

Countryside Stewardship priorities for Berkshire and Marlborough Downs

Choosing priorities

Countryside Stewardship is a competitive scheme and funding is limited. Not all eligible applicants will be offered a grant. This guide will help applicants choose the options that will increase their chance of success.

Countryside Stewardship applications are scored - both top priorities and other priorities (listed in the boxes below) score points. Applicants should select at least one top priority. Choosing other priorities will improve an application's score.

Top priorities

Priority group	Priority type
Biodiversity	Priority habitats
	Priority species
Water	Water quality
	Flood and coastal risk management
Historic environment	Designated historic and archaeological features
	Undesignated historic and archaeological features of high significance
Woodland	Woodland management
	Woodland planting
Landscape	
Multiple environmental benefits	

Other priorities

Priority group	Priority type
Other priorities	Water quality
	Archaeological and historic features
	Woodland
	Climate change

Biodiversity - top priorities

Priority habitats

Applicants should choose land management options and capital works that maintain, restore and create priority habitats and support priority species that depend on these habitats.

Priority habitats to be maintained include:

- lowland calcareous grassland
- lowland fen
- lowland meadow
- wood pasture and parkland with veteran trees
- ancient and native woodland
- riparian habitats associated with priority rivers and lakes
- arable field margins

Priority habitats (especially projects to enlarge existing sites or help join up habitat networks) to be restored include:

- lowland calcareous grassland
- lowland fen
- lowland meadow
- wood pasture and parkland with veteran trees
- ancient and native woodland
- riparian habitats associated with priority rivers and lakes
- floodplain grazing marsh

Priority habitat creation to extend or link priority habitat to increase connectivity and reduce fragmentation. In particular, create priority habitat that will also contribute significantly to improvements in:

- water quality
- air quality
- flood and coastal risk management

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

Restore or maintain SSSIs that include features eligible for options – this includes options that will reduce diffuse water and air pollution effects.

Priority species

Managing priority habitats will create the habitat needs for many of the priority species associated with this area. In particular by providing such essential elements as bare ground, areas of scrub and varied sward structures which will help these species thrive.

This area also has a number of priority species that need tailored management and advice. Applicants should choose land management options and capital works that meet the specific needs of the following priority species:

- corn bunting
- lapwing
- stone curlew
- turtle dove
- willow tit
- marsh fritillary
- Duke of Burgundy
- liquorice piercer
- lunar yellow underwing
- wartbiter
- lesser horseshoe bat
- Bechstein's bat
- *Anaptychia ciliaris* subsp. *ciliaris* (a lichen)
- Desmoulin's whorl snail
- thorow-wax
- wild candytuft
- shepherd's needle
- broad-fruited corn salad

Woodland bird assemblage

Parts of this area are targeted for their variety of woodland birds. Natural England has assessed the area as being nationally significant where 4 or more of the following species occur:

- lesser spotted woodpecker
- tree pipit
- redstart
- pied flycatcher
- spotted flycatcher
- wood warbler
- marsh tit
- lesser redpoll
- hawfinch

In these areas applicants should choose land management options and capital works that maintain or enhance conditions for woodland birds.

Arable plant assemblage

This area has cultivated land that may contain nationally threatened and declining populations of arable plants. The correct management of these areas will help these species thrive and help their populations increase.

The Wild Pollinator and Farm Wildlife Package

This package is a collection of scheme options that benefit wild pollinators, farmland birds (such as grey partridge, tree sparrow and yellowhammer) and other farm wildlife (such as arable plants, great crested newt, bats and brown hare).

The package is voluntary, but an application will have a greater chance of success if options from the package are chosen.

The options provide the essential resources (especially year-round food, shelter and nesting places) that wild pollinators, birds and farm wildlife need to survive and reproduce. These include:

- sowing nectar flower mixes
- increasing flowers on grassland
- sowing winter bird food mixes
- managing hedgerows and other key farm habitats (like ponds and ditches)

Mid-Tier

Applicants can choose from groups of options for different farm-types – arable, mixed or pastoral. Typically, the options should be applied over a minimum of 3% to 5% of the farmed land on the holding.

Higher Tier

An application will have a greater chance of success if the holding has already helped wildlife thrive under previous schemes. For example, where a Higher Level Stewardship agreement is coming to an end, and from other areas where priority farmland species are present.

Applicants can choose from similar groups of options, tailored to their holding, in consultation with a Natural England adviser. Typically, the options will cover a minimum of 5% to 10% of farmed land to target a broader range of farmland species and habitats

Applying the right combination of these options over at least 3% of the farmed land or a holding will bring benefits to farm wildlife.

Water - top priorities

Water quality

Applicants should consider options and capital works in the water quality options table that address:

- phosphate, nitrate and sediment in the Kennet, Bristol Avon Rural and Hampshire Avon catchments
- phosphate, nitrate, sediment and pesticides in the Upper and Middle Test and Ock catchments

This includes:

- groundwater drinking water sources near Ashdown Park, Ogbourne St George, Marlborough, Hungerford, Leckhampstead, Shepherds Shore and Wantage affected by nitrate
- surface water drinking water sources from the Thames downstream of this NCA, from Cookham to Egham and to Teddington affected by pesticides
- a protected aquatic species in the Bristol Avon affected by phosphate, nitrate and sediment
- the River Lambourn, Kennet Valley Alderwoods and Kennet and Lambourn Floodplain affected by phosphate, nitrate and sediment

These options help improve water quality by controlling the source or the movement of potential pollutants, including:

- nutrients from fertilisers, manures and organic materials
- sediment from soil erosion and run-off
- pesticides from their use and disposal

Flood and Coastal Risk Management

An application will have a greater chance of success if applicants select options for flood and coastal risk issues in the priority areas of the:

- Kennet upstream of Hungerford and Marlborough
- Og catchment upstream of Marlborough
- Aldbourne catchment upstream of Knighton
- Dun catchment upstream of Hungerford including the catchment upstream of Great Bedwyn
- Lambourn catchment upstream of Great Shefford
- Pang catchment
- Upper Hampshire Avon catchment and tributaries

Applicants should choose options from the flood risk table that:

- reduce the amount and rate of surface water run-off
- reduce soil erosion
- slow the movement of floodwaters on floodplains

Historic environment - top priorities

Applicants should choose active management which ensures the long-term survival of historic environment features and protects them against damage and decay. In particular some of the biggest land management threats in this area are from:

- arable cultivation
- scrub and tree growth

The following features are a high priority for active management in this area:

- designated features - archaeological features of national significance (Scheduled Monuments), Registered Parks and Gardens (RPG) and Registered Battlefields (RB)
- designated and undesignated traditional farm buildings and non-domestic historic buildings on holdings
- undesignated historic and archaeological features of high significance which are part of the Selected Heritage Inventory for Natural England (SHINE)

Applicants should consider options and capital works to:

- revert archaeological sites under cultivation to permanent grass
- reduce damaging cultivation and harvesting practices through minimum tillage or direct drilling where this provides a suitable level of protection
- remove scrub and bracken from archaeological or historic features
- maintain below-ground archaeology under permanent uncultivated vegetation or actively manage earthworks, standing stones and structures as visible 'above ground' features
- maintain and restore historic water management systems, including those associated with water meadows and designed water bodies
- restore historic buildings that are assessed as a priority in the area
- maintain or restore Registered Parks and Gardens, including structures or features that contribute to the design intentions or feel of the parkland or provide for their biodiversity and amenity value
- protect or enhance the condition of Registered Battlefields

Woodland - top priorities

Woodland management

Climate change, pests (such as deer and grey squirrels) and various diseases threaten woodland. Applicants' proposals will need to address such threats where present.

Certain types of woodland are a high priority for bringing into management, including:

- protected woodland – those designated for their national biodiversity value
- priority woodland habitat – other unmanaged broadleaved woodland
- priority species – target woodland within priority areas for woodland priority species
- planted ancient woodland site (PAWS) restoration – conversion of conifer plantations on ancient woodland sites to broadleaf woodland within priority woodland habitat networks
- United Kingdom Forestry Standard – unmanaged conifer woodland within catchments subject to eutrophication and acidification, both to reduce pressures on the water environment and improve biodiversity

All management should comply with the United Kingdom Forestry Standard and other relevant guidance such as [‘Managing ancient and native woodland in England’](#).

Woodland planting

High priority objectives for new woodland planting include:

- biodiversity – planting to buffer and link existing woodlands and other semi-natural open habitats within priority woodland habitat networks
- water quality – planting designed to reduce and intercept diffuse pollution from agriculture
- flood risk – planting designed to increase infiltration of heavy rain into the ground, reduce erosion, or slow the flow of floodwaters on floodplains

Landscape

Each application is likely to include a range of landscape features whose restoration should form an important part of agreements. Top priority in the area is the maintenance and restoration of features that will enhance the pattern and scale of the landscape and add to the area’s ‘sense of place’.

Top priorities in this area for landscape are:

- hedgerows
- in-field trees
- field margins and buffers
- permanent pasture
- bankside trees

Multiple environmental benefits

Applicants should look to provide for multiple priorities by selecting options that achieve multiple environmental benefits.

In this area, the greatest opportunity to achieve multiple objectives is by:

- creating reed-beds, lowland meadow, wet woodland, buffer strips, field margins and other semi-natural habitats in the floodplain around the Kennet and Lambourn Floodplain, Kennet Valley Alderwoods and the River Lambourn, in locations where this will increase habitat connectivity to benefit biodiversity, landscape character, water quality and flood risk
- creating new areas of low-input herb-rich grassland in and around the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site and along the length of the Ridgeway, where this will protect and link historic features whilst benefiting water quality, soil quality, biodiversity and flood risk management
- creating new areas of low-input, herb-rich permanent grassland and new woodland around Hungerford and Leckhampstead, where it will improve the quality of water entering swallowholes improving water quality in the Kennet and Lambourn, reducing flood risk and enhancing biodiversity
- creating non-cultivated areas such as buffer strips, swales, sediment traps, beetle banks, flower-rich field margins and areas of winter cover crops on cultivated, steep slopes within the upper catchments of the Kennet, Lambourn, Og, Aldbourne, Pang, Ock and Bristol Avon where this will intercept surface run-off and benefit landscape character, biodiversity, water quality, soil quality, pollinating insects and flood risk
- enhancing existing woodlands and expanding woodland cover in locations where well managed woodland can benefit landscape character, biodiversity, water quality and flood risk, in addition to wider climate change, economic and social benefits - key locations include:
 - the areas around Savernake Forest
 - the Avon and Kennett valleys
 - the north of the M4 corridor
 - the south of the NCA
 - the area between Marlborough and Whittonditch

Other priorities

Applicants should select at least 1 of the top priorities. However, applicants can also select other priorities, as this will increase the score of the application.

Water quality

Applicants should consider options and capital works in the water quality options table that address:

- surface water drinking water sources in the Kennet catchment near Reading (Kennet, Foudry Brook and Clayhill Brook) affected by pesticides

These options help improve water quality by controlling the source or the movement of potential pollutants.

Historic environment

The following historic environment features are lower priorities:

- designated and undesignated traditional farm buildings
- undesignated SHINE features of medium and low Significance
- priority undesignated historic parklands

Woodland Management

Woodlands not included in the top priority categories listed above are a lower priority for management but may still be supported.

Woodland Planting

Areas are prioritised for new planting based on their potential to create biodiversity and water benefits.

Woodland planting schemes are scored depending on where the proposed scheme is in relation to the opportunity maps for woodland planting in England and how well the planting design will benefit biodiversity and water.

Other priorities for appropriately designed biodiversity schemes exist across the whole of England. Opportunities for new woodland planting for water only exist in certain parts of England.

Climate change

By choosing land management options and capital works which support the management of the vulnerable features and habitats listed in this statement, including where vulnerabilities are increased by climate change, applicants will support the resilience of biodiversity, water and other scheme priorities to the impacts of climate change, which is a cross-cutting objective of the scheme.