

# What are the environmental and socio-economic benefits of the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund?

## Agri-environment monitoring theme: Scheme design

### What are the issues?

The current agri-environment scheme (AES) in England (Countryside Stewardship (CS)) brings together a range of environmental protection and enhancement measures. Similar to previous AESs, agreements are based on measures implemented at the holding or farm level. However, for many environmental issues collective action at a landscape scale has greater benefit than actions delivered by individual farmers acting alone at farm level.

The Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund (CSFF) provides funding for both individuals and organisations within a defined geographical area. Supporting collaborative action between farmers, foresters and other land managers the aim is to go beyond the level of the individual farm to deliver environmental improvements at a landscape scale. It provides a mechanism to enable local action to drive positive environmental change through improved AES option deployment, better alignment of AES options with existing habitats and to improve connectivity across the area. Groups receive additional funding to support coordination, advice and training to group members.

Since its launch in 2015 to 2017 there have been three rounds of funding including one targeted at natural flood management. The CSFF in this period supports 98 groups across England, with upwards of 3,500 members and represents a total of nearly half a million hectares.

### What are the aims of the project?

This project was a desk study which aimed to evaluate the success of the Facilitation Fund with respect to both quantitative environmental objectives and social capital outcomes. The project also involved the development of a monitoring framework in order to assess future group activity.

These aims were achieved by:

- Analysis of outputs of funding
- Exploring the potential environmental outcomes of AES activity through mapping option uptake, assessing alignment with CS targets, water quality & flood risk and analysing spatial coherence of option implementation for various biodiversity resource groups
- Collecting evidence on social and wider impacts through a survey of facilitators and interviews with selected group members
- Compilation of 28 case studies to explore - context specific impact pathways.



Figure 1: Farmer Guardians of Upper Thames, soil sampling.

### Which policy areas will the research inform?

This work will help our understanding of the delivery of landscape scale environmental action through the CSFF. It will further knowledge about delivery of advice & training and of both the socio-economic and environmental implications.



Department  
for Environment  
Food & Rural Affairs

This project is supported by the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) for which Defra is the Managing Authority, part financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development: Europe investing in rural areas



# What are the environmental and socio-economic benefits of the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund?

## What are the results from the project and how will they be used?

### Uptake and activity

Funding per group member averaged £3,763, although there was considerable variability between groups and smaller groups tended to receive greater funding per member. Mean group size was 19 at formation and 27 at analysis. Most groups increased by up to 15 members, but a few groups expanded their membership even further.

### Likely environmental impacts

Many group members did not have an AES agreement, but this may have been influenced by relatively low uptake of CS. Also, the limited scope to adjust existing agreements may mean that improvements to environmental outcomes are not maximised until AES renewal. Where agreements were present, they were of similar value to those which were not part of a group, but option richness and diversity were significantly greater in facilitated agreements compared to other AES agreements in the area. There were also indications that group membership was encouraging uptake of more challenging options.

Group activity has had a positive impact on connectivity of resource managed under AES for most biodiversity groups assessed compared to agreements outside CSFF, leading to more resilient landscapes. There was also some positive alignment of relevant AES options with areas of higher risk for water quality/flooding.

Holdings or habitats may not be part of an AES for many reasons, but the survey of facilitators and land managers indicated that CSFF impact on environmental management extended beyond that delivered under AES agreements.

### Socio-economic and wider impacts

Results from the survey of facilitators and land manager interviews suggest that the CSFF has had a positive impact on a wide range of socio-economic indicators. These included increased awareness, expertise and confidence of land managers in enhancing environmental features on their land plus increased collaboration. Other measures of social capital which also benefited were: trust, both in the

training being delivered and among each other, social interaction, between existing relationships or new, information & knowledge sharing and wider public engagement.

### Success factors, enablers and barriers

Results from the facilitator survey suggest that funding for facilitation and land manager training have been the most important factors contributing to the achievement of group aims. External funding serves to motivate and maintain interest in group activity and provides greater scope for more complex and ambitious programmes, helping to provide tangible outcomes that can be achieved as a result of training.

Improvements to social capital made through the facilitation fund groups, in terms of trust, relationships, communication, collaboration and confidence were also key to the perceived longevity of the group and achieving the most environmental impact.

### Areas for improvement

Facilitators highlighted the provision of one to one advice and simplification of CSFF administration as key areas where the scheme could be improved. In addition, some form of continued support, after the short CSFF lifespan, would be required to sustain the positive impact on environmental objectives.

The project team identified a number of improvements in group documentation (standardisation of reporting, identification of priorities and parcels) which would improve the ability to evaluate the outcomes of CSFF.

### Conclusions

Outputs of this desk study suggest that CSFF funding has had a range of benefits. Facilitation and training are likely to contribute to improved environmental outcomes through better alignment of option uptake, land manager capability and improved wider environmental management.

More significantly, a wide range of social capital benefits are realised through the CSFF, including improved trust, collaboration, communication and relationships.

**Where can I find further information about this and related research?** A copy of the final report can be found on Defra Science pages (LM0479). Alternatively, please contact Brian McDonald (Natural England project officer): [Brian.mcdonald@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:Brian.mcdonald@naturalengland.org.uk)

## Defra Science – did you know?

At any one time Defra manages over 1000 research projects covering a wide range of topics. For more information on current research see <http://randd.defra.gov.uk>