

Weald Meadows Group -

Informing a High Weald Nature Recovery Area (grassland)



Summary of recommendations

Data, monitoring and evaluation

- Acknowledge the complexity of the High Weald's grasslands.
- Prioritise a baseline habitat survey and grassland inventory.
- Use bespoke rapid assessment & monitoring templates in the High Weald.
- Set bespoke targets for High Weald grasslands acknowledging their complexity.
- Set realistic expectations for grassland outcomes.
- Set realistic expectations for land managers for grassland monitoring and evaluation.
- Develop a clearer system for categorising and adding grassland habitat data to local databases.
- Use a bespoke High Weald Habitat Network targeting model as a basis for an NRA.
- Agree an approach to the overlap between potential woodland and grassland enhancement zones.
- Encourage the new ELMS scheme to develop a mechanism that enables landowners to submit sightings of grassland indicator species.

Knowledge transfer and collaborative working

- Acknowledge the variety of land managers and tailor incentives to their motivations and needs.
- Create a formal Meadows Network (a themed farm cluster) to inspire and enable a NRA.
- Set up mechanisms that 'introduce' new landowners to their meadows before harm is done.
- Facilitate relationships and agreements between non-farming landowners and new farming entrants.
- Recognise the need for ongoing support to achieve grassland restoration success.
- Enable the creation of Meadow Management Plans, particularly for small sites ineligible for CS, to provide confidence in investment.
- Develop a more comprehensive training programme through collaborative planning and delivery.
- Build the capacity of landowners/managers to provide peer-to-peer advice.
- Refresh and update the existing Weald Meadows guidance, including more videos.
- Invest in analysing, promoting and sharing landscape-scale guidance and data in a way that is practical and empowering.
- Develop a mechanism for collaborative recording and sharing of site-based knowledge.
- Enable local farmers/landowners to work together to purchase and share equipment for the management of small sites.

Environmental Land Management Scheme

- ELMS should be a single delivery scheme including both production and environmental measures.
- ELMS in the High Weald must be designed for the High Weald.
- ELMS must provide different arrangements and payment models for different entrants.
- ELMS should have simple procedures for making applications, monitoring of progress and results, and in processing payments.
- ELMS should retain the 'handbook' approach of current Stewardship schemes, but allow it to be used in two ways.

- The 'price list/ready reckoner' proposed for self-assessment of an ELM contract value should have payment rates that reward distinct levels of costs through different phases.
- ELMS should promote and reward more productive options for grassland that have wildlife benefit.

Restoration approaches

- Provide support for a thriving livestock sector to ensure retention of the infrastructure that is needed to maintain and manage a national important pastoral landscape.
- Explore regenerative agriculture techniques as a mechanism for creating high value grasslands.
- Increase the impact and financial sustainability of the Weald Native Origin Seed operation, increasing demand while reducing operating costs.
- Build capacity for the effective use of direct transfer techniques in grassland restoration.
- Raise awareness and demand for best practice in seed sourcing, harvesting and use.

Landscape-scale working (observations from facilitating a Farm Cluster)

- Training events need to be tailored to the range of land managers in the High Weald; the motivations and needs of a non-farming owner of small site is very different to those of a commercial manager.
- Landowners relate to their holding and neighbouring holdings as 'their landscape'. They find it harder to relate to a bigger landscape area in a practical way.
- Engagement on a one-to-one basis, as well as one-to-many is needed to help landowners grasp the concept of landscape-scale working.
- Collaborative working doesn't come naturally to land managers. Very few will 'take the lead' on collaborative activity. Most don't have the time or don't feel there is enough in it for them to justify the time.
- Maps are a tool for explaining landscape-scale concepts, but not everyone is comfortable with maps.
- Landowners feel that altering or tailoring Countryside Stewardship (CS) agreements to achieve landscape-scale connectivity aspirations is currently too hard.
- CS invests in site-specific works and the CS Stewardship Facilitation Fund invests in training; neither invest in the projects landowners wish to collaborate on, for example purchasing equipment to manage small sites.
- Land managers find it easier to collaborate around projects that may benefit commercial farming e.g. soil health and deer control.
- 'Hard to reach' landowners i.e. those who don't want to engage with CS, or their neighbours generally, are perceived to be the main barrier to achieving connectivity by other landowners.
- Building strong relationships between Cluster members (which can take time) is a precursor to planning and delivering landscape-scale work.
- Land managers like the Cluster concept, are keen to be members and value the opportunity to meet and discuss management issues with a range of other land managers.

Managing road verges for biodiversity

- Support the enhancement of verges, especially verges in new developments, with local provenance grassland species.
- Identify ecologically-rich historic routeways in biodiversity and green infrastructure planning.g
- Prioritise the appropriate management of ecologically-rich road verges in highway management and avoid damaging operations such as 'chip and smother'.
- Provide ecological training for highway management engineers and contractors to ensure all roadside verges are managed sensitively for biodiversity.

- Encourage investment in the identification of ecologically rich roadside verges, including community schemes to identify ecologically-rich roadside verges, and enhance others with local provenance wild grassland species.
- Avoid vehicular traffic on sensitive routeway verges, particularly when the ground is wet.
- Undertake sensitive management of old coppice on routeway banks.
- Maintain routeway verges in their 'natural state' and refrain from planting non-native species along routeways.
- Develop an agreement or code of practice for the management and maintenance of all road verges.
- Produce work specifications for contractors working on verges to cover working techniques, environmental impact assessment, mitigation and reinstatement.
- Encourage the incorporation of habitat restoration into new road building and road widening schemes wherever feasible.

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31 March 2019