

LANDSCAPE OBSERVATORY FUNDING 2026-27

1. Purpose

- 1.1 For Members to approve the Authority entering into agreements with the Protected Landscape Partnership (PLP) and National Parks England (NPE) to accept funding (circa £650k) to continue to host Landscape Observatory in 2026–27. Landscape Observatory will continue to provide, and develop as, a platform for collaborative working between universities, protected landscapes, the Defra family, and national partners 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 in a protected landscape context for monitoring landscape change.

2. Context

- 2.1 At the Authority Meeting on 9th May 2025, Members approved acceptance of £500k in order to establish Landscape Observatory and deliver the programme in 2025/26 (item 59/25).
- 2.2 December 2025 the PLP Strategy Group gave very strong indication of intention to fund Landscape Observatory workstreams in 2026/27 commenting:

Landscape Observatory has taken the PLP and the sector by storm and we are very excited to be able to continue to support this ambitious programme. Strategy Group are particularly supportive of broadening the scope of mapping to include assets like heritage, and would like to see LO continue to work collaboratively across workstreams and support other projects such as the 'Developing a rapid condition assessment methodology'.

Funding is dependent on final PLP/NPE grant agreement with Defra.

- 2.3 This programme provides funding to the Authority's Strategy and Performance Team to lead and deliver Landscape Observatory project development and workstreams.
- 2.4 A full report on Landscape Observatory delivery in the first year of operation will be presented to the members forum at the February 27th meeting.

3. Proposals

- 3.1 The funding provides for continuation of the 4 main workstreams of the Landscape Observatory in 2026/27.
1. Development of Landscape observatory scope and funding base via the Board.
 2. Continue scaling up AI land cover mapping to cover more Protected Landscapes.
 3. Develop rapid condition assessment of Protected Landscape features using AI, digital modelling and field methodologies.
 4. Climate change adaptation decision making and prioritisation using adaptive management techniques incorporating RAD/AR.
- 3.2 The funding is to be spent in three ways – an element for the Authority, some for contracts that the Authority will let, with the remainder used to support collaborative working and knowledge exchange between protected landscapes and partners. 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 2026/27, covering enabling services. External expenditure will be mainly on contracted professional fees for data processing, scientific and analytical work.

- 3.3 The acceptance and approval to spend Landscape Observatory funding provides much needed additional capacity to continue to develop the groundbreaking work of the Strategy and Performance Team, and maintains the capacity to deliver their Authority work.

4. Recommendations

- 1. That acceptance of funding for Landscape Observatory project workstreams, as described in this report, of up to £650,000 for 2026-2027 is approved. Approval of the terms of funding is delegated to the Head of Resources in consultation with the Chief Finance Officer.**
- 2. That authority be delegated to the Authority Solicitor to enter into and determine the terms and conditions of the funding agreement and all other legal documentation required for the project in the best interests of the Authority.**
- 3. That approval be granted to incur expenditure up to £650,000 as detailed in the report, pursuant to Part 3, C3.(c), subject to compliance with the Contract Procedure Rules and Standing Orders.**
- 4. That this project be monitored by Resources committee and progress reported annually to the members forum.**

5. Corporate Implications

a. Legal

i) 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.

ii) Pursuant to section 112 of the Local Government Act 1972, the Authority has power to appoint officers on such reasonable terms and conditions as is considered necessary for the proper performance of the Authority's functions.

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

b. Financial

The funding is for the financial year 2026-27. 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 project risks 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 the Resist-Accept-Direct framework.

6. Background papers (not previously published)

None.

7. Appendices

None.

Responsible Officer, Job Title and Publication Date

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