

That time of year is fast approaching when our minds start to turn to the daunting prospect of filling in this year's BPS forms, although the substantial numbers of you out there who have yet to receive last year's payment may be forgiven for having more pressing concerns.

The conspicuous silence of the RPA on the subject of how, given the debacle that ensued last year, we are expected to relay information to them come 16 May (assuming it isn't delayed again) is at least slightly concerning and I do worry that we are looking at a system that will to all intents and purposes be a rerun of last year's deeply frustrating and long winded paper chase.

Even without the demands of BPS my other main seam of work as spring approaches now revolves around the annual application process for the new Countryside Stewardship Scheme which will see the



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# Here we go again

second tranche brought forward for a January 2017 start date. Those of you with an HLS ending either this year or next year (there is potential for HLS agreements to be converted early to CSS) or an ELS ending this year will certainly want to be giving some thought to what options are available.

The new scheme currently manifests itself in two main parts; Higher and Mid Tier. The former is broadly equivalent to the old HLS with similar options while the latter falls somewhere between ELS and HLS and as a competitive scheme can best be described as akin to the old Countryside Stewardship of pre 2005. Broadly speaking the payment rates for grassland options have reduced by around a fifth whereas, slightly perplexingly given that they are supposedly based on income foregone, those for arable options have generally seen an increase. Natural England are not in the habit of publishing these income foregone figures and I can only assume that they're calculation methodology is such a dark art that no mortal would be able to fathom it.

Overall, especially where agreements have come out of ELS, we have seen some encouraging signs with all our applications accepted and annual income not only largely increased but also being bolstered by the welcome addition of healthy capital grants for items such as fencing and hedging.



Take up of the Mid Tier scheme particularly was lower than hoped by Natural England and this was perhaps, in part at least, due to adverse publicity revolving around the paperwork required with each application; including but by no means limited to soil samples for all grassland parcels and an array of photographs that Lord Lichfield would have balked at. I am glad to say, however, that NE staff have appreciated this burden and made every effort to help ensure a smooth progression.

The onus of record keeping will also extend to ongoing agreements (more photographs!) and while travelling in Europe recently one of my colleagues came across a selection of decoys in a hunting store which may prove useful; we are now considering hiring them out to farmers and will guarantee their presence on any given field throughout the southeast in under 48 hours (it may take

marginally longer for the Isle of Wight).

Back to reality, and for those considering entering Higher Tier, an Expression of Interest window is due to open on 1 March and close on 30 April. With this, as well as Mid Tier and BPS deadlines in mind, we have organised a series of seminars with the CLA where we will weigh up the pros and cons of the new scheme and outline how a CSS agreement can complement a commercial farming enterprise. These are to be held on 9 and 11 February at Avington Park, Alresford; Hampton Estate, Farnham; Firle Estate, Lewes and Bradbourne House, East Malling. Details can be found on our website.

One further aspect of the scheme which has largely crept under the radar but which we feel is deserving of some consideration is the Facilitation Fund which encourages farmers and landowners to work together on a wider scale to deliver the priorities of CSS. Thus far we have come up with a list of geographical areas where we would like to work with groups of farmers to help them manage their existing Stewardship agreements and transition to the new schemes. We will be working on potential bids for the South Downs from Brighton to Eastbourne, Pevensey, North Kent Marshes and the environs of Ashdown Forest. At present this is no more than an outline and we would welcome any input from readers within these areas.



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