

Proposal to Create a Chilterns Land Management Fund

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Summary: It is proposed that the Board creates a land management fund of up to £30,000, drawn from reserves, to support land management which contributes directly to the conservation and enhancement of the landscape.

Purpose of Paper: To seek Board support for the creation of a Chilterns Land Management Fund

Background

1. Many of the features considered to be characteristic of the Chilterns were created by viable economic farming and forestry such as chalk downland, hedgerows, beech woodland and farm ponds. They have all long since ceased to form part of a commercial enterprise and their management has increasingly relied on public grants, ownership by public and voluntary bodies and cross subsidy by private owners from the profitable parts of their business.
2. The public sector support has primarily been given in the form of Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS) grants operated by Natural England, Woodland Management and Planting Grants offered by the Forestry Commission and Wildlife Enhancement Scheme grants for Sites of Special Scientific Interest, operated by Natural England. Those grants are under financial pressure and can no longer be expected to cover as significant an area of land as might have been hoped for when they were introduced.
3. The exception is the Entry Level Scheme of the ESS but that only provides a basic grant to encourage good management and does not provide financial support for special measures. As previously reported to the Board the funds available for the Higher Level Scheme are severely constrained and it is unlikely that even 0.5% of the Chilterns farmland will newly qualify each year.
4. The grant schemes operate a selection process often based, for example, on a range of features or on achievement of a series of management objectives which tends to favour larger areas.
5. It is therefore proposed that the Board creates a fund to support small scale but high impact land management. Applicants would have to demonstrate how it helps conserve and enhance the Chilterns AONB and why they are not able to qualify for other grant schemes or why they are not appropriate. Such projects have occasionally been supported by the Sustainable Development Fund, but that scheme is over subscribed and the Land Management Scheme would enable the SDF to target resources to other types of project as discussed in Item 9.

6. The fund would have a total of up to £30,000 to award in grants. The scheme should operate in a flexible way in order to encourage applicants and to achieve the maximum overall benefit to the landscape. Preference would be given to supporting land management rather than preparation of plans, surveys etc.
7. In order to support a number of schemes the individual grants are unlikely to exceed £2,000 per site. As with the SDF grant, awards would not normally exceed 50% of the costs, but grant aid may be up to 75% for small scale community based projects. Consideration would also be given to accepting volunteer time or contributions in kind as matched funding. Applicants would have to undertake to maintain the site to the Board's satisfaction for a period of at least five years.
8. A pre-condition is that an appropriate management plan is drawn up for the site. In exceptional circumstances the grant could be used to seek expert technical advice if it is included in a proposal for active subsequent management. The grant would not be paid if there was no actual follow up action.
9. The scheme would be managed by the Board's staff. Up to 5% of the fund may need to be used to secure technical advice on applications. Where the scheme is contentious for any reason it may be referred to the SDF Panel for a decision. The decision to refer the application would rest with the Chief Officer.
10. Any proposal would be assessed against:
 - The AONB Management Plan
 - Biodiversity Action Plans
 - Landscape Character Assessments
 - Historic Landscape Characterisation
11. All management would have to accord with good practice, as promoted for example by Natural England and the Forestry Commission.
12. This proposal has been discussed with Natural England which is supportive. The Board has already applied for grant aid to Natural England to promote the management of Chalk Grassland, Common land, Chalk Streams and Small Woodlands (under 20 ha.). In most cases the funds, if approved, can be used to support land management but they will also need to be used for surveys, promotion, events and training.
13. The funds for the Land Management Scheme would be limited and, at this stage, should not be considered as an annual grant scheme. Ideally the scheme should be incorporated within the Board's overall annual grant application to Natural England. They have stated they do not have any funds available this forthcoming financial year to support such a scheme. The first few months of the land management scheme should be considered as a demonstration project to support a bid to NE for 2008-09. It is also hoped that

government funding for the Environmental Stewardship Schemes, especially the Higher Level Scheme, will improve thus supporting more land management than at current rates.

14. Whilst the scheme should be flexible and all type of land management scheme proposals be considered, the following type of proposals should be favoured:
 - Hedgerow restoration, enhancement and new planting.
 - Planting of hedgerow trees.
 - Planting of in-field trees.
 - Linking woodlands of known landscape and biodiversity value.
 - Conservation of landscape features (e.g. avenues).
 - Grassland management for conservation.
 - Pond management.
 - Scrub management and removal.
 - Management of small woodlands.
 - Management of sites important for the historic environment.
15. Grant will be directed to one off or capital works rather than recurring annual management and maintenance. Applications will be favoured from private landowners, community and voluntary groups. It is also suggested that applications will be favoured from locally based voluntary groups rather than national organisations.
16. It is not proposed to set specific targets for the Fund. At this stage the fund should be used in a flexible way to support the type of land management identified in paragraph 14. All proposals must be assessed and help to deliver the AONB Management Plan and other priorities identified, for example, in biodiversity action plans.
17. The Countryside Stewardship Scheme was introduced by the Countryside Commission in the early 1990s to promote these forms of land management to complement those supported via the agri-environment schemes. As the new Environmental Stewardship Scheme has been introduced the Countryside Stewardship Scheme will be phased out by 2013. These members have been undertaking sensitive land management for many years but are unlikely to gain entry to the Higher Level Scheme. These are the type of land owners the new scheme should appeal to for one-off works.
18. The possibility of creating this fund has been discussed with a number of organisations. The advice from them is that there is a need for such a scheme to encourage the management of those sites unlikely to be successfully entered to the Higher Level Scheme or Forestry Commission Grant Schemes.
19. The Board is able to afford to allocate £30,000 from reserves, which are neither restricted nor already earmarked for other projects, which are likely to be in the order of £260,000 as at 1 April 2007.

20. The future of the fund would be considered by the Board later in the year and reviewed in light of early progress, the likelihood of future funding from Natural England and enhanced provision of grant aid via the Environmental Stewardship scheme.

Recommendations

1. **A Chilterns Land Management Fund is created with an initial fund of £30,000.**
2. **Progress reports are presented to each Board meeting in 2007-08.**
3. **Authority to award grants of up to £2,000 is given to the Chief Officer.**
4. **The Chief Officer be authorised to refer what may regarded as contentious cases to the Sustainable Development Panel.**