

Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier

Introduction

Defra has released details of its new Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier (CSHT) scheme. It forms part of the Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme and makes available 132 management options and 151 capital items aimed at:

- Managing woodland and agroforestry.
- Creating, restoring and managing wetlands, coastal habitats, lowland peat, moorland and grassland.
- Managing water bodies, such as lakes, ponds and rivers.
- Preventing flooding and improving resilience to flooding.
- Supporting species recovery of specific animals and plants.
- Providing permissive access to the public.
- Protecting and restoring historic or archaeological features.

Pre-applications for the scheme started in January 2025, although initially, this was by invitation only. This note will go into further detail on the actions offered by CSHT, who is eligible to apply, and the options available to those currently in Higher Level Stewardship agreements that are due to expire within the next year.

The offer

CSHT provides 132 management options, or 'actions', categorised into various themes, as shown in the list below. These include 99 base actions and 33 supplementary actions, which can only be used with a base action from the corresponding section. For instance, grassland management offers seven base actions and eight supplements, such as the difficult site supplement, which would add £93 per hectare to the base payment.

- Agroforestry
- Boundary features
- Buffer strips
- Coastal
- Farmland wildlife on arable and horticultural land
- Grassland
- Heritage
- Integrated pest management
- Lowland heath
- Lowland peat
- Moorland
- Nutrient management
- Orchards
- Permissive access
- Scrub
- Soil health
- Species recovery and management
- Waterbodies
- Wetland
- Woodland, trees and wood pasture

Payment rates for actions vary significantly in CSHT. For example, creating 6-24 metre wide 3-dimensional buffer strips pays £1,182 per ha, while managing intensive grassland adjacent to a watercourse pays £311 per ha. It is also worth noting that rates for many options have remained static between this version of CSHT and the previous iteration of countryside stewardship (CS). In 2022, GS4, an action for planting legume and herb-rich swards, had its payment rate changed to £382 per ha – this rate is maintained for CGST which is the new version of this action.

CSHT also offers 151 capital grants. These are a combination of updated options that have been carried over from previous versions of CS and capital grant offerings, as well as 26 new capital grants, which are presented in the table below:

Item code	Item title	Item payment rate
AC3	Install and maintain signage to stop feeding wildfowl, not access	£55.65 per sign
BN16	Repair stone walls	£16.17 per m

FY4	Create 2-zone rides in woodland	Up to 100% of actual costs
FY5	Create 3-zone rides in woodland	Up to 100% of actual costs
FY6	Restore coppicing in woodland	Up to 100% of actual costs
FY7	Assessing woodland condition	First 30ha £13.63 per ha (minimum payment £300). Over 30ha £4.09 per ha
FY8	Supplement for a freestanding deer high seat	£180 supplement for free-standing seat
GR1	Create or restore grassland habitat	£186.02 per ha
GR2	Standard seed mix for grassland habitat	£203 per ha
GR3	Floristically enhanced seed mix for grassland habitat	£890.02 per ha
PA7	Species management plan	£204.79 per type of species to a maximum of £1,023.95 per approved plan
SM1	Training to control and manage deer	Up to 100% of actual costs
SM2	Training to control and manage American mink	Up to 100% of actual costs
SM3	Training to control and manage non-native plants	Up to 100% of actual costs
SM4	Traps for American mink	Up to 100% of actual costs
SM5	Traps for edible dormouse	Up to 100% of actual costs
SM6	Use monitoring equipment to manage invasive species	Up to 100% of actual costs
TE15	Plant groups of trees in large guards	£572.78 per large guard
TE16	Use tree surgery to 'hinge' a tree or limb into a watercourse	£95.26 per tree
TE17	Tree surgery for veteran trees	£488 per tree
TE18	Supplement: Pruning to restore fruit trees	£146 per tree
VED1	Educational access visits	£363 per visit
WF1	Create a wildfire checklist	£327.12 per farm
WN11	Install temporary water storage features	£7.36 per m ²
WN12	Create or restore ponds	£1,879.46 per pond
WN13	Supplement: Manage wetland cutting	£1,346 per ha

Eligibility and payment frequency

CSHT will be available to all farmers, foresters, and land managers in England (although initially by invitation only; see “roll out”) who have management control of the land on which they apply for the agreement. Those receiving delinked payments are eligible to apply for CSHT, although measures will be in place to prevent double funding. Any applicant who received a lump sum exit payment will not be eligible to apply for a CSHT agreement unless the lump sum exit payment is repaid; the exception to this rule is if the lump sum exit payment was to leave a farming partnership, in which case the remaining partners may apply for a CSHT agreement without repaying the lump sum. These eligibility restrictions do not affect the five hectares of land that applicants were permitted to retain occupation of under the lump sum exit scheme rules.

Land is eligible for a CSHT action if it aligns with the requirements of the specific action being applied for; it also must be wholly in England and registered on the Rural Land Registry. CSHT is permitted on agricultural and non-agricultural land, common land, woodland, protected sites, recreational land, and land supporting a priority species. CSHT cannot be placed on land with solar panels, developed areas, or land that is already receiving another type of ELM payment. Any land with historic or archaeological features must have an up-to-date historic environment farm environment record (HEFER) before a CSHT application can be made.

CSHT will be paid quarterly, starting in the fourth month following the start of the agreement. This is for actions only; capital items are claimed separately and paid as one-off lump sums.

Roll out

The CSHT scheme will initially roll out by invitation only, with Natural England and the Forestry Commission assisting invited farmers and land managers from certain priority groups in developing their applications from January 2025. These groups are those with an existing countryside stewardship higher tier agreement that expires in 2025, those with approved woodland management plans in place, and those with implementation or agroforestry plans in place under the previous capital grants system.

Natural England and the Forestry Commission will advise these applicants on which new CSHT options may be suitable for their sites, whether any capital items may be needed to support the application, and whether some Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) options may be more applicable.

The scheme will open fully for applications in the summer of 2025, and the RPA will provide further advice in February on applying if you are not part of one of the initial groups. The current guidance states that “not everyone that would like to apply will be able to do so when CSHT opens”.

Mirror agreements and HLS extensions

For any existing CSHT agreements that expired in 2024, Defra has said that a mirror agreement will be offered with the same duration of five or 10 years. This will be an exact duplicate of any expiring agreement, aiming to support the continued delivery of environmental outcomes without interruption. This will not apply to CSHT agreements that involve woodland. The RPA has said it will contact anyone eligible for a mirror agreement by post or email.

Similarly, for Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreements that expired in December 2024, the RPA is offering two-year extensions. These extensions have been pre-approved by Natural England and can be offered immediately. If an HLS agreement is set to expire in 2025, Natural England will review it and offer a one- or two-year extension, depending on the agreement. The RPA will first contact the holders of agreements that expired in 2024, followed by those expiring in 2025.

Consultant's view

For those wanting to carry out environmental practices that go above and beyond the ambition of the SFI scheme, this information about CSHT will allow them to plan and prepare for applications opening fully this summer. However, for those locked into a rolling HLS or Mid-Tier agreement, the new scheme still does not offer the flexibility to transfer to the new scheme as Defra originally promised. If you would like to discuss an application, please contact [Georgina Sweeting](#) in our Food and Farming team.

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