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Countryside Stewardship and Environmentally Sensitive Areas Schemes

Annual Report 2002–03



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April 2004

Annual Report 2002–03

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Nobel House
17 Smith Square
London SW1P 3JR
Telephone 020 7238 6000
Website: www.defra.gov.uk

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Front cover photograph of cirl bunting habitat, CS arable options and access link to SW Coastal Path at Prawle Point, South Devon © RSPB

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Foreword



This report marks a significant landmark in the lives of our two flagship agri-environment schemes, Countryside Stewardship and Environmentally Sensitive Areas.

Since 1987, the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme has given land managers in designated areas of England a chance to play a real part in conserving our traditional landscapes and features, and in improving and extending wildlife habitats. And, since 1991, the Countryside Stewardship Scheme has been extending these important principles to all areas of the country.

Both schemes have made a significant contribution to the sustainability and preservation of rural and urban fringe areas. Their achievements are many, as this report points out.

The schemes have served their purpose well. However, the time has come to take stock of their best features while, at the same time, reshaping them for the future. This is what we are doing in our current Review of Agri-environment Schemes and which we expect will lead to the introduction of a new, single, replacement scheme, Environmental Stewardship, in 2005.

Meanwhile, this first annual report documents the performance of the Countryside Stewardship and Environmentally Sensitive Areas schemes over the last year and recounts a few of the many success stories. It is a real pleasure for me to be associated personally with Government schemes that have done so much for so many.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elliot Morley". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Elliot Morley
Environment Minister
Defra

Contents

Introduction	5
History	5
Objectives and targets	6
How the schemes operate	7
Landscape types and features	7
Partner working	8
Schemes in focus	8
Expenditure on both schemes 2002–03	12
ESA	12
CS	13
Significant developments in 2002–03	14
Cereal field margins	14
Cirl bunting	15
Arable options	15
Access review	15
Review of payments for capital and access items	16
Measures to improve the quality and effectiveness of the schemes	16
Renewal of agreements	17
Scheme monitoring and evaluation	17
Publicity	17
Schemes in action	18
Landscapes	18
Heath and chalk downland	18
Upland commons	19
Water meadows	20
Coastal land	20
Wildflower meadows	20
Archaeology	21
Stonehenge and Avebury	21
Traditional farm building restoration	22
Wildlife	22
Corncrakes	22
Corn bunting	22
Butterflies	23
Access	23
Educational access	23
The future	24
Further information	25
Annex: Map of ESA and CS land under agreement in 2002	26

Introduction

In its response to the report of the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on *'The Future of UK Agriculture in a Changing World'* (January 2003), the Government agreed that it should provide regular reports on the performance of agri-environment schemes, including uptake and other data.

This is the first annual report for the two flagship schemes in England – Countryside Stewardship (CS) and Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) – and covers the period 2002 to 2003.

History

Over the last 20 years, it has become increasingly apparent the extent to which farming shapes the countryside and how modern farming methods encouraged by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), with their trend towards greater intensification, have contributed to the loss of wildlife habitats and landscape features. Through its agri-environment schemes, the Government is reversing this trend and encouraging more extensive agricultural practices.

The first scheme to be set up in England was the ESA scheme, which was introduced in 1987 following the Agriculture Act of 1986. The areas covered were The Broads, The Pennine Dales, The Somerset Levels and Moors, The South Downs and West Penwith. These were added to in 1993 and 1994 so that they now cover 22 of the most nationally important areas, including The Lake District (see map on the back page). The 'stages' of ESAs refer to the years when the areas joined the scheme: the 5 initial areas are thus Stage I ESAs, those joining the following year became Stage II ESAs, those in 1993 Stage III and those in 1994 Stage IV.

CS, which operates competitively countrywide outside ESAs, began as a pilot project under the then Countryside Commission in 1991. Over the years, it has expanded in terms of both landscape types and options covered. For example, in 1999, a suite of new options specifically designed for the uplands was offered for the first time following a review. In 2002, following the successful Arable Stewardship Pilot Scheme in East Anglia and the West Midlands, a set of new wildlife-friendly options were introduced into the scheme to cater for arable areas (see page 15).

Both schemes are co-funded by the EU as part of the England Rural Development Programme (ERDP), under the EU Rural Development Regulation (RDR) (Council Directive 1257/99).

Objectives and targets

Both CS and ESAs have similar objectives, which are to:

- sustain the beauty and diversity of the landscape;
- improve and extend wildlife habitats;
- create new habitats and landscapes where appropriate;
- restore neglected land or features;
- conserve archaeological sites and historic features; and
- improve opportunities for countryside enjoyment.

Through these objectives, both schemes contribute to the delivery of a range of Defra's Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets for 2003-06, particularly target 3, which is to:

"Care for our natural heritage, make the countryside attractive and enjoyable for all, preserve biological diversity by:

- *reversing the long-term decline in the number of farmland birds by 2020, as measured annually against underlying trends;*
- *bringing into favourable condition by 2010 95 per cent of all nationally important wildlife sites; and*
- *opening up public access to mountain, moor, heath and down and registered common land by the end of 2005."*

The schemes also contribute significantly to the achievement of Defra's Service Delivery Agreement (SDA) target 7, which helps to support the PSA target and the Department's aims of sustainability. This is:

"To contribute to achievement of sustainable development through the delivery of the outputs envisaged in the England Rural Development Programme (ERDP) including: annual increases in the area farmed organically and under stewardship agreements; development of the rural economy and creation of new jobs through the Rural Enterprise Scheme; and the setting-up of collaborative marketing ventures through processing and marketing grants. ERDP delivery contributes to a range of Defra targets, and in particular PSA targets 3, 4 and 5."

The schemes play an important role in helping the Government to meet its UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) commitments, and thereby implement the UN Convention on Biological Diversity agreed at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. The UK BAP identifies agri-environment measures to be used to achieve the goals of the Plan. A series of priority habitats and species have been defined, each of which has an action plan containing actions and targets and identifying organisations expected to contribute.

As well as having primary policy responsibility for the UK BAP, Defra is the lead partner for ancient and/or species-rich hedgerows, cereal field margins and upland hay meadows and is expected to act as 'champion' for their habitats, with responsibility for the Habitat Action Plans.

Defra is also the contact point within Government for 18 priority species, including six farmland birds (linnet, curlew, corn bunting, tree sparrow, bullfinch and turtle dove).

The agri-environment programme also contributes to other Habitat Action Plans, such as those for coastal and floodplain grazing marsh, lowland heathland and upland calcareous grassland.

How the schemes operate

To achieve scheme objectives at the individual farm level, management prescriptions are applied and formal management agreements are drawn up that last for 10 years, with an option in most cases to renew. Both schemes are voluntary and, in addition to offering annual management payments, they also provide grants for capital items such as hedging and walling. All payments reflect income forgone and any costs incurred in working to the prescriptions. In the case of ESAs, there is a range of tiers which prescribe different management practices. Payments vary depending on the management required under each tier. Land entered into the schemes may be eligible for an additional payment if new public access is provided.

Landscape types and features

A wide range of landscape types and features is covered by the schemes:

- arable farmland;
- chalk and limestone grassland;
- coastal areas;
- countryside around towns;
- field boundaries;
- lowland heath;
- old meadows and pastures;
- old orchards
- uplands; and
- waterside land.



Many landscapes and features are eligible for grants.

Each contributes to national and local BAPs by supporting a diverse range of species. The historic element of the schemes includes protection or renovation of archaeological sites and traditional farm buildings. Permissive access allows the public quiet enjoyment of the countryside and complements statutory Rights of Way.

Partner working

Partnership working is a key aspect of both schemes. Statutory agencies, such as the Countryside Agency, English Heritage, English Nature and the Environment Agency, together with the National Park Authorities (NPAs), and a wide range of non-Governmental organisations, including the Wildlife Trusts, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG), the National Farmers' Union (NFU) and the Country Landowners and Business Association (CLA), are fully involved in all aspects of the schemes, both nationally and regionally.

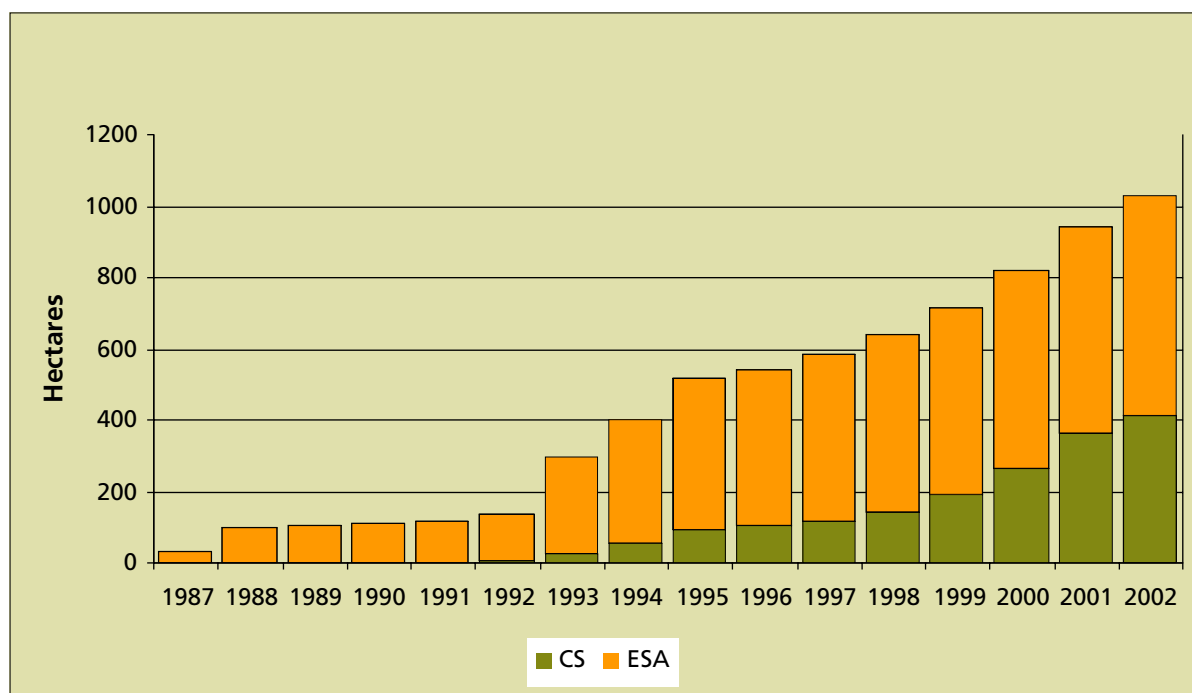
At the national level, regular meetings are held with partners to discuss policy and operational issues. Partners also play an important part in helping to re-design the schemes. For example, their involvement was an essential element of developing the new arable options in CS.

At a regional level, partners play an important role in helping to draw up CS county targeting statements, which set out the landscape types and features that are considered to be priorities locally. Partners, such as the NPAs and FWAG, are also heavily involved in developing CS applications.

Schemes in focus

There has been a significant expansion in the schemes from 1987 to 2003. The number of agreement holders has risen steadily from 1,300 with the introduction of the first ESAs in 1987 to 27,500 in 2003. Of these, 12,500 are now in ESAs and 15,000 are in CS.

Figure 1: Achievements to date – area in schemes (000s hectares)



Countryside Stewardship and Environmentally Sensitive Areas Schemes

The area under both schemes has also increased significantly, and this increase has been particularly marked under CS since the introduction of the ERDP in 2000. There are now over **1 million hectares** under agreement, with 615,000 hectares (ha) under ESAs and over 400,000 ha under CS (a twofold increase since the introduction of the ERDP).

The area under agreement in each ESA is shown in the table below and shows high levels of uptake in ESAs such as the Pennine Dales, the North and South West Peaks, Exmoor and West Penwith.

Table 1: Land in ESA stages			
ESA	Total eligible area (ha)	Land under agreement (ha)	% Uptake of eligible area
Stage I			
Pennine Dales	51,000	39,611	77.7
South Downs	51,600	18,500	35.8
Somerset Levels & Moors	27,600	18,548	67.2
The Broads	32,400	19,665	60.7
West Penwith	8,600	7,953	92.5
Total	171,300	104,277	60.8
Stage II			
Breckland	54,100	8,415	15.5
Suffolk River Valleys	33,700	10,440	31.0
Clun	18,400	16,287	88.5
North Peak	50,300	44,570	88.6
Test Valley	3,500	1,465	41.8
Total	160,000	81,177	50.7
Stage III			
North Kent Marshes	12,200	5,801	47.5
Avon Valley	4,000	2,536	63.4
South Wessex Downs	44,300	26,187	59.1
Exmoor	68,100	53,750	78.9
South West Peak	30,500	25,558	83.8
Lake District	205,100	157,016	76.5
Total	364,200	270,848	74.4
Stage IV			
Blackdown Hills	33,400	14,097	42.2
Cotswold Hills	65,900	51,292	77.8
Dartmoor	86,600	55,135	63.7
Essex Coast	21,900	5,251	24.0
Shropshire Hills	32,900	23,481	71.4
Upper Thames Tributaries	23,300	8,892	38.2
Total	264,000	158,148	59.9
GRAND TOTAL	959,500	614,450	64.0

Countryside Stewardship and Environmentally Sensitive Areas Schemes

Table 2 shows that the higher tiers include those areas where there is an opportunity for the land to be enhanced, eg meadows. Also included are enhancement supplements, eg winter cattle removal supplements on moorland, as well as those habitats that have been restored or re-created, eg arable reversion.

	2000	2002	2003	% Increase
Total area under high value habitats (land for which ESA was principally designated)	308,868	322,269	331,595	7%
Total area under higher tier (land which has been subject to enhancement)	81,601	110,068	138,452	70%
Total area under other land (eg arable land, grazing marsh)	128,145	138,827	144,403	13%
TOTAL	518,614	571,164	614,450	18%
Higher tiers as a percentage of total	16%	19%	22%	

Not only do both schemes fund a significant amount of land management, but they also make a major contribution to the restoration of traditional landscape features and buildings. So far, under the schemes over **740 km** of new hedgerows have been planted, and nearly **10,000 km** of existing hedgerows restored. Over **1,100 km** of dry stone walls have been restored with commitments under CS for a further **1,500 km**. Grants for the restoration of traditional farm buildings are a key feature of both schemes. It is estimated that nearly **3,500** projects have been completed.

Figure 2: Hedgerows

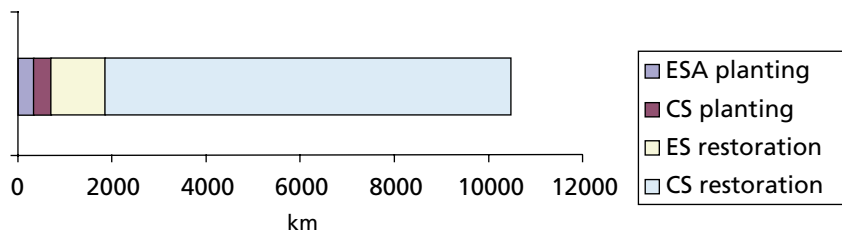
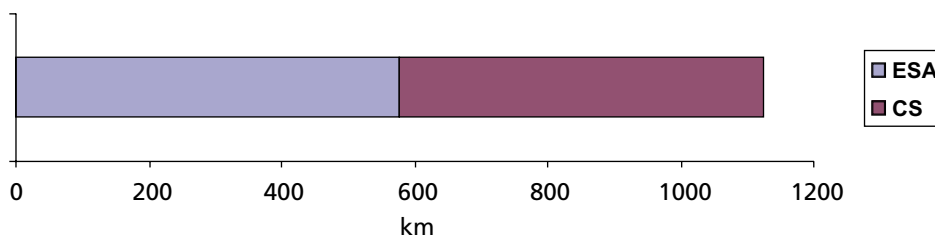
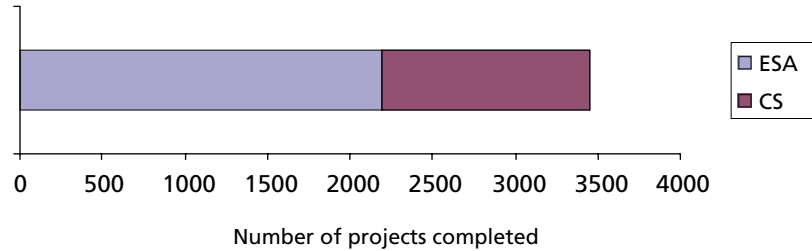


Figure 3: Dry stone walls



NB: CS has commitments for a further 1,500 km of walling, which would bring the total under agreement to 2,600 km.

Figure 4: Traditional farm building restoration



Expenditure on both schemes has also increased significantly, with the increase being particularly marked for CS since the introduction of the ERDP. By 2002, **£41.5 million** came via the EU or modulated receipts levied on CAP subsidy schemes.

Figure 5: Achievements to date – ESA/CS expenditure combined (£m)

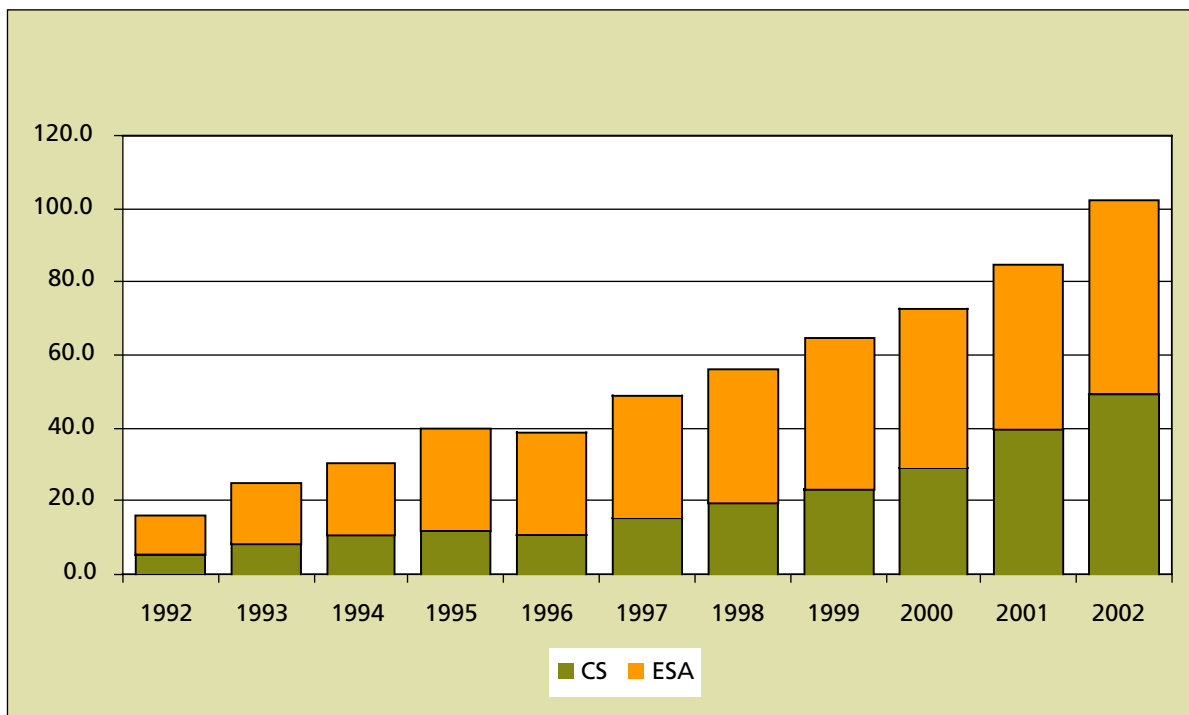
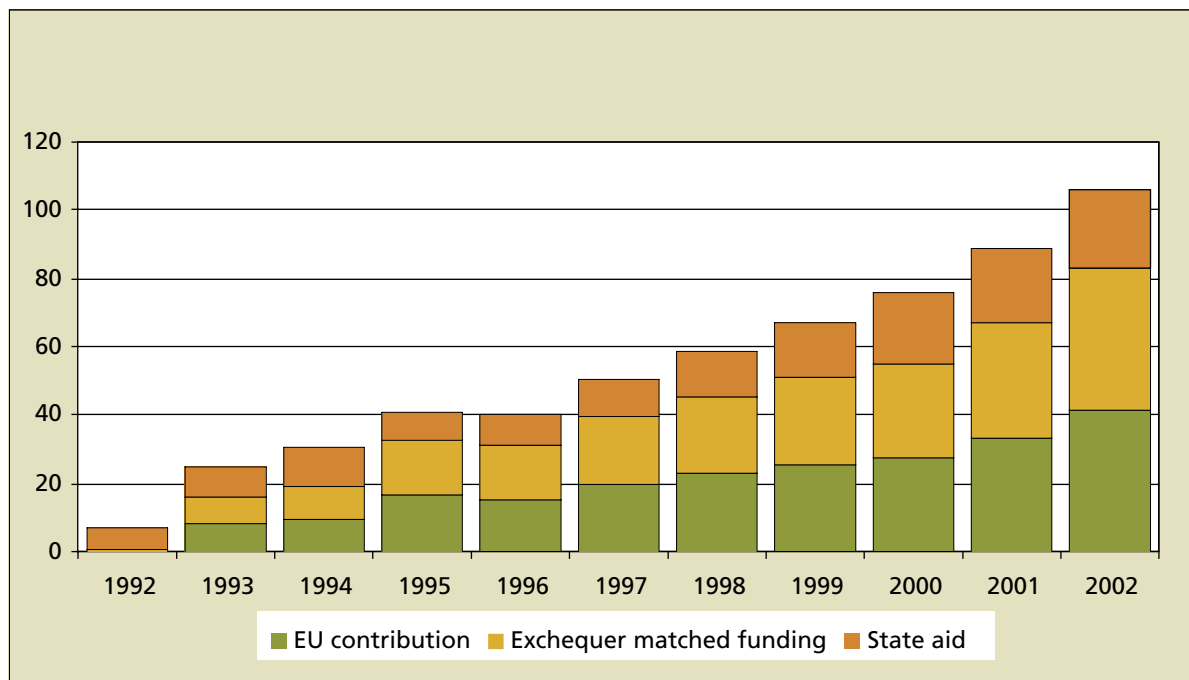


Figure 6: Achievements to date – EU/Exchequer expenditure combined (£m)



Expenditure on both schemes 2002–03

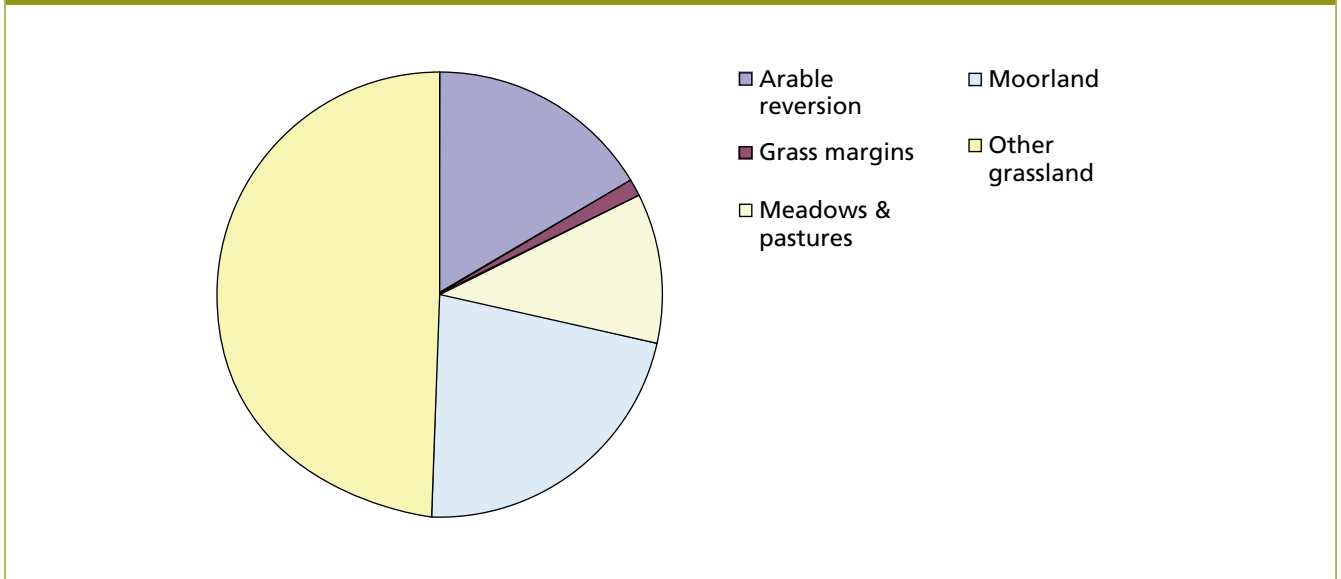
A total of just over **£105 million** was paid to CS and ESA agreement holders in the 2002–03 financial year (£53 million ESAs and £52 million CS). Of this, **£81 million** was for annual land management and **£24 million** for capital works.

ESA

In 2002-03, ESA agreement holders were paid over **£43 million** for the annual management of a variety of landscapes. This included **£6 million** for arable reversion to grassland, **£4 million** for managing meadows and pastures, **£18 million** for managing all other grassland, **£8 million** for managing moorland and around **£370,000** for establishing and maintaining grass margins.

ESA agreement holders can also opt to run a 2-year conservation plan to fund capital projects for improving the landscape, wildlife and historic interest of the area. An extensive menu of items is available, including hedge planting and restoration, fencing, building and restoring stone walls and the restoration of traditional farm buildings. The programme cost **£10 million** in 2002–03.

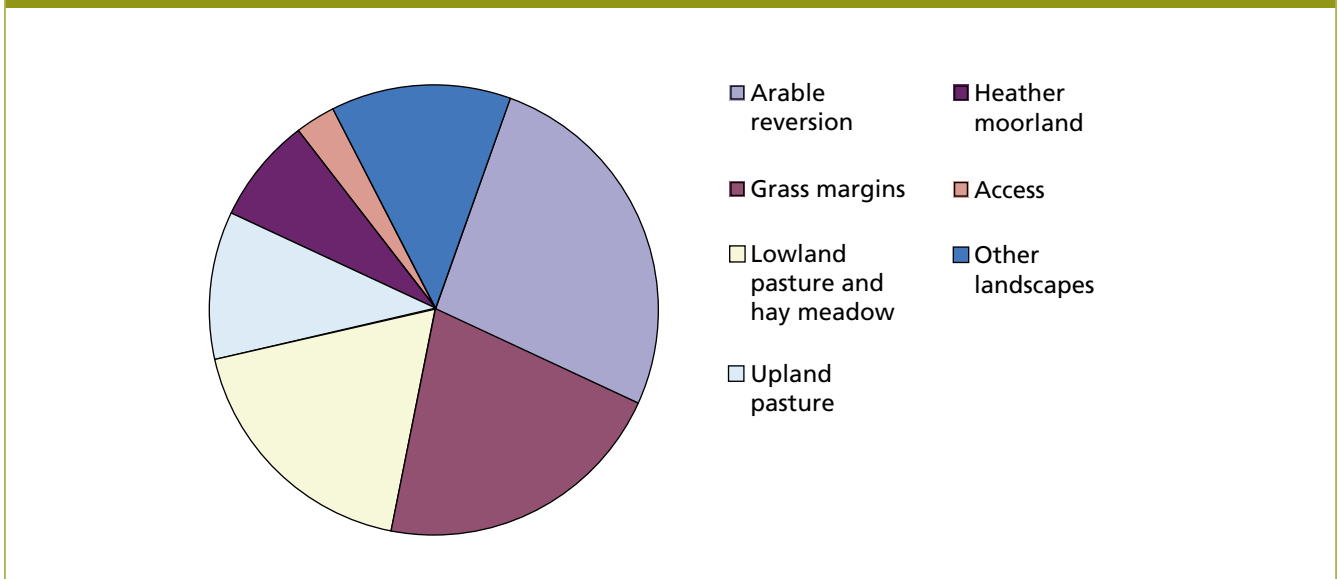
Figure 7: ESA land management



CS

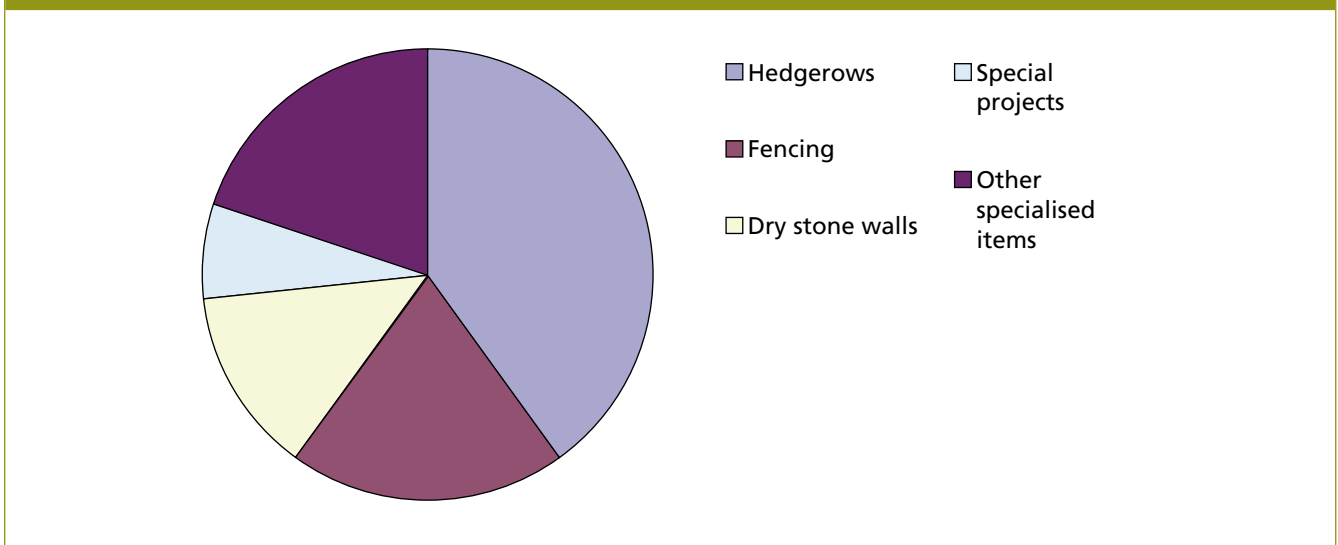
CS agreement holders received **£38 million** for the annual management of a variety of landscape types in 2002–03. This included **£10 million** for arable reversion, **£8 million** for establishing and maintaining grass margins, **£7 million** for managing lowland pasture and hay meadows, nearly **£4 million** for managing upland pasture and **£3 million** for managing heather moorland. Just over **£1 million** was also paid for the annual management and maintenance of permissive access routes, such as footpaths, bridleways and cycle paths and for the provision of ‘educational access’ for school children and other interested groups.

Figure 8: CS land management, including access



CS also has a wide-ranging capital works programme to facilitate the introduction of land management and to restore and maintain valuable environmental features. The programme cost **£14 million** in 2002–03 and included **£6 million** for planting and restoring hedgerows, **£3 million** for fencing, nearly **£2 million** on restoring dry stone walls and over **£1 million** for special projects, including the restoration of traditional farm buildings. The remainder was spent on a wide range of other capital items, such as access furniture (stiles, gates, bridges, etc) and ponds and scrapes for wildlife.

Figure 9: CS capital works



Significant developments in 2002-03

Cereal field margins

In 1995, MAFF (now part of Defra), in conjunction with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, made a commitment under the UK BAP to increase the number of hectares of cereal field margins in the UK to 15,000 ha by 2010. This target was exceeded in 2002, 8 years ahead of schedule. CS has helped in the early completion of the target by being able to offer more agreements with the additional funding under the ERDP.

Cereal field margins are strips of land between cereal crops and field boundaries, managed to create habitats which benefit a range of wildlife without having detrimental effects on the remaining cropped area and act as a buffer. This range of wildlife includes farmland birds and rare arable plants, which have been in decline with the growth of modern intensive agricultural practices. One of Defra's aims is to reverse this decline.

Threatened and important species of rare arable plants encouraged by these margins include pheasant's eye, cornflower and corn buttercup, and overall there can be around 300 species of plants occurring in arable fields. Many invertebrates, such as butterflies, benefit directly and indirectly from cereal field margins, as well as a range of birds (eg barn owl, grey partridge and quail) and possibly mammals (eg the brown hare).

Grass margins can also act as pollution buffers between arable land and watercourses.

Cirl bunting

By 1989 the cirl bunting population had dropped to 118 pairs, mainly as a result of changes in farming practices, which reduced both winter and summer food supplies and caused the loss of hedges and scrub for nesting sites.

A CS special project was introduced in Devon in 1992 to help restore the declining numbers of this species. Agreements enabled farmers to implement strategies for maintaining and extending the special habitat required. RSPB worked with CS farmers and encouraged them to grow a spring barley crop with no insecticides and reduced herbicides. After the harvest, the stubble was to be left untreated until 1 April.



Cirl bunting: the UK BAP target was exceeded one year early. © RSPB.

As a result, between 1992 and 1998 numbers increased by 83% on CS land compared with 2% elsewhere. In 1998 over 450 pairs were recorded and RSPB linked this increase to CS agreements with winter stubble and arable grass margins options. Now there are around 150 agreements, providing over 400 hectares of stubble. By 2002, the UK BAP target of 550 pairs by 2003 had already been exceeded with an estimated 576 pairs recorded. The birds are concentrated in South Devon on low-intensity mixed farms and around 50% of the UK population is now on CS agreement land, with 90% within 1 km of agreements. With the introduction of the new CS arable options nationally, it is hoped that cirl buntings will extend their area beyond Devon.

The cirl bunting project has become a flagship, linking agri-environment schemes to the delivery of biodiversity targets for increasing farmland birds.

Arable options

Following a successful pilot in two areas (see page 5), the most beneficial Arable Stewardship options were incorporated into CS and launched as national options within the scheme in 2002. Nearly 30% of applicants applied for the overwintered stubbles options, and it is estimated that these options accounted for over 10% of the new land added to the scheme in 2002. Uptake of margins and other arable options, such as conservation headlands and wildlife seed mixtures, remained comparable with previous years.

Access review

Under the two schemes, permissive access allows quiet enjoyment of the countryside through walks, rides (horse riding and cycling) and picnic sites. It can also provide links to existing Rights of Way.

As part of a review of permissive access in agri-environment schemes, a public consultation was carried out from July to September 2002, which stimulated a wide variety of interest. There was general support for the Government to continue to fund this option. As a result of the review, a number of changes are being implemented in the 2003–04 scheme year, while others covering

longer term issues will be developed as part of the new scheme proposed for 2005.

The website about current agri-environment permissive access (the Country Walks and Rides Register at <http://countrywalks.defra.gov.uk>) has been re-designed to give better information on footpaths, bridleways, cyclepaths and opportunities for the less mobile. A publicity and promotion strategy for access has been approved by Ministers. Implementation will start in 2003/04 and will be carried forward to the new scheme, in 2005.

CS also offers opportunities for educational visits to farms in two main forms:

- visits by school or higher education groups to study aspects of the school curriculum or college courses, using the farm as a 'countryside classroom'; and
- guided farm walks, to learn about the farming industry, its relationship with the countryside and the measures being taken on the farm to conserve and enhance wildlife, landscape and historical features.

Educational access has also been reviewed. As a result, updated Health and Safety information was provided to agreement holders, and improvements have been made to other information supplied to farmers, teachers and group leaders. An accreditation scheme is being considered by the Countryside Agency, in which agreement holders would be encouraged to participate. A pilot training scheme was launched in September 2003, with 20% of participants coming from CS.

Review of payments for capital and access items

Payment rates for capital and access items in CS and ESA have been reviewed and a consultation exercise completed. The recommendations from the review were:

- to standardise the rates across the two schemes in preparation for the new Environmental Stewardship Scheme (see page 24);
- to reflect increased costs in the revised rates;
- where appropriate (for example, payments for access), to reflect 100% of costs in payment rates; and
- to introduce some new items (for example, permanent electric fencing and dog gates).

Following EU approval, the increased payment rates were implemented at the beginning of 2004.

Measures to improve the quality and effectiveness of the schemes

A number of initiatives have been successfully implemented to ensure the continuing high quality of agreements, compliance with EU RDR requirements and effective administration.

Agri-environment scheme compliance inspections now include on-the-spot checks for compliance with the standards of Good Farming Practice (introduced in line with the new requirements of the RDR). These standards include compliance with existing environmental legislation and certain verifiable standards that are complementary to existing legislative requirements. Work

is continuing with enforcement agencies to maintain and develop processes for the effective monitoring of suspected breaches of the relevant environmental legislation.

Automatic cross-checking of all land information provided on ERDP scheme applications against data held on the Integrated Administration and Control System (IACS) was introduced. The new cross-checking procedure has significantly eased the burden of this legislative requirement. In the short term queries generated by the cross check inevitably led to some delay while data was checked, but the majority of claims were paid within the published target periods.

In the future, data will be held on the new Rural Land Register (RLR), which will be developed during 2004 and will go live in early 2005. This will provide a common database for IACS and agri-environment schemes and aims to streamline and speed up the administration of land-based schemes.

Renewal of agreements

It is Defra policy to encourage renewal of agreements, not only to maintain the environmental improvements achieved, but also to protect the 10 years of public investment. Renewed agreements continue existing prescriptions, but can include enhancements, such as the new arable options. They also reflect changes introduced by the EU Rural Development Regulation (for example, Good Farming Practice).

In 2001, the first Stewardship agreements reached the 10-year mark and over 500 agreement holders renewed their agreements for a further 10 years. In 2002 the figure was over 700. For ESAs, in 2002 there were 1,884 applications for renewal (value £8.2 million) in Stage 1. This represented 92% of the agreements that could be renewed.

Scheme monitoring and evaluation

Regular monitoring and evaluation programmes are in place to assess the success of the schemes and individual options. The output from these programmes informs scheme development, ensuring that it is evidence-based. A review of these programmes, and relevant Research and Development (by a consortium led by Ecoscope <http://www.defra.gov.uk/erdp/schemes/esas/esasmonitor.htm>) concluded that the existing schemes have largely been successful in achieving their primary objectives of maintaining biodiversity, landscape and historic interest. An accompanying economic evaluation of agri-environmental schemes (by Cambridge University and CJC Consultancy) concluded that the objectives of both CS and ESA are largely being met and that agreement holders are generally supportive of the schemes and their aims (<http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/evaluation/agrienv/>). Recommendations from both evaluations have been fed into the Review of Agri-environment Schemes.

Monitoring and evaluation has also shown that existing schemes have had significant benefits for some species, particularly when the option management has been developed for specific habitats. For example, monitoring of the Arable Stewardship Pilot Scheme by the Game Conservancy Trust (http://www.defra.gov.uk/erdp/pdfs/arable_stewardship/ara_hare_partridge.pdf) revealed that the grey partridge and brown hare have both benefited from the introduction of an

extended range of options for arable land.

Publicity

The Government actively publicises and promotes both schemes to the general public and potential applicants through regular News Releases and by involvement in agricultural shows and other events. On a number of occasions, exhibits have been organised jointly with partners. Several publications are produced to promote the scheme to as wide an audience as possible.

CS reached its 10th anniversary in 2001 and, to mark the occasion, a special anniversary conference was held in Kew Gardens in April 2002. With speakers from all the major partner organisations, the conference focused on the importance of partnership working to the delivery of the scheme and reviewed CS successes over the years 1991 to 2001. The same year also saw the 10,000th CS agreement holder, who was presented with a commemorative plaque.

In 2003 the Defra farmland conservation site at the Royal Show, which featured a permanent display of many of the more popular CS and ESA options, was moved to a larger and more central location. This gives greater opportunities to showcase Defra's wider rural conservation and sustainable development policies and a much better opportunity to feature the wide range of Defra schemes under the ERDP.

Defra has also helped the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, celebrate British biodiversity at its 'Go Wild' Festival during the summer of 2003, with a Defra Biodiversity Garden. The Defra garden displayed a range of our biodiversity policies and demonstrated the variety of scheme options available.

As well as the main annual CS Handbook and general CS information leaflets, a newsletter, *Stewardship News*, is published twice a year and distributed to all agreement holders, partners and other stakeholders. The newsletter aims to keep agreement holders up-to-date with policy developments and what the scheme is achieving, as well as providing help and advice on important issues. *Guidelines for Farmers* has been produced as a handbook for each ESA, together with general scheme information leaflets. *Our Living Heritage* and *Traditional Farming in the Modern Environment* were published as introductions to ESAs and CS respectively.



Defra Biodiversity Garden, Kew Festival. © Peter Bennett/
Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

Schemes in action

The multi-objective nature of the schemes has played a key role in developing a holistic appreciation of our natural and historic features. The following are some examples of how this is

achieved on the ground.

Landscapes

Heath and chalk downland

For the past 10 years, CS has provided the specialist conservation management of a site at Ventnor Downs, on the Isle of Wight. Situated on the south side of the island, this heath and chalk downland is managed to benefit wildlife and increase public enjoyment.

Careful scrub management encourages a variety of habitats and keeps the heathland and grassland open. Feral goats control invasive scrub on a section of chalk grassland, whilst New Forest ponies graze on heathland. A herd of cattle is used to control the growth on the acid grassland, which has been restored from former arable use.

The land is home to a range of wildlife including butterflies (such as the Chalkhill Blue and the Adonis Blue) and, uniquely, bluebells and red campion flourish under a canopy of bracken. It also supports skylarks in the grass and Dartford Warblers in the dense bushes.



Gorse bushes provide habitat for various wildlife species, such as the rare Dartford Warbler.



bracken.
tussocks
gorse
Black Grouse. © RSPB.

Upland commons

Upland commons are diverse and complex areas, many covering thousands of hectares of valuable habitats and dramatic landscapes, and often involving a large number of commoners who have rights over them – especially grazing rights. To set up an agri-environment agreement to cover all the land can be complicated and time consuming and landowners and commoners are therefore encouraged to work together. Partners and agents, acting for the commoners, play an invaluable role in negotiating agreements.



East Arkengarthdale Common, Yorkshire Dales National Park.
© Robert Goodison, RDS.

One of the earliest commons agreements covered East Arkengarthdale Common in the Yorkshire Dales National Park (Pennine Dales ESA). This early commons agreement involves both a CS and an ESA agreement. Eight farmers, including the owner of the moor, co-operated to include all the 2,100 ha commons in one agreement. This has resulted in a reduction in the number of grazing sheep, particularly in winter, and has enabled heather and bilberry to recover and other plants, such as cotton grass, to flower and set seed.

Countryside Stewardship and Environmentally Sensitive Areas Schemes

The area is also particularly valuable for Black Grouse, which is one of Britain's most endangered species. It is making a dramatic comeback in Arkengarthdale, with the number of males increasing from nine in 1998 to 24 in 2002. This success is due to a combination of factors: sheep numbers on the moorland have been reduced using CS; native woodlands have been planted in the ghylls; and in-bye meadows and pastures have been enhanced under the ESA scheme.

As the area is the southern edge of the Black Grouse's current range, it may provide the beginning for re-colonisation of former haunts to the south.

Water meadows

CS and the Avon Valley ESA are helping to restore what was recently voted the loveliest view in Britain – Salisbury Cathedral with the ancient water meadows of Harnham. This picturesque area was threatened by disuse, falling river levels and the pressure of development. The water meadows were first placed under a CS agreement for 10 years and in 2001 were renewed into the Avon Valley ESA.

Since joining the agri-environment schemes, extensive grazing has been introduced to the meadows, which helps protect and diversify the existing meadow flora and fauna. A number of old sluices and around 4 km of ditches are being restored over a 2-year programme to help "drown" the meadows again for the first time in nearly half a century.



Salisbury Cathedral: with the ancient water meadows of Harnham.

Coastal land

Saltmarsh and grazing marsh are characteristic of the Essex coast with its many estuaries. The area has been significantly reduced during the last 25 years and saltmarsh continues to be eroded. ESA and CS agreements are providing more than £400,000 over the next 10 years in support of projects led by the Essex Wildlife Trust at Abbots Hall Farm, Essex (Essex Coast ESA). These will re-create the complete and continuous transition of wildlife habitats from the open estuary through to saltmarsh vegetation, coastal grassland and commercial farming where hedgerows, grass margins and beetle banks will be established. The sea wall has been breached to create 84 ha of new marsh.



Abbots Hall Farm: preparation of the land prior to the breach.

Behind this area, coastal grazing is being introduced. This new area will support wildfowl such as brent geese, widgeon, redshank and lapwing. The marshland will also support a rich mix of



Cross Lane Meadows, Gateshead: the many wild flowers attract a wide range of insects and birds.



plants and invertebrates like ragworm, snails and bivalves.

Wildflower meadows

Cross Lane Meadows, which overlooks Europe’s largest indoor shopping centre, the Gateshead MetroCentre, was once an area of degraded horse pasture and arable land. But thanks to the joint efforts of Gateshead Council and CS, it is now almost 15 ha of wildflower-rich grassland, which shoppers can enjoy.

The aim was to re-create grassland similar to the species-rich grasslands that were much more widespread in the area in the past and it has become so successful that the area is now set to become a Local Nature Reserve.

Archaeology

Stonehenge and Avebury

A CS special project, set up in October 2002, has been funded by the Department for Culture, Heritage and the National Trust and is helping to protect the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site. The sites are being protected from damage by reversion to a low-intensity regime. At Avebury, the West Kennet Long Bar is being protected by establishing and managing a low-intensity regime. A payment rate to encourage conversion from arable to low-intensity regime is being offered.



Stonehenge. © Valerie Heathorn.

Other features of the special project involve increasing the availability of breeding and

foraging habitat for lapwings, establishing stone curlew plots and improving the breeding and foraging habitat for corn buntings and grey partridges. Typical chalk downland species of flowers will be encouraged on chalk slopes, including wild thyme, self heal, bird's foot trefoil and devil's bit scabious.

Traditional farm building restoration

A rare example of late mediaeval architecture is being restored with a £100,000 grant from the Lake District ESA. The 16th century cruck barn is the oldest of four traditional farm buildings on the Esthwaite Hall estate in Hawkshead. The Grade II listed building is thought to be one of only three barns in the Lake District to have four pairs of distinctive 'cruck' trusses, as opposed to the more common two or three pairs.



Esthwaite Barn, Hawkshead. © GNN Northwest.

The barn and surrounding buildings – which include a 17th century barn extension, an 1880s cowshed and an 1890s stable – are to be completely renovated in the original style, in close consultation with Defra's ESA team and the Lake District National Park's Building Conservation Officer.

Wildlife

Corncrakes

One of Europe's rarest birds, the corncrake, has successfully bred in England for the first time in decades, with help from the ESA scheme to protect a nesting site. The presence of the birds was noticed in the Pennine Dales ESA when their distinctive mating call was recognised in the summer of 2002. Advice was provided jointly by Defra and the Yorkshire Dales National Park on how to continue to farm the land without endangering the birds. Chicks were seen in August of that year.

A new cutting date for the meadows was agreed, along with a bird-friendly mowing pattern to ensure that if any eggs were laid the chicks would have the best possible chance of survival.

It is now clear that careful management has been successful. Because of the extreme sensitivity of the breeding location, it is being kept a closely guarded secret.

Corn bunting

One example of the benefit of a CS renewal is in Padstow, Cornwall, where conservation work has been expanded to help increase the numbers of the rare corn bunting. The UK population of these birds fell by 85% between 1970 and 1998 due to intensive agricultural practices.

Under the new agreement, the problems created by intensive agriculture are being reversed. Field margins are being created to provide both habitat for nesting and suitable conditions for insects for food. Also, winter stubbles will be left and wild bird seed crops grown for food. The changes in land management will benefit other species and will protect various archaeological sites on the farm.

The agreement also provides permissive access for the public to use the many footpaths which cross the farm leading to existing Public Rights of Way, including the South West Coastal Path.

Butterflies

A Defra-funded research project, conducted by Butterfly Conservation, has revealed that the CS and ESA schemes are helping to slow, and even reverse, the long term decline in numbers of England's rarer butterfly species. The improvement in butterfly performance on scheme sites is associated with the restoration of grazing management and removal of encroaching scrub, which has benefited most species preferring short or medium length swards.

Over half of our butterfly species breed on downland, making it the richest of our butterfly habitats. Downland is a target landscape for CS and ESA and the great variety of plants and flowers found in these areas provide food for both adults and developing larvae.



Downland now hosts several 'habitat specialists', such as the stunning Adonis Blue, butterfly. © Butterfly Conservation.

Species which have benefited most from the conservation and enhancement of their downland habitat include the Chalkhill Blue, the internationally endangered Marsh Fritillary and the tiny Silver-spotted Skipper, the population of which has been increasing at a rate of 14% per year since 1987.

Access

Safe horse riding can be limited in many areas, due to the increase in road traffic and the destruction of ancient rights of way through post-war development. However, with the help of a CS permissive bridle route, riders in Herefordshire have the opportunity to enjoy a scenic route of 13 km around mixed farmland.

The route, which is suitable for riders, cyclists and pedestrians alike, takes in points of interest such as a bluebell wood and a deserted medieval village, and offers extensive views across the county to the Black Mountains. Parking facilities have also been made available on site for cars and horseboxes.

The new route has been welcomed by the Highways Authority and local riders, who recognise the value of a safe route which offers the opportunity to enjoy leisure time in the countryside.

Educational access

One farm that is committed to providing a first class educational facility is Home Farm at Newton St Cyres, a few miles north-west of Exeter. During the course of the year, many groups use the farm for a variety of educational topics.

One notable event, held on the farm annually, is the Kingfisher Award for Schools. This scheme is both informative and enjoyable and concentrates on spreading the message of good practice as well as reinforcing the link between the food we eat and the farms on which it is produced.

The future

Since CS and ESAs were introduced, they have become increasingly complex. The agricultural industry and its regulatory framework have also changed significantly during this time. The report of the Policy Commission on the *'Future of Farming and Food'* (the Curry Report) included recommendations to simplify CS and ESAs, and to introduce a new 'broad and shallow' scheme that would be open to all land managers to farm in a more responsible way for the environment, whether or not they had the high quality habitats and historic features demanded by CS and ESAs.

Ministers undertook to review CS and ESAs and the Organic Farming Scheme when the ERDP reached its halfway point in 2003. The Review started in January 2002 and is expected to conclude in spring 2004.

Responses from the first public consultation included ideas for the 'broad and shallow' Entry Level Scheme (ELS). The suggestion to replace CS and ESAs with a new 'narrow and deep' Higher Level Scheme (HLS) found favour and this is being designed to complement the ELS under the new Environmental Stewardship Scheme.

As part of the development, the ELS is being piloted in four areas of England that represent different types of farming, in order to gain information on how such a scheme could work. It is planned to make the ELS available to all farmers early in 2005. It is also planned to launch the HLS in 2005.

Defra will be finalising scheme design in 2004, discussing it with the European Commission, building the scheme delivery mechanisms and preparing for launch. The higher level element of the new Environmental Stewardship Scheme will be based on the existing CS and ESA schemes, but with additional objectives. The new scheme's main objectives will be:

- wildlife conservation;
- protection of the historic environment;
- maintenance and enhancement of landscape character and quality;
- promotion of public access and understanding; and
- resource protection.

Secondary objectives will be:

- flood management; and
- genetic conservation.

The HLS will be aimed at complex types of management needed to achieve the above objectives, much like the existing CS and higher tiers of ESAs. The ELS component will take a simpler approach to supporting good stewardship of the countryside through a flat rate payment per hectare in return for carrying out appropriate management.

2004 is therefore likely to be the last year in which CS and ESAs will be open for new applications.

More information on the new scheme can be found at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/erdp/reviews.agrienv/default.htm>.

Further information

Further information is available on the Defra website www.defra.gov.uk or by contacting the Defra helpline (telephone 08459 33 55 77 or email helpline@defra.gsi.gov.uk).

Annex: ESA and CS land under agreement in 2002



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**Nobel House
17 Smith Square
London SW1P 3JR**

www.defra.gov.uk

