

Delivering the HLS Package for Farmland Birds

Advisory Note for Land Management Teams

(Information for stakeholders, partners and ES agents)



This note is to provide guidance on the way we deliver the HLS package for farmland birds across England, focusing on using specific key ES arable options to do this. The guidance has been produced working closely with the RSPB, FWAG and the GWCT. The guidance will be made available to all external partners and will provide an agreed and consistent approach to deliver farmland birds using HLS going forward.

A Q&A annex is included in this document with frequently asked questions

How much do we need to deliver the HLS Farmland Bird Package?

- Key ES arable options for farmland birds should where possible total a minimum of 7%, but no more than 10% (or 15% if weed rich stubbles are used to provide the winter food), of the arable area of the holding. Both ELS and HLS options count towards these threshold figures. See tables 1 and 2 for further guidance.
- It is understood that some flexibility on the 7% figure may be required where advisers are negotiating agreements with other important features on the holding which can be delivered using HLS eg. SSSI's. With this in mind it has been agreed that the package can be delivered at 5% of the arable area of the holding. This figure still fits within the evidence based criteria set for farmland birds if the package is composed of at least 2% wild bird mix and 2 % flower-rich habitats plus skylark plots, but not if it includes a fallow plot or over-winter stubbles.

The decision to use this agreed flexibility will be left to the advisers' discretion, working closely with team leaders, the farmer and local partners on the ground. However please note that where the sole HLS objective for the agreement is the farmland bird interest, then the 7% to 10% minimum ask will apply.

- In some cases team leaders and advisers may be aware of a 'cluster' of applications which will produce the desired 7-10% of land in the right balance of options to deliver the 'big 3', where individual applications may not meet these requirements. Team leaders can approve these if such a cluster of farms are clearly delivering the package at the right scale across a defined area.
- Care should be taken to ensure an appropriate balance of options is maintained in order to deliver the three critical resources (the 'big 3') needed by farmland birds – Nesting habitat, Summer insect food and Winter seed food.

For example 7% of the holding's arable area in wild bird mix options or summer fallow options only will not deliver the complete package that farmland birds need in order to thrive. See tables 1 and 2 for further guidance.

Summary of National HLS Targeting framework for Farmland Birds

- Six range restricted farmland bird species are specifically targeted using HLS.

They are:

1. **Lapwing (breeding)**
2. **Grey partridge**
3. **Turtle dove (breeding)**
4. **Yellow wagtail (breeding)**
5. **Tree sparrow**
6. **Corn bunting**

These species are often referred to as the '**Arable Six**'.

- Holdings where 3 or more of these species occur together can be specifically targeted through HLS.
- Where with strong supporting evidence the holding is known to support a regionally important breeding population for any one of these six species then HLS can be used to deliver the habitat requirements of that species. Strong supporting evidence is defined as actual evidence of breeding birds being present on the holding. Natural England will determine and communicate where regionally important populations occur.

Summary of Evidence Based Farmland Bird package

This is crucial to the delivery of farmland birds. The package focuses on those in-field options that deliver the maximum benefit for farmland birds with a 'fixed list' approach. When deployed together, the options provide the critical resources that farmland birds need to survive and breed successfully i.e. over-winter seed food, spring/summer invertebrate food and places to nest in-field. These are often referred to as the **Big Three**.

The mix of ES options was formulated using the best research, evidence and experience to date from RSPB, GWCT, BTO and Natural England. The evidence all pointed to a need for a minimum of 4-7% of a 1 km-square to contain suitable in-field management to deliver enough key habitats to help reverse the decline of farmland birds.

The HLS minimum threshold is higher than the ELS threshold because it is designed to meet the needs of the six fastest declining and now range-restricted arable specialists (the 'arable 6'). The ELS package will benefit these species but is more focussed on the still widespread species which require a lower level of intervention such as Skylark, Yellowhammer, Reed Bunting and Linnet.

These packages have been adopted as best practice across England by a range of local and national initiatives, such as the Campaign for the Farmed Environment and ETIP.

Table 1: ELS & HLS Farmland Bird Packages

Resource	ES options	ELS (minimum per 100 ha)	HLS (minimum per 100 ha)
Winter seed food	Wild bird seed mixture <i>or</i> Weed-rich stubble (or a combination)	2 ha <i>or</i> 5-10 ha	2 ha <i>or</i> 5-10 ha
Spring-summer invertebrate food	Conservation headlands, low input spring cereals, beetle banks, blocks/strips of nectar mix/flower-rich margins	1 ha	2-3 ha
Places to nest in-field	Skylark plots Fallow plots	20 <i>or</i> 1 ha	20 <i>plus</i> 2 ha (if appropriate)

HLS agreements for Farmland Birds

Please use this to guide you when developing HLS agreements for farmland birds. If you need help then please also talk to both RSPB and Natural England regional farmland bird advisers where necessary.

At the farm level it is important that the package is delivered across all its constituent parts to give the maximum benefit where possible to farmland birds. For example 7% of the holding's arable area in wild bird mix options or summer fallow options only will not deliver the complete package that farmland birds need in order to thrive.

Table 2 shows those key options (ELS & HLS) that we have used to date to deliver the Arable Option HLS Package for Farmland Birds. Field corners has been removed as a key option for farmland birds as it is felt that this option does not necessarily provide the flower-rich habitat quality required and we should be focusing on those options that deliver the maximum benefit possible for farmland birds.

Where possible please take into account the assemblage of arable 'six' species identified as being present on the farm and use those options that benefit any of these six key species the most. We have given guidance in table 2 on which options benefit which species.

This farmland bird guidance applies to HLS agreements ‘with effect from’:

- For agreements starting in 2011/12 the remaining offers should be negotiated using the former guidance. These offers do not require any amending to comply with this new guidance.
- For applications with proposed start dates in 2012/13, this new guidance applies. The only exceptions would be those applications with an April 2012 or May 2012 start date where significant negotiations have already taken place with the applicant – these should have been negotiated using the former guidance.
- For applications that we expect to include in the 13/14 programme, this new guidance will apply to all cases.

Table 2: These are the ES options that we use to deliver the 3 parts of the package per 100ha

ES Code	Option	Which key farmland birds species benefit
1. In-field nesting habitat: (Minimum requirement - 20 skylark plots and 2 ha of summer fallow needed if Lapwing are present)		
EF8, OF8 (HF8, OHF8)	Skylark plots	Yellow wagtail
EF13, OF13 (HF13, OHF13)	Un-cropped cultivated areas for ground nesting birds on arable land	Lapwing, yellow wagtail
HF12,	HLS enhanced Wild Bird Seed Mixtures	Corn bunting specific (nesting) 2-5ha blocks
EF22	Extended over-wintered stubbles	Grey partridge, corn bunting, yellow wagtail
EF7, OF7 (HF7)	Beetle banks	Grey partridge, corn bunting
2. Over-winter seed food: (Minimum requirement - 2ha wild bird mix or 5-10ha of weed-rich stubble, but <u>only</u> those stubbles listed below)		
HF12, HF2, OHF2, EF2, OF2	HLS, ELS, OELS Wild Bird Seed Mixtures	Grey partridge, tree sparrow, corn bunting
HF14	Unharvested, fertiliser-free conservation headlands	Grey partridge, tree sparrow, corn bunting
EF15, OF6 (OHF6, HF15)	Organic over-winter stubbles (OWS) & reduced herbicide crop followed by OWS	Grey partridge, corn bunting, tree sparrow
EG4, OG4 (HG4, OHG4)	Cereals for whole crop silage followed by over-wintered stubbles	Grey partridge, corn bunting, tree sparrow
HG5, OG5	Brassica fodder crops	Grey partridge, corn bunting, tree sparrow
EF10 (HF 10)	Un-harvested cereal headlands within arable fields	Grey partridge, tree sparrow, corn bunting
EF22	Extended over-wintered stubbles	Grey partridge, corn bunting, tree sparrow
EF6	Over winter stubbles (Please note that HF6 does not count towards the package)	Grey partridge, tree sparrow, corn bunting
3. Insect-rich foraging habitats: (Minimum requirement 2 to 3ha needed)		
EF4, OF4 (HF4, OHF4)	Nectar flower mixture	Tree sparrow, corn bunting
HE10	Floristically enhanced margins	Grey Partridge, yellow wagtail, tree sparrow
EF9 (HF9)	Unfertilised cereal headlands within arable fields	Grey partridge, tree sparrow, corn bunting
EF10 (HF 10)	Un-harvested cereal headlands within arable fields	Grey partridge, tree sparrow, corn bunting
EF11, OF11 (HF11, OHF11)	Un-cropped cultivated margins for rare plants on arable land	Turtle dove, yellow wagtail, tree sparrow
HF14	Unharvested, fertiliser-free conservation headlands	Grey partridge, turtle dove, tree sparrow, corn bunting
EF15 (HF15)	Reduced herbicide cereal crops followed by overwintered stubbles	Grey partridge, yellow wagtail, tree sparrow, corn bunting
HF20	Un-cropped cultivated plots or margins for arable plants	Grey partridge, turtle dove, yellow wagtail, tree sparrow, corn bunting, lapwing (plots only)
EF7, OF7 (HF7)	Beetle banks	Grey partridge, corn bunting
HG7	Low input spring cereal	Grey partridge, corn bunting
EG1, OG1 (HG1)	Under-sown spring cereal	Grey partridge, corn bunting

Annex 1 – Q&A - Frequently asked questions

Q1 Which options count towards the delivery of the package?

Only 'key' arable farmland bird options within ELS, HLS and OELS will count towards the target. The options highlighted in the table above are the ones that contribute towards the package at present. Please note that this does include a selection of 'more of the same' ELS options within HLS agreements. It is important to note that these options will also help more widespread species such as linnet, reed bunting yellowhammer and skylark.

Q2 What about ELS options?

ELS options will count towards delivery of the package.

Q3 Are we meant to target certain landholdings?

Ideally the delivery should focus on those areas identified as supporting 3 or more of the 6 specialist species (corn bunting, yellow wagtail, grey partridge, tree sparrow, turtle dove and lapwing).

Q4 Will agreements outside of the HLS target areas with less than 3 of the specialist farmland birds present count towards the target?

Yes. For example where there is an important concentration of one or more of the 6 specialist birds outside the target areas we should target these areas to secure an agreement under ELS, HLS or OELS. It is important that we get agreements on as much suitable land as possible but we also need to make sure that we target those areas of importance to ensure that we achieve our ultimate aim of reducing the decline in farmland birds.

Q5 What extent/coverage are we looking for on each agreement?

We are ideally looking to have 7 to 10% of arable land under appropriate farmland bird options. We are under no illusion that this can be a challenge. With this in mind we have built in some flexibility into the ask, and you can set it at 5% of the arable area of the holding if some flexibility of approach is needed at the farm scale in order to get agreements on land with other HLS priority objectives. However where the sole HLS objective for the agreement is its farmland bird interest then the 7% to 10% minimum ask will still apply.

Q6 Is there an upper limit in terms of arable options that can be included in an offer?

The key ES arable options for farmland birds should where possible total a minimum of 7%. The maximum is 10% (or 15% if weed rich stubbles are used to provide the winter food), of the arable area of the holding. Both ELS and HLS options count towards these threshold figures.

Q7 Do we still need to consider the 'Big 3'?

Yes, it is important that we strike a balance in terms of options between those that provide nesting habitat, summer invertebrate food and winter seed food, by delivering the consistent parts of the package (Please see table 1 and 2).

Q8 Do stubbles count?

Yes they do. EF22 is an excellent ELS option and we want this promoted where ever possible. EF6 can also count towards the package but we would prefer the over-winter food to be delivered through wild bird mix options and EF22. Where EF6 is used then it should be at the equivalent of 10ha of stubble equalling 2ha of wild bird mix. When including 10ha of the arable area in EF6 stubble, then there will still be a requirement to deliver at least 2ha as insect-rich foraging habitats, 20 skylark plots and, if nesting lapwings are present, a 2 ha fallow plot per 100 ha.

However HF6 stubbles do not count towards the package as we would prefer the more targeted arable options to be delivered specifically through HLS.

Q9 Some HLS enhanced Wild Bird Seed Mixtures have been specifically designed to deliver the requirements for nesting corn bunting, do we look to maintain these?

Yes, these are extremely important in helping deliver in-field breeding habitats for this species. The size of these has been set between 2ha and 5ha in size – to deliver the nesting requirement and will have a specific seed mix.

Q10. Are there any key issues I need to be aware of when delivering ELS and HLS farmland bird options?

When offering agreements there are a number of options, particularly the arable ones, which are very specific about both the size of the option (maximum and minimum areas) and where it can be located.

For ELS options you need to be very aware of the following area constraints which apply to **ELS options** under the current handbook (v3):

EF1 Management of field corners – Patch size must be no more than 2ha and there must be a maximum of 1 paid patch per 20ha of arable land to ensure that patches are well distributed across the land.

EF2 Wild bird seed mixture – Blocks and/or strips should be between 0.4ha and 2ha in size, and there should be **no more than 3ha in total per 100ha of land** to ensure they are well distributed across the .

EF4 Nectar flower mixture – Blocks and/or strips must not exceed 1ha in size and there should be no more than 3ha per 100ha of land to ensure they are well distributed across the farm.

EF8 Skylark plots – Plots must be created in fields of more than 5ha in area, avoiding fields bounded by tree lines or adjacent to woods, unless the field is greater than 10ha. The plots should be at least 3m wide and have a minimum area of 16m² (eg 3m x 6m or 4m x 4m).

EF13 Uncropped, cultivated areas for ground-nesting birds on arable land – The cultivated area must be in fields larger than 5ha, avoiding fields bounded by tree lines or adjacent to woods unless the field is larger than 10ha. The cultivated area must be at least 1ha and no more than 2.5ha in size and at least 100m wide.

EF22 Extended overwintered stubble – This option must be in arable fields of 2ha or over. It can be part or whole-field, but if part-field, the area must be at least 2ha in size.

There are no upper limits for **HLS options** as defined in the 3rd edition of the HLS handbook so follow the guidance in this paper.

For **HELS options** (ELS options being paid as £ within the HLS part of a combined agreement as More of the Same) the area limits set in ELS can be exceeded (but not decreased) when the option is used in HLS providing there is clear evidence to justify the change. We should always seek first to apply the option within the published area limits, or use a package of different options recommended in the FB guidance to achieve the desired environmental outcome without the need to breach the area limit. This is the best practice approach and should be followed whenever possible. If however, after assessing the situation on the ground and taking the FB guidance into account, there is a clear need to breach the prescriptions this is allowed, but a very clear justification must be made and recorded on the EDRM.

The one **exception** is **HF13**, where the 2.5ha upper limit is fixed and can't be exceeded. This is the one option where the limit was included in the RDPE Programme Document, so has been approved by the European Commission. We don't have the flexibility to change this without submitting an amendment to the EU.

James Phillips, Natural England. November 2011