

FARMING IN PROTECTED LANDSCAPES

Summary: To present a summary of year 3 (2023/24), an overview of the programme to date and a forward look to year 4 (2024/25)

Recommendation: That the report is noted

Report by: Mark Connelly, Land Management Lead, Scott Brown, Farm Engagement lead, Caroline Regan, Programme Administrator and Olivia Blackwell, Farm Engagement Officer

Introduction

1. This report provides a summary of the Farming in Protected landscapes (FiPL) programme delivered by the CNL Board during 2023/24, an overview of the programme to date and a forward look to year four, 2024/25. 'FiPL at a glance' is attached as Appendix 'A'. Data is still being collated at the time of writing and some additional facts and figures may be available at the meeting of the Executive Committee.

FiPL Year 3 – 2023/24

2. The third year of the FiPL Programme officially concluded on the 31st March 2023 although work to process 58 claims received during March, finalise the year's finances, collate data and send various report to Defra continued through April and into May.
3. Due to the success of FiPL, the allocation for year three was increased from £882,337 to £1,369,084, an increase of £486,747 which included corresponding increases for Admin and Advice and Guidance. The 2023/24 project budget was £1,183,693, a large portion had already been allocated, leaving £572,000 available for allocation during 2023/24 (an increase of £418,601).
4. Year three was very successful. 53 applications were received, 35 considered by the panel and 18 applications under £10,000 (increased in Y3 from £5,000) assessed by the CNL's land Management Lead. A total of £1,749,323 was awarded to 52 new projects with an overall project value of £3,590,643¹. The range of projects supported during the year was very broad, ranging from grazing infrastructure, education visits to farms, market gardens and hedge planting to two wetlands totalling 3.7ha, adapting a listed farm house for residential visits and a hemp processor. The list of FiPL projects on the CNL website will be updated to include those supported during 2023/24.
5. 2023/24 was originally the last year of the FiPL programme. A total of 42 projects were completed. These consisted of multi-year projects along with those approved during year three. A total of 84 projects needed to be managed, assessed and claims made and processed. Some projects could not complete by the end of March as planned. However, the extension of FiPL to March 2025 enabled those projects to be rolled into 2024/25. To balance this, other projects due to claim in 2024/25 had made good progress and could make a claim early. Underspend in the Admin and Advice and Guidance budgets was also moved into the project budget and allocated. Several applications for under £10,000 helped to utilise the remaining end-of-year budget. As a consequence, there was a lot of complex juggling of claims and budgets during March but out of a total FiPL allocation of £1,369,083 the final sum of underspend was only £2,847.

¹ Total project value is identified where the applicants add in additional funding from themselves or other funders. It does not include any additional costs for items with a Countryside Stewardship rate. Consequently, the Total Project Value figure is undervalued

6. The FiPL team worked with a total of 84 active projects during the year. A total of 42 projects completed during the year with 42 projects rolling into year 4 along with 7 (+1) projects approved by the panel on 2 May 2024 planned to complete during 2024/25.
7. In January some payment rates for revenue options in Countryside Stewardship (CS) increased including for existing agreements. The impact was not as significant as the rate rises in January 2023, impacting just three projects which also had project extensions approved by Panel on 11 March, and will therefore require new agreements.
8. The FiPL team has changed during 2023/24. We successfully recruited a part-time Administrative Support role, Ellie Robinson. Heidi Gibbs left us in February 2024. Heidi was part-time, working two days a week. Due to the extension of the programme and increased budget for 2024/25 we had plans to recruit a part-time FiPL role to develop case studies and organise events for farmers and land managers during the year. We put the two roles together and have been successful in recruiting a FiPL Communications and Engagement Officer. The post is for four days a week and is due to start on 29th May.

FiPL Year 4 - 2024/25

9. FiPL has been extended for a further year due to the programme's success and popularity with the farmers and Ministers. The allocation for the Cotswolds for 2024/25 is £2,010,940. This includes £85,499 for Admin, £158,695 for Advice and Guidance and £1,766,746 for allocation to projects.
10. During 2023/24, the Panel approved £1,153,942 of the Year 4 budget. At 1st April 2024, the budget available for allocation was £612,803. Following a panel meeting on 2 May 2024, the budget remaining for allocation during 2024/25 is £392,370.
11. Currently 20% of the CNL's Land Management Lead's time and cost is allocated to FiPL. This will increase to 40% in from 1st October. The Farming Engagement Lead is currently 4 days a week on FiPL and will become full time on FiPL also from 1st October. Where possible, FiPL contributes to covering other costs to the CNL Board of running the programme such as finance, communications and CNL admin.

FiPL Year 4 – progress to date

12. The FiPL panel met on 2nd May. Ten applications were assessed. 7 were approved. Two applications were deferred (one is subject to reducing their costs so fully expect to have their award approved). The panel allocated a total of £220,432 (this includes the grant for one deferred project) and a total project value of £337,719. One application was declined. Two applications under £10,000 have also been approved. The budget available for projects is now £392,370.
13. The panel also considered and approved a project submitted to the Historic Buildings Restoration Grant (HBRG), a standalone £5 million capital and revenue grant fund for buildings within the FiPL programme delivering under the 'Place' theme. HBRG is held centrally by Defra and is open to proposals from all protected landscapes and pays 80% of eligible costs towards restoration of eligible historic buildings. An EOI is scored and submitted by the FiPL team. It is then assessed by the central HBRG Panel and if approved goes to the local FiPL panel for final approval. The scheme is now closed to new EOI submissions but two further applications for buildings in the Cotswolds were submitted before the deadline. We await the results.
14. In addition to the HBRG, Defra have secured a further £2million, also held centrally by Defra, for access improvements, educational access or related activities. The deadline for submitting EOI's was 7th May. We have submitted four EOI's.

Project pipeline

15. We currently have over 60 potential projects logged as 'in development', which means eligibility has been confirmed, usually with a site visit, and the application is with the applicant for drafting. The total value of these would be far more than the remaining funds available, but we do not expect all of them to convert into approved bids.
16. The diversity of applications in the pipeline appears good, with respect to farm types, location, thematic outcomes, etc. but we have not had time to carry out a detailed review of gaps in delivery and target engagement accordingly, mainly due to high workloads and capacity in the team making this less feasible.
17. The flow of new enquiries continues to grow in volume – often two to three per day – demonstrating the popularity and reputation of this now well-established programme. Dealing with new enquiries, alongside managing live agreements, applications in development and other tasks, is challenging for our small team, but we are maintaining a good service and feel confident that we will allocate our final year's budget.

Communications and Engagement

18. The focus for communication and engagement will shift over the coming months, from principally promoting grant opportunities to farmers and land managers, to communicating the programme's impact and legacy among wider audiences. Ideally, we would have done both from that outset but limited capacity in the team made this very difficult, with promoting the grant opportunity then taking priority. The newly recruited Communications and Engagement Officer role will ensure that this work is now prioritised and resourced appropriately.
19. If time and capacity allow, we would like to review the programme's impact to date more thoroughly and target engagement for the last funding opportunities accordingly, for example in areas that are currently underrepresented. However, we are also mindful that the number of applications in the pipeline and volume of new enquiries is already very high, and that sustaining a good level of service to existing customers is the main priority. While some competition for funds is healthy, encouraging an unmanageable number of applications could easily become counterproductive.

Supporting documents:

- Appendix 'A' - FiPL at a glance (May 2024)

MAY 2024