Nature Networks Fund (round three)

See all updates

This fund aims to strengthen the resilience of Wales' network of protected land and marine sites, building capacity to strengthen and upscale future delivery for nature, and actively encouraging community engagement.

Page created: September 2023.

Important

Nature Networks Fund (round two) is no longer accepting applications.

Explore our available funding.

Is this the right programme for you?

- ?Are you an individual or organisation working with natural heritage in Wales?
- Do you need funding for planning or delivering a nature-based project?
- Does your project focus on improving wildlife and biodiversity in Wales in and around the network of protected sites?
- Do you require a grant between £50,000 and £250,000?

If you answered?**yes**?to these questions, then the?**Nature Networks Fund**?is for you.

Overview

The aim of the Nature Networks Fund is to improve the condition and resilience of?**Wales'?network of protected land and marine sites**. It is a key element of the delivery of the Welsh Government's wider Nature Networks Programme.

Improving the condition of and connectivity between protected sites enables them to function better as?**nature networks**. Nature networks are vital, resilient areas where habitats and species can thrive and expand. Restoring connectivity in these networks will:

- prevent further declines in species and habitat condition
- support nature?recovery
- enhance capacity to adapt to the climate crisis

The protection of sites is reliant on strong organisations, good governance and robust project planning. Therefore,?the Nature Networks Fund will also **support project development and capacity building** for future nature recovery projects. This work may include (but is not restricted to):

- partnership development

- landowner/community consultation and engagement
- ecological surveying
- feasibility studies
- scheme design
- other preparatory work for future capital projects

Capacity building can help project developers and partners to demonstrate outcomes, create robust business models that have the potential to attract investment and provide an evidence base to facilitate the uptake and innovation of new approaches.

This fund also supports the active involvement of communities in and around protected sites. This can be fundamental to the long-term success of nature recovery projects, as well as often having wider benefits for health and wellbeing for people.

You can submit a maximum of **two** applications to the Nature Networks Fund: one for capital project delivery and one for project development/capacity building. Projects should be for a maximum of two years, although we anticipate development/capacity building projects will be shorter.

What is the protected sites network?

The protected sites network covers Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas, National Nature Reserves, Ramsar sites and Marine Conservation Zones. To check whether land or sea is included within these definitions, please?visit the Natural Resources Wales website?and the Wales Environmental Information Portal.?

Application deadline

12 noon on 23 November 2023

Once you have read the guidance below, visit our application portal to apply

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Aims of the fund

Through the Nature Networks Fund, we want to support:

- Action on protected sites or the ecological networks that support them. The project should also?demonstrate?the sustainable management of natural resources across Wales. This can include action outside of protected sites that will benefit the network as a whole (see ‘What we expect from projects’ below).
- Action that local communities can actively participate in and benefit from. This includes supporting active involvement?with a diverse range of people and communities (particularly under-served groups) to increase the network of people engaged with nature, and with building the resilience of protected sites and the ecological networks that support them.
- Development activity that enables organisations to build their capacity and evidence base to plan nature recovery projects that will benefit the network and reach under-served communities in the future. This could include

building capability to attract financial investment into nature recovery projects to enable scaling up of delivery.

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Who can apply?

The scheme is open to all private landowners and organisations working with natural heritage in Wales. You must demonstrate that you are aware of and have, or be working towards obtaining, the right permissions, licences and consents to undertake activity on the protected site network or surrounding areas. The area you are improving must be in Wales, but you/your organisation can be based anywhere in the UK.

What we expect from projects

Activities must deliver direct benefits to the protected site network now or in the future. This will usually involve improvements directly on a site or on surrounding areas that will improve the condition of features?and connectivity of sites. It can also include:

- improvements to accessibility of a site
- supporting organisations to reach under-served communities
- Supporting organisations or individuals who are (or will be in the future) involved with projects on sites and/or ecological networks that support them. This could include planning, staffing, training, apprenticeships, green financing, acquiring evidence through surveys, governance reviews, etc.

Projects can operate on land/sea both within and outside of the protected sites themselves. For example, projects outside of protected sites might:

- improve ecological connectivity between specific protected sites?
- act to benefit habitats or species outside of protected sites where they are also features of associated protected sites
- focus on a species which isn’t a feature of a site, so long as it delivers benefits to the condition, connectivity or ecosystem functioning of specific sites and their features
- benefit a habitat or species which currently isn’t a feature of a site, but which evidence suggests could become so
- be based around areas which are not currently statutorily protected, but which have similarly high biodiversity importance
- reduce external impacts on protected sites to improve condition, for example from nitrogen deposition or colonisation of INNS
- restore ecosystem functions around protected sites at a landscape scale

In each of these cases, an application must include an evidence-based justification for the project’s eligibility.?The specific sites and features benefiting from the project should be named and the ecological rationale behind it explained.

You will be expected to demonstrate that your planned project delivers against the management objectives or conservation objectives for the relevant site.?

We will be looking to fund a combination of capital and revenue activity across a portfolio of projects. To understand more, please see ‘Preparing your application’ below.

Identifying potential sites for connectivity

Action to improve connectivity between protected sites will be most effective if it is located to enhance existing patterns of connectivity in the landscape. Action is likely to be most effective if it consolidates, expands or makes linkages between habitat networks.

The Nature Networks Map is available to help with this and can be accessed through DataMap Wales and Wales Environmental Information Portal.

- DataMap Wales: Habitat Networks and Priority Ecological Networks
- Wales Environmental Information Portal. Please select ‘explore’ from the main menu, then click on the ‘Ecosystem Resilience’ tab.

The maps show modelled networks for a range of habitats that indicate how well habitat patches are likely to be connected across Wales and the Priority Ecological Networks. They indicate likely existing connectivity specifically between and around protected sites for different habitats. The maps also present a generic buffer around all protected sites to draw attention to the importance of action in close proximity to existing sites.

It is important to note that these maps are modelled outputs and are intended to inform, rather than to prescribe where action goes. Other model outputs may be available, and there are other connecting features in the landscape, such as watercourses, hedges or even road verges, that could be considered when planning projects.

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Key dates

- programme opens?**20 September 2023**
- application deadline:**?12 noon on 23 November 2023**
- applicants informed of decisions by?**1 March 2024**
- projects must be complete by?**1 March 2026**

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Preparing your application

What costs can you apply for?

It is important that you identify which of your project costs are capital and which are revenue. Applications can include any of the following –

Capital costs:

- the purchase of items associated with land management activities, such as trees, hedge plants, fencing and capital works items required to deliver the outcomes
- general costs incurred in installing the capital works, which include contractor costs for labour and use of equipment
- the purchase of machinery and equipment up to the market value of the asset
- the purchase, design and installation of interpretation panels, including translation costs
- the acquisition or development of computer software and acquisitions of patents, licenses, copyrights and trademarks
- consultant and architect fees, other technical design costs, site surveys and professional fees such as fees related to environmental and economic sustainability
- Planning application fees and costs. Fees incurred for statutory permissions, licences and consents are eligible, provided they are essential for the delivery of the capital project. These can be incurred before the start of the project but must be incurred after March 2024 and must be evidenced in the same way as other expenditure.
- contingency funding for additional capital costs (we recommend approximately 10% contingency)
- inflation funding to allow for cost increases in future years of project delivery

Revenue costs

- staff time
- full cost recovery or core organisational costs towards project delivery
- activity costs (events, refreshments, room hire, etc)
- evaluation
- project planning (feasibility studies, ecological surveying or baselining, landowner/community consultation, governance reviews, consultancy advice on green finance)
- training and apprenticeships costs
- translation costs
- contingency funding for additional revenue costs (we recommend approximately 10% contingency)

You may not include future costs for ongoing maintenance or running costs beyond the duration of the project.

Welsh language

You must consider the Welsh language in all aspects of your work and tell us how you will promote and support the Welsh language and reflect the bilingual nature of Wales.

You will need to show how you will offer bilingual provision in your project budget and plan. You should include the budget for translation under the 'Other' costs category in the project costs section of the application form.

If you would like more information on how to do this, please explore?our guidance for delivering a Welsh bilingual project. You can also get in touch with our Welsh language support team at?cymorthcymraeg@heritagefund.org.uk.

Supporting documents

The following supporting documents must be uploaded with your application form. File sizes should be smaller than 20MB.?**Please note**?that some of the supporting documents required for this programme are different to those stated in the online application form.

For this programme, we require the following documents:

- governing document (mandatory if your organisation has one)
- Audited or verified accounts (mandatory if you are an organisation). If you are an individual, a newly formed organisation or do not have accounts less than 12 months old, we will require bank statements in the same name as your application for the last three full months.
- project plan (mandatory for all projects) –?you can download a?template from our project plan page
- partnership agreement (mandatory if you are working in a partnership)
- job descriptions (mandatory if you are creating new jobs or apprenticeships as part of your project)
- briefs for commissioned work (if applicable)?
- images, including at least one map showing the locations of capital works?
- calculation of full cost recovery (if applicable)?
- evidence of support, such as letters, emails or videos of support (optional)

Third party ownership requirements

Your project's land (which may include different plots of land over a wide area) may be owned by a third party or multiple third parties (including private owners). If this is the case, legal agreements should be put in place between you and each landowner.

There is no prescribed form of agreement, but we have specific requirements which should be included in any third party landowner agreements. At a minimum, the landowner agreements should include the following:

- details of the parties
- confirmation as to how the land is held (freehold or leasehold)
- a description of the property (including plans)
- covenants on the part of the landowner to maintain the land and provide public access in accordance with the terms of the grant (as applicable)
- a provision that any onward disposal should be subject to the third party agreement
- that the agreement will last from the start of the work on the third party land until 10 years following project completion

You will need to provide us with copies of the landowner agreements to make sure you are compliant with these requirements. The landowner agreements will need to be completed and in place before grant money is released for work on each plot of land owned by a third party. In some circumstances,?we might require the owner to sign up to our? terms and conditions.

You may include the costs of adapting and setting up any third party agreements, including the cost of taking legal advice, as part of the costs in your application.

Licences, permissions and consents

Applicants must demonstrate in their application that they are aware of, and working towards obtaining, the relevant permissions and licenses to carry out their project.

Match funding

There are no requirements for cash or non-cash contributions for the Nature Networks Fund. However, any cash, non-cash or volunteer contributions you provide can add to the impact and value for money of your project, which will be considered in assessment.

You may not use this grant as match funding for a project from The National Lottery Heritage Fund, or vice versa.

Evaluation

We recommend that you consider evaluation from the beginning of your project. The more carefully projects budget for their evaluation, the higher the quality of the final report.?We have recommended minimum spends on evaluation. You can find further information in?our evaluation guidance.?

At the end of your project, we will expect you to submit an evaluation report. This needs to be submitted before we pay the last 10% of your grant. This should include details of how ecosystem resilience and/or habitat connectivity has benefitted (or will benefit in the future) from the investment. You should share relevant monitoring data and methodology.

We will also expect you to share geo-spatial data on where your project has worked to enhance NRW data sets. Further guidance will be supplied on this if you are awarded a grant.

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How to apply

You can apply as soon as you're ready. The application deadline is 12 noon?on **23 November 2023**.

Before you apply, make sure you read our?application help notes?carefully and check that you are eligible.

Please note:?the Heritage Fund uses the same application forms across a variety of our?programmes.?Some questions need to be answered differently for this programme, so you must carefully read the?application help notes?to understand what information is required where.?Please?**do not**?use the help icons embedded in the online form.

We have designed the application process to be as straightforward as possible and we are requesting only the information we need.

When you're ready, apply for grants between £50,000 and £250,000

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Application help notes and templates

- application help notes for grants between £50,000 and £250,000
- receiving a grant guidance

For all applications, you need to submit a project plan with your application – you can download a?template from our project plan page.

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After you apply

Assessing your application

We will assess eligible applications on the following criteria:

- contribution to nature recovery of protected sites in Wales
- engagement of a wider range of people in nature
- the number?of jobs/apprenticeships/traineeships offered, especially for young people
- value for money
- long-term sustainability

Balancing criteria

If we receive more good quality applications than we can fund, we will prioritise projects which will:

- work in areas that most strongly support the delivery of Resilient Ecological Networks within the Nature Networks Programme as identified from the Nature Networks Map
- represent a?geographical and biodiverse spread across Wales and across all?Nature Networks Fund (rounds one and two)?projects
- provide active public engagement with nature
- provide a combination of capital and revenue projects across the portfolio

If your application is successful

We will **notify applicants of our decisions by 1 March 2024**. We will provide additional guidance on our monitoring requirements and legal conditions at that point.

All grants under £100,000?will be paid in three instalments. You will receive 50% of your grant once you have received permission to start your project. You will receive the next 40% at the midpoint of your project, when the first 50% has been spent. We withhold the final 10% of your grant until the project is completed.

Grants of £100,000 and over will be paid in arrears, in regular instalments, on receipt of evidence of expenditure.

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Additional information

Subsidy control

It is an applicant’s responsibility to confirm that their application has been considered and checked in relation to subsidy control rules.

At the point of publication of this guidance, public funding for organisations is no longer governed by the European Commission’s state aid rules. This is as set out in Article 107–109 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union and associated regulations and guidelines.?

Instead, all grant decisions made after 11pm on the 31 December 2020 are subject to the new UK subsidy control regime. The principles of which are set out in Chapter Three (Subsidies) of Title XI (Level Playing Field) of Part Two (Trade, Transport, Fisheries and Other Arrangements) of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement.

There is expected to be further guidance, a consultation and possibly new legislation in this area to build upon those principles. You will be expected to comply with the principles of the subsidy control regime and to satisfy any future requirements. Agreements that have been entered into will be reviewed and varied accordingly.?We?reserve the right to impose further requirements and additional conditions in relation to this matter.?

As an applicant, it is your responsibility to check whether state aid or subsidy control clearance is required.?You should seek independent legal advice if you are unsure whether a project will require clearance.

Working on private land

Many designated habitats and species occur on land that is owned by private individuals or for-profit organisations. Projects can deliver works or activities on private land so long as any public benefit clearly outweighs any potential private gain and provided subsidy control rules are not breached.

For example, we could fund the restoration of hedgerows or create farm ponds, provided they do not add financial value to the land or convey any significant indirect financial benefit that could breach subsidy control rules.

When working on private land, we understand there may be limits to public access. We do, however, encourage public access whenever practical. We also accept that physical access may not always be appropriate or desirable for habitat conservation reasons. If improved access is possible, you may also wish to apply for funding for new infrastructure, for example paths or hides, that can help accommodate increased public access.

Works can take place on land owned by a government department or arm’s length body provided they do not financially benefit from any investment.?If an environmental charity or partnership were to undertake work on such land, then it can only be for works that would not be covered by any statutory responsibility.

Property ownership

Land and buildings for capital works

You must either own the freehold or have a lease which meets the following requirements:

- **not-for-profit organisation**:?your lease must have 10?years left to run after the project completion date
- **private owner**:?your lease must have at least 10 years left to run after the project completion date
- we?**do not**?accept leases with break clauses (these give one or more parties to the lease the right to end the lease in certain circumstances)
- we?**do not**?accept leases with forfeiture on insolvency clauses (these give the landlord the right to end the lease if the tenant becomes insolvent)
- **you must?**be able to sell on, mortgage or sub-let the whole or part of your lease, but if we award you a grant you must first have our permission to do any of these

Land or buildings in third party ownership

If a third party owns the land (which may include a project partner) we will either require the owner to sign up to your grant contract directly with us or require you to enter into a legally binding agreement with the owner.

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Further help and resources

- We ran a webinar to answer applicants' questions in October. Read the questions and our answers about Nature Networks Fund (round three).
- for technical support or assistance with accessibility, please contact our customer service team on? enquire@heritagefund.org.uk
- our good practice guidance provides advice on a range of topics to help you achieve a high-quality project, including conducting evaluation
- our nature and landscapes guidance can help you design and deliver projects
- area statements from Natural Resources Wales?outline the key challenges and initiatives taking place within each area of Wales
- For activities on or adjacent to a protected site, advice should be sought in advance from Natural Resources Wales. Please email?sitesactions@cyfoethnaturiolcymru.gov.uk for advice on management objectives and consents/permissions.
- the Nature Network Map can help inform the location of activities to develop connectivity and is available through DataMap and Wales Environmental Information Portal (WEIP):
  – DataMap Wales: Habitat Networks and Priority Ecological Networks
  – Wales Environmental Information Portal. Please select ‘explore’ from the main menu, then click on the ‘Ecosystem Resilience’ tab.
- for more information about how your data will be processed under this grant programme, please?see our privacy policy

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Making a complaint

We understand that you may be disappointed with a?decision.?There is no right to appeal or re-apply for the Nature Networks Fund.

We can only review our decision if you can make a formal complaint about how we have dealt with your application. We have a two-stage complaint process for this fund. We will only be able to consider and investigate the complaint if you can demonstrate that:

- we did not follow the published procedures for assessing your application
- we have misunderstood a significant part of your application
- we did not take notice of relevant information

A formal complaint must be made in writing by emailing?enquire@heritagefund.org.uk?within 10?working days of receiving your application decision. We aim to acknowledge your complaint within three?working days.

Your complaint will initially be reviewed by an area/nation Director from The National Lottery Heritage Fund who is independent of recommendation and decision panels for this fund.?We aim to communicate a decision within 15 working days from when you submitted your complaint.

For assistance, contact our Customer Services Team on 020 7591 6044 or?enquire@heritagefund.org.uk.

Changes to this guidance?

We will regularly review this guidance and respond to user feedback. We reserve the right to make changes as required. We will communicate any changes as quickly as possible via this webpage.?

The Nature Networks Fund (round three) is being delivered by the Heritage Fund, on behalf of the Welsh Government and in partnership with Natural Resources Wales.