

19 June 2017

Rt Hon Michael Gove MP  
Secretary of State  
DEFRA  
Seacole Building  
2 Marsham Street  
London  
SW1P 4DF



Dear Mr Gove

### **Countryside Stewardship**

We write to express our grave concerns over the shambolic administration of Countryside Stewardship putting at risk years of valuable conservation work with many farmers reaching the end of agri-environment schemes unable to start new agreements. The backlog of farmers awaiting payments for environmental work, some up to nine months, is also unacceptable and must be sorted quickly. The current arrangements are simply not fit for purpose.

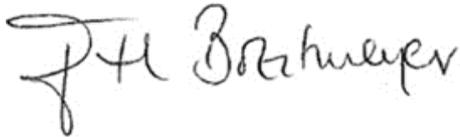
As recently as 2014 we had over 70 per cent of farmland involved in environmental work through Entry and Higher Level Stewardship Schemes and the vast majority of farmers wanted to continue with such arrangements when their schemes were brought to an end. Huge investment has gone into achieving environmental gains on farmland however farmers are now reporting that when existing agreements end they don't see the current Countryside Stewardship Scheme as a realistic option - the risks of falling foul of the rules is too high and Natural England is struggling to convert sufficient expiring HLS agreements into Higher Tier Countryside Stewardship.

DEFRA must give serious consideration to alternative approaches to securing continued delivery of agri-environment schemes, including the continuation of ELS and HLS agreements whilst we transit towards new schemes for the long term. For those who are facing payment delays we urge that you make bridging payments as has been done for Basic Payment Scheme.

Farmers and landowners are rightly proud of the environmental delivery achieved through agri-environment schemes but this good work is being undermined both by late payments and by the poor administration of new schemes. Finding a way to allow expiring schemes to continue on a year to year basis must be seen as a good way to maintain momentum

whilst taking the pressure away from hard-pressed, Natural England staff. We would welcome a meeting with you on this specific point in order to make urgent progress.

Yours sincerely



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