



Address

May 2018

Dear (to be supplied)

Replacing BPS with ELM – Somerset Levels and Moors

As a group of local organisations working on flood risk, land management and nature delivery in Somerset, we are writing to put the Somerset Levels and Moors (SLM) forward as a candidate area to help develop a new Environmental Land Management scheme.

As the largest area of lowland wet grassland in England, with more than 8000 ha of SSSI, SPA or Ramsar, with the specific challenges of balancing agricultural production, flood risk management and nature, the SLM provides a unique platform for helping to develop a multi-objective Environmental Land Management support mechanism.

A vision for the SLM (attached) has been already agreed by key partners and stakeholders and with the aim of working towards this we are making the following outline proposals for the SLM:

1. Carry out a Trial in the SLM on how a new scheme can deliver natural flood management through large scale use of floodplains alongside agricultural production and nature provision. The reverse auction method of engagement is being currently being tested in the upper catchment areas feeding into the Levels and Moors and it is proposed to trial this in the SLM floodplains in 2019-20.

This trial would test the suitability of the reverse auction as an engagement and delivery mechanism and a range of different flooding scenarios from those that offer only very temporary storage of flood water to those that provide flood storage benefits alongside high value nature delivery.

The current Hills to Levels Partnership would operate the trial with funding of the measures coming through the Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA), which was set up after the 2014 Somerset floods with the purpose of using locally raised revenue to deliver projects that reduce the severity and impact of all types of flooding on communities than could be delivered solely through Treasury support.

2. Use the SLM as a Pilot Area for a new ELM scheme to ensure it is well tested in a lowland wet grassland setting with multi-functional demands. In a landscape where flooding is such a major issue, the local delivery body for the pilot would be the SRA which is well set up to ensure the scheme fits the special character of the SLM. The technical support for the pilot could be provided by the developing Levels Land Trust, a new initiative that works with land managers on a cooperative basis across whole hydrological units, similar to the way the Facilitation Fund operates. The Land Trust draws on farming expertise from the local community and pulls in specialist help from nature NGOs and statutory agencies.

Both the SRA and the Levels Land Trust were strong recommendations of the 20 year Somerset Flood Action Plan, written in the aftermath of the 2014 flood event. It is this local delivery body combined with a Levels specific source of technical support and advice that provides an attractive package for a pilot that can be tailored to the unique challenges of the SLM.

Also, the SLM has 250 expiring HLS agreements in 2022, many of which may not get into Higher Tier. As a result, there is real concern about abandonment and declining environmental quality on some of the more difficult to manage areas of the SLM system. The need to have a Pilot in place to coincide with this to help farmers and landowners manage the uncertainty and commit to future environmental management of their land.

3. In addition, running a Pilot ELM scheme in the Somerset levels and Moors will help ensure that public support for land management is better able to deliver the biodiversity priorities of internationally important wintering birds, breeding waders, species-rich network and mosaic of herb-rich meadows. Both HLS and Higher Tier have not allowed the flexibility for fine-tuning land management on a field by field basis to suit the priorities of particular species. It has taken too much of a prescriptive approach that has often been difficult to implement and failed to deliver the biodiversity gains the schemes set out to achieve. Local flexibility on the higher tariff delivery options is essential going forward on the Somerset Levels and Moors with greater emphasis on results and less focus on prescriptions.

We would be happy to discuss these outline proposals with you in the near future and we look to align the future strategies for flood risk management and nature provision on the Somerset Levels and Moors with the transition to new ways of supporting

Yours sincerely