



PARTRIDGE - socio-economic aspects

Background

The PARTRIDGE project is an Interreg North Sea Region project, running from 2016 to 2023, with 12 European partners in six participating countries (Belgium-Flanders, Denmark, England, the Netherlands, Germany-Lower Saxony, and Scotland). The GWCT is the lead partner of PARTRIDGE. The project seeks to provide practical solutions for the countries within the North Sea Region to help them achieve their 2030 Biodiversity Targets on arable farmland. A key element of this is the need to improve the existing national Agri-Environment (AE) schemes and widen their uptake by farmers.

How to improve the take up and implementation of Agri-Environment (AE) schemes?

This question occupies the minds of many of us seeking to improve the conservation of farmland wildlife. As part of the PARTRIDGE project we have undertaken face-to-face interviews and surveyed farmers and stakeholders online across the North Sea Region (Belgium, Denmark, England, Germany, the Netherlands and Scotland) to help answer this question. This has revealed some similar experiences and suggestions for improvements of AE schemes across the area – resulting in broad recommendations to help increase the number of farmers involved and improve the way schemes are implemented. It has also highlighted differences between countries. We highlight both here.

Our initial interviews with farmers (both those who had AE schemes and those who did not – eight in each country) and other stakeholders (including policymakers, farming representatives, researchers – seven in each country) took place in autumn/winter of 2018 into 2019. Across all countries farmers indicated a desire for targeted advice that was free to them and for the results of AE schemes (more flora and fauna) to be monitored. A need for greater flexibility was mentioned by interviewees across all countries. Increased flexibility was seen in a desire for the simplification of the process of applying to join a scheme and in inspections, as well as in management of AE options (timing of planting, weather-related issues, seed mixtures, length of agreements). Support for farmers to work together, such as through Farmer Clusters in England or in collectives, as in the Netherlands, was found across all five countries.

Two big issues for farmers in the UK at that time, but not in other countries, were concerns about receiving payments (reflecting the problems the Rural Payments Agency was dealing with at the time of the interviews) and a real feeling of anxiety about the effects of Brexit – which was on the horizon but with little detail on how it was going to affect farmers at the time of the interviews.

In spring 2021 we followed up our interviews with an online survey. The survey questions were designed to explore more fully what our interviewees told us in 2018/2019 and compare how farmers with an AE scheme differed to those without one, across five countries (total of 886 respondents, excluding Denmark as it did not, at the time, have an AE scheme). We had 199 respondents from England and 62 from Scotland. The goal was to find practical ways for those designing AE schemes to improve scheme uptake and effectiveness. We considered aspects of what we found in our interviews: advice and who should pay for it, details of options directed towards arable farmland that are offered through AE schemes (most popular, how to improve, other options of interest) and payment levels.

Our respondents (both those in and not yet in schemes) were mainly motivated by an interest in wanting to help nature and the environment – acknowledging this will go a long way to encouraging involvement in AE schemes. Overall, there were few differences between farmers with and without AE schemes across all countries. These were:

1. The length of AE scheme agreements they preferred – those without AE schemes preferred shorter agreements (see Figure 1). This was less pronounced in England and Scotland where respondents without AE schemes were equally divided between annual, short (less than five years) and medium-length contracts (five-10 years). Those in AE schemes preferred contracts of medium length (England 44%, Scotland 60%).
2. Whether farmers are prepared to pay for advice – although a majority of both those with and without AE schemes thought advice should be funded by the Government, a significant proportion of those with AE schemes were open to funding it themselves. This was especially the case for over half the respondents in schemes in England and Scotland.
3. How often they wanted advice – both groups thought advice was needed when starting a scheme but those with AE schemes wanted advice more often. In England and Scotland over 50% of our respondents preferred to get advice when they requested it.

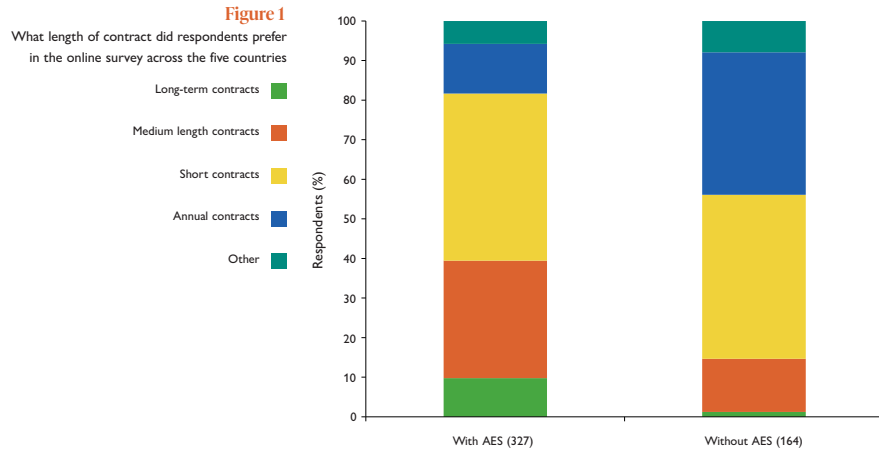
Key findings

- Farmers report a lack of flexibility. This current inflexibility extends to how AE options are managed, the types of options available in schemes and lengths of scheme agreements.
- Shorter, more flexible schemes will encourage those without the experience of an AE scheme to join one. Access to advice, with Governmental funding for this, is important, though there is some evidence that farmers in the UK are prepared to pay for this advice.
- Increasing payment levels would help expand AE scheme participation but was not the only consideration. We asked specifically about the level of payment for Wild Bird Seed Mixes. A third of respondents thought these were too low. In Scotland and England farmers suggested an increase of 25-34% in the level of payment.

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All our respondents were motivated by an interest in wanting to help nature and the environment.
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- Who should pay for AE schemes? Again, a majority of both those with and without AE schemes thought funding for them should come from the Government. However, there was a significant proportion of those with AE schemes who thought private funding (carbon or biodiversity offsetting) could be a source of funding for schemes. This was especially the case in England, where 33% of those not in a scheme and 59% of those in a scheme thought private sources could provide funding.
- Flexibility in the way AE options are managed – both groups thought that there should be more flexibility in how AE options are managed. For those not in AE schemes, more were concerned about flexibility in aspects of agricultural management (herbicide use, manure spreading, etc.) than those in AE schemes. Management flexibility can raise concerns, however, as this shouldn't weaken the biodiversity impacts of AE options. Examples of this would be earlier mowing that destroys nests of ground-nesting birds, or the planting of seed mixtures chosen by the farmers

Respondents wanted advice more often, not just when starting a scheme.
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themselves, resulting in measures that do not maximise the habitat needs for the targeted wildlife. Seed mixtures should therefore be designed by experts, based on the results of research. There should be scope for farmer involvement.

Farmers across all countries wanted the results of AE schemes to be monitored.
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We asked respondents with AE schemes what other options they were interested in undertaking and asked those without AE schemes what options they would select if they were to join an AE scheme. These lists were similar, with floristically-enhanced grass margins, permanent wildflower cover, and supplementary overwintering food the most selected by both groups. Most of our respondents expressed an interest in predation control as a possible option, whether through habitat changes or through lethal, legal means – 85% of respondents in England and 80% in Scotland.

Regarding payment levels, we asked whether the level of payment for wild bird seed mix (£550/ha to £650/ha at the time of the survey) was enough. A subset of around a third of farmers thought this level was too low. We asked what payment level would be more accurate. Across all countries, they suggested payment increases of 18% to 29%, on average. In England respondents suggested an increase of 34% and 25% in Scotland.

Recommendations

To recruit those not currently in an AE scheme, we recommend that there should be an option for shorter contracts – of one or two years in duration, which allow farmers to experience being in an AE scheme. These schemes could include options with slightly less onerous requirements in terms of agricultural management conditions (restrictions on herbicides, manure, fertiliser use), although care needs to be taken to ensure that these options still provide for the environment. It is also important to provide free, targeted Government-paid advice and ensure fair payment levels.

To encourage enhanced engagement with AE schemes for existing participants, targeted Government-paid advice, longer contracts (five to 10 years), more options (including support for predation control), private sector funding, higher payments, addressing problems, building on experience and public recognition are important.

Reports on both the face-to-face interviews and the online survey can be found on the PARTRIDGE output library northsearegion.eu/partridge/output/library/.



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