



Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

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Baroness Bakewell of
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24 October 2023

Dear Cathy,

Thank you for your contributions during the oral question regarding assisting British farmers to meet net zero challenges on 20 September 2023. During the question you asked about Countryside Stewardship and Landscape Recovery schemes. I am writing in response to your question and hope I can correct some misunderstandings.

Countryside Stewardship (CS) Higher Tier has a competitive application process. The handbooks explain this approach and sets out the scoring method. The scoring system includes, for example, the areas of habitat that are going to be managed or created on the farm. This year 758 Higher Tier applications are being progressed towards an agreement, 268 more than last year. So, far from farmers 'being turned away' from schemes, more are being signed up. There are 33,000 CS agreements in place across England in 2023, a 94% increase over the last 3 years.

This year's Higher Tier successful agri-environment and mixed (combined woodland and agri-environment) applications could bring over 35,000 hectares of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) land into favourable management. Important habitats like lowland and upland heath, grazing marsh and chalk grassland will be managed and protected and habitats restored and created to help support recovery of threatened species like curlews, woodlarks, nightjars, corn buntings and fritillary butterflies.

In any competitive process there will be applicants who were unsuccessful. However, we have contacted them to provide them with further advice, including asking them to consider applying for the Mid Tier offer or to look at grants for capital works which would support specific habitat creation or restoration undertaken over the next year that will help prepare for entry into the scheme.

Looking ahead, we will be evolving our Higher Tier offer further to enable more farmers and land managers to be paid to carry out ambitious actions on their land to help deliver greater levels of environmental outcomes, including on our most environmentally important sites. We are planning to introduce a wider range of options to help support delivery of our Environmental Improvement Plan, as well as broadening the eligibility of some existing options. Across our land management offers, we are looking at ways to support local join-up, spatial targeting, and rewarding outstanding results.

We are also looking at how we support farmers and land managers to apply and ensure the right level of local advice and support can be provided.

We also know some farmers want to look at moving from their existing Higher Level Stewardship agreement into Countryside Stewardship. We've provided some more detailed

guidance on this to help farmers to think about equivalent options available to them under the Countryside Stewardship scheme.

Like Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier, the Landscape Recovery scheme involves a competitive application process, in which a panel of subject matter experts assess and score applications against the published criteria. We initially said we would recruit up to 15 projects in the first round of Landscape Recovery, within the total project development budget available of up to £7.5m, but we were so impressed with the quality of applications that we extended this to 22 projects, which were announced in September 2022. They are now in the project development phase and over the course of this will receive a share of around £12 million in development grants to help them finalise their delivery plans. Collectively, the projects aim to restore nearly 400 miles of rivers and protect and provide habitat for at least 263 species such as water vole, otter, pine marten, lapwing, great crested newt, European eel and marsh fritillary across over 40,000 hectares.

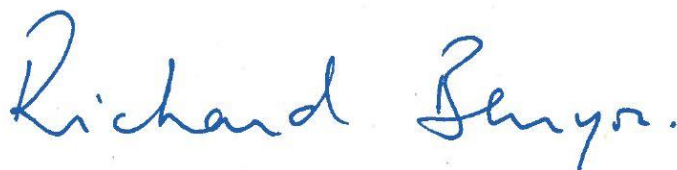
Unfortunately, not all Landscape Recovery applications are taken forward. However, we want to see all interested projects continuing to participate in a suitable scheme. We provided feedback to unsuccessful applicants in round one and, where possible, signposted them to other relevant funding opportunities suitable for their projects.

The second round of Landscape Recovery closed for applications on 21 September 2023. The applications are currently being evaluated, and we are considering how we can improve the feedback we provide to unsuccessful applicants.

In the light of this I hope you can see why I found your comments in the House to be, at best, a bit 'glass half empty'!

As this reflects an area of great concern to a number of Noble Lords, I am placing a copy of this letter in the Library.

Yours sincerely,



THE RT HON LORD BENYON