

FARMING IN PROTECTED LANDSCAPES

Summary: To present a summary of year 5 (2025/26), a brief overview of the programme to date and a forward look to year 6 (2026/27)

Recommendation: That the report is noted

Report by: Mark Connelly, Land Management Lead, Olivia Blackwell, Farming Engagement Lead and Ellie Robinson, Administrative Support.

Introduction

1. This report provides a summary of the Farming in Protected landscapes (FiPL) scheme delivered by the CNL Board during 2025/26, an 'at a glance' overview of FiPL since launching in July 2021, and a forward look to year 6 2026/27. 'FiPL at a glance' is attached as Appendix 'A'.
2. FiPL launched in July 2021 and was intended to be a three-year grant scheme. Due to its success, FiPL was extended to March 2025 and again to March 2026. In January 2026 it was announced that FiPL was to be extended for a further three years to March 2029.

FiPL year 5 – 2025/26

3. The total allocation for the CNL for 2025/26 was £1,369,084 with £1,183,695 available for allocation to projects and £185,389 for administration and advice and guidance
4. Year 5 was a year of challenges and successes for FiPL. The extension for 2025/26 was confirmed late by which time the programme was being wound down for the expected end in March 2025. The FiPL Farming Engagement Lead left in April 2025. Olivia Blackwell stepped up into the role, but we were unsuccessful in recruiting for a replacement Farming Engagement Officer. The Programme Administrator left in September. With FiPL due to end in March 2026, recruitment would have been difficult. Ellie Robinson, FiPL Administrative Support, picked up much of the Administrator role and additional support was provided by the CNL Finance Team through Jonathan Rogers and more recently Lyna Zhang.
5. The reduced FiPL team, however, rose to the challenge. The FiPL Panel met 5 times and in addition assessed some applications via email, particularly from January onwards. Applications seeking £10,000 or less were assessed by the CNL's Land Management Lead.
6. A total of 64 applications were assessed. 59 projects were approved with a total grant of £1,246,176 awarded. The total awarded included 4 projects for 2026/27.
7. In previous years, the team normally over allocate to cover year-end underspend from projects. This time there was some caution over taking this approach as the programme was due to end and we were delivering the FiPL with a reduced team.

8. One project was unable to complete their project due to the wet winter and another was struggling to complete the final part of their project due to unexpected challenges of final design. Due to the extension of FiPL we were able to move these into 2026/27. Toward the end of 2025, the team maintain regular contact with all active projects seeking reassurances about completion and that the allocated budget will be used. Several projects at the final claim stage informed the team of unexpected significant underspend which we were not in a position to reallocate.

9. The underspend for 2025/26 was £181,425.85, 13.25% of the overall budget. This is unusually high for the CNL. Up to now FiPL underspend has been around 1% or less. The high level of underspend was due to a combination of several factors, some highlighted above:
 - Late confirmation that FiPL was to be extended for a further year to March 2026.
 - Due to an unsuccessful recruitment campaign, the FiPL team was short-staffed for 11 months.
 - FiPL was due to end on 31st March 2026, consequently Defra was not operating a ‘national pot’ to which we could move project underspend for use by other protected landscapes.
 - Several projects ended with significant underspend that was not declared until the claims were submitted in March. By which time we were unable to re-allocate funding.
 - Due to team capacity and FiPL due to end March 2026, we were not in a position to over-allocate as previous years.
 - Two projects could not complete by 31st March due to the wet winter. Because FiPL has been extended to March 2029, we were able to move them into 2026/27.

Whilst the underspend figure is disappointing compared to previous years, the depleted FiPL team did extraordinarily well with 59 projects approved with 54 completed and claimed.

The underspend is not returned to Defra, it is subtracted from the first FiPL claim we make to Defra for 2026/27.

FiPL extension to March 2029

10. In January 2026, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, announced at the Oxford Farming Conference that FiPL was to be extended for a further three years to March 2029. The budget allocation for the CNL has been confirmed for 2026/27. The budget figures for the following two years are the same but subject to annual confirmation by Defra.

The allocation for 2026/27 is:

Grant available for projects	£1,174,656
Admin, advice and guidance	£201,231
Total	£1,375,887

11. The extension of FiPL and the confirmation of the budget has enabled us to advertise for a Farming Engagement Officer. Interviews were held on 23rd April and the post offered. We will be in a position to make a further announcement once the contract has been signed and a start date confirmed.

12. We have also extended Ellie's contract, due to end on 21st March 2026, to March 2029. Olivia's contract currently runs to March 2028 but will be also extended in due course to March 2029. We are not in a position to recruit a replacement Programme Administrator but are working with Ellie and the finance team to agree a way forward.

Supporting paper:

Appendix 'A' - FiPL at a glance.