

Environmental Stewardship

Case study: Making life easy: Best practice advice for your ELS



Farmers in County Durham are taking advantage of free training visits offered by Natural England to help them to make the most of their Entry Level Stewardship Scheme agreements.

Expert advisers are providing one-to-one best practice training for farmers that will enable them to better manage the options that they have chosen so that maximum benefits are secured for wildlife and the wider farmed environment.

Two farmers in Baldersdale near Barnard Castle have already benefited from a best practice training visit when Jennie Stafford visited their farms to discuss the options that they have chosen.

Baldersdale, a remote but breathtakingly beautiful tributary of the River Tees, has been recognised as important because it contains many tracts of largely unimproved, species rich grassland. It also supports a variety of invertebrate species such as butterflies and bees.

Farmers are encouraged to choose options for their ELS agreement that benefit these target species and conserve and where possible, enhance the remaining valuable grasslands. The low input and very low input grassland options seek to create the structural and species diversity in the sward that will provide ample nectar and caterpillar food plants for bees and butterflies.

As the prescriptions for low input grassland also restrict the amount of nutrients that can be applied to the land as fertiliser and manure, this is also an effective option for reducing the level of diffuse pollution that can reach the groundwater.

In addition to the grassland options, farmland entered into UELS must also comply with a suite of upland grassland requirements which are essentially good practice. These requirements aim to maintain the character and conservation value of upland grassland and include obligations such as preventing the spread of bracken, no spread zones next to water courses and guidelines on supplementary feeding.

Similarly, when farmers enter areas of moorland into UELS, similar moorland requirements apply including the sensitive supplementary feeding of haylage and hay (rather than silage) and restrictions relating to certain operations such as fertiliser/manure application, cultivations and re-seeding.

Once in UELS, most farmers find that these requirements are easily met, despite initial concerns prior to signing up for their agreement.

Mr Keith Lind of Hury Farm in Baldersdale has found that his Upland ELS scheme has fitted in very well with his farming operation. He farms just over 130 acres running down to the edge of Baldersdale reservoir and also has some adjacent higher ground which is wet and rushy. He runs a flock of 250 breeding ewes alongside 22 suckler cows and followers.

For his UELS scheme, he chose the permanent grassland with low inputs and very low inputs in SDAs option (EL2 and EL3), together with cattle grazing on upland grassland and moorland (UL18), management of rush pastures in SDAs (EL4) and the stone wall restoration option (UB17).



Permanent pasture with low inputs adjacent to Baldersdale Reservoir

Keith commented: "The grassland options fit in well with my farming system and the prescriptions make sense on this ground as I've never used much fertiliser anyway. Going into UELS has spurred me into restoring a few of my stone walls that I've been meaning to do for a while.

Mr Lind was happy to invite Natural England Adviser, Jennie Stafford, onto his farm when she contacted him to offer him a best practice ELS training and information visit.

Jennie explained: "I'm here to help and to provide the farmer with practical suggestions about managing the various UELS and ELS options on the farm. It's really encouraging to see so many farmers achieving so much for wildlife now they are 2 or 3 years into their agreements"

In his first year, Mr Lind completed the 26 metres of wall restoration in his agreement. Jennie recommended that he took some photographs of the finished sections for the record:

'I'm pleased to see you took photographs of the sections you wished to restore and sent them in with your original application. It's worthwhile having the 'before' and the 'after' photos to complete the picture'.

Mr Lind has placed several of his fields further up the hill into the rush pasture option. As part of the option prescriptions, he has to cut up to a third of the rushes each year. Since doing this, he has observed several species on these fields for the first time since he took over the farm. He said:

"I've seen several black cock on these rush pastures; brown hare now seem to be more common and I've spotted snipe and grey partridge there too. I've also seen an increase in curlew on the meadows near the reservoir that are in the low input grassland options."

Mr Lind has also included several fields in the cattle grazing option where he has to ensure that cattle represent a minimum of 30% of livestock units on each field parcel. Jennie highlighted the importance of keeping good records:

'I'm pleased to see that Mr Lind has kept accurate records of how many cattle are grazing where and when in accordance with Natural England's guidance.' She added;

'I have come across agreement holders that didn't realise that they had to do this so I've helped them come up with a system that suits them so that they can keep the right records.'

Mr and Mrs Alderson of Howgill Grange Farm are neighbours of Mr Lind and were one of the earliest UELS schemes. They farm 297 acres of land below the moorland line with a further 90 acres of moorland. They have suckler cows and a flock of breeding ewes. They sell Mule ewes for breeding at the annual Kirkby Stephen breed sale in early September.



Mr Alderson explains the challenge of rush-cutting on the wet pastures

They have chosen options that allow them to secure enough points to meet their target and offer sufficient flexibility in terms of allowing light applications of fertiliser and cutting dates so that they can get ewe lambs away in time for the sale. They have opted for the low input and very low input grassland options along with parcels of higher, very wet ground entered into the rush pasture option.

Mrs Alderson explained that generally, they were happy with their agreement as the low input and very low input grassland (ELS and EL3) and the 'no cut' strips in the hay meadows integrate well with their farming system. Mr Alderson has always maintained his stone walls so he's very happy to repair gaps in accordance with the stone wall protection and maintenance (EB11) option.

The Aldersons have noted an increase in the number of curlews over recent years and they take care to cut round any lapwing or curlew nests that they spot in the hay meadows.

The Aldersons have ongoing concerns about the rush pasture option on some of the fields, particularly in recent wet years. Mrs Alderson described the problems that they faced...

"The ground is so wet and last autumn we tried to cut the rushes but it made so much mess that we had to give up in the end.



Walking across Howgill Grange Farm to discuss grassland prescriptions

Jennie clarified the situation, saying; “The handbook states that no more than a third of rushes must be cut each year, and not between 1st April and 31st July. The guidance notes that cutting rushes on the wettest areas may be impractical.”

She added: “I think there is enough scope within the rush pasture prescription to allow Mr and Mrs Alderson to comply fully, recognising that they might not be able to cut as much as a third of the rushes every year if it is wet. There may be scope to cut later in the year if the autumn is wet, perhaps when the ground is frozen”

She also pointed out that if this option proved impossible in a particularly wet year, they could always apply for a derogation.

Mr and Mrs Alderson were reassured by this suggestion and were happy to follow Jennie’s advice. At the end of the visit, Mrs Alderson commented how useful it had been for them:

“I’ve learnt a lot and it’s been a really interesting afternoon. I’m a lot happier with my agreement now we’ve come up with a way forward on the rush pasture”.

Jennie will now prepare reports for Mr Lind and the Aldersons. The reports will highlight the excellent work that is taking place on both farms and the environmental benefits that have resulted. Jennie will also include some recommendations for changes to management such as taking advantage of frosty ground in the winter to cut the rushes at Howgill Grange.

For more details about a best practice farm walk near you, visit [Natural England’s website](#)

Where can I find out more?

Please follow this [link](#) for the latest information on Environmental Stewardship.