

Delivering the HLS Package for Farmland Birds

Advisory Note for Natural England advisers

(Information for stakeholders, partners and ES agents)

Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) is the main mechanism for delivering sympathetic farm management for a suite of range-restricted and declining birds associated with arable/mixed farmland in England – lapwing, grey partridge, turtle dove, yellow wagtail, tree sparrow and corn bunting. In addition, HLS agreements targeted on these species will also greatly assist efforts to conserve more widespread but declining farmland birds such as skylark, linnet, reed bunting and yellowhammer. All of the above-mentioned species appear on the ‘Section 41’ list of ‘priority species’ that Government considers are of ‘principal importance for the conservation of biodiversity in England’, and all but one (reed bunting) also appear on the UK ‘Red’ list of birds of conservation concern.

This note is to provide guidance on the way we deliver the HLS package for farmland birds across England - a suite of Environmental Stewardship (ES) options that, when deployed together, deliver the key, limiting ecological requirements for declining farmland birds. The guidance has been produced in close collaboration with RSPB and GWCT (and formerly FWAG). The guidance will be made available to external partners to ensure that there is a consistent approach to delivering for farmland birds within HLS.

An annex of [frequently asked questions](#) is provided at the end of this document. This contains a list of [national and regional contacts](#) should further information be required.

How much land do we need under key options to effectively deliver the HLS Farmland Bird Package at the agreement scale?

Key ES arable options for farmland birds should usually total a minimum of 7%, but no more than 10% (or 15% if weed rich stubbles are solely used to provide the winter food element), of the eligible arable area¹ of the holding. Both key Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) and HLS options count towards these threshold figures - see

¹ The arable area of a farm is defined as the sum of the claimed areas for the arable SPS codes (OT1, FL1, HM1, TG1, TG2, TG3 and OT2) for all parcels on the agreement, using the most recent SPS declaration from the RPA scheme data. If there is no SPS declaration available because there is no SPS claim, then the FEP can be used to determine the arable area.

Tables 1 and 2 for further guidance. **It should be remembered that this is guidance and there may be situations where the minimum or maximum threshold levels are not rigorously applied. Examples of these situations are as follows:**

- In landscapes unsuitable for lapwings or where they breed on wet grassland (hence no need for E/HF13) and where there is extensive spring-sown cropping (hence no need for skylark plots), the threshold may be reduced to 5%.
- Where advisers are negotiating agreements with other important features on the holding which can be delivered using HLS (for example, SSSI's or Scheduled Monuments). In such cases, a lower threshold of 5% may be agreed as long as this figure is still made up of the desired balance between winter seed food, invertebrate-rich habitat and in-field nesting sites (as prescribed in Tables 1 and 2).
- Where a 'cluster' of applications will produce the desired 7-10% of land in the right balance of options, but where individual applications may not meet these requirements. Team leaders can approve these if such a cluster of farms are clearly delivering the HLS 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, limiting, resources needed by farmland birds – nesting habitat, summer invertebrate food and winter seed food.
- On mixed farms, where the arable makes up a relatively small component, the maximum threshold level can be increased if desired. To guide this, convert the thresholds '% arable' to 'per 100ha' of farmed land. To give an example with reference to table 1, if there is 200ha of farmed land in the agreement with 50ha of arable, the thresholds would be 4ha of wild bird seed mixtures/10ha of stubble, 6ha of summer invertebrate food options and 4 ha of nesting plots (+40 skylark plots, although these would not be necessary in many mixed farming situations as there is likely to be sufficient spring cropping). This would mean a maximum % arable threshold of 14-20%, but it is still only 7-15% of the landscape. These levels of arable option uptake would be difficult to achieve in some mixed farming situations, but this is where suitable grassland options should be promoted (especially the new ELS ones, EK20 and EK21).

The decision to use this agreed flexibility will be left to the advisers' discretion, working closely with NE team leaders, the farmer and local partners on the ground. **Any deviations from the 7-10% requirement should also be discussed first with your regional farmland bird specialist prior to agreement issue.** Please note that

where the sole HLS objective for the agreement is the farmland bird interest, then the 7% to 10% ask will apply.

Summary of National HLS Targeting Framework for Farmland Birds

Six range restricted farmland bird species are specifically targeted using HLS:

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

These species are sometimes 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, a holding is known to support a regionally important breeding population of 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. The distribution and populations of several of the target species can undergo rapid change (for example localised on-going range contraction in turtle dove), so what constitutes a 'regionally important breeding populations' should first be discussed with your NE regional farmland bird specialist prior to targeting HLS at areas with less than 3 of these species.

Summary of the Evidence Base Underpinning the HLS Farmland Bird Package

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 the resources that research has shown are actually limiting the breeding populations of declining farmland birds, and are often referred to as '**The Big Three**'.

The mix of ES options chosen to deliver these key resources was formulated using the best research evidence and experience available to date from RSPB, GWCT, BTO and Natural England. The evidence all points to a need for a minimum of 4-7% of a 1 km-square to contain suitable in-field management to deliver enough of key habitats/ecological requirements needed 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 has a greater focus on the more widespread species which require a lower level of intervention, ie 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.

From January 1st 2013, options for supplementary feeding for farmland birds (EF23, OF23 and HF24) have become available to new and existing agreement holders whose agreements started **on or after 1st February 2007**. The need for these options has emerged from research by NE, CEH, RSPB, BTO and GWCT, which revealed the existence of a so-called 'hungry gap' period for seed-eating farmland birds from mid/late-winter to early spring, when other winter seed options have been depleted and more natural seed resources are low. These options can benefit a number of the resident farmland bird species, though should only be promoted where all other elements of the farmland bird package are also in place (see table below for eligibility criteria).

Please note that a mandatory requirement for using HF24 is that the agreement must meet the minimum ask of the HLS Farmland Bird Package as stated below

Table 1: ELS & HLS Farmland Bird Packages (example per 100 ha of arable)

Resource	ES options	ELS (minimum per 100 ha)	HLS (minimum per 100 ha)
Winter seed food	Wild bird seed mixture <u>or</u> Weed-rich stubble (or a combination)	2 ha <u>or</u> 5-10 ha	2 ha <u>or</u> 5-10 ha
Winter seed food - Supplementary feeding	EF23, OF23	0.5t per ha of EF2/OF2 <u>or</u> 0.2t per ha EF22	-
	HF24	-	Flexible, but holding needs to be delivering the HLS farmland bird package
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 <u>or</u> 1 ha	20 plus 2 ha (if appropriate)

HLS agreements targeted on Farmland Birds

Table 2 shows a revised list of key HLS and ELS options that can deliver the HLS Farmland Bird Package. Note, field corners have 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 there needs to be a focus we should be focusing on those options that deliver the maximum benefit possible for farmland birds. Also, a number of new options have been added to the package (supplementary feeding, ryegrass seed set, and legume and herb-rich swards) which were introduced into ES from January 2013 (following the MESME programme).

When selecting options to contribute to the package, please be guided by the HLS target species that have been identified as being present on the farm – Table 2 indicates which options are of most benefit for each of the 'Arable 6'.

Table 2: ES options that can be used to deliver the 3 components of the HLS Farmland Bird Package (based on 100 ha of arable)

ES Code	Option	HLS target birds that benefit
1. Places to nest In-field: (Minimum requirement per 100 ha: 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 (also turtle dove foraging)
HF12, HF12 NR	HLS enhanced Wild Bird Seed Mixtures	Corn bunting specific (nesting) 2-5ha blocks
EF22	Extended over-wintered stubbles	Grey partridge, yellow wagtail, corn bunting
EF7, OF7, OHF7 HF7	Beetle banks	Grey partridge, corn bunting
2. Winter seed food: (Minimum requirement per 100 ha: 2 ha wild bird mix or 5 - 10 ha 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, HF14 NR	Unharvested, fertiliser-free conservation headlands	Grey partridge, tree sparrow, corn bunting
EF15, OF6, OHF6, HF15, HF15NR	Organic over-winter stubbles (OWS) & reduced herbicide crop followed by OWS	Grey partridge, tree sparrow, corn bunting
EG4, OG4, HG4, OHG4	Cereals for whole crop silage followed by over-wintered stubbles	Grey partridge, tree sparrow, corn bunting
EG5, HG5, HG6, OHG5, OG5	Brassica fodder crops	Grey partridge, tree sparrow, corn bunting
EF10, HF 10, HF10 NR, HF19	Un-harvested cereal headlands within arable fields	Grey partridge, tree sparrow, corn bunting
EF22	Extended over-wintered stubbles	Grey partridge, tree sparrow, corn bunting
EF6	Over winter stubbles (Note: HF6 does <u>not</u> count towards the package)	Grey partridge, tree sparrow, corn bunting
EK20, OK20, OHK20, HK20	Ryegrass seed set as winter/spring food for birds	Grey partridge, tree sparrow, corn bunting
EF23, OF23, HF24*	Supplementary feeding in winter for farmland birds	Grey partridge, tree sparrow, corn bunting
3. Spring/summer invertebrate food (invertebrate rich foraging habitats): (Minimum requirement per 100 ha: 2 - 3 ha)		
EF4, OF4, HF4, OHF4, EF4NR,	Nectar flower mixture and pollen and nectar mix in grassland areas.	Tree sparrow, corn bunting

OF4NR, HF4NR, OHF4NR, EG3, HG3, OG3, OHG3		
EE12, OE12, HE12, OHE12	Supplement to add wildflowers to field corners and buffer strips	Grey Partridge, yellow wagtail, tree sparrow
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, HF10NR, HF19	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, HF14NR	Unharvested, fertiliser-free conservation headlands	Grey partridge, turtle dove, tree sparrow, corn bunting
EF15, HF15, HF15NR	Reduced herbicide cereal crops followed by overwintered stubbles	Grey partridge, yellow wagtail, tree sparrow, corn bunting
HF20, HF20NR	Un-cropped cultivated plots or margins for arable plants	Grey partridge, turtle dove, yellow wagtail, tree sparrow, corn bunting
EF7, OF7, HF7, OHF7	Beetle banks	Grey partridge, corn bunting
HG7	Low input spring cereal	Grey partridge, corn bunting
EG1, OG1, HG1, OHG1	Under-sown spring cereal	Grey partridge, corn bunting
EK21, OK21, OHK21, HK21	Legume and herb-rich swards	Tree sparrow, corn bunting

*** Note the weight restrictions of this option in ELS and OELS. In HLS this option should only be used where the farmland bird package is being implemented using other options in this table.**

Annex 1 – Frequently asked questions

Which options count towards the delivery of the HLS package? Only 'key' arable farmland bird options within ELS, HLS and OELS will count towards the threshold levels for the package. The options highlighted in Table 2 above are the ones that contribute towards the package at present. Please note that this does include a selection of 'more of the same' HELS options, which will also provide resources for more widespread species such as linnet, reed bunting, yellowhammer and skylark.

What about ELS options? Selected ELS options do count towards delivery of the package, as indicated in Table 2.

Are we meant to target certain landholdings? The delivery of the HLS package should focus on those areas identified as supporting 3 or more of the 6 range-restricted arable specialist species (corn bunting, yellow wagtail, grey partridge, tree sparrow, turtle dove and lapwing). Holdings with a known regionally important population of one of these species can also be targeted.

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 (but this can rise to 15% if stubbles are being used to meet the winter seed component of the package). We are under no illusion that this can be a challenge. With this in mind we have built in some flexibility into the ask, as noted above, to take account of local circumstances. You should, however, discuss any variations from the 7-10% ask with your NE regional farmland bird specialist prior to setting-up the agreement.

Do we still need to consider the 'Big 3'? Yes, it is important that we achieve strike a balance in terms of options between those that provide nesting habitat, summer invertebrate food and winter seed food, by delivering the component parts of the package (as prescribed in Tables 1 and 2).

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 (HF6 does not), 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 10 ha of stubble equalling 2 ha of wild bird mix. When including 10 ha of the arable area in EF6 stubble, then there will still be a requirement to deliver at least 2 ha as insect-rich foraging habitats, 20 skylark plots and, if nesting lapwings are present, a 2 ha fallow plot per 100 ha.

Some HLS enhanced Wild Bird Seed Mixtures have been specifically designed to deliver the requirements for nesting corn bunting - Should we 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 to deliver the nesting requirement and will have a specific seed mix.

Supplementary feeding is available to new and existing agreement holders from 1st January 2013 - Should we be encouraging this option? Yes, but only where:

- for EF23, the farm is delivering other winter seed provision through EF2/OF2 and / or EF22 (note the EF23 feed weight restrictions in ELS handbooks), and
- for HF24, the complete farmland bird package is being implemented under HLS and at least one of the three HLS target granivorous birds (tree sparrow, corn bunting and grey partridge) are present. This helps ensure that the other constituents of the 'Big 3' are also in place and the farm is more likely to hold existing populations of our target farmland birds.

Note also that the addition of the supplementary feeding options to existing agreements is only permitted where the agreement started after 1st February 2007.

Farmers are asking lots of questions about the supplementary feeding options. Where can I find information? There is a very useful NE Technical Information Note on supplementary feeding produced with input from a wide range of specialist stakeholders, which provides useful practical tips and should answer most queries. The [HLS Options - Supplementary feeding in winter for farmland birds](#) [NB this link will only work for Natural England staff] guidance page contains all the information on eligibility and processing agreements with HF24. If you still have queries on the option, please speak to your regional farmland bird specialist.

Lapwing, yellow wagtail and turtle dove will not use the supplementary feeding option during the standard target period, which only leaves 3 of the 6 target species. Can we use the option under HLS if we only have 1 or 2 target species in winter on the farm?

As above, in the main we can only target the FB package on HLS agreements where 3 or more of the arable six occur. However for HLS agreements that have been set up (putting in place the wider FB package) targeting farms with fewer than 3 of the target species, but whose populations are of regional significance, then provision of HF24 could be added to help these species through the hungry gap period. Note also that the more ubiquitous farmland bird species (yellowhammer, reed bunting, skylark and linnet) are also likely to benefit from the provision of supplementary feeding through HF24.

Who is my NE 'regional farmland bird specialist' that you refer to above, to whom I can direct queries related to this document?

Farmland bird national leads:	Phil Grice and James Phillips
WM	Matt Willmott
SW	Neil Harris
EM	Adam Kwolek and Stephen Duncan
SE	Des Sussex
NW	Hannah Birtles and Bart Donato
E	Sarah Brockless and David Whiting
Yorkshire	Stephen Duncan and Steve Pullan
NE	Steve Pullan

I have heard about a bespoke flower mix being used to provide breeding season foraging habitat for turtle doves – Should I be applying this on HLS agreements that have turtle dove present? RSPB and NE are undertaking an R&D project investigating the use of a bespoke nectar-type mix with early-seeding flowers designed to provide seed food for turtle doves. In parts of the East of England, NE is contributing to a wider trial of such plots in a limited number of new and existing HLS agreements as part of our commitment to *Operation Turtle Dove* (<http://operationturtledove.org/>). Whilst the initial results are encouraging, we are some way off having an option that can be rolled-out across the country. In the meantime, please continue to target turtle doves, either as part of a 3+ arable assemblage or where there is a regionally important population. The turtle dove is our fastest declining farmland bird and it is vital that we deploy high quality HLS agreements that benefit them.

Table 4 provides a list of those options within HLS and ELS that can provide good nesting and foraging habitat for turtle doves. Whilst turtle doves are known to travel considerable distances between their nest sites and their foraging habitats, the ideal situation is to have the options that provide their nesting and feeding requirements sited as close as possible to each other.

Further advice on optimising option management for turtle doves can be obtained from your regional farmland bird specialist.

Table 4: HLS and ELS options providing the nesting and foraging habitat requirements of turtle doves

Habitat requirement	HLS options	ELS options	Notes
<p>NESTING:</p> <p>Hedgerows or areas of scrub, especially those with thorny shrubs and climbers</p>	<p>HC15 Maintenance of successional areas and scrub</p> <p>HC16 Restoration of successional areas and scrub</p> <p>HC17 Creation of successional areas of scrub</p> <p>HB11 Management of hedgerows of very high environmental value (both sides)</p>	<p>EB3 Enhanced hedgerow management</p>	<p>Ideally, there should be areas of shrubs over 4m tall. Wide (i.e. 4m+) hedgerows should be targeted. Lines of scrub should be avoided.</p>
<p>FORAGING:</p> <p>Margins or plots with early-seeding plants that retain openness to allow birds to access the seeds</p>	<p>HF13 Un-cropped cultivated areas for ground-nesting birds on arable land</p> <p>HF20 Cultivated fallow-plots or margins for arable plants.</p>	<p>EF11 Un-cropped cultivated margins for arable plants</p> <p>EF13 Un-cropped cultivated areas for ground-nesting birds on arable land</p>	<p>Maintaining a sparse vegetation structure during the breeding is essential. The grass content of plots/ margins should be as small as possible.</p>

* Note: To be deployed as part of the underpinning ELS agreement. Options that are more complex to deploy on heavier soils are highlighted in red

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