

Bittern Countryside Community Interest Company

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Agriculture Consultation Team,
1b – Future Farming Directive,
Department of the Environment,
Food and Rural Affairs,
17 Smith Square,
LONDON
SW1P 3JR

2nd May 2018

Dear Sir/Madam,

Consultation on “Health and Harmony: the future for food, farming, and the environment in a Green Brexit”

I am writing to you as Chair of the Bittern Countryside Community Interest Company to welcome the Minister’s recognition that there has been significant environmental damage to ‘precious’ habitats and to farmland bird populations (*The State of Nature* in the UK in 2016) and strongly support the long term thinking in “*A Green future: our 25 year Plan to improve the Environment*” for England and the government’s plan to ensure broader landscapes are transformed by connecting habitats into larger corridors for wildlife, (as recommended by Sir John Lawton in his official review) and the recent consultation document to make the environment the ‘cornerstone’ of the new environmental land management scheme.

Our shareholders work for the public benefit of both residents and visitors within the Arnside and Silverdale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (hereinafter called "the AONB") by stimulating and encouraging both understanding of and active involvement in the protection, conservation and practical improvement of features of general public amenity or historical interest within the landscape. They also work to protect the biodiversity and ecology of the area in order to provide a bulwark against species loss, breakdown of eco-systems and mitigate the effects of climate change

We strongly support the general principal for the new agricultural policy to be underpinned by “*payment of public money for the provision of public goods*” and some of our members have also completed the online consultation that includes the transition from Single Payments (that have turned out to be fundamentally flawed) to a new successor environmental stewardship scheme. The crucial thing will be in the detail of how this is done.

We consider that the future environmental stewardship scheme should primarily do three things: –

1. Make Conservation financially practical:
By supporting landowners (including many small productive farmers with less than 5 ha.) who are already practicing a system of land management that is producing well recognised environmental and public benefits that are appropriate and desirable for a particular location. In National Parks and AONB's farmers and landowners should also be rewarded for coping with increased casual recreation pressure and for creating and maintaining permissive access where appropriate.
2. Discourage environmentally damaging use of land:
Grants should not be paid to continue or promote environmentally damaging land use.
3. Working for the long term:
Landowners who are willing to sign a conservation covenant for not less than 25 years should be rewarded with higher rates of payment for more complex environmental improvements. These could include such things as catchment wide flood mitigation schemes, linked land restoration, reforestation or rewilding projects on a landscape scale, particularly in the more remote uplands and National Parks.
4. Allocate resources well:
It is also important that we reward high standards of animal husbandry. Support for maintaining and improving the health of our water systems should be encouraged. Schemes could also support things like fast broadband provision for rural communities and look at ways to mitigate rural poverty. Above all any system should be easy to use, simple to administer, and well run and monitored.

All of this work requires dedicated well qualified field staff, many of whom are already in post both as conservation advisers and forest officers, that can provide continuity of support to landowners and a career structure for staff. To ensure compliance with international obligations post-Brexit the Government must continue to safeguard sites of European importance, i.e. those designated as Special Protection Areas (Birds Directive) and as Special Areas of Conservation (Habitats & Species Directive) that are particularly relevant to this AONB.

We strongly endorse the recommendation of 22nd March by the *House of Lords Select Committee on the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006* that, as a matter of urgency, '*Natural England should be funded to a level commensurate with the delivery of its full range of statutory duties and responsibilities.*'

Leaving the European Union should not be used as an excuse for removing our commitment to environmental protection and better land management. This will require a more focussed, adequately staffed and funded service to ensure that the government's excellent initial policy statements are satisfactorily implemented. We are expecting a change of attitude and a better, joined up system for farming, forestry, and landscape and wildlife conservation in the countryside of the future.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Ann Kitchen: Chair, Bittern Countryside Community Interest Company.