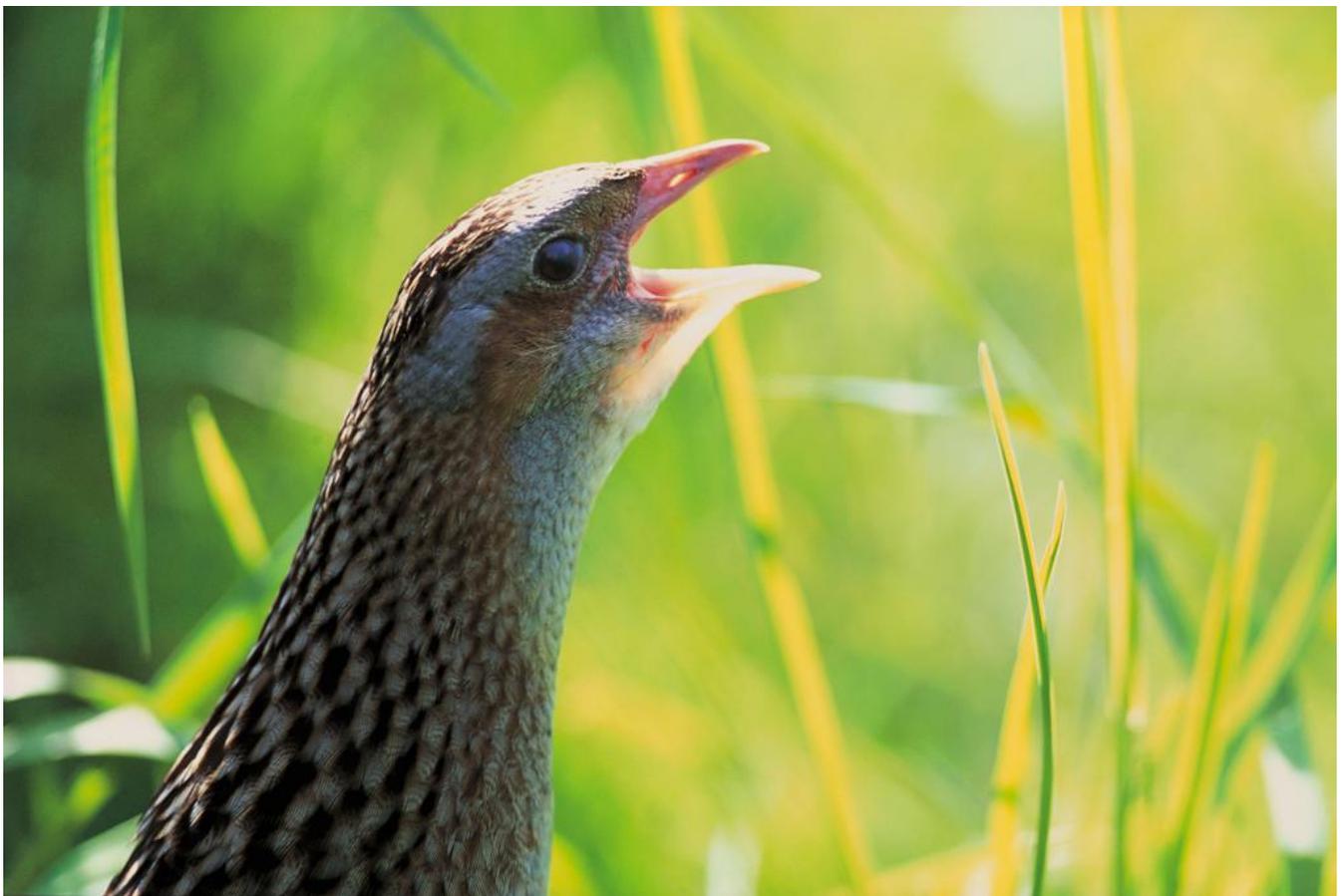




**An Assessment of the Likely Effectiveness of the Scotland Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 in Delivering for the Environment**



**Summary Report**

**November 2011**

*RSPB Scotland has undertaken an assessment of the likely effectiveness of the Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP) 2007-2013 in delivering for the environment.* This assessment was carried out in the form of a six-month review project starting in December 2010. The following is a summary of this work, its results and implications, put together for the information of interested and contributing parties. This summary report is accompanied by a full set of maps produced as part of the project. Scheme data contained within this summary report and presented in the supplementary information was extracted in February/March 2011.

This summary report does not represent an RSPB Scotland policy position on the next SRDP but will be used to inform the RSPB's policy position as it is developed.

RSPB Scotland wishes to extend many thanks to all interviewees for giving willingly and generously of their time and expertise and to Scottish Government for providing scheme data for analysis.

RSPB Scotland would welcome comments, feed back and discussion from interested parties on any of the issues raised in this review. Please contact Amy Corrigan on [amy.corrigan@rspb.org.uk](mailto:amy.corrigan@rspb.org.uk) or 0131 317 4146

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## List of Acronyms

SRDP	Scotland Rural Development Programme
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
MTE	Mid-Term Evaluation
RP	Rural Priorities
LMOs	Land Managers Options
CCAGS	Crofting Counties Agricultural Grant Scheme
LFASS	Less Favoured Area Support Scheme
RPACs	Regional Proposal Assessment Committees
SAC	Scottish Agricultural College
NFUS	National Farmers Union Scotland
HIE	Highlands and Islands Enterprise
SCF	Scottish Crofting Federation
SEPA	Scottish Environment Protection Agency
FCS	Forestry Commission Scotland
SNH	Scottish Natural Heritage
NTS	National Trust Scotland
WTS	Woodland Trust Scotland
BCT	Bumblebee Conservation Trust
BC	Butterfly Conservation
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
HNV	High Nature Value (farming)
EU	European Union
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
BAP	Biodiversity Action Plan

## **Executive Summary**

The Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP) is the main source of funding to incentivise land management for the benefit of species, habitats and the wider environment across Scotland. Given its importance, this review set out to generate an understanding of what the programme has supported since it began, the distribution of support, what it is likely to deliver, and why.

This review found that certain areas of Scotland consistently receive a greater proportion of rural development funds, namely Grampian, the North East peninsular and Northern Isles and the lowland regions toward the Scottish border. Within both Rural Priorities (RP) and Land Managers Options (LMOs), the options with highest committed spend tend to be those options that are easily implemented and fit well with the existing farm business. A range of stakeholders have serious concerns that the high committed spend options in Axis 2 are unlikely to deliver the environmental outcomes that they should, and could, due to the way they are being implemented.

The requirements for effective option delivery were found to be: targeted location (holding and landscape scale); targeted management (tailoring options to desired outcomes); correct scale (holding and landscape); an engaged land manager; after-care; and, most importantly, good advice. It was a widely held view that although there is a good range of options available within RP (less so within LMOs), the requirements for good option implementation are not being met and therefore options have a reduced chance of being effective on the ground.

A wide range of barriers to effective environmental delivery through the RP scheme were found but, despite the many problems, it is considered that the RP scheme can deliver environmental benefits. This is most likely to be achieved where: it is used proactively; it is used in targeted, large scale areas for target species and habitats; it is delivered with adequate support on the ground to advise on the development of the agreements; and, a partnership approach is taken or good working relationships exist between the agents, specialist NGOs, case officers and land owners.

Three key areas for intervention were identified, including: the role, time resources, skills and autonomy of case officers; scheme regionalisation and targeting; and, the approach to advice. By tackling these three issues it should be possible to significantly improve the effectiveness of the RP scheme in achieving environmental objectives.

The project concluded that it is unlikely the current SRDP will be delivering a satisfactory level of environmental protection and enhancement. The lack of targeting in the RP scheme is likely to lead to a scattered and diluted environmental benefit. The apparent failure of other key schemes within the

programme to adequately deliver environmental benefits, particularly the Less Favoured Area Support Scheme (LFASS) and LMOs, compound the problems with the RP scheme.

## 1. Introduction

The Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP) is a programme of economic, environmental and social measures, worth, at the time this project commenced, £1.5 billion. The SRDP has explicit objectives to improve the environment and countryside of Scotland by supporting land management. It is the main source of funding for delivering the land management practices desired by RSPB Scotland and other organisations for species and habitat protection and enhancement.

RSPB Scotland seeks funding through the SRDP to carry out specific habitat management on its own reserves and considers the SRDP to be a key means of influencing land use across rural Scotland. The SRDP encourages land managers to adopt or continue practices that will be of benefit to priority Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) species and habitats as well as helping to address wider environmental issues such as diffuse pollution and climate change. The effective distribution of funds through the SRDP and the translation of these funds into meaningful outcomes at a holding level is therefore essential to meeting biodiversity commitments and aspirations across the country.

The current SRDP (2007-2013) is an ambitious programme in many ways but since it began, elements of the programme have been heavily criticised by users and administrators for being overly complex and bureaucratic, to the point of discouraging entry and undermining the quality of management agreements reached. As such, serious concerns have arisen amongst the conservation community in particular as to the programme's ability to deliver for the environment.

### 1.1 Purpose

This project set out to develop an understanding of the likely effectiveness of the Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP) in delivering for the environment. The work was prompted by growing concerns about the implementation of the SRDP and the lack of any ecological monitoring data by which to determine its performance. The *specific project objectives* were:

1. To determine how much money has been spent, on what, and where since the start of the SRDP;
2. To determine which options and combinations of options are effective in terms of environmental delivery, specifically for species and habitats of RSPB concern (also BAP species and habitats), and;
3. To identify the barriers to uptake and effectiveness of schemes and options.

## **1.2 Approach**

*The review drew on both quantitative scheme data supplied by Scottish Government and qualitative stakeholder views of the programme obtained primarily through semi-structured interviews, in order to derive a 'best guess' understanding of the environmental outcomes of the programme.* The quantitative data was used to identify what environmental management activities have been supported by the programme to date and where. The qualitative data was used to identify where this spend was likely to be generating the desired outcomes on the ground, and where it was not, and to develop an understanding of the reasons for this.

### **1.2.1 Scheme data**

Quantitative scheme data was taken from existing sources (SRDP website<sup>1</sup>, Mid-Term Evaluation<sup>2</sup> (MTE)) where this was sufficient for the purposes of the review. Where existing available information was insufficient to answer review questions then it was requested from Scottish Government. In order to adhere to the Data Protection Act and the European Court of Justice ruling which prevents the publication of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) payments to "natural persons" (individuals) the Scottish Government data came with a confidentiality agreement. This agreement prohibits publication of any data from which an individual might be identified. There are also small inconsistencies in the way differing scheme data and differing aspects of same scheme data are recorded and so were provided. This all limits the way data can be presented but does not affect the integrity and legitimacy of the data and displays created from it.

### **1.2.2 Stakeholder views**

Stakeholder views were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews that were recorded, transcribed and coded. The primary objective of the stakeholder interviews was to collate and rationalise the substantial experience and expertise of RSPB staff involved with the SRDP and thereby form a reliable evidence base on which conclusions about the SRDP and its likely effectiveness could be based. They were designed to confirm the issues with SRDP that are of relevance to environmental objectives and begin establishing an understanding of the consequences for environmental outcomes. Therefore RSPB staff made up the majority of interviewees. However, it was also considered important to check alignment of RSPB views with other SRDP stakeholder groups as a means to validate, or otherwise, conclusions drawn as well as to gain an understanding of alternate perspectives. To achieve this, representatives from a range of other stakeholder groups were also interviewed or, where an interview could not be arranged, were asked to respond to several key open questions in writing.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://scotland.gov.uk/Topics/farmingrural/SRDP>

<sup>2</sup> MTE, 2010. Mid Term Evaluation of Scotland Rural Development Programme. Report for Scottish Government. Rural Development Company Ltd, Ekos, P&L Cook and Partners & The Macaulay Institute, December 2010.

The stakeholder groups interviewed, further to the RSPB, were:

- **Consultants** (Scottish Agricultural College (SAC) and others); as the main writers of RP applications in particular
- **Administrators** (Case Officers, Regional Programme Assessment Committees (RPACs)); as the assessors and decision makers for RP. All interviewees were Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) staff.
- **Representative bodies** (National Farmers Union for Scotland (NFUS), Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), Scottish Crofting Federation (SCF)); in lieu of input from the end users of SRDP themselves (land managers), for which there was not sufficient time in this project, their respective representative bodies were considered an appropriate substitute
- **Government agencies** (Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA), Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS), SNH (case officers and RPAC members)); as statutory bodies with their own requirements of the SRDP
- **Other interested NGOs** (National Trust Scotland (NTS), Woodland Trust Scotland (WTS), Bumblebee Conservation Trust (BCT), Butterfly Conservation (BC)); as other NGOs with their own expectations of the SRDP

Questions asked for stakeholder views across a range of themes including the cohesiveness of the SRDP as a whole, the integrated approach taken to the RP and LMO schemes, the regionalisation of RP and the usefulness and implementation of options.

Responses were collected from a total of 58 SRDP stakeholders. This is a substantial number of responses for this type of analysis, making it possible to draw reliable, generic conclusions from personal opinions.

### **1.2.3 Secondary data**

Other sources of data were used to support the scheme data and stakeholder views. These secondary data sources were:

- Case study examples of RP schemes
- Review of schemes outwith SRDP in crofting areas
- Literature review
- Internal RSPB SRDP review and planning workshop

## 2. Results

The results of the review are extensive, containing large amounts of spatially represented scheme data and categorised stakeholder perspectives. This section draws out key aspects of the results, by project objective, and presents examples of the type of information on which conclusions are based.

### 2.1 Results: Objective 1

*Examination of funding allocation to the differing SRDP schemes (as presented in Table 1) shows clearly that the RP scheme is the most significant scheme within the SRDP (given that legacy schemes are not open to new applicants and spend on them will drop off as agreements draw to an end) and has considerable scope for delivering environmental benefits.* It is also clear that the LFASS continues to take up a significant proportion of the budget. RSPB Scotland's view is that this scheme does not, and can not in its current form, deliver significant environmental benefits even though its objectives are to do so. This view is supported by stakeholder responses; *very few stakeholders realise that LFASS is part of the SRDP and rather see it as a Pillar 1 mechanism – a form of income support rather than an environmental scheme - because of its similarity to direct payments.*

*Stakeholder responses indicate that other SRDP schemes have some potential for delivering environmental benefits but are not currently considered to be doing so.* This includes the most obvious broad and shallow elements of the programme, in LFASS and LMOs, but also less well funded schemes including Leader and Crofting Counties Agricultural Grant Scheme (CCAGS).

**Table 1. Total Estimated SRDP Spend from 2007 to February 2011**

Scheme	Committed Spend (£ 000)	Percentage of Total SRDP Spend (%)
RP	392100	35.7
LMOs	15756	1.4
LFASS	180736	16.5
Legacy Schemes	133907	42.1
CCAGS	978	0.09
CF	1246	0.11
FPMC	23078	2.1
SDS	1751	0.2
Leader	19339	1.8

Data sources vary, MTE & Scottish Government figures, for legacy schemes it is remaining spend at Feb 2011 multiplied by 4 to give an estimate plus Land Management Contract Menu Scheme for 2009 multiplied by 4 to give an estimate.

*Spatial distribution of SRDP funds (as far as was possible to see) shows that certain areas of Scotland, namely Grampian, the North East peninsular and Northern Isles and the lowland regions toward the border, consistently receive a greater proportion of rural development funding than others, in particular the Highland area and Western Isles.* See for example the total committed RP Axis 2 spend map, total committed LMO Axis 2 spend map and RSS remaining spend map (pages 15, 50, and 60 respectively of the supplementary information document). To a certain extent, although not exclusively, high spend areas are consistent with the areas of greatest economic land value and symptomatic of the way in which payments are calculated. *A key concern is that high rural development spend distribution does not match the High Nature Value (HNV) utilisable agricultural area*, as mapped in the recently produced *Developing High Nature Value Farming and Forestry Indicators for the Scotland Rural Development Programme* report<sup>3</sup>. This confirms significant and long standing questions about the purpose and associated underlying logic of rural development funding allocation.

LMOs appear to be performing as expected for a broad and shallow scheme in terms of allocation of funds, and are paying out relatively small amounts of money across the whole of Scotland (page 48 of the supplementary information document). In contrast, the narrow and deep elements of the programme, RP and the Legacy schemes, are paying large sums of money (particularly RP) to a more restricted area (pages 13 and 59 respectively of the supplementary information document). Table 2 shows committed spend for RP and LMOs and the number of cases approved since the SRDP began.

**Table 2. Comparing RP and LMO Committed Spend and Number of Cases 2007 until February 2011**

		Axis 1	Axis 2	Axis 3	Total
<b>RP</b>	Committed Spend (£ 000)	98608	243942	49550	392,100
	Percentage of Total	25	62	13	100
	Approved Cases				5,454
<b>LMO</b>	Committed Spend (£ 000)	3482	6195	539	10,216
	Percentage of Total	34	61	5	100
	Approved Cases				10,369

The highest overall committed spend is in Axis 2 and the highest spend options within Axis 2 for RP and LMOs are:

1. Woodland creation – native woodland (RP);
2. Hedgerows – 3 yrs biodiversity benefit (RP);
3. Open grazed grassland for wildlife (RP);
4. Improving rush pasture (LMOs).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/08/10135254/0>

The highest committed spend on individual options in RP and LMO are in Axis 1 and 3 respectively e.g. restructuring agricultural business (Axis 1 RP) and management of vernacular rural buildings (Axis 3 LMOs). These options are not designed to deliver explicitly for the environment, although some options may have the potential to do so.

There was stakeholder agreement that all of these high committed spend Axis 2 options have the *potential* to deliver significant environmental benefit, however, there were significant concerns within RSPB in particular about the appropriate use of these options and their implementation on the ground. Table 3 gives an overview of the differing stakeholder perspectives of the high committed spend options across all three Axes for the RP scheme.

*There was clear consensus that the high spend options reflect one of: a) easy implementation and fit with existing farm management; or b) very attractive payments rates.*

It is also worth noting at this point that the highest spend and highest uptake options do not always match due to the high payment rates associated with some options. The highest uptake option in Axis 1 of LMOs for example is the ‘membership of quality assurance schemes’ option which the Mid Term Evaluation found to have one of the lowest levels of additionality in the programme, i.e. people taking up the option would have joined quality assurance schemes anyway, without the payment from the LMO scheme. RSPB Scotland therefore questions whether this kind of activity should be supported by public money through the SRDP.

Examination of mapped distribution of RP Axis 2 spend by RSPB regional staff indicated that areas of particularly high or particularly low committed spend for the RP scheme could generally be explained by a knowledge of what exists on the ground. For example, economically viable forestry areas were not expected to enter into the RP scheme, state owned forestry areas are not eligible for the RP scheme, and areas of intensive economically viable agriculture were not expected to enter into the RP scheme. These areas, to the best of staff knowledge, matched very low committed spend areas on the map. *High committed spend areas were thought to be associated with a high number of active agents, a long standing culture of entering into management agreements and a mixed farming system that easily allows it.* Also of relevance to high committed spend areas was the presence of intensive and targeted advisory activity on the ground, encouraging entry to Axis 2 options for the benefit of BAP species. Staff from all regions noted some overlaps between RSPB partner projects such as the Strathspey Wetlands and Waders Initiative and the Clyde Valley Waders Initiative, that provide dedicated proactive advisory resources on the ground to encourage entry to the scheme, and high committed spend areas. However, other factors beyond advice provision may account for this funding distribution.

**Table 3. Likely Outcomes from High Committed Spend Options in RP**

Option	Comments	Environmental Outcome
<b>Restructuring agricultural businesses</b>	<p>Differing views about whether options like this should be paid for by the public purse.</p> <p>Some see it as legitimate support to countryside managers who need to develop their businesses and others see it as doing the job for land managers that banks do for other businesses.</p>	<p>Limited. Potential indirect benefits from improved business viability.</p>
<b>Woodland creation - Native woodland planting</b>	<p>Clear agreement that uptake of this option has been driven by the relatively high payment rate, climate change national target and long term benefit assessment criteria.</p> <p>Agreement amongst RSPB that this option will not be being implemented to the best advantage of biodiversity, with concerns over the location, size and long term management of these woodlands.</p> <p>A strong RSPB view that: good management of existing woodlands should be prioritised over new planting; new planting should ideally be adjacent to existing woodland or connect disparate woodlands; new planting should be sufficient in size to become valuable habitat in itself; and new planting should not be carried out on parts of the holding currently delivering for wildlife i.e. wet corners and similar. However, RSPB also hold the view that these guidelines are not being applied.</p> <p>WT respondent view that any planting is better than none as long as not to the detriment of existing interests and that there is a value in having a more 'wooded' landscape e.g. changing view of land managers about trees and helping them realise some of their benefits which should result in more trees in the future.</p>	<p>A carbon storage and potential land manager perception benefit, but overall a risk that the option is being poorly implemented in terms of also delivering well for biodiversity and concerns over long term management.</p>
<b>Hedgerows - 3 years for biodiversity benefits</b>	<p>Differing views between RSPB and other stakeholders. RSPB have concerns about the long term management of these hedgerows, in the early stages of the scheme saw them being implemented in inappropriate ways e.g. across wader habitat and, as with woodland, think that good management of existing hedgerows should take priority over planting of new ones. There is a strong feeling that uptake of the option has been high given its reasonable payment rate, the long term benefit assessment criteria and its relatively easy implementation.</p> <p>Outside RSPB there is a much more positive view of this option and the high committed spend on it, seeing it as very valuable from an environmental perspective and concern over its suspension.</p>	<p>Likely to deliver some biodiversity benefits but concern over long term management of hedgerows.</p>
<b>Open Grazed or Wet Grassland for Wildlife</b>	<p>Widespread agreement that this option is not being implemented well enough to deliver any significant biodiversity benefits. View that the simple stock-off option is used widely and inappropriately and that even when grazing plans are being applied they are often nothing more than a cut and paste of the guidance provided.</p> <p>However, there is also an agreement that this option, when implemented with a well considered grazing plan can be very beneficial in returning grasslands to good condition.</p> <p>General agreement that uptake of the option is so high because without a specialist grazing plan it is very simple to implement and generally requires very little change to existing management.</p> <p>Some view that this option has an indirect environmental benefit as a 'loss leader' i.e. it is useful in making agreements pay well enough to be worth the applicants' time and so help ensure the other activities in the plan occur.</p>	<p>Limited value in most instances because of poor implementation.</p> <p>High biodiversity value when used appropriately.</p>
<b>Diversification Outwith Agriculture</b>	<p>Vast majority of respondents were not clear what this option was and were sceptical of its likely environmental outcomes, both direct and indirect.</p>	<p>Very limited if any.</p>

Staff examination of committed spend distribution for LMOs found relatively high committed spend on LMOs in some low RP spend areas such as the Lothians, where RP committed spend was thought to be low because of the intensive, economically lucrative agricultural system in the area. This suggests that LMOs, although widely criticised for not performing as they should be, may well be performing an important role in terms of environmental delivery in areas that remain unlikely to enter into more restrictive RP agreements. *It is clear though that there is currently an even greater lack of knowledge about the deployment and effectiveness of LMOs than there is of RP options.*

Packages of options within the RP scheme were introduced with the intention of directing applicants to the options most suitable for their desired outcome. Committed spend on individual packages was found to follow a similar trend to options, with the highest spend packages (looking only at spend on agri-environment measure 214 options) being: Arable fields and hedgerows, Seed eating birds, Supporting biodiversity and Farmland waders. *Examination of the spatial distribution of funding allocated to species specific packages showed a good (but not perfect) match with target bird distribution. At a landscape scale then, where there is a clear geographical basis for restricting option availability i.e. restricted range and species specific options, this suggests that the RP scheme is largely succeeding in directing resources appropriately to ensure maximum biodiversity benefit.* This in itself does not translate into effective delivery of environmental benefits on the ground however. *Stakeholders were consistent in their view that the delivery of environmental benefits is highly dependant on the appropriate choice of options and implementation at a holding level.*

It is apparent from examination of general scheme data and its spatial representation that environmental options within RP and LMO, and more specifically biodiversity options, appear to be relatively well funded by the schemes and this should be encouraging in terms of environmental outcomes. Unfortunately, it is also clear *there is a propensity toward 'easy' options within both the RP and LMO schemes and stakeholders raised serious concerns about option implementation, both of which make effective delivery of environmental benefits more doubtful.*

## **2.2 Results: Objective 2**

*Review of the RP and LMO scheme options showed that within the RP scheme there are options that will benefit the majority of priority species and habitats of RSPB concern (also BAP species and habitats) but that LMO options do not have this same scope.* This view was also held by other NGOs and statutory bodies with regard to their priorities. All stakeholders had some suggestions for option improvements, additions, retractions, movement to a differing level scheme or delivery mechanism (e.g. pillar 1 and cross compliance) that would, in their view, improve the basic tools available within the schemes. *The overwhelming message however was that the issue currently, with regard to*

*delivering environmental benefits, is not with available options but with option implementation on the ground.*

*There was strong agreement on the factors important for effective delivery of environmental benefits from options. These agreed factors are as follows:*

- **Targeting;** both in terms of *location* of options at a landscape and farm scale e.g. is it the right place for that option or would another be more suitable? And in terms of the *management* stipulated within the option for the desired outcome, such as the grazing plan or seed mix.
- **Scale;** at a landscape and holding level, is there sufficient quantity of the option for it to deliver the desired outcomes? Do we know how much is required?
- **Attitude of land manager / cultural issues;** an engaged land manager is much more likely to deliver the desired outcomes of an agreement than one who is disinterested. It is important that the land manager knows what they have signed up to do, why they are doing it and are clear about what they are trying to deliver. There are also issues of self perception that may affect the quality of delivery e.g. do options fit with the land managers view of what it is to be a farmer? Do they accept some responsibility to deliver public goods for the money they are receiving?
- **'After care' and monitoring;** it is important to recognise that agreements will not always be perfect in the first instance and that some support and advice subsequent to the start of contracts would be useful in ensuring agreements deliver rather than being allowed to fail. This would also allow valuable lessons to be learned about option effectiveness in differing situations.
- **Advice;** good, specialist advice is paramount in achieving the correct targeting and scale of options. It can be extremely useful in engaging land managers and could in itself be the basis of improved monitoring and an 'after care' approach to agreements. Bespoke advice provision is the most important factor in ensuring agri-environment options deliver environmental benefit on the ground and *better advice provision, where the remit is best delivery of public goods for public money rather than maximum return for landowner for minimum effort, must go hand in hand with any moves to increase the flexibility and simplicity of schemes.*

Table 4 summarises the issues with the RP scheme that mean the above factors are generally not being accounted for in option implementation. It should also be remembered that given the nature of the LMO scheme it is even less likely these factors are being accounted for in option choice and implementation, and that there is a more limited capacity within LMOs as they currently exist to address this.

**Table 4. Requirements for Effective Option Delivery and Associated Scheme Issues**

Requirement	RP Issues
<b>Targeted location</b>	Arguably some targeting of options at the landscape scale but limited and no targeting of options at a holding scale, exemplified by lack of site visit by case officers. Reliant on agent view of appropriate options and location but widespread concerns regarding the quality of agents (some very good, a lot considered not so good). Also no existing requirement for aerial photographs or other supplementary materials showing context of holding.
<b>Targeted management</b>	Not required for many options where it would be appropriate. Where written into agreements may be difficult to follow through on, e.g. sourcing the correct seed mix, carrying out grazing plan
<b>Scale</b>	Some requirement for minimum areas within option prescriptions and some targets on scale for national priorities but overall no planning on a regional level as to the balance of desired outcomes and so desired quantities of many options. Scale of implementation often limited by funding and competing priorities as well as land manager response.
<b>Attitude of land manager</b>	Currently most land managers use an agent because system too time consuming and bureaucratic, view that this could lead to land managers being unaware of what they are actually signed up to. Packages designed to help land managers understand what they are being asked to deliver but currently limited usefulness. Some view that current levels of auditing are not sufficient to encourage all scheme participants to take their agreement seriously.
<b>After care</b>	Currently no requirement for this in scheme. Sometimes built into applications as part of additionality criteria. Difficulties in changing the contract once it is in place - time consuming and bureaucratic to make changes if necessary. No requirement to develop baseline and no monitoring means no lessons being learned about effectiveness or otherwise of options.
<b>Advice</b>	Varying ability of agents to deliver specialist advice. Varying willingness of agents and case officers to seek specialist advice. Varying willingness of agents to use advice received. No formal requirement for advice within scheme and no consistency in approach. No site visit by case officers. But assessment criteria driving an informal culture of seeking advice from specialist NGOs when appropriate to the application, to show meeting demand or to demonstrate quality.

*The packaging of options for differing desired outcomes within RP has been generally well received as a principle.* With regard to delivering for priority habitats and species, the range of packages was found to be good, encompassing most priority habitats and species either as discrete specialist packages such as for Corncrake or capturing them as part of broader packages such as Lapwing in Farmland Waders.

The effectiveness of packages was one topic on which stakeholder views differed considerably; some stakeholders thought they work well, others less so. There is a strong view that there should be a shift to a more outcomes based approach and it is sensible to guide applicants to the options appropriate to the desired outcomes. Some well designed packages such as the Corncrake and Capercaillie package are already being used by RSPB staff and agents as a guide to the options of relevance to that species. The big caveat to this argument is that *packages must be fit for purpose and well designed in the first instance.* This does not appear to be the case across the board at the moment. For example, the enhancing biodiversity package is so broad it lacks any real meaning, as highlighted by one NGO who pointed out that the package groups all hymenoptera (a large order of insects, comprising the sawflies, wasps, bees and ants) together which in all accounts for around 7000 individual species in Scotland, many with differing requirements. This package is widely used but probably primarily for this reason, you can do virtually anything you want through it. The climate change related packages are currently thought to be an amalgamation of options within the scheme that may have some climate change related benefit but are not necessarily designed with a climate change outcome in mind so there are questions as to why they are packaged for that purpose at all. There are also issues with the way packages are used. For example, the current ability to pick a few, easily implementable options from a package, rather than having to choose the *most appropriate* options for the desired outcome in any given circumstance, greatly reduces the likely effectiveness of packages. Furthermore, there is an argument that packages add an extra layer in an already complex administrative system, are counterintuitive and restrict option choice unnecessarily and unhelpfully.

In short, this argument can be distilled down to the ongoing debate within agri-environment schemes about *control and prescription versus flexibility.*

It is suggested that the basis for and purpose of packages needs to be reconsidered, e.g. are they for specific species, issues, and/or related to priorities? Does every priority *need* a package? How do you make a package meaningful without overly restricting option choice or having a large range of local differentiations? What is the logic for them and how do they fit with integrated land use and a desire for multiple benefits?

### 2.3. Results: Objective 3

*Barriers to environmental effectiveness of the SRDP were found to be multiple, broad ranging and largely already well documented in e.g. the Cook Review<sup>4</sup> and Mid-Term Evaluation. For the SRDP as a whole, chronic under funding and a lack of clarity and coherence with regard to the purpose of individual schemes means the programme is overburdened and often poorly focused.* Furthermore, the lack of information on programme expenditure as a whole and RP expenditure in particular, coupled with the lack of environmental monitoring as was, has a significantly deleterious affect on stakeholder confidence with the programme and therefore likelihood of meaningfully engaging with it.

Looking specifically at the RP scheme, the range of issues extend from process related problems with for example, assessment (including the role of case officers, the assessment criteria themselves and the administrative process) through to problems with the supporting systems, including variable access to agents across the regions. Table 5 outlines a sample of the issues raised by stakeholders and their likely impacts on environmental performance of the scheme. All issues raised in the review were found to be important in terms of effectiveness of the scheme but *key barriers in terms of achieving environmental outcomes from the RP scheme were: the assessment process, specifically the role, time resources, skills and autonomy of case officers; regionalisation and targeting of resources, specifically local targeting of resources and options against specified desired outcomes and regional autonomy; and, advice provision.*

In short, the lack of importance placed on, and resources dedicated to, the actual implementation stages e.g. option selection and location, mean the RP scheme can be, and often is, implemented extremely poorly. This is despite what is a complex and burdensome application and assessment process e.g. the application form and assessment criteria.

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<sup>4</sup> Cook, P. 2009. Scotland Rural Development Programme First Stage Review. P&L Cook and Partners, May 2009.

**Table 5. Example Issues with the RP Scheme and Impact on Uptake and Effectiveness**

Category	Agreed Issues	Differing Views	Impact
Assessment Process	<p><b>Assessment criteria:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are poor and assess the wrong things</li> <li>• Are ambiguous and interpreted differently by different case officers</li> <li>• Favour large land owners</li> </ul>	<p><b>Assessment criteria:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are sensible and produce agreements that meet multiple requirements</li> <li>• Are transparent with guidance on website</li> <li>• Are easy to use (case officers) and apply, a good aid to assessment process</li> </ul>	<p>Evidence of points chasing rather than a focus on getting best possible environmental outcomes</p> <p>Lots of wasted time and effort with little environmental benefit (if believe other objectives of criteria are not valid)</p> <p>Small but potentially very important sites put off entering</p>
	<p><b>Case Officers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vary in level of involvement with application development</li> <li>• Are generally time poor</li> <li>• Do not carry out site visits</li> <li>• Are required to assess issues beyond their expertise</li> <li>• Interpret criteria differently and at times make decisions without transparency</li> </ul>	<p><b>Case Officers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shouldn't advise on developing applications and assess them</li> <li>• Are an administrative role only</li> <li>• Seek expertise from other administrative organisations when required</li> <li>• Interpret criteria as per website guidance</li> <li>• In some instances attempt to ensure consistency within organisations by discussing cases</li> </ul>	<p>Poor case officer involvement or advice can lead to failure of good quality applications</p> <p>Limited time and consequent lack of site visits means case officers ill-informed for making assessments on appropriate use and placement of options, potentially allowing poor applications through</p> <p>Lack of skills and site visits means poor quality (in terms of environmental effectiveness) applications getting through</p> <p>Inconsistencies and lack of transparency leads to uncertainty about likely success in applicants and can put them off applying</p>
Regionalisation	<p><b>Regional Priorities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are not as distinct regionally as they could be, with the broad priorities being virtually identical regionally</li> <li>• There is no plan for how much of what to be delivered where</li> </ul>	<p><b>Regional Priorities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Detail within the generic broad priorities are influencing what species are being targeted in some areas</li> <li>• Have facilitated good NGO involvement for priority species e.g. BC in Argyll</li> <li>• Risk with prescriptive, binding targeting is that areas out side the line where land owners would have done work and would be some benefit are not eligible but no guarantee that landowners within the line will want to take up the options</li> </ul>	<p>Some targeting of options but not as much as required, 'scatter gun' effect of options on the ground</p> <p>No control over scale of delivery of options</p> <p>Confusion and dilution of priorities</p>
	<p><b>Level:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should be greater than currently is, currently limited ability to tailor scheme</li> </ul>	<p><b>Level:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional differences in criteria interpretation by case officers is legitimate reflection of regional differences and priorities</li> </ul>	<p>Limited ability to tailor scheme to local circumstances so one size fits all solution which does not work, particularly for crofting areas</p>

*Despite the broad range of problems with the RP scheme, there are examples where it has been utilised to great effect and is likely to deliver significant environmental benefits. The scheme is likely to be effective where:*

- It is used **proactively** and landowners are actively encouraged into the scheme where appropriate
- It is used in **targeted** areas for target species and habitats
- It is delivered with **adequate support** on the ground to advise on the development of the agreements
- It is delivered at a **landscape scale**, encouraging collaboration between land owners or complimentary management for a specified desired outcome
- A **partnership approach** is taken or good working relationships exist between the agents, specialist NGOs, case officers and land managers.

Table 6 outlines a range of potential solutions to some of the issues with RP, as suggested by stakeholders, which could address some of the existing problems with the scheme and facilitate the adoption of the above principles for effectiveness. This table does not represent an RSPB policy position. Broadly speaking however, it is considered that *effectively addressing some of the problems with the SRDP, particularly in the RP scheme, will require Scottish Government to consider the trade off between scheme administrative costs and likely scheme outcomes as well as a re-examination of the interplay between the differing SRDP schemes, clearly defining their roles and dedicating resources accordingly.*

**Table 6. Example Potential Solutions**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Issue</b>	<b>Solutions</b>
<b>Assessment Process</b>	<b>Assessment criteria</b>	<p>Modify criteria and make appropriate to each Axis individually</p> <p>Learn lessons from previous set and avoid criteria that create an economically inequitable barrier to entry, equally, maintain criteria that facilitate specialist NGO input</p> <p>Explore alternatives to scoring system e.g. fit of application to overall farm plan</p> <p>Ensure case officers better skilled and resourced in terms of time</p> <p>Give case officers more autonomy to employ judgement about quality of applications</p>
	<b>Case Officers</b>	<p>Fund more case officers</p> <p>Fund better training of case officers</p> <p>Expand the role of case officers to include advice provision at a basic level, assistance with development of application</p> <p>Decide if case officers should be specialists, who can make an assessment on applications in their field without assistance, or generalists who have a broader overview and know where to go to seek advice and ensure that advice is accessible</p> <p>Ensure case officers within a given area meet (within and across agencies) to calibrate criteria and option guidance interpretation and make public any decisions/changes</p>
<b>Regionalisation</b>	<b>Regional Priorities</b>	<p>Existing regional priorities should be built on and refined further with stakeholder engagement</p> <p>Regional priorities should be linked to a plan that outlines how much of the priorities are desired and where, based on an understanding of what funds are available and how much delivery for each priority costs and the scheme should be publicised accordingly i.e. entry be encouraged in areas where management is needed</p> <p>Consider the possibility of regional priorities being used to develop landscape scale 'opt in' schemes, that link designated sites where land owners are encouraged to enter under a given regional priority with a basic plan already defined in terms of which options would be suitable and on what scales, akin to the targeting approach taken in the Higher Level Scheme in England</p> <p>Consider possibility of a wider countryside biodiversity national target that is applicable to defined areas as defined in the regional plan that are important for linking designated sites and can deliver for regional biodiversity priorities. This has the potential to be useful in future in securing a maintained biodiversity benefit if there is a move towards an ecosystems services approach. Could potentially be based around previous ESAs</p>
	<b>Level</b>	<p>Consideration be given to the use of priorities to inform regional differences in option and package eligibility as has been done to good effect with Corncrake</p> <p>Consideration be given to tailoring option prescriptions and package contents to differing regions where necessary</p>

### 3. Likely Outcomes and Future Direction

Based on the results of this review, RSPB Scotland considers that SRDP funding is delivering some environmental benefits. This is particularly through the Rural Priorities scheme and Axis 2 options as would be expected. *It is thought environmental benefits will be most pronounced for certain, well targeted species with dedicated and proven option provision, and largely within defined target areas. These benefits will be maximised where a proactive approach is taken to encourage entry into the scheme for the target species, where dedicated specialist advisory services have been made available in the locality and where partnerships have been developed between case officers, agents, land managers and specialist NGOs.*

*There is limited expectation of significant environmental benefits resulting from SRDP funding outwith these targeted species and areas.* The general lack of targeting in the RP scheme is likely to lead to a scattered and diluted environmental benefit as opposed to the focused one that was hoped for and is necessary.

*There are risks of significant environmental decline in areas or on holdings where access to RP is difficult such as in the Western Isles or on small farms.* For example, in the Western Isles the cessation of Rural Stewardship Scheme agreements without RP agreements being in place leaves large areas of Corncrake habitat vulnerable to changed management practices, such as a reversion to early cutting. Many of the issues with the RP scheme disproportionately affect small land managers.

Outside of the RP scheme, LMOs, LFASS, CCAGs and Leader, all have the potential to deliver environmental benefits but are considered currently to be failing to do so to any satisfactory level. For example, the current lack of suitable options and very limited ability to guide option choice and implementation within the LMO scheme all mean it is unlikely to be effective for its purpose and, as with RP, will produce only scattered and highly diluted environmental benefit.

*There are some positive elements of the current SRDP, or more specifically RP, that should be maintained and might be considered for rolling out to other schemes within the programme. These are:*

- a. Good option provision,
- b. Moving to a regionalised system,
- c. Increased flexibility of options,
- d. Moving to a more outcomes based approach,
- e. Closer working between delivery agencies,

- f. Involvement of specialist advisors, currently facilitated through some option requirements e.g. grazing plans, and some assessment criteria e.g. 'quality' and 'meeting demand',
- g. Moving towards more landscape scale/complimentary management approaches, currently facilitated by the collaboration criteria and setting of regional priorities.

*There are also significant problems with the existing programme that minimise its likely environmental effectiveness. Improvements that could be made include:*

- Improved delivery of environmental benefits from *all* SRDP schemes, particularly LFASS and LMOs. This is in order to alleviate the pressure on the RP scheme, and in the interests of effective use of public money.
- Improvements to the targeting of the RP scheme, including better regionalisation and local targeting of resources and options against specified desired outcomes and increased regional autonomy as a key factor in improving the effectiveness of the RP scheme. Furthermore, greater consideration could be given to the targeting of options within the LMO scheme as a means to improving its environmental delivery.
- Improved resourcing of case officers within the RP scheme, an expansion of their role and skills and increased autonomy as a key factor in overcoming the wide ranging issues with the assessment process and so improving the effectiveness of the RP scheme.
- Potentially as part of the above, embedding an efficient, effective and equitable approach to advice provision (specialist and application based), including an 'after-care' service, within any new SRDP as the basis for improving the effectiveness of the RP scheme and LMOs where appropriate.
- Timely implementation of ecological monitoring for all expenditure of public money with an environmental purpose as a key factor in determining success of differing approaches and so learning lessons for the future.
- Greater transparency on the distribution of funds, in the RP scheme in particular, within the restrictions of the recent EU ruling regarding CAP beneficiaries.

Concentrating primarily on the RP scheme, this review highlights many of the successes and problems with the current SRDP. Drawing on information from a variety of sources, it allows a judgement to be made on the significance of the differing issues and their likely impacts on the effectiveness of the programme in delivering for the environment. Although this review was carried out primarily from a species and habitats perspective, it is thought the issues it raises - particularly factors important for option delivery and principles for making the RP scheme work - are equally relevant to other concerns and desired outcomes and therefore should be of interest to a range of other parties. RSPB Scotland hopes that this work will help to inform the development of the next SRDP and will prompt discussion amongst stakeholders on the challenges and opportunities presented by the start of a new programme.