the driving force behind the change comes from the farmers themselves the likelihood of success is increased.

The GWCT envisages support for a “**Foundation Scheme**”, which should include the environmental criteria included in current statutory requirements and good agricultural practice. Payment would not be entirely related to farm size, but would reward the retention of features such as field margin strips and buffer zones.

After this foundation scheme would come the “**Universally Accessible Scheme**” consisting of two strands – one for shorter-term commitments and one for long-term conservation.



Short-term: Pre-packaged schemes to support certain aspects of the environment, as well as farmer-driven, personalised schemes. We hope that better engagement with farmers and land managers would be achieved with farmers having the flexibility to design their own schemes, and gaining ownership of the environmental benefits derived on their farms. This will allow farmers to select their preferred options and combine them to result in a personalised scheme, capturing local enthusiasm to support certain species/habitats/environments. The size of the payment would be linked to the number and environmental value of the options chosen on a sliding scale, with payment by results.

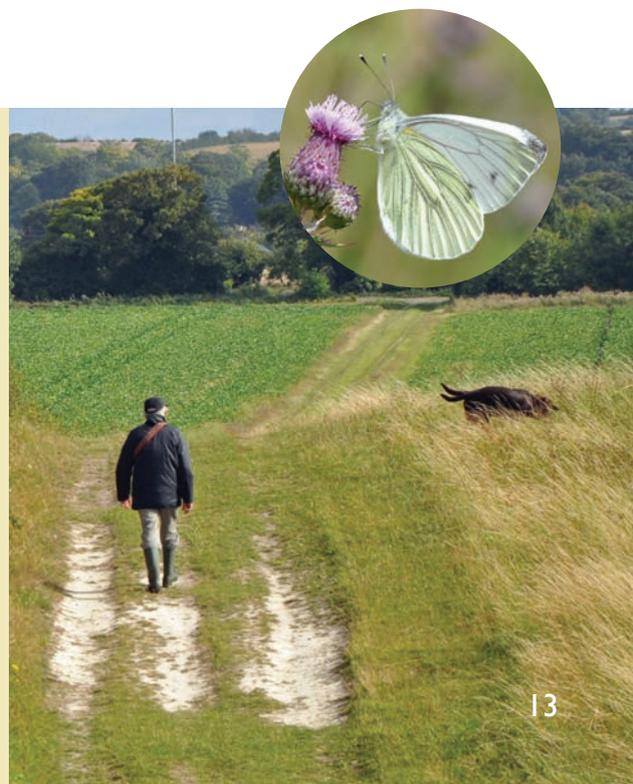
Long-term: Supporting very long-term commitments to conservation, either in the form of 20-year AES contracts, with a five-year break clause, or as voluntary conservation covenants.

We suggest the highest level of support for collaborative, large-scale working, in the “**Farmer Cluster Scheme**” which focus on collaborative, landscape-wide working.

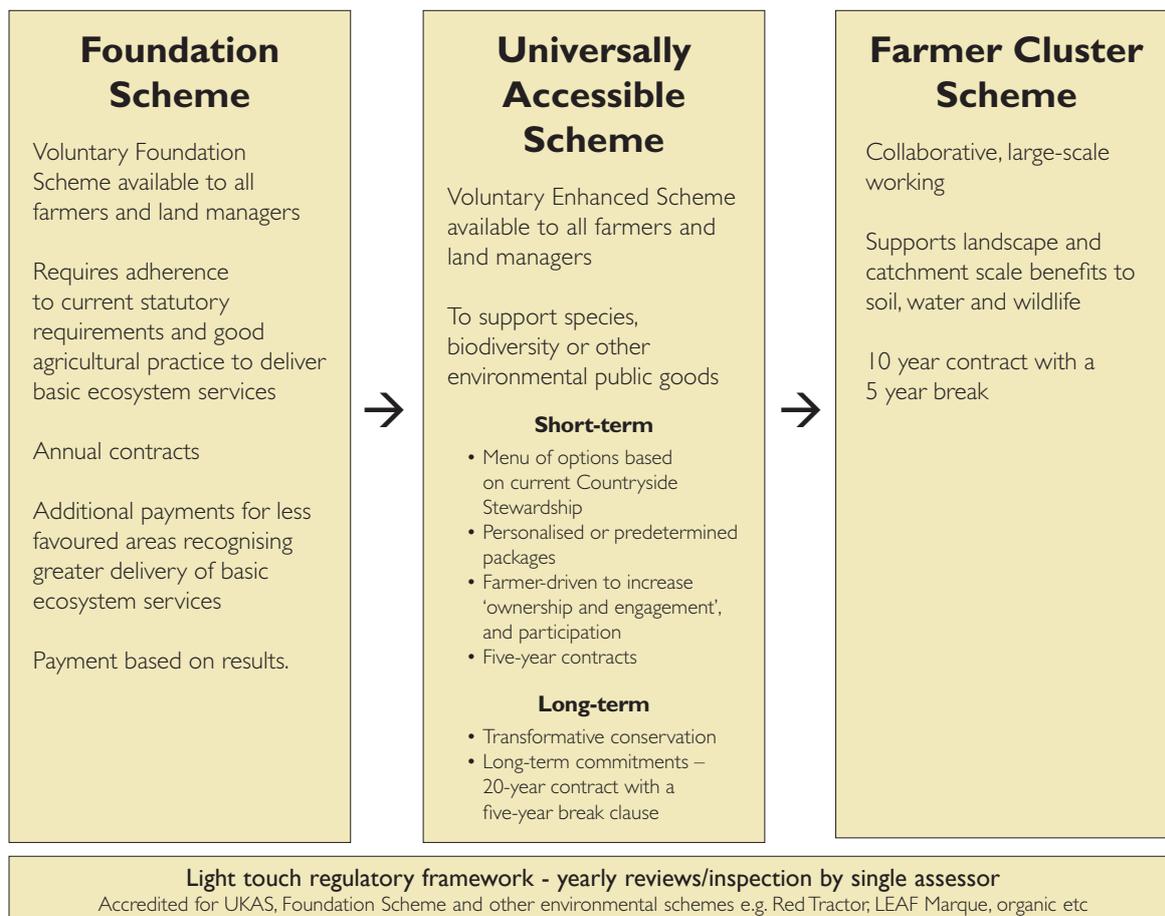
Conservation covenants explained

A conservation covenant is a voluntary agreement between a landowner and a responsible body, for example a charity, public body or local/central government, to do or not do something on their land for conservation purposes. Like any covenant, conservation covenants go with the land, in perpetuity.

Examples of this may be: maintaining woodland and allowing public access, refraining from using certain pesticides on native vegetation, or managing a wildflower meadow for the benefit of biodiversity. The landowner can be involved in designing the management plan for the area, and receives financial support and advice from the body which is responsible for the land.



GWCT Proposal



Increasing level of financial support with increased commitment

Additional funding opportunities

- 1. Capital Grants**

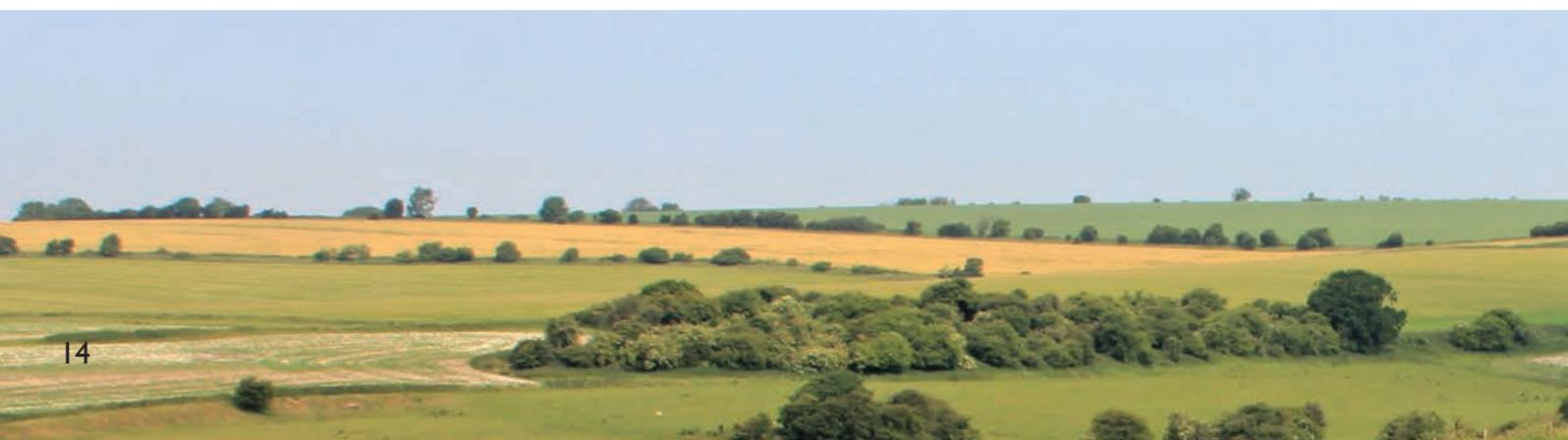
Support for investment in equipment and infrastructure

2. Rural Development Scheme

Support for training and professional development

3. Moorland and Uplands Landscape

Uplands environments are challenging to farm, but provide essential environmental services, iconic landscapes, biodiversity and strong communities. Additional financial support should be available



Key benefits

1. Encouraging conservation and environment measures across a larger scale, which gives better results than isolated pockets of effort
2. Farmer-driven choices to capture individual enthusiasm, increase motivation to achieve conservation goals, and result in better outcomes
3. Reduced burden of administration for both farmers and regulators

Key differences

- The voluntary Foundation Scheme is underpinned by a single yearly inspection which is paid for by the farmer, performed by an inspector accredited by UKAS, and able to certificate for multiple bodies, for example, LEAF Marque, organic standards and Farm Assurance
- Increased support for large-scale environmental benefits – working together across farms to improve the whole landscape. The highest level of support would be available for collaborative working
- Increased support for wider environmental outcomes other than biodiversity – for example clean water, soil health or carbon storage
- More flexibility in AES schemes – the ability to select individual options to make up a personalised package, with suitable financial support. Payment by results, after qualitative assessments
- Currently, payments are made in advance, with a small percentage of farms being inspected annually and breaches leading to a request for some of the Basic Farm Payment to be returned. Following a successful entry review, our proposals include a single yearly review for all farms choosing to enrol for the Foundation Scheme, followed by payment
- Single yearly review providing advice and action plan to work together on, rather than multiple separate inspections
- A 10% deviance threshold permitted to allow for the practicalities of implementing environment measures. Managing with a tractor, then measuring with a ruler, can lead to over-precision and therefore penalties when there was no intention to breach. Repeated breaches would lead to loss of payment



The general principles

- **Less red tape**
- **Better compliance**
- **More flexibility**
- **More cost-effective regulation**
- **Greater environmental gains**

Yearly review

We recommend voluntary yearly reviews consisting of independent assessors and farmers working together, rather than inspections with verifiable standards and failures. These assessors would be UKAS-registered inspectors, able to perform a complete farm assessment, reducing the need for multiple visits.

Yearly action plans will be drawn up, based on the advice given at these reviews. Increased farmer engagement with such a collaborative, advisory process could increase motivation to achieve conservation goals. These reviews would be commissioned, paid for, and the inspector chosen by the farmer – as with many current certification schemes. The review cost would be reflective of farm size.

Modified greening measures?

Greening measures in their current form are unlikely to feature when post-CAP agri-environment schemes are developed. However, the GWCT would support retaining greening measures in a modified form. We propose the following adjustments to the current measures to improve conservation benefits:

- The “three crop rule” specifying crop rotation and area should be replaced with a requirement to grow both exploitative and restorative crops in a rotation – those that take from the soil, and those which allow it to recover. This would include funded grass phases in arable rotations.
- Permanent pasture: the present system to maintain national levels of permanent pasture should remain, however long-term grass leys should not be classified as permanent until they are at least eight years old. Grass strips around arable fields should not be classed as permanent pasture. Farmers would receive payments for the environmental benefits of permanent pasture.
- Ecological Focus Areas: EFAs should remain at 5%, and be used for growing insect- and bird-friendly seed mixes. The use of plant protection products to manage these options should only be restricted by the product label recommendation. Farmers who include these measures within a Universally Accessible Scheme would be exempted from this EFA requirement.

Achieving better outcomes for wildlife: the value of advice

Good quality advice and support is well recognised as being important in the success of agri-environment scheme agreements. The GWCT believes that the best results can be achieved through combining the local knowledge and experience of the landholder with expert advice and support.



Participants enter agri-environment schemes for many reasons, including financial as well as environmental motives, but most measure the success of their scheme on environmental results¹. Achieving a positive environmental impact is the aim, and therefore it is important to maximise the chance of achieving this not only for the environment itself, but for the engagement and satisfaction of the landholder. If you actually see more harvest mice, bumblebees or wildflowers on your land through implementing the management plan, it is more likely that you will continue. Accessing good advice and support can help in achieving the aims of the agreement.

Two recent studies carried out by Natural England have looked at this in detail. The results showed that receiving advice and support during the establishment of agri-environment agreements had a significant effect on their design and led to including the most suitable options. The approaches chosen were more cost-effective, and targets appropriate. The agreement holders in this study, particularly farmers, valued the advice and support they received¹. Getting the agreement right at set-up stage, with the right options for the farm and suitable indicators to measure success, is extremely important.

Not only does advice and support help shape agri-environment agreements at the set-up stage, Natural England has also studied the effect of advice being available throughout the agreement. 71 percent of agreement holders said that the advice they had received had been important or very important to the successful delivery of their HLS agreement².

Expert advice, available either from Natural England or other parties such as the GWCT or FWAG, can combine expert conservation knowledge with practical considerations and experience. Industry-led voluntary approaches such as the Campaign for the Farmed Environment and the Voluntary Initiative, established to minimise the impact of pesticides, also have an important role to play in the provision of advice. This can include delivering statutory requirements such as the current greening measures to best practice standards. Collectively these can enable farmers to maximise the benefits to nature on their land, within the framework of their agreements and alongside best agricultural practice.

1. Jones, N, Short, C, Elliott, J, Cao, Y, Gaskell, P, Hallam, C, Laybourn, R, Breyer, J, Conyers, S & Boatman, N. (2015). Assessing the role of advice and support on the establishment of HLS agreements. LM0433.
2. Boatman, N, Short, C, Elliott, J, Cao, Y, Gaskell, P, Hallam, C, Laybourn, R, Breyer, J & Jones, N. (2014). Assessing the impact of advice and support on the environmental outcomes of HLS agreements. LM0432.



The proposals in detail

The Foundation Scheme

Encouraging maximum participation, whilst retaining the conservation benefits of cross-compliance and greening measures after Brexit, is critical. These criteria will be taken forwards into the Foundation Scheme, with some modifications, to help ensure both environmental benefits and product quality.

The Foundation Scheme will be voluntary, and consist of annual contracts, with yearly reviews paid for by the farmer, who appoints a UKAS (or equivalent) accredited inspector. These reviews will examine the farm in one visit on behalf of multiple bodies – for example, to access the Foundation Scheme payment, for LEAF Marque or organic status, and to attain basic farm standards certification at one visit. A publicly-funded payment will be triggered after this review has been successfully completed, with the possibility of minor non-compliances to be noted. Persistent or serious breaches would result in non-qualification for the Foundation payment, or accession to other schemes.

The Rural Payments Agency (RPA) will cross-check a small sample of farms successfully entering the Foundation Scheme, with farms that do not join the scheme being more likely to receive a full RPA inspection. Some of the payment will be based on an assessment of the quality and quantity of the environmental outcomes achieved. Valuing natural capital is a developing concept and will play a central role in agricultural policy.

The Universally Accessible Scheme

The next level of support would be available to farms that increase their wildlife, habitat or environmental benefit. We envisage two strands within this level, to allow long or short-term commitments to conservation.

Short-term:

Two routes would be available, to either allow flexible choices for those who wish to personalise their package, or standard packages.

- 1. Personalised scheme:** This will allow farmers to choose the options they prefer to implement from a wide range of possibilities. Payments will increase incrementally according to the number and environmental benefit of the selected options. This will give the chance for each farmer to design their own package, based on their needs and interests. Natural England is beginning to recognise the benefits of a simplified, yet more flexible system and explore this further with the Wildlife Offers scheme from January 2018. The GWCT supports this approach and it forms the basis of the personalised options in our Universally Accessible Scheme.
- 2. Packaged measures:** For those who prefer to select a pre-determined package of measures, options should be available to support specific aspects of the environment, for example birds, mammals, pollinators, flood protection, woodland, soil quality, native species, conservation agriculture, etc.

Long-term:

Long-term commitment to conservation can also be supported in one of two ways. Agri-environment scheme contracts of 20 years, with five-year break clauses, will be available. These will encourage and support the creation, restoration or maintenance of conservation schemes providing environmentally valuable areas, which need long-term management and support. This would reward investment that has already been made in long-term conservation and encourage its continuation. Examples might include conversion of arable farmland to chalk downland, restoration of moorland or blanket bog, or creation of woodland.

Alternatively, such areas could be managed under a conservation covenant. This is an agreement between the landowner and a “responsible body” such as a charity that takes on a duty for management of that land for the benefit of the environment. The landowner is involved in negotiating the contract for management of the area, with flexibility around who undertakes the management and designs the plan.

The Farmer Cluster Scheme

Increased conservation benefits are seen when environmental support is given across a large area. This is called landscape-scale conservation, and can deliver the highest value in terms of both conservation and environmental service delivery. The concept of a Farmer Cluster was developed by the GWCT and supported by Natural England, and such collaborative working across the landscape is now widely recognised as giving increased benefits compared to individual landowners taking different management approaches. Farmer Clusters also increase the ability to address connectivity issues through habitat creation, allowing wildlife to move through the countryside, potentially mitigating the effects of climate change. To get the best results, such joined-up, landscape-scale conservation should be encouraged, and we propose awarding the highest level of support to those adopting it.

Collaborative working in a Farmer Cluster would entitle the group to apply to a facilitation fund to finance personalised design of a scheme for the land as a whole. Such collective working and cooperation across a landscape gives wider benefits than can be achieved on smaller areas of land in isolation, and would therefore attract a higher level of financial support. This can be for the benefit of environmental services as well as biodiversity, for example improvement of water quality across an entire river catchment, with the engagement of the local community.



**Farmer
Cluster Case
Study**

The Marlborough Downs Nature Enhancement Partnership

This landscape-scale, farmer-led nature conservation project started in 2012, when 10,000 ha of the Marlborough Downs was approved as a Nature Improvement Area (NIA). Defra piloted NIAs between 2012 and 2015 to develop landscape-scale conservation projects as recommended in the Lawton Review. The Marlborough Downs was the only farmer-led project in the pilot and involved farmers and landowners representing 30 farms and estates.

The successor to NIAs were Farmer Clusters, which GWCT conceived and piloted with support from Natural England in summer 2013. These followed the Marlborough model: groups of farmers working together, voluntarily, combining their farmed area to create a landscape-scale nature conservation project, which the farmers manage and plan themselves with the help of a biodiversity adviser. From 2015 ongoing funding was provided through the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund. There are now over 100 Farmer Cluster-type projects in England, most operating as CS Facilitated Groups with some finding their own funding. They encompass 1200 farmers, and nearly 500,000 ha of farmland. The Marlborough Downs Space for Nature project continues with the benefit of Facilitation Funding to support biodiversity and landscape conservation on farms, alongside member subscriptions and grants from other sources to deliver its community and outreach programme.

The Marlborough Downs has been a truly pioneering project. It brought together dozens of farmers to focus on nature conservation across 10,000 ha, focusing in

particular on the restoration of chalk grassland; farmland birds such as tree sparrows and corn bunting; the provision of pollen and nectar-rich habitat as wildlife corridors and stepping stones; and the recreation of dew ponds which are the only source of water on the top of the hills. The farmers have planted miles of new hedgerow, created several tree sparrow 'villages', and are encouraged to provide grains and seeds for farmland birds over the winter. They have worked with local ornithologists, botanists and other specialists to identify and quantify the biodiversity on their farms. Through the project, the farmers involved have developed a pride in, and sense of ownership of, their landscape and wild flora and fauna. They have also developed strong links with their local community, which includes an annual LEAF Open Farm Sunday with over 1,000 visitors, owl prowls, bat walks, wildflower identification workshops, and improved access to miles of tracks for Carriage Riding for the Disabled. Visits from local schools, clubs and other community groups are actively encouraged, and the farmers want the project to be recognised as contributing to 'health and well-being'. They have recently started a new initiative called Bee Roads which encourages local communities and businesses to support pollinators.

The Marlborough Downs project provided a blueprint for all the Farmer Cluster-type projects and Facilitated Groups that have followed. GWCT was proud to be involved in its creation and development, and our chief executive, Teresa Dent CBE, was chairman of the NIA partnership (the Marlborough Downs' farmers, GWCT and Wiltshire Council).



Additional funding opportunities

1. Protecting the moorland and upland working landscape

Farming in the uplands is very challenging, both physically and financially, and yet upland farms play a vital role both in local communities and for the environment, with a role in supporting biodiversity and improving water quality. The environment produced and maintained by upland farming underpins some of the UK's most iconic landscapes, therefore also supporting tourism. Upland farming communities would be encouraged to design their own schemes to achieve positive outcomes both for the farm and elsewhere.

2. Capital Grants Scheme

This funding stream will be open to applications for one-off payments to support investment in equipment and infrastructure that farmers may not otherwise be able to afford. For example, it is environmentally beneficial for slurry storage containers to be fitted with lids. However, these can be expensive and are not compulsory and as such are often omitted.

3. Rural Development Scheme

The GWCT advocates the continuation of the Rural Development Scheme, to provide grants for environmental measures not included in the three-tiered scheme. This would include capital grants for infrastructure that delivers benefits to society. This would be a competitive application process, targeted at local objectives.



How does this fit in with the government's 25-year Plan?

Natural Capital

By 2024, the government is likely to end the current system of paying farmers per hectare. As 60% of farms are not profitable without them, the loss of these support payments will have a serious impact on farm businesses. However, the government does intend to support “public benefits” – things like water quality, soil health, biodiversity and carbon storage. Through their management of the land, farmers directly influence these important services that the countryside provides and should therefore be rewarded for caretaking such “public goods”. The idea of allocating a value to beautiful landscapes, biodiversity and public services provided by the land is called “Natural Capital”.



Agro-forestry and Woodland Management

With England missing its tree-planting targets last year by 93%, we clearly need to develop better schemes to encourage farmers and landowners to plant trees. As well as providing timber, trees offer benefits to wildlife, carbon storage, flood prevention, shelter, soil and wildlife, and these should be included in their value. This is another example of the important concept of natural capital, showing how valuing those aspects of the natural world whose role may not be obvious can enable their expansion and lead to important gains for us all.



The rules that prevented trees being planted on agricultural land have been relaxed recently, and now it is possible to farm and plant trees at the same time, called agro-forestry. Agro-forestry and bio-energy planting schemes should be funded, and government recognises the need for pest control as part of a package of management measures.

Soil Health

Soil health and structure are very important, and in many places, declining. Loss of soil through erosion and reduced soil quality are also pressing issues in the farmed landscape. These factors combine to have a negative effect both on the productivity of that soil, and on the wider environment. Improving soil health is increasingly important, and we need to look at ways to achieve this. One such example is crop rotations that include phases which enhance the soil, to balance those that can degrade it. This could be incorporating crop residues into the soil, planting green manure or cover crops to protect and enhance soil over winter or adding organic matter such as livestock manure. Incorporating grass phases into arable crop rotations is another technique that can improve soil health, as well as considering reducing the intensity of tillage where that is suitable. The GWCT has pioneered a range of techniques in support of sustainable soil management at its Allerton Project. More information on soil health can be found in the GWCT publication, *The Soil & Water Balance*, available at www.gwctshop.org.uk.



An important step on the way to improving soil health is being able to measure how soil is faring, and whether the techniques that are introduced are helping. One way to look at this may be a simple audit of organic matter in soil, measuring what is there and taking into account the management practices – what goes in and what comes out. Managing soil in a sustainable way is in the best interest not only of the landowner themselves, but also for society, and soil measurement and management should be eligible for the concept of Natural Capital discussed above, with payment for public goods.

Protecting Crops

For farmers to be able to farm profitably and produce the food we need, it is important that they can responsibly use crop protection products – these are treatments that allow their crops to thrive. These products are properly regulated and used by prescription only as part of a combined approach that includes natural pest control – known as Integrated Pest Management. Reducing the negative impacts of pesticides to the environment is best achieved by a combination of management and regulation.



For example, scientists have highlighted some negative impacts from the use of neonicotinoid insecticides and additional restrictions were introduced while more scientific research was done. This is important to allow the time to properly investigate the possible impacts, suitably considered against both the benefits, and potential alternatives. GWCT research has shown that when kale is grown as part of a wildlife seed mix it provides a valuable winter food source for a range of farmland birds. Yet young kale is vulnerable to flea beetle attack and, as it flowers in the second year from sowing, neonicotinoid seed treatments are approved for use and have proved very constructive in supporting the establishment of wildlife seed mixes. Any future restrictions imposed on this means of protection must be supported by scientific evidence and consider the impacts of alternative insect pest control methods.

Glyphosate is a herbicide that plays an important role in weed control in reduced tillage farming, which in turn is good for soil ecology. Although there are concerns about its use/effect in some circumstances, no detectable residues occur in the harvested crop when glyphosate is used to control weeds prior to crop establishment.

The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust

For over 80 years our scientists have been researching why species like the grey partridge, corn bunting and black grouse have declined. We are continually developing practical measures to reverse these declines.

Our aim is simple – a thriving countryside rich in game and other wildlife.

We are an independent charity reliant on voluntary donations and the support of people who care about the survival of our natural heritage.

Be the first to know about our new research and call 01425 651010 to join us today.



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Front cover picture: Jen Brewin

Design and layout: James Swyer

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June 2018. (Formerly The Game
Conservancy Trust.)

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ISBN 978-1-901369-28-1