



Devon Hedge Group submission to the Environmental Audit Committee inquiry into the future of the natural environment in the light of the EU referendum.

1. Summary

The Devon Hedge Group advises that:

- 1) Current basic protection measures afforded to hedges through domestic legislation (e.g. the Hedgerows Regulations) and cross compliance should be maintained.**
 - 2) A new agri-environment scheme should be developed with a strong hedge component which is better resourced, simpler and more cost-effective than Countryside Stewardship, and which fully recognise the wide range of public goods delivered by hedges.**
 - 3) Before rewilding is promoted in any area, careful consideration should be given to the likely impact on biodiversity, landscape character and especially social factors. Rewilding should never be a proxy for land abandonment which would be fundamentally damaging.**
2. The Devon Hedge Group draws together a wide range of organisations and individuals wishing to secure a healthy future for Devon's hedges. Members include local government, farming organisations and conservation bodies. We promote the many benefits of hedges, advise on management and provide training. The group was formed in 1994.
 3. Hedges are vital for the continued existence of much of the wildlife currently found on farmland throughout Devon, as with much of the rest of the UK. They provide many important ecosystem services, including improving water quality, reducing flood risk, conserving soil, improving crop pollination, reducing crop pests and providing shelter for livestock and crops. They define the county's lowland landscape and as such are important to the local tourism economy. They are also of great historical and cultural significance. Most of the benefits are delivered to society as a whole rather than to individual farm businesses. The Devon Hedge Group believes it is proper and right that hedge management (which is often expensive) should be financially supported by public funding for the public and environmental good.
 4. At a basic level, cross compliance requirements relating to hedgerows have been effective in ensuring the Hedgerows Regulations and Felling Licence provisions in England and Wales are implemented, reducing the rate of hedgerow removal and hedgerow tree loss. The requirement for hedgerow protection zones (i.e. no fertilizers or pesticides within 2m of the centre of a hedgerow) and no hedgerow trimming between 1 March and 31 August have been beneficial both for the health of hedges themselves and for biodiversity. The Devon Hedge Group strongly advises that similar requirements, linked with public support for agriculture, should continue after we leave the EU. Uncritical adherence to deregulation or

market-led approaches are likely to lead to substantial damage to hedges and hedge networks, and to a long term loss of valuable natural capital.

5. Good, resilient, wildlife-friendly hedge management is costly, especially essential activities such as hedge laying, new planting and bank maintenance. Over recent decades agri-environment schemes have been vital in enabling many farmers to look after their hedges - mainly for the benefit of society as a whole, through enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem service delivery, rather than for the farmers themselves. The Devon Hedge Group advises that continued and indeed increased support for hedges under agri-environment schemes after the UK leaves the EU is of paramount importance to ensuring their continued existence and good health.
6. We urge that the opportunity should be taken to simplify agri-environment schemes (e.g. Countryside Stewardship) and make their delivery more outcome-focused. The unintended but nevertheless real trend over successive schemes has been to make them more complicated, exacting and inflexible, with the result that they have been less attractive to farmers and less cost effective. Future schemes should be tailored to the assets and needs of particular geographic areas.
7. The Devon Hedge Group is deeply concerned that any withdrawal of support payments for farmers, especially those of marginal land such as on and around Dartmoor and Exmoor, will lead either to alternative land use practices which are environmentally damaging or to land abandonment. Land abandonment in particular will cause severe damage to farming communities and the loss of land management skills developed over centuries. This is likely to be irreversible and would be highly regrettable. It will also lead to a decline in the historical and cultural value of Devon's hedges, and to a drastic change in landscape character and appearance which many will consider undesirable.
8. Many of the societal benefits delivered by hedges and their associated ditches and margins may continue to be delivered within rewilding schemes, but only if these schemes are managed and appropriately placed. Landscapes that have a wide mix of different hedgerow types and structures, together with other landscape features, are optimal for biodiversity. For example, dense shrubby hedges, as can be created by trimming, are important for many nesting birds, small mammals and invertebrates. Any proposals for rewilding must therefore recognise that management intervention is necessary to maintain diversity, as well as for social and environmental continuity. Hedges should be functioning structures, continuing to benefit both farmer and the public, and not become relict features.
9. Good advice should go hand in hand with regulation and financial incentive. An overwhelming body of evidence has demonstrated that appropriately channelled and well resourced advice is essential to achieving lasting positive changes in land management, including hedge management.

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