

## **17. LANDSCAPE OBSERVATORY FUNDING 2025-26**

### **1. Purpose**

- 1.1 For Members to approve the Authority entering into agreements with the Protected Landscape Partnership and National Parks England to accept funding (circa £500k) to establish and host the Landscape Observatory in 2025–26. The establishment of the Landscape Observatory will provide a platform for building on and advancing the latest critical thinking in conservation management. This includes climate focused adaptive management frameworks such as Resist-Accept-Direct, use of AI and satellite data pioneered, in a protected landscape context.

### **2. Context**

- 2.1 In 2023, Authority officers (in partnership with The Alan Turing Institute, Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and Cranfield University), demonstrated that Artificial Intelligence (AI) generated fine scale maps that could detect a wide range of habitats and landscape features quickly and accurately. This is even when features are small and sparsely distributed. The strong potential application in understanding species distributions, measuring nature recovery, heritage and other physical feature condition changes in time was evident in the work.
- 2.2 In June 2024, the Authority, with The University of Sheffield, held an event to establish a Landscape Observatory. Funded by the universities Knowledge Exchange programme, the workshop framed the Landscape Observatory as a response to the significant challenges facing the UK landscape. Examples explored were climate change, the commitment to 30x30 requiring better measurement, reporting of management effectiveness in protected land and to invest in improving cross sector understanding of the factors preventing it.
- 2.3 In July 2024, Members and staff undertook training workshops on climate change adaptation. Supported by colleagues and funding from The University of Sheffield, the events brought together Members, Cultural Heritage academics, writers, artists and experts from Natural England to explore the use of alternative decision frameworks such as Resist-Accept-Direct (RAD) and Adaptive Release (AR), as the world gets warmer in the next decades.
- 2.4 At the Authority meeting on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2024, Members were provided with an update on the development of the AI mapping work, and noted that the main barrier to further development on the AI was ‘... funding and that with further funding it would be possible to develop this for other protected landscapes.’ (Item 84/24).
- 2.5 Throughout this period, Authority staff and university colleagues, sought to promote and progress funding the development of the Landscape Observatory. Presentations were given to Natural England, National Parks England (NPE), The Protected Landscapes Partnership (PLP), Defra, and the National Parks Officer groups on AI, RAD/AR, adaptive management. The value of a Landscape Observatory in bringing these advances together and apply them to earth science, cultural heritage, access and stakeholder feature management alongside nature recovery grew in recognition in this period.

### 3. Proposals

- 3.1 April 2025 NPE Director Jayne Butler secured funding from Defra to support work across a range of strategic projects for protected landscapes, including the establishment of the Landscape Observatory led by NPE and the PLP. This programme provides funding to the Authority's Strategy and Performance Team to lead the Landscape Observatory project, staff from across the PLP family to deliver project elements and the large scale data processing and analysis needed for AI development.
- 3.2 The funding provides for 4 main workstreams under the Landscape Observatory in 2025/26.
1. The establishment of the Landscape Observatory, its Board and Steering Group.
  2. Begin the process of scaling up AI land cover mapping to cover more Protected Landscapes.
  3. Explore the potential for rapid condition assessment of Protected Landscape features using AI, digital modelling and field methodologies.
  4. Climate change adaptation decision making and prioritisation using RAD/AR.
- 3.3 The funding is to be spent in three ways – an element for the Authority, some for contracts that the Authority will let, and the final funding will be distributed to other protected landscapes. The contribution to the Authority will be for temporary additional staff, and will be on a full cost recovery basis. This will secure and increase the corporate overhead income into the Authority in 2025/26, covering enabling services. External expenditure will be mainly on contracted professional fees for data processing, scientific and analytical work.
- 3.4 The acceptance and approval to spend the Landscape Observatory funding provides much needed additional capacity to develop the groundbreaking work of the Strategy and Performance Team, and maintains capacity to deliver their Authority work.

### 5. Recommendations

1. **That acceptance of funding for the Landscape Observatory project, as described in this report, of up to £550,000 for 2025-2026 is approved. Approval of the terms of funding is delegated to the Head of Resources in consultation with the Finance Manager/Chief Finance Officer (or such other person appointed under S151 of the Local Government Act 1972).**
2. **That authority be delegated to the Authority Solicitor to enter into and determine the terms and conditions of the funding agreement for the project in the best interests of the Authority.**
3. **That approval be granted to incur expenditure up to £550,000 as detailed in the report, pursuant to Part 3, C3.(c) of Standing Orders, subject to compliance with the Contract Procedure Rules and Standing Orders generally.**
4. **That authority be delegated to the Authority Solicitor to enter into and determine the terms and conditions of any contracts and/or agreements required for the project, subject to compliant procurement exercises being carried out as required in line with Standing Orders and in the best interests of the Authority.**

- 5. That this project be monitored by the Audit, Budget, and Project Risk Management Group or any equivalent group or committee.**

**6. Corporate Implications**

a. Legal

Pursuant to section 65(5) of the Environment Act 1995, the Authority has power to do anything which is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive or incidental to the accomplishment of its statutory purposes. This project falls within the Authority's statutory purposes. This power is subject to any express statutory or public law constraints which should be considered holistically and as the project progresses.

As the funding for the project is anticipated to exceed the sum of £200,000, approval to accept the monies and thereafter to incur the expenditure is required to be submitted to this Committee, pursuant to Part 7, delegation 7.C-2(b) and Part 3, C3.(c), respectively.

b. Financial

The funding is for the financial year 2025-26. Plans are already being refined to ensure that we can allocate and spend the funding in the current financial year.

c. National Park Management Plan and Authority Plan

This will contribute to the National Park Management Plan aims of climate change and landscape and nature recovery, as it will provide a more robust evidence base.

d. Risk Management

The greatest risk to the delivery is being able to spend the funds in the current financial year. However, a spend profile is currently being refined, and the project will be tightly managed by the Strategy and Performance Manager and the project board.

e. Net Zero

This report doesn't directly contribute to meeting net zero. However, it will assist in taking forward the climate focused adaptive management frameworks such as Resist-Accept-Direct .

**7. Background papers (not previously published)**

None.

**8. Appendices**

None.

**Responsible Officer, Job Title and Publication Date**

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