



# Countryside Stewardship:

Natural England's approach to 2016 conversions to CS Higher Tier

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Conversions are potentially available for land in year nine (of a ten year) Higher Level Stewardship agreements to be transferred to a Higher Tier Countryside Stewardship agreement to ensure there is no 'gap' in management. Specifically, it is used to protect against the risk of significant environmental decline, or the long-term loss of a management regime that has been specifically adapted to optimise the environmental outcomes on a site. Few sites have such risks so conversion is likely to be by exception.

Our authority to do conversions is based on a specific regulation: Article 27.11 of E/C regulation 1974/2006 which says:

Member States may authorise one commitment to be converted into another during the period of its operation, provided that all the following conditions are fulfilled:

- (a) any such conversion is of significant benefit to the environment or to animal welfare or to both;
- (b) the existing commitment is substantially reinforced;
- (c) the approved rural development programme includes the commitments concerned.

In addition to the above regulation, Natural England has set out additional criteria to capture the most important expiring agreements. All the criteria must be met for an existing agreement to be considered for conversion:

- 1 There must be a justifiable threat to a priority environmental feature (see [Statements of Priorities](#)) if there is a break in agreement management.
- 2 The HLS agreement must have an expiry date of 30th September 2017 or earlier
- 3 There must be no potential barriers to conversion

Transferring land under HLS into Higher Tier Countryside Stewardship through conversion will not expose an agreement holder to the risk of recovery if the conversion is done in line with the regulation that underpins conversion: Article 27.11 of regulation 1974/2006.

If you have a HLS agreement expiring in 2017 and you feel you are suitable for conversion please discuss this with your Natural England adviser.

### **A 'justifiable threat' example:**

The cessation of a specific land management option will lead to a significant long term negative change to a habitat or species. Note: the option must have been introduced under HLS as a departure from existing land management practices i.e. the option is not just to keep the status quo.

For example: the loss of grazing on a priority habitat in a low livestock area due to withdrawal of HR1 or HR2 where grazing was introduced to the holding as part of the HLS agreement. This would not be justifiable in a high-livestock area or a holding where grazing is a core part of the farm business.

Threats to habitats or species are likely to be more significant the longer the scheme is out of agreement as more seasons without specific management will have passed e.g. we would consider August expiries carry the lowest risk as management through the most sensitive seasons of spring and summer will have been undertaken under the existing agreement.

### **Potential barriers to conversion**

There are several situations that may apply to an HLS option that would prevent that option being converted into an option in a Higher Tier CS agreement:

- 4** The feature under HLS is not targeted in the same way under CS.
- 5** The feature is still targeted but the eligibility criteria under CS are more demanding than they were under ES.
- 6** There is an obvious replacement option under CS, but the option has eligibility criteria that the HLS option cannot meet.



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