

## Current practices across the EU27

*This series of informative fiches aim to present, in summary, examples of practices and approaches that EU Member States and Regions have put in place in order to implement their Rural Development Programmes in the current period. These examples want to contribute to the understanding of what has worked well and less well in the delivery of the 2007-2013 RDPs and as far as possible, draw lessons in the view of future improvement of the programmes.*

### Thorney Farmland Bird Friendly Zone: joined up delivery of agri-environment - the United Kingdom (England)



#### Needs addressed

The Thorney Farmland Bird Friendly Zone (TFBFZ) was set up as part of the RSPB Fens Futurescape initiative, a much wider initiative which aims to enhance the populations of farmland birds across the Fen landscape in the East of England. The aim of the TFBFZ is to produce a contiguous area of land which is being managed to benefit wildlife and create a wildlife-rich countryside for the local community to value, enjoy and take pride in. The idea for the TFBFZ was the inspiration of the local RSPB project officer and local farmers after discussions about how to best increase the numbers of farmland birds and other wildlife in the area using the options available within the Environmental Stewardship scheme (the agri-environment scheme operating in England) –

both Entry Level and Higher Level Stewardship. The area is considered to be a nationally important farmland bird hotspot for arable farmland birds and so is a priority for entry into the higher tier part of the scheme.

Environmental Stewardship is the agri-environment scheme that operates in England. It has two main elements. Entry Level Stewardship (also organic ELS and Uplands ELS) which is open to all farmers as long as they can meet the scheme requirements. Higher Level Stewardship is a discretionary scheme which is targeted to particular areas where there is a priority for action. Targeting statements are available for these areas. High quality, multi-objective applications may also be considered from areas outside the target areas if they address a pre-determined set of priority themes.

**Keywords:** Biodiversity, farmland birds, agri-environment, collective approaches

**EU Member State:** the United Kingdom (England)

**Specific Location:** Area surrounding the village of Thorney, near Peterborough, Cambridgeshire (part of the Fens)

**Implementing entities:** Thorney Farmers' Group, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Natural England, Peterborough City Council

**RDP Measure and budget:** 214 – Agri-environment  
Approximately €200 000 across the whole area for agri-environment agreements for 17 farmers involved (the budget is an estimate based on the average agreement value).

**Implementation Period:** From January 2012—ongoing



#### Key elements of the approach

The Thorney Farmland Bird Friendly Zone has brought together a group of farmers to implement an optimal mix of agri-environment options for the benefit of farmland birds across a contiguous area of mainly arable farmland in Cambridgeshire.



#### Objective

The objective of the initiative is to encourage farmers within the Thorney Farmland Bird Friendly Zone to work in partnership to create a large area of wildlife friendly habitat to improve the conservation prospects of, in particular, six range-restricted farmland bird species: corn bunting, tree sparrow, turtle dove, lapwing, grey partridge and yellow wagtail, as well as other species over 220 square kilometres of farmland.

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### Main steps and features of the initiative or approach

- The farmers who are participating in the project (17 to date), selected key Entry Level and Higher Level Environmental Stewardship Scheme land management options to benefit farmland birds – for example unharvested crops to feed birds over the winter, fallows and skylark plots providing in-field nesting habitat, and nectar rich plots supplying insect rich areas.
- Each farmer is asked to enter between 7-10 per cent of their arable land under options that form part of the 'Farmland Bird Package', which is based on evidence that suggests that this level of provision of this selection of management actions will, if rolled out across the landscape, reverse the decline of farmland birds.
- Farmers negotiate individual agri-environment agreements, but all of those within the area are developed with input from an RSPB adviser, who provides advice on the most appropriate location of individual options and provides follow-up advice on best practice management for the targeted species. This ensures that the land management options and the needs of wildlife are linked across the landscape and at the required scale.



### Main results and benefits

- Over the past 18 months more farmers have joined the initiative and are able to access payments via the discretionary, targeted and more demanding Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme, for which they would not have been eligible without working together.
- The initiative now covers about 7,000 ha of mostly intensively managed farmland and involves 17 farmers (as at September 2013). All of these farmers have agreed to put between 7 and 10% of their arable land into appropriate ES options, and the project has helped a number of them to qualify for HLS.
- The effects of the management are being monitored by RSPB, however the baseline has proved difficult to quantify as the initiative has evolved, with more farmers and land coming on board over time. The RSPB surveyed the area in 2011 and plan to revisit these surveys in 2014, in order to provide some comparable data. Casual monitoring suggests considerable increases in farmland bird numbers (e.g. three-fold increase in corn buntings and two-fold increase in grey partridge).
- The group has also tried hard to engage the local community in their work and ran a very successful Open Farm Sunday event this year. The farmers believe that this project has helped them being recognized and more appreciated by the rest of the community.



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### Lessons learnt

- There have been many challenges in developing the TFBFZ. A major initial challenge was how to involve a sufficient number of farmers. Although the initiative has been driven by a number of key local farmers, farmers were at first sceptical about the merits of agri-environment schemes and the intentions of the RSPB and did not want to participate. Using practical examples of what is possible and other farmers' success stories encouraged farmers from Thorney to change their viewpoint. Key to the implementation has been the farmers themselves, particularly the original group of farmers who were enthused by the idea and acted as advocates to engage others within the local area and helped to sell the merits of entering into Environmental Stewardship. The group dynamics are as important to the success of a project as ensuring the right options are chosen and implemented in the right locations. For example, in this case, the farmer peer group's members pressure on each other to abide by the rules, and to manage their habitats well. The importance of having a key farmer(s) to drive innovative approaches forward and encourage buy-in from other farmers has been key to the initiative's success.
- Another challenge has been the availability of funds for agri-environment and persuading the delivery body (Natural England) that this area and these farms deserve funding via the targeted and discretionary HLS scheme. The HLS is a discretionary scheme, with limited funding allocated to it and the TFBFZ is not within an official target area for the scheme. However, the zone does include a number of key arable farmland bird species whose decline is a priority to halt. As such, they can apply for funding under HLS, but applications are very competitive due to the limited funding available.



### Additional sources of information

- Information on the Environmental Stewardship Scheme can be found at: <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/farming/funding/es/>
- Information on the Fens Futurescape Initiative: [https://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/fens\\_tcm9-275951.pdf](https://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/fens_tcm9-275951.pdf)
- News piece from launch of the initiative: <http://www.rspb.org.uk/news/300731-rspb-and-farmers-launch-new-landscapescale-conservation-project-for-wildlife-and-local-communities>