**Evidence submission to the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee on Biodiversity and Ecosystems**

This evidence is submitted by Dr Ruth Little (University of Sheffield), Dr David Rose (University of Reading), Dr Judith Tsouvalis (University of Sheffield) and Professor Charlotte Burns (University of Sheffield). The authors are academics and are investigators on an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grant analysing the future prospects for [agri-environmental governance in the UK post-Brexit](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/geography/research/projects/agri-environmental-governance-post-brexit/project-outputs)[[1]](#footnote-1). The evidence is informed by the findings from this research grant and a recently completed project on identifying and engaging with ‘harder to reach’ farmers to enhance the inclusivity of ELM led by the University of Sheffield (Little) in collaboration with Reading (Rose)[[2]](#footnote-2).

This evidence concentrates primarily upon the question of how the planned Environmental Land Management scheme can maintain and improve biodiversity.

1. It is clear that the options available to land managers under the new Environmental Land Management scheme (ELM) will play a key role in maintaining and improving biodiversity. Its successful design is critical as maximising buy-in and uptake from landowners will have a profound effect upon efforts to protect biodiversity. The short and longer-term success of the scheme depends upon successful co-design that includes harder to reach farmers and landowners.
2. The history of the Common Agricultural Policy illustrates only too well that poorly designed payment schemes can lead to negative and unintended consequences, such as unsustainable intensification and increased pesticide use. These can have negative ecosystemic impacts that compromise soil health, longer-term yields (Bateman and Balmford 2018; Pe’er et al. 2014; Stewart et al. 2019) and have led to a dramatic decline in farmland birds (Hayhow et al. 2017). In contrast, well-designed schemes can deliver a range of environmental, social and economic co-benefits, such as enhancing biodiversity, improving yields, and reducing costs (e.g. see Chaplin et al. 2019).
3. The effective design of ELM relies upon policy being informed by social science that reaches beyond economic analysis to take account of a range of social and cultural variables that are critical to its success. To work effectively, the scheme relies on engagement, buy-in and participation so we need to understand the motivations and needs of farmers and land users. Low engagement in ELM and low take-up once launched is likely to compromise the promised benefits to biodiversity and the other public goods of ELM.
4. ELM scheme co-design needs to take account of farmers’ ‘productivist’ identity which may run counter to environmental goals – objectives such as maximising yield, taking pride in maintaining ‘tidy’ fields and boosting productivity can influence farmers’ receptivity to environmental practices (Riley 2016; Burton, 2012; Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012; Burton et al. 2008). Identifying ‘win-wins’ that deliver production and environmental benefits alongside recognising the importance of producing agronomic a­­s well as environmental gains are critical to promoting and maintaining buy-in to the scheme.
5. An effective advisory service with trusted advisors will aid the transition from the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) to ELM – research indicates that tailored, farm-specific advice is important in achieving buy-in and the delivery of environmental benefits (Klerkx and Proctor, 2012; Ingram and Morris, 2007). It is important to note that the knowledge, training and interpersonal skills of the advisor are important in building a productive relationship with the landowner.
6. Farmers need to be able to identify tangible benefits arising from ELM and for protecting biodiversity, such as the pollination services provided by insects and the key role played by biodiversity in promoting soil health. For these benefits to be realised there needs to be buy-in from a range of farmers as ELM is only as strong as its weakest link. For example, within a catchment one farm can do enormous damage that can undo the good work of others (e.g. one farmer polluting a river upstream will undo good management downstream). There consequently needs to be a way to engage and reach all land users and to encourage collaboration between farmers at the landscape scale. Advice, knowledge exchange, farm visits and demonstration farms will also play an important role in helping farmers to share learning about farming practices that foster the achievement of biodiversity goals (Fry and Thieme, 2019; Krzywoszynska, 2019).
7. One key foundational building block for establishing an effective ELM scheme is co-design of policy with farmers and land-users so that policy reflects their needs and they feel a stake in the successful operation of the scheme. However, whilst co-design is identified as a central plank for future policy in the Agriculture Bill, it is a concept that remains underdeveloped both in the literature and in practice and definitions and understandings of it can vary widely depending on the contexts in which they are used (Hurley et al. 2020a; Tsouvalis and Little, 2019). Successful co-design relies on trust, sharing of decision-making power between stakeholders from the start, inclusion of the full range of affected stakeholders, good facilitation, transparency of process and an understanding of how decisions have been reached and a process of listening and learning.
8. Our research highlights the importance of reaching beyond the ‘usual suspects’ in co-designing ELM. These usual suspects (e.g. NFU, RSPB, CLA, Nature Friendly Farming Network) do need to be involved, but if other land managers (less engaged farmers, foresters, gamekeepers, landowners etc.) are not included in scheme design, then the ELM scheme may fail to understand the needs of these communities leading to disengagement and limited success.
9. Our research shows that there are many types of land manager who might be harder-to-reach in the context of ELM. Reasons for this include a digital divide due to poor rural connectivity (restricting engagement with online consultation exercises and digital-by-default agri-environment schemes) with some farmers ‘having to drive to McDonalds to access wi-fi’[[3]](#footnote-3). Other key reasons include lack of trust of Defra due to past experiences; excessive scheme bureaucracy; lack of obvious benefits to engagement; and a lack of time (Hurley et.al. 2020a and 2020b; Lyon et.al. 2020).

**Recommendations**:

1. Successful ELM co-design that can enhance biodiversity should: (a) take account of the existing motivations and priorities of landowners (i.e. starting where they are) and identifying agronomic-environmental ‘win-wins’ to encourage early buy-in to ELM; (b) effectively apply principles and practices of co-design, focusing on trust and transparency of the process and outcomes; (c) reach out beyond the usual suspects to include harder to reach stakeholders in ELM; (d) make provision for biodiversity-tailored advice, farm visits, demonstration farms, and other knowledge-exchange activities that will support the achievement of biodiversity goals.
2. ELM engagement exercises should take place in locales and at times that suit farmers; provide simple, free and accessible advice; engage land managers through trusted intermediaries; invest in rural connectivity, digital skills, and provide options for those without online access; pay land managers on time once ELM starts; ensure that ELM benefits a range of land managers; provide attractive incentives to participate; provide assistance for land managers to transition away from the Basic Payment Scheme towards ELM.
3. Determining the success of the scheme will rely upon effective and robust monitoring. Distributional analysis should be conducted to ascertain the social, economic and ecological outcomes of (non-)participation across different areas of the country.

**Conclusion**:

1. Delivering on the UK’s biodiversity targets requires a well-designed environmental land management payment scheme that engages farmers and landowners so that they can realise the objectives of the new scheme. Effective co-design and widespread engagement and participation are central to the successful delivery of the scheme, which is in turn a key foundation to the successful enhancement of biodiversity.

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1. See Project website: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/geography/research/projects/agri-environmental-governance-post-brexit/project-outputs> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Contributors to this project were Jess Lyon, Dr Paul Hurley and Dr Jilly Hall [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.farminguk.com/news/brexit-red-tape-and-digital-divide-threatens-success-of-elm-scheme_55931.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)