

THE ROAD TO SHANGRI LA

I had been thinking about entitling this article something along the lines of 'Keep it simple' but the more eagle eyed among you would no doubt have noticed a certain similarity to our article last month, in the title at least, and the message within the prose will be broadly similar too; although in this instance I'm applying that mantra so that you too will be able to follow the necessary steps to agri-environment enlightenment.

Uptake of these schemes, despite the Natural England PR machine making positive noises to the contrary, has not been as high as was hoped and this is in no small part down to the fear that the schemes are too complicated and the penalties for any indiscretion potentially painful (not to mention the protracted trauma involved should you find yourself in dispute with their paymasters at the RPA).

However, in order to avoid any of the above bad karma (and a distinct lack of any enlightenment), we return to the concept of simplicity. As the

scheme remains undersubscribed, and I have seen no evidence to suggest that this year is shaping up to be any different, I would suggest that it is quite possible to have at least some of your cake and eat it by applying to enter the scheme but at the same time ensuring that it is not too complex. An application can normally be relatively easily designed which, for example, will more than match the annual income achieved through ELS but with the added benefit of funding for capital works. A very good example of this is that any grassland entered into the scheme is potentially eligible for additional grant funding of up to £4.90/m for fencing which can easily amount to some meaningful figures.

Furthermore this can be done without putting together a suite of options that require an algorithm that Stephen Hawking would be proud of in order to work out where and when they will fit in the rotation. One of the aspects of the old ELS scheme that people were keen on was that it followed a fairly simple formula and, give or take a few options falling off the list and some new ones having been added, the reality of the new scheme is remarkably close to that of the old one. Based on the assumption that we are dealing with a fairly typical mixed lowland farm one could combine some grassland options with no more than two or three arable ones such as grass margins, nectar flower mix and winter bird food.

DISTINCT ADVANTAGE

One further distinct advantage which is again comparable to ELS is that, unlike the higher tier of CSS and the old HLS, you will not have a Natural England adviser prescribing what and where you can or cannot have options – if it's within the rules you can have it.

Choosing simpler, relatively static options is

a safer bet than those which must be moved on an annual basis as each movement and/or reestablishment increases the risk of the option area being incorrect. That said, the scheme will allow them to be moved (and there may be very good agronomic reasons to do so at times) but the less this occurs the lower the risk. If found to be undersized during an inspection the automatic assumption will be that it was not correct in previous years with the obvious ramifications. One solution to this thorny issue would be to factor in a buffer of say 5-10% with all the arable option areas and so be confident year on year that you won't be caught out.

The last but by no means least significant advantage is that, bearing in mind our impending fate at the hands of Monsieur Barnier, by entering these schemes now you are hedging your bets against what could turn out to be very turbulent times; while the government has guaranteed it will fund schemes prior to our departure from the EU nothing is clear about what will follow.

So, by following the broad principle of not over complicating things you too can go some way to reaching the bright sunlit uplands of your Countryside Stewardship Shangri La (or is that nirvana?)...alright, perhaps in my eagerness to continue the tenuous Buddhist theme I'm overstating it slightly but, with a little thought and planning, you too can have a scheme that works for you and doesn't result in any unwelcome letters from a franking machine in Reading.



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