



# Arable Coast Environment

European Innovation Partnership

## Arable Coast Environment (ACE) European Innovation Partnership Project (EIP) Guidelines For ACE Demonstration Farms 2026



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland



Arna chomhchistiú ag  
an Aontas Eorpach

Co-funded by the  
European Union



SECAD 

# Welcome to the Arable Coast Environment (ACE) European Innovation Partnership (EIP)

## Introduction: What is an EIP?

The European Innovative Partnerships (EIP) initiative is co-funded by the European Commission and the Irish Government under the CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027.

The EIP initiative involves a range of stakeholders coming together to trial innovative solutions aimed at addressing challenges on Irish farms. The projects are locally led and implemented by collaborative Operational Groups, involving farmers, scientists, ecologists and other experts, to deliver on specific goals.

## Launching the ACE EIP October 2025:

On the 16th October 2025 Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Martin Heydon, together with Minister of State for Nature, Heritage and Biodiversity, Christopher O’Sullivan, announced that the Operational Group led by SECAD Partnership have been approved to deliver the European Innovation Partnership (EIP) project ‘The Arable Coast Environment’, on the theme of enhancing habitats for biodiversity in an arable environment, along the coast from South Cork to Wexford.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine together with the National Parks and Wildlife Service will jointly provide funding of €7 million to the Arable Coast Environment (ACE) EIP over the next four years.

## Contents:

Primary aims of the ACE EIP project	3
ACE EIP project area	3
ACE EIP Birds of Conservation Concern	4
Importance of Tillage (Arable) Farms for Hen Harrier	4
ACE Logo	5
ACE EIP Principles	5
The ACE Demonstration Farm	6
Core ACE Actions	6
1: Developing Your ACE Farm Plan	7
2: Field or Arable Grass Margins	7
3: Beetle Banks	8
4: Skylark Plots	9
5: Winter Wild Bird Cover Tillage Fallow	10
6: Supplementary Feeding	11
7: Additional Associated Actions	12
8: Demonstration Farm Additional Responsibilities	14
9: Connected Corridors and Future Actions	15
Technical Requirements for Field Margins and Beetle Banks	17
Skylark Plots Additional Information	17
Key Clarifications	18

## The primary aims of the ACE EIP project are to:

- Identify and prioritise areas for action (hubs), based on proximity to Hen Harrier winter roost sites
- Work to secure the long-term conservation of Hen Harrier winter roosts sites working with local landowners in the project area, exploring mechanisms for protecting roost sites
- Identify and implement a suite of results-based and other measures to deliver habitat benefits at scale and quality for Hen Harrier and its prey, farmland birds and small mammals, in the project hubs and in the wider project area
- Create or enhance existing linkages between farmers and local artisan producers and industry
- Provide the competent authorities (The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, National Parks and Wildlife Services) with a comprehensive dataset, as well as outcomes and recommendations for upscaling measures at landscape scale in the wider countryside.

## ACE EIP project area:



## The ACE EIP Birds of Conservation Concern in the Project Area

Species	Status	BoCCI4	Project area
Hen Harrier <i>Circus cyaneus</i>	Summer/winter	Amber	Y
Barn Owl <i>Tyto alba</i>	Resident	Red	Y
Kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Resident	Red	Y
Chough <i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	Resident	Amber	Y
Meadow Pipit <i>Anthus pratensis</i>	Summer/winter	Red	Y
Skylark <i>Alauda arvensis</i>	Summer/winter	Amber	Y
Yellowhammer <i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	Resident	Red	Y

## The Importance of Tillage (Arable) Farms for Hen Harrier

The Hen Harrier has been selected as a 'flagship' for the ACE EIP. This iconic bird, once common in Ireland, is now edging close to extinction based on surveys supported by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. To address this serious challenge, ACE EIP recognises that coastal communities from Wexford to Cork can play a big part in this work. This is one of the remaining areas in Ireland where the wintering Hen Harrier, primarily younger birds, will spend their first winter. By focusing on managing habitat improvements for the Hen Harrier, from the ground up, this EIP will aim to create various other benefits including soil health, water quality on project sites and improvements for pollinators and other birds, especially seed eating birds linked to tillage (arable) farming. ACE needs the buy-in and support of local farmers, other landowners, state services, businesses, schools and communities to achieve our aim of protecting the Hen Harrier future in Ireland.





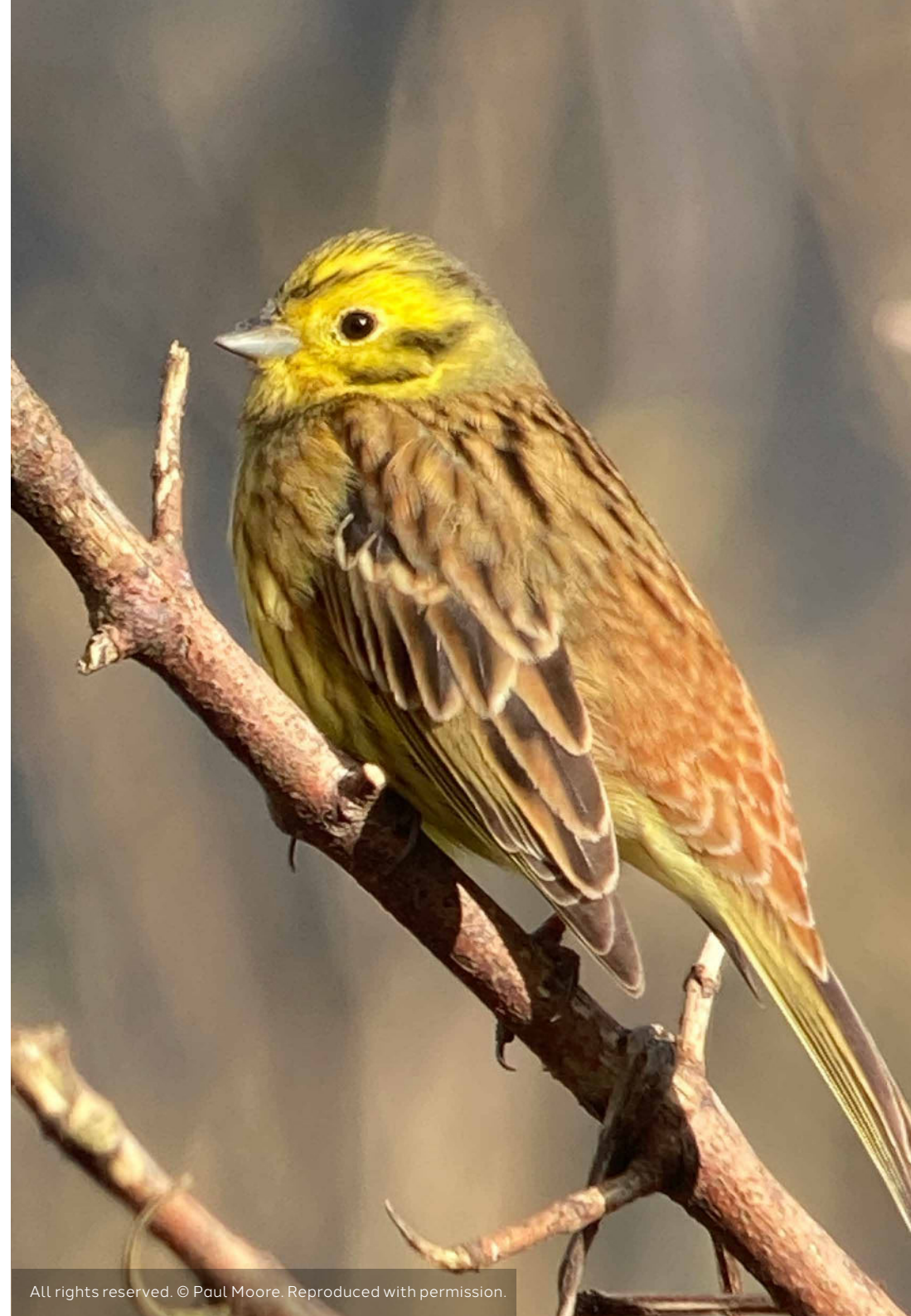
# Arable Coast Environment

European Innovation Partnership

The ACE EIP Logo depicts one of the key birds of the project, the Yellowhammer, often found near cereal crops as the seeds from these tillage fields provide a vital food source. The yellowhammer (*Emberiza citrinella*) holds a distinctive place in Irish folklore, primarily known for its unique song, often interpreted as “a little bit of bread and no cheese”. Frequently associated with Irish farmland, this brightly coloured bird is also recognised by local names like “scribbly-jack” or “writing lark” due to the, almost, calligraphic markings on its eggs. Once so common and widespread but now needs help, having been lost from much of Ireland.

## ACE EIP Principles

- Co-design & Collaboration
- Value for Money and Value All Stakeholders
- Simplification of Approach and Design
- Focus on Creating Habitat Benefits ‘At Scale’
- Education, Communication & Partnership



## The ACE Demonstration Farm:

If you are a farmer located within the project area and interested in becoming an ACE EIP Demonstration Farm, please take time to consider the following guidelines and requirements. These will outline the initial 'Core ACE Actions' that will be developed by the Demonstration Farms to help future ACE Participant (neighbouring) farmers to learn from these actions and be attracted to join the initiative. Our hope is that the selected Demonstration Farms will also continue to support the development of capacity (of others stakeholders) during the lifetime of the project.



## Core ACE Actions:

The initial core ACE actions include a combination of:

1. Developing the ACE Farm Plan (incorporating all of the actions to be undertaken and how these will be reviewed)
2. Field Margins (5m wide)
3. Beetle Banks (2m-3m wide)
4. Skylark Plots (circa 16m<sup>2</sup>)
5. Winter Wild Bird Cover Tillage Fallow
6. Supplementary Feeding
7. Additional Associated Actions (Stubble Retention and Existing Hedgerow Maintenance)
8. Demonstration Farm Additional Responsibilities
9. Connected Corridors and Future Actions (After Year 1)

Each of these Core Actions is described in the following pages.

Each ACE Demonstration Farms must include each of the above actions/ activities, setting out to do so within their initial planning period (in spring and early summer 2026) and being in a position to host related farm walks from mid-summer 2026 through the winter of 2026/2027.

## Core ACE Action 1: Developing Your Ace Farm Plan

Developing a farm plan with ecological impacts involves a holistic, long-term approach that integrates agricultural production with environmental stewardship, such as enhancing biodiversity, improving soil health, reducing greenhouse gases, and protecting water quality.

As part of the ACE Project every participating farmer, including Demonstration Farms, will be required to develop their ACE Farm Plan. The farmer will be supported with inputs from their own Farm Advisors plus the support of the ACE EIP Team. These plans will identify the specific actions that the farmer will be undertaking, defining the type, location and scale of each action across a 12 month period. The farm plans for the first twelve months will have a number of common features, such as the requirement for all demonstration and participating farmers to undertake a number of core ACE actions and capacity building activities.

## Core ACE Action 2: Field or Arable Grass Margins (within tillage fields)

Arable margins (5 Meters Wide) provide a habitat for flora and fauna, increase biodiversity and help protect water quality.

The establishment of an arable grass margin along the full length of an existing field or LPIS parcel boundary will increase the biodiversity on the farm. Where established along a watercourse or open drain it acts as a buffer zone to intercept sediment and nutrients and slows overland flow and surface water run-off providing additional ecosystem services.

Where the margin is established along a watercourse, an additional 2 metre unsown (with an arable crop) and unfertilised margin must be in place between the watercourse and the arable grass margin.

**See field margin technical detail later.**





## Core ACE Action 3: Beetle Banks (within tillage fields)

Beetle banks are created by ploughing furrows that point towards each other during cultivation to create a raised bank of about 0.4m along the plough line.

The headland at each end of the beetle bank can remain cropped. Leaving a gap of 25m between the end of the beetle bank and the field margin will reduce ground predators accessing the beetle bank. The bank should be seeded with a native grass seed mix with up to 30% tussock-forming species such as cocksfoot or timothy. The rest of the mix can consist of fescues and bent grasses. The seed should be broadcast immediately after cultivation at a rate of 70kg/ha for good establishment. Grass mixes can include tall, tussock-tolerant wildflowers which can encourage other pest predators such as hoverflies and parasitic wasps.

Once established, cut the grass strips as little as possible as established tussocks are key overwintering features for many of the species that will utilise the beetle bank. A 2 to 3-year mowing and mulching is ideal, and this will help to produce a diverse grass structure which will support a wider range of wildlife. Cutting should take place during autumn, before insects look to find shelter over winter. To improve the degree of natural pest control in large arable fields, beetle banks should be located through the middle of fields larger than 20ha, between tramlines so that the crop can still be sprayed on either side with minimal disruption to spraying operations. To intercept surface run-off, beetle banks should run along the contours of the slope so that the raised bank holds up water running down the slope and increase the rate of infiltration into the soil.

**See Beetle Bank technical detail later.**

## Core ACE Action 4: Skylark Plots (within tillage fields)

The purpose of this action is to provide Skylarks with suitable nesting habitats in cereal crops throughout their breeding season. The aim is that there are bare areas for ground nesting skylarks within a cereal crop until the crop is harvested in the summer.

There is no requirement to alter any farm practices (spraying, fertilising) for the plot as long as no machinery drives on it.

For each land parcel there should be 2 plots per ha of cereal crop you're growing. For example, if you're growing 2ha (5 acres) of cereal crop in a land parcel, there should be 4 plots. The plots must be away from tramlines, away from telegraph poles and pylons and at least 80 metres from field edges, as these all provide perches for potential predators.

Farmers must make sure that the plots are large enough to meet this action's aim. This will usually mean they need to be at least 3m wide and around 16 square metres in area.

You must retain the fallow plots until the cereal crop is harvested.

Note: In the initial years of the ACE Farms will be required to initially put in place 1 Skylark Plot per acre of land allocated to ACE related habitat.

**See Skylark Plots additional information later.**





## Core ACE Action 5: Winter Wild Bird Cover Tillage Fallow (two year fallow system)

Winter Wild Bird Cover (WWBC) managed on a two year cycle provides a highly effective habitat for farmland birds while allowing the field to function as fallow during the establishment period. By leaving the crop in place for two full years, the plot delivers continuous food resources and structural cover throughout multiple winter seasons, while also offering soil resting and biodiversity benefits associated with extended fallow.

WWBC is typically sown with a diverse mixture of annual and biennial species such as kale, quinoa, linseed, millet, and seed bearing cereals. As these crops mature and remain undisturbed, they produce abundant seed in year one and continue to offer valuable shelter and residual feeding opportunities in year two. This two year standing period supports a wide range of priority farmland birds – including linnets, reed buntings, yellowhammers, and tree sparrows – helping them bridge the winter “hungry gap” when natural food supplies decline sharply. By leaving the site undisturbed it may also provide nesting options for birds such as Lapwing.

Maintaining the cover for two years also enhances environmental outcomes by reducing soil disturbance, increasing invertebrate populations, and contributing to carbon retention. Positioning WWBC adjacent to hedgerows or other semi natural features improves landscape connectivity and maximises habitat quality. Management focuses on minimal intervention: avoiding cutting or grazing, preventing disturbance during winter, and rotating the plot after the two year period to maintain soil health and seed productivity. When implemented in this extended cycle, WWBC supports farmland biodiversity while delivering the ecological benefits of a managed fallow system.

## Core ACE Action 6: Supplementary Feeding



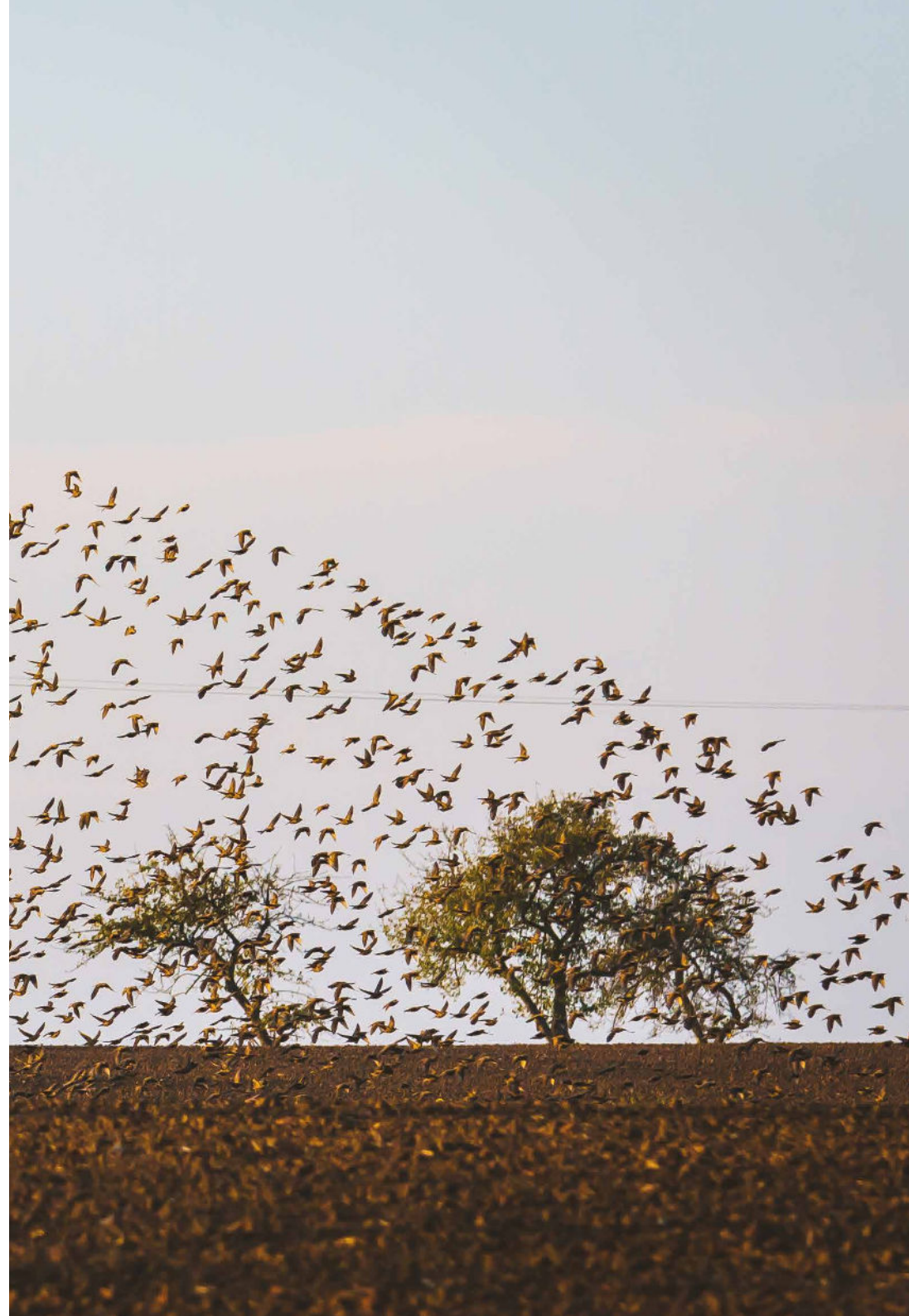
Seed-eating farmland birds can often struggle to find sufficient seed during winter and early spring. This period is often referred to as the 'hungry gap,' when seed is in short supply and birds are beginning to enter the breeding season

Spreading seed or grain regularly throughout winter and early spring can provide an essential source of food for seed-eating farmland birds, once the naturally available food has run out. Bird species such as yellowhammers and tree sparrows need seed food throughout the year to survive. By spreading seed regularly throughout winter and early spring, populations of declining farmland birds can be supported once the natural sources of seeds and grains have been used up. This can be particularly valuable where over-winter stubbles are left uncultivated.

Participants will set aside 1 to 1.5 tonnes of their own grains each year of the project and apply this 2-3 times per week, while also avoiding buildup, to target parcels included in their farm project area.

Seeds may be broadcast by hand or spread using a pellet distributor mounted on an ATV. Target areas should include access routes to field parcels, field margin and stubbles, banks and flower strips, skylark plots. These will be agreed and outlined in the ACE Farm Plan with each farmer.

ACE Project will supply a suitable storage bin and may add up to 0.5 tonne of additional 'small seeds' each year to compliant the mix of seeds to be distributed by the participating ACE farm.





## Core ACE Action 7: Additional Associated Actions (stubble retention and existing hedgerow maintenance)

Retaining Winter Stubble: A lack of winter seed food has been identified as a cause of decline for some of the farmland birds that rely on them. Retaining over-winter stubbles is the easiest way to feed these seed-eating birds on arable (tillage) farms where spring crops are still used, and can help to reverse these declines. Spilt grain and the seeds of broad-leaved weeds make a vital contribution to the winter survival of many seed-eating birds including skylarks, tree sparrows, linnets, yellowhammers, reed buntings, etc.

Spring crops following over-winter stubbles can also provide nesting habitat for lapwings and skylarks, and encourages annual plants to feed birds in spring. Over-winter stubbles and spring cropping are also important for other mammals.

Stubbles allow many plants to set seed and gives spring-germinating plants the chance to grow alongside spring crops. Beneficial insects can benefit from the increase in arable plants while others over-winter in the retained stubble itself.

The ACE EIP Project will require all participating farmers to retain an agreed area of their cereal crop stubble without cultivation or spraying until the 1st March each year. This will be agreed at the time of developing the ACE Farm Plan with Demonstration Farms.

Hedgerow Maintenance: The Heritage Council of Ireland state that 'Hedgerows and their associated field margins or ditches occur across our county and are crucial for biodiversity, with so many species using them, such as plants, birds, bats, insects, small mammals, e.g. hedgehogs and much more. Of the 110 bird species regularly recorded in the Countryside Bird Survey during the breeding season in Ireland, 55 use hedgerows. Hedgerows are important for the long-term survival of many species, acting both as corridors – providing connectivity to important habitats and to the wider landscape – and offering both food sources and nesting sites for many species.

The ACE Project will require participating farmers to not cut the top of hedgerows in the vicinity of the land that is being established for ACE Habitat within each farm. Delaying hedge cutting until the end of winter enables many species to benefit from its food (berries and nuts) and shelter. Not cutting hedges annually enables woody hedge plants to flower and fruit. A rotational approach to hedge cutting is best.



## Core ACE Action 8: Demonstration Farm Additional Responsibilities

The Demonstration Farmer will be required to participate and complete a number of training programmes each year to support their communication skills and understanding of the project, the key bird species and their habitats. The success of this project will also depend on creating linkages across all participating farms involved in ACE, with demonstration farms playing a large role in developing these linkages and an innovative community-led approach.

Training for ACE Demonstration Farmers (& ACE farmer participants) will include:

### Communications / Public Engagement

### Ecology / Citizen Science Training

- Bird Identification – with a focus on ACE species
- Training on bird habitat creation and maintenance
- Insect and pollinator identification
- Beetles and soil fauna identification
- Earthworm surveying and identification

### Sustainable Development

- AgNav Software completion of carbon footprint

## Facilitating Farm Visits and Open Days

Each Demonstration Farm will be required to host and support three farm visits across the first 12 months of ACE for other farmers interested in ACE in the area and one open day during the year for a broader group of stakeholders organised by the ACE Team.





## Core Action 9: Connected Corridors and Future Actions (after year 1)

During year 1 the aim is to support each of the ACE demonstration farms to complete the Core Actions and develop the skills to help communicate to others the methods employed, and results achieved through these initial works.

It is essential that these core actions continue on the demonstration farms and are in turn taken up by new ACE participant farmers in the years that follow. This will create the opportunity for common actions (such as Field Margins and Beetle Banks) to be planned along corridors between neighbouring farms, when neighbouring tillage farmers are connected through ACE to plan together and achieve a greater impact.

There are also a number of other key activities that merit development during the lifetime of the ACE Project which have a positive impact on the survival rates for the key bird species that are targeted by the ACE Project. This could include specific actions to support specific birds (e.g. Chough) or improving the biodiversity along the corridors created near field margins (e.g. improving hedgerow quality or investing in winter bird feed crops). These will be reviewed across the project period and considered in the context of the needs of each of the catchments, corridors and farms.

A close-up photograph of a field of wildflowers. In the foreground, a tall, slender stem with a dense spike of small purple flowers stands out. To its left, a white daisy with a yellow center is partially visible. The background is filled with various other wildflowers and tall grasses, all softly blurred, creating a bokeh effect. The lighting is bright and natural, suggesting a sunny day. A semi-transparent dark grey banner is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the text 'Technical Requirements' in white, bold, sans-serif font.

# Technical Requirements

## Technical Requirements for Field Margins and Beetle Banks

1.	Using plough , seed and one-pass roll approach establish a flower enhanced grass margin along the full length of a LPIS parcel or field boundary. The Grass Margin / Beetle Bank must be established on tillage parcels on which arable crops will be harvested in 2026 -2029.
2.	The location and length (metres) to be identified on the LPIS parcel(s) and marked on the ACE farm map. The margin(s) / banks must remain in the same location for the duration of the contract. Participants can choose one or all boundaries within the same LPIS parcels, and on separate field and LPIS boundaries.
3.	Sow a grass seed mix containing at least 60% Cocksfoot or Timothy (no ryegrass) or a combination of these at the standard rate of 30 kg/Ha. Grass seed labels and receipts must be kept for the duration of the ACE contract.
4.	Soil cultivation cannot be carried out within the margin once established.
5.	The margin can be mulched (rather than mowing) once during the four years of the project lifetime but not between the 1st March and the 15th August. Offtakes can be removed.
6.	Fertiliser or agrichemical sprays may not be applied to the grass margin.
7.	Application of herbicide may only be used within the margin for the spot treatment of noxious and/or invasive weeds.
8.	Access and use of Field Margins and Beetle Banks must not be allowed for tractors or other mechanical traffic other than for essential works on the margins or banks themselves.

## Skylark Plots Additional Information

The ACE project will include skylark plots on selected demonstration farms. While these Skylark plots (small, undrilled patches in winter cereals) are highly beneficial for conservation, they may inadvertently create targeted feeding sites for corvid species, particularly if grain is left on the surface.

Deeper sowing in these areas of the conventional crop is desirable. These areas will not be used for the supplementary feeding action to avoid any surface presence of cereal grains.

The potential effect on attracting non-target species into crop fields where they could consume freshly sown or mature grains near harvest will be assessed and monitored during the pilot phase of the project.

### **Potential Mitigation Strategies:**

- **Deep Sowing:** *Sowing seeds at a depth of 4cm or more reduces the accessibility for corvids.*
- **Avoid Excessive Seed:** *Ensuring the drill is properly lifted and there is minimal seed spilled in the plots.*
- **Vary Control Methods:** *If corvids are a persistent issue, farmers often need to employ a mix of control strategies (e.g., scaring, shooting) to prevent them from becoming established, as they habituate quickly to single methods.*
- **Time of Sowing:** *Some farmers have had success with sowing sacrificial grain to keep corvids busy, though this may not be practical for all.*

If the Skylark Plots do not prove to cause an issue for corvid species (during the establishment phase of the ACE Project) or if mitigation strategies prove to be successful, the introduction of Skylark Plots will be included in the package of actions on future participating farms involved in the ACE Project.

# Key Clarifications

- ACE can work with farmers who are part of ACRES, NPWS and other schemes or EIPs. However, ACE EIP cannot fund measures or actions that are already supported or funded via another Agri-Environment Project or Scheme. Therefore, if you are considering becoming a Demonstration Farm you must identify parcels of land where these other schemes or projects are involved to ensure that there is clear distinction and no possible duplication of funding.
- The ACE Team are looking for a small number of Demonstration Farms spread across the project area. In the event that there is a large number of applications this may lead to a selection process that will take place after the deadline for applications has passed. All applicants will be made aware of this process and the ACE Team may need to seek additional supplementary information to support this selection process
- In the event of being selected to become an ACE Demonstration Farm, you must confirm that you will have the support of a Farm Advisor who will support the design of the ACE Farm Plan including the registering of the identified parts of the farm to be designated for specific measures that will form part of the ACE Demonstration Farm contract.
- Other terms and conditions relating to the delivery of the ACE Project will be shared in advance of completing all formal agreements with Demonstration Farms
- As part of completing this application (EOI), you are confirming that you understand this form authorises the Arable Coast Environment EIP to access your BISS/ACRES and related DAFM data in order to progress your application to participate in the EIP.

The purpose of collecting your personal data and sharing with DAFM/ Department of Housing is to carry out the necessary checks to ensure that there is no double funding of measures paid for under this EIP, with similar measures funded under other public funded schemes or projects.

