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## Agri-Environment Update- January

### Summary

Over the past few months the RPA has been focused on payment processing for both Countryside Stewardship (CS) and Environmental Stewardship (ES). The payment window opened on the 1<sup>st</sup> December 2020 and runs through until the end of June 2021. Additionally, the RPA has been focused on processing CS applications in order to deliver agreement offers (for agreements that began on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2021). Restrictions caused by the pandemic continue, though this does not seem to be hindering the RPA's ability to process and deliver the suite of services they provide. The application window will re-open for new CS applicants in February 2021. At the end of November, the agricultural transition plan was published, setting out details for the next few years of agri-environment schemes.

### Covid-19 update:

As we remain under restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic, please do continue to refer to the RPA's Covid 19 landing page which can be [found here](#). This is regularly updated with any important information linked to the pandemic.

The RPA continues to deliver the range of services to agricultural and rural communities whilst operating a predominantly working from home business model. Schemes continue to open for new applicants as they otherwise would, and further guidance will be published with necessary updates as and when required, this will include any contingency arrangements the RPA may need to do to support farmers. Inspections will continue (with strict social distancing measures and covid-19 secure health and safety measures) in order to meet regulatory targets and allow for payments to be delivered.

### Payment/Delivery update

The payment window for 2020 scheme delivery opened on the 1<sup>st</sup> December 2020. Both CS and ES payments are now made in one payment and will be issued during the payment window which runs from **December to June the following year**. Meaning, any payment still outstanding for 2020 is still within the payment window timeframe. The NFU has been very clear that the expectation is to see the RPA makes a significant improvement on the time taken to deliver 95% of payments (which was reached by June last year). The RPA is making progress with payments processing and have made significant improvements on last years performance. At the last update in mid- January, around 70% of payments had been issued for CS and around 60% for ES.

### Agreement offers

Whilst the RPA has improved on its performance last year in terms of delivering agreement offers by now (for agreements that started on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2021), the RPA still has a significant number to deliver. The NFU is continuing to monitor this situation closely and seek regular updates from the RPA on its progress. Agreements that include spring sown options are being prioritised. If you are still waiting to hear back from the RPA regarding the status of your application, you should have received a letter or email communication from the RPA setting out timelines and why this is delayed. The RPA is working to a deadline date of the 31<sup>st</sup> March to respond to all agreement applications.

The NFU is live to the issues delayed agreement offers cause on the ground and continue to stress this to the RPA at all levels. If you have capital works as part of your agreement and receive a late agreement offer that hinders your ability to deliver the capital works in the 2-year allocated window, the NFU encourages you to apply for an extension to this work. The RPA reviews this on a case by case basis.

### CS and HLS Extensions

The first CS extensions began on the 1<sup>st</sup> Jan 2021 and will run until the end of December this year. HLS extensions, for those who have been offered an extension throughout 2021 will begin the following month after the expiry of the original agreement (or the previous years rollover). Natural England should have concluded the early work associated with determining which HLS agreements will be put forward to the RPA for recommendation by now.

### Application window opening – new CS agreements

Defra has confirmed the application window will open on the 9<sup>th</sup> February for agreements that will start on the 1<sup>st</sup> Jan 2022. The full suite of CS will be on offer, which includes CS Mid-tier (core) and CS Mid-tier Wildlife offers (WLO). CS Higher tier will also be opening on the same date, and finally an extended capital only offer running for two years (including new air quality options) will also be open to new applicants. The capital only offer has replaced the previous Hedgerow and Boundary offer and the capped amount has doubled from £10,000 to £20,000 per option group. The NFU welcomes this after lobbying in previous years for this amount to be increased and the scope to be extended.

The various schemes opening have differing deadline dates and the NFU will promote this information once the schemes have opened for application. These schemes will operate under domestic legislation and benefit from increased flexibilities such as the early exit for ELM (should a place be secured) and the removal of draconian penalties.

### Agricultural Transition Plan

The agricultural transition plan (ATP) document was published on the 30<sup>th</sup> November which sets out government plans to the years beyond 2021 for transitioning the industry. The full document can be [found here](#). A full NFU analysis can be [viewed here](#) for NFU members.

The ATP sets out details on how CS and ES will operate throughout the transition period (present – 2024) to the Environmental Land Management scheme (ELMs). ELMs will be rolled out fully in autumn 2024. Until then CS will be open to new applicants. The final application for CS will be in 2023, with agreements that begin in January 2024. Any agreements starting from January 2021 will be operating under domestic regulations. Those agreements existing before January 2021, or on an extension (CS or HLS) will remain under EU regulations. A more detailed specific briefing on the ATP and agri-environment schemes is [available here](#).