

West Midlands: Higher Level Stewardship Theme Statement



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Natural England is actively seeking **Higher Level Scheme (HLS) applications** outside of Target Areas (area shown in green). Despite falling outside of Target areas, **high quality / multi-objective agreements** will continue to be accepted. To help you determine whether you qualify for HLS in these areas Natural England has, in conjunction with partners, identified a number of **specific themes** as set out below. Each theme relates to a particular HLS feature(s) at risk and in particular need of HLS management. Applications should look to address more than one theme wherever possible.*

*Please note: If you think you might qualify please follow the link provided at the bottom of the page or contact Natural England using the number provided below.

What do I need to do to get an agreement?

Applications outside of target areas **MUST** contribute to at least one of the following themes:

Theme 1: Improving the resilience of Nationally Important (UK Biodiversity Action Plan) habitats to climate change: Natural England will consider applications in the West Midlands region offering to maintain and/or restore/link/buffer 'significant'¹ areas of the following habitats: **traditional orchards particularly in Worcestershire, Herefordshire and South Shropshire; wood pasture and parkland across the region with a priority in Herefordshire and Worcestershire; heathland (both upland and lowland) particularly in Staffordshire and Shropshire; floodplain grazing marsh where this occurs in association with other BAP habitats or supports breeding or wintering waders; lowland dry acid grassland particularly where it is associated with lowland heathland; calcareous grassland; species rich lowland meadows particularly in Worcestershire, reedbeds, purple moor grass and rush pasture, upland flushes, fens and swamps; ancient semi-natural woodland.**

Theme 2: Reversing the decline of farmland birds: Natural England will consider applications that will provide a package of ELS/HLS options² capable of delivering the most appropriate management possible within **Nationally Important Farmland Bird Hotspots**³ defined as areas supporting (a) 3 or more of the following range restricted arable birds: **grey partridge; corn bunting; lapwing; turtle dove; tree sparrow; yellow wagtail** OR (b) 3 or more of the following breeding, range-restricted wet grassland species: **lapwing, redshank, curlew, snipe and yellow wagtail** OR (c) (with strong supporting evidence) important regional breeding populations for any of the above species.

Theme 3 : Securing the recovery of Nationally Important (UK Biodiversity Action Plan) Species: Natural England will consider applications offering appropriate management for the following rare & rapidly declining species outside of areas of important habitats (listed above): **greater horseshoe bat**, in south Herefordshire; **brown banded carder bee; large garden bumble bee; brown hairstreak butterfly and rare arable plants.**

Theme 4: Improving the quality of nationally important water bodies and/or habitats adversely affected by diffuse water pollution from agriculture⁴: Natural England will consider applications offering management and/or capital items to tackle soil erosion and run-off issues. All sites should be supported by good evidence of need from Catchment Sensitive Farming Officers or the Environment Agency⁴. This will focus on Herefordshire and South Shropshire (particularly around Marton Pool); the rivers Tern, Roden and Leadon catchments; the upper Severn in North Shropshire.

Theme 5: Reducing risk to nationally designated assets identified by the Heritage At Risk Survey: Natural England will consider applications that maintain low risk assets in their present circumstances or provide the most appropriate options for addressing the source of high or medium risk to Scheduled Monuments, such as addressing imminent collapse or further deterioration. Applications that significantly address the condition of **Registered Historic Parks and Gardens** should make a major contribution to the design intentions or feel of the parkland and provide for their biodiversity and amenity value. Applications on **Registered Historic Battlefields & World Heritage Sites** should seek to maximise opportunities for their protection, enhancement and amenity value⁵.

Theme 6: Securing positive management of prioritised historic buildings: Natural England will consider applications offering to maintain or restore historic buildings that are assessed as a priority in the region⁶.

Theme 7: Reducing the damage caused to undesignated below-ground archaeological sites by cultivation and protecting and enhancing visible undesignated historic environment features:⁷

Natural England will consider applications offering to take the most vulnerable archaeological sites out of

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cultivation, and to reduce the depth of damaging cultivations through minimum tillage or direct drilling where this offers a suitable level of protection, in accordance with advice from Natural England and local authority archaeologists⁸. Natural England will also consider applications offering to maintain below-ground archaeology under permanent uncultivated vegetation or offering to provide positive management of historic features such as earthworks, standing stones and structures that have been assessed as a priority in the region⁸. Natural England will also consider applications making a significant contribution to the maintenance of historic landscape character⁹.

Theme 8: Improving people’s enjoyment & understanding of the farmed environment: Natural England will consider applications offering to enhance or improve access and recreation¹⁰ where it can be shown that (a) there is identified demand or need and (b) where it will link people with place or (c) where it will enhance existing networks and/or provide opportunity to improve the public’s understanding of the farmed environment through educational access visits¹¹.

Theme Statement Notes – additional information for applicants

¹: ‘Significant’ areas of Nationally Important (UK Biodiversity Action Plan) habitat are defined as below:

a) all areas of Nationally Important (UK Biodiversity Action Plan) habitat (listed under theme 1) occurring on sites designated as **Sites of Special Scientific Interest** (see www.natureonthemap.org.uk)

b) all areas of Nationally Important (UK Biodiversity Action Plan) habitat (listed under theme 1) occurring on sites notified as **County Wildlife Sites**

c) all areas of Nationally Important (UK Biodiversity Action Plan) habitat (listed under theme 1) occurring on non-statutory/un-notified land supported by recent records for key **Nationally Important (UK Biodiversity Action Plan Species)** identified as priorities for HLS management

d) all areas of Nationally Important (UK Biodiversity Action Plan) habitat (listed under theme 1) occurring on non-statutory/un-notified land present in quantities over the **size thresholds** provided below:

Habitat	Size
upland flushes, fens and swamps	0.5ha
calcareous grassland (lowland calcareous grassland)	1ha
dry acid grassland (lowland dry acid grassland)	2ha
heathland (lowland heathland/upland heathland)	2ha
lowland meadows	1ha
floodplain grazing marsh (coastal and floodplain grazing marsh)	2ha
purple moor grass and rush pastures	2ha
reedbeds	1ha
traditional orchards	1ha
upland hay meadow	1ha
wood pastures and parkland	2ha

* in exceptional circumstances applications containing named habitat may be considered where supported by firm evidence relating to the significance of the site within its landscape context.

² The package of ELS/HLS options deemed capable of achieving the most appropriate management for farmland birds will vary from agreement to agreement and can be selected at Natural England’s discretion. A typical package of options for farmland birds would look to deliver: provision of nesting habitats, summer food and winter food. For arable birds this will typically include a combination of the following: field corner management; provision of beetle banks, wildlife seed mixtures (both wild bird food and pollen & nectar mixes), fallow nesting plots; conservation headlands; uncropped/cultivated margins, sowing of low-input spring cereals and hedgerow management. For wetland birds this will typically require specific management/restoration of existing wet grassland and management of water levels to provide the right sward height and conditions for this assemblage of species.

- ³ National farmland bird hotspots are defined as 2km tetrads containing breeding records of three or more of the range-restricted species listed above AND important 2km tetrads containing important populations of rare single species (also listed above). These hotspots can be seen at the following address: www.natureonthemap.org.uk
- ⁴ HLS applications will be targeted at soils that are at moderate to very high risk of soil erosion. This can be assessed by using guidance available from www.defra.gov.uk/erdp/pdfs/es/guidance/soilerosion-lowlandmanual.pdf
- ⁵ The Heritage at Risk Survey is an annual condition survey of all nationally designated heritage assets, undertaken by English Heritage. In the context of this theme, 'Nationally designated assets' are Scheduled Monuments, Registered Historic Parks and Gardens and Registered Battlefields. You can find out if you have a designated site on your holding by visiting <http://www.magic.gov.uk/> or by looking at the Environmental Information map provided as part of your ELS application. If you have a designated site on your holding, Natural England will be able to advise you on its 'risk rating' and, where appropriate, the major threats to the asset.
- ⁶ Natural England has a method of prioritising historic buildings by assessing them for their significance, vulnerability and value for money. To check the eligibility of your building, and to find out if your building is a priority for action, please contact Natural England.
- ⁷ The terms used above have the following meanings: 'Undesignated features' are those which are not statutorily designated as Scheduled Monuments, Registered Historic Parks and Gardens or Registered Battlefields -the primary source of information on the location and nature of these sites is held by your local authority Historic Environment Record; 'Below-ground archaeological sites' means features that can only be identified by soil or crop marks on aerial photographs, and underground structures such as souterrains and 'Visible features' are those which can be seen 'above the ground' as humps and bumps or structures.
- ⁸ Natural England will seek advice from local authority archaeological officers to identify the most appropriate management for features and their priority for action.
- ⁹ Natural England will liaise with local authority archaeological officers to identify the contribution that would be made to the maintenance of historic landscape character of an area by any proposals. This might include, for example, the positive management of traditional orchards, field boundary systems or undesignated parklands where their survival makes a good, visible contribution to historic landscape character.
- ¹⁰ Opportunities to enhance or improve access through HLS will be defined by local teams, in liaison primarily with Local Authorities, but also with others including National Park Authorities, AONBs and National Trail Teams. Such opportunities will meet the criteria listed and be based upon demonstrable evidence. Although the availability of relevant data is expected to vary from county to county the primary sources for this information are likely to be:
1. Rights of Way Improvement Plans
 2. Green Infrastructure Plans where applicable
 3. Expiring Classic Scheme Agreements
 4. National Park / AONB management plans where applicable
- ¹¹ Applications that include **educational access** will necessitate the hosting of educational access visits to the farm by schools, colleges, clubs, youth groups, adult study centres and other special interest groups for formal or informal study, or guided walks to learn about the relationship between farming, conservation, and food production. Land managers are required to produce a Farm Facts Leaflet for all visits and a Teachers Information Pack if carrying out school visits.

If you think that you can help NE achieve any of the above objectives please contact Natural England using the number below. NE currently hold additional information about environment features on your holding which will be used to identify priority holdings, as a result of this, please note that you may be contacted directly by Natural England.

Please note:

HLS remains a competitive scheme. Only the best applications will be selected and these will generally (though not exclusively) be those addressing most themes within a single agreement. Successful applications should focus on management relating to the key themes under which they qualify with any additional management proposals being at the discretion of the Natural England advisor.

For more information on Higher Level Stewardship please see our website: www.naturalengland.org.uk

Before applying for HLS you are required to discuss your proposals with a Natural England adviser.

To contact an adviser please telephone 0300 060 1115