



Big Chalk Nature Recovery Fund

Applicant Guidance - August 2026

Capital grants from £1,000 to exceptional amounts above £100,000 for nature recovery across the chalk and limestone landscapes of southern England

Introduction

The chalk and limestone landscapes of southern England are amongst our most important places for wildlife. They are home to species-rich grasslands, ancient woodlands, chalk streams, farmland habitats and wetlands. These landscapes are also important for local communities. However, many of these habitats are under pressure and need urgent action to help them recover and flourish.

At Big Chalk, we believe nature recovery works best when local people, organisations and partnerships work together across large areas. To support this, we have created the Big Chalk Nature Recovery Fund. The fund supports projects that help restore nature across chalk and limestone landscapes of southern England and contributes to the Government's 30by30 target (see information box below) of managing 30% of land effectively for nature by 2030.

The Big Chalk Nature Recovery Fund provides capital funding for projects of all sizes.

Grants start at £1,000 and can exceed £100,000 for exceptional projects that deliver large-scale environmental benefits. We recognise nature recovery needs investment at every level, from local action to supporting major landscape-scale initiatives. We are particularly focussed on projects that help create and expand a network of nature-rich habitats across chalk and limestone landscapes.

Whether you are planning a small community project or a large-scale conservation initiative, there is a funding route to suit your needs.

Applications are assessed throughout the year on a rolling basis.

After reading this guidance, please submit an expression of interest. If your expression of interest is successful, you will be invited to discuss your project with one of our fund managers and invited to submit a full application.



About the Fund

Fund overview

- **Total funding:** Approximately £2 million is available for capital projects during 2026/27
- **Grant size:** Funding starts at £1,000, with exceptional grants of more than £100,000 available for larger projects.
- **Deadline:** Funding should be committed within the relevant financial year. We encourage funded work to be completed by 31 March 2027, but we can be flexible where there is a strong ecological or practical reason for a delay, if the funding has already been committed.
- **Multi-year projects:** Grants can be formally awarded for work completed by 31 March 2027. As Big Chalk has a three-year funding agreement with Defra, we can also make provisional funding offers for multi-year projects running until 31 March 2029, subject to Defra confirming funding for future years.
- **Payments:** Grant payments will be made in agreed stages, as set out in your grant agreement.
- **Eligible Costs:** Funding is available for capital costs only. This means costs for creating, improving or restoring assets that deliver long-term benefits for nature.
- **Flexible funding options:** Grants can be used as match funding, top-up funding alongside other non-government funding sources, or in some cases to cover the full cost of a project.
- **Value Added Tax (VAT):** If your organisation cannot reclaim VAT, the non-recoverable VAT element of your project costs can be included as an eligible grant-funded expense.

What makes Big Chalk different?

The Big Chalk Nature Recovery Fund has been designed to make it easier for you to deliver projects that benefit nature.

- **Payment in stages:** Funding can be paid in agreed instalments throughout your project, helping with cash flow rather than requiring you to wait until all work is complete.
- **Support before you apply:** Our Fund Managers are available to discuss your ideas and help you develop a strong proposal before you submit an application.
- **Fast decision-making:** Applications are assessed quickly, with decisions typically made within 5 to 35 working days, depending on the size and complexity of the grant.
- **Expert-led assessment:** Funding decisions are made by a panel of experts representing the wide range of organisations and interests involved in the Big Chalk partnership.
- **Flexible funding options:** Grants can be used as match funding, top-up funding alongside other funding sources, or, where appropriate, to fund the full cost of a project.
- **A strategic approach to nature recovery:** We focus on supporting projects that enhance and expand existing habitats or strengthen the links between them.

Proportional Approach

The Fund uses a three-tier assessment process, that matches the application and assessment process to the size of your project. This helps smaller projects to be approved quickly, while more complex projects receive the level of assessment they require.

Small grants (£1,000 - £9,999)

Small grants are designed to support community groups and organisations delivering practical projects with local benefits.

- Simple and streamlined application process.
- Assessed by the Fund Managers.
- Decisions are normally made within two weeks of receiving a complete application.
- Assessment focuses on project delivery, value for money and benefits for nature.



Standard Grants (£10,000 to £100,000)

Standard grants support larger projects that can deliver significant environmental outcomes.

- Reviewed by the Big Chalk expert assessment panel.
- More detailed application and assessment process.
- Appropriate due diligence and project checks are carried out.
- Assessment considers both project quality, innovation, and its contribution to wider nature recovery objectives.

Exceptional grants (above £100,000)

Exceptional grants are intended for ambitious projects with the potential to deliver lasting, landscape-scale benefits.

- Enhanced review by the expert assessment panel.
- Assessment focuses on strategic importance and transformational impact.
- Additional specialist advice or external expert input may be sought where appropriate.

The assessment process for exceptional grants will reflect the scale and complexity of the project, while ensuring that decisions are made as efficiently as possible.

What Big Chalk wants to achieve

Strategic Outcomes

The Big Chalk Nature Recovery Fund supports projects that create, restore and improve habitats for wildlife, and help populations of rare or declining native species recover and thrive over the long term.

We are looking for projects that deliver one or more of the following outcomes:

- **Priority habitats restored, recreated, and connected**, including species-rich grasslands, chalk and limestone streams and rivers, and ancient woodlands.
- **Create varied habitat structure**, from open areas to scrub, trees and wetland features that provide a variety of living conditions to support a wide range of species
- **Habitat connectivity** enabling nature to respond to climate change, including strategically located farmland habitat creation
- **Support for rare and threatened species** through habitat creation, restoration and management that meets their long-term needs.
- **Innovation and shared learning**, that can be shared across the Big Chalk partnership and beyond.
- **Strategic, landscape-scale impact**, particularly where projects contribute to Local Nature Recovery Strategy priorities and demonstrate the value of collaborative working.
- **Greater capacity for nature recovery**, including investment in infrastructure, equipment and other capital assets that support long-term habitat restoration, monitoring and conservation activity.
- **Build long-term capacity and capability for nature recovery**, giving people and organisations the skills, resources and confidence to continue conservation work into the future.
- **Deliver wider benefits for people**, including improved wellbeing, stronger community connections and a greater sense of pride in local landscapes.
- **Contribute, where appropriate, to the Government's 30by30** (see information box next page) of managing 30% of land effectively for nature by 2030.

Successful projects will deliver lasting benefits for nature and contribute to a healthier, more resilient network of habitats across the chalk and limestone landscapes of southern England.



30by30 – What does it mean?

The UK Government has committed to ensuring 30% of land and sea is effectively managed for nature by 2030. Known as 30by30, it is a key part of our international commitment to halt biodiversity loss and support nature recovery.

The Big Chalk Nature Recovery Fund is supported by Defra and contributes to this ambition by funding projects that create, restore and improve habitats, support wildlife, and help ensure these benefits are sustained in the long term.

The criteria below describe what is needed for land to be recognised as being effectively managed for nature.

Purpose. The area should be managed with nature conservation as a clear and important objective. This does not have to be the only purpose of the site, but wildlife and nature recovery should be a priority.

Long-Term Protection. The environmental benefits created by the project should be protected for the long term. As a guide, the 30by30 framework expects sites to be secured for at least 20 years through legal agreements, management commitments or other effective arrangements.

Management and Control. The landowner, organisation or governing body should have the ability to deliver the management needed to achieve the project's nature conservation objectives.

Management Plan. There should be a management plan, or a similar document, that explains how the site will be managed and how it will contribute to nature recovery over time.

Monitoring and Learning. Projects should include appropriate monitoring and review. This helps demonstrate progress, measure outcomes, and ensure that management can be adapted where necessary to achieve the best results.

Progress and Outcomes. The site should already be delivering benefits for nature, or there should be clear evidence that the proposed actions will lead to measurable nature conservation outcomes in the future.

30by30 and your application

It is not a requirement to meet all of the 30by30 criteria to apply to Big Chalk Nature Recovery Fund. We recognise projects will be at different stages of development and not every one will be able to demonstrate all criteria from the outset.

When preparing your application, consider if and how your project meets these criteria and explain any long-term arrangements, management plans and monitoring commitments that will help secure lasting benefits for nature.

Where relevant, applicants should commit to the area in the proposal being formally recognised as a 30by30 Area or as making progress towards meeting the 30by30 criteria. This will not be relevant for every project, but it may strengthen an application where there is a clear long-term commitment to nature recovery.

You can find out more about 30by30 at [**30by30 on land: assessing whether land can contribute - GOV.UK**](#).



Who can apply?

Eligible organisations and individual

The Big Chalk Nature Recovery Fund is open to organisations helping to deliver nature recovery in the Big Chalk area.

- **Environmental organisations**, such as Wildlife Trusts, conservation charities, environmental NGOs.
- **Farming and land management**, such as farm clusters, individual farmers, and collaborative landowner groups.
- **Community groups**, such as community land trusts, volunteer conservation groups and other local community-led initiatives.
- **Councils, parish and town** councils and local authorities.
- **Protected Landscape organisations**, such as National Landscapes, South Downs National Park and National Trails.
- **Educational institutions** that manage land, such as schools, colleges and universities.
- **Managers or tenants of publicly owned land**. Government departments cannot apply directly, but organisations managing land on their behalf may be eligible.
- **Partnerships and collaborations** involving two or more organisations working together to achieve shared nature recovery goals.

We welcome applications from both experienced conservation organisations and groups that are new to delivering nature recovery projects, provided they can demonstrate a clear plan and the ability to deliver the proposed work.

Eligibility requirements

To be eligible for funding, applicants must meet the following requirements:

- Be a legitimate organisation, business, charity, public body or community group with appropriate governance arrangements in place.
- Have a UK bank account in the name of the organisation or business applying for the grant.
- Deliver a project within the Big Chalk Programme Area. Projects relating to chalk or limestone streams and rivers that originate within, or are closely connected to, the programme area may also be considered. An interactive map is available on our website.
- Hold appropriate insurance cover for the activities being undertaken.
- Own the land, hold a tenancy for at least a further 5 years, or have clear written permission from the landowner to carry out the proposed work.
- Be able to demonstrate that the land can continue to be managed for the intended conservation outcomes until at least 2032.
- Be able to complete any Year 1 capital works by 31 March 2027 (unless otherwise agreed for ecological or operational reasons).
- Have, or be able to access, the skills, knowledge and capacity needed to successfully deliver the project.

Grant rates

The Big Chalk Nature Recovery Fund is supported by Defra funding. Grant rates are, by default, aligned with those set out in Defra schemes, including the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme for transparency, accountability and consistency.



We recognise some projects involve specialist or bespoke work that may not fit neatly in existing funding rates. Where this is the case, we may be able to consider higher or lower grant rates, provided you can demonstrate why the work is necessary and supply appropriate technical evidence and cost information. Justification must be based on robust evidence against the exceptional circumstances and demonstrate value for money.

For any bespoke item or activity funded on an actual-cost basis, you will need to provide:

- A clear and detailed specification of the proposed work.
- A breakdown of costs.
- Evidence that the activity will deliver defined and measurable outcomes for nature recovery.
- Three quotes for any individual item or contract costing more than £5,000. If obtaining three quotes is not practical, for example because the work is highly specialised or there are only a limited number of suppliers, we may accept fewer than three quotes where a clear justification is provided.

The proportion of project costs that can be funded will vary depending on the nature of the project and the benefits it delivers.

As a guide:

- Projects that provide a clear commercial benefit to the applicant are likely to receive 40% grant funding.
- Projects that primarily deliver public benefits for nature, with limited private benefit, may receive a higher level of 80% funding.
- In exceptional circumstances, where a project delivers significant public benefit and provides little or no commercial benefit to the applicant, funding of up to 100% of eligible costs may be considered.

The Big Chalk Nature Recovery Fund can support projects in a variety of ways.

We can act as the sole funder of a project, provide match funding alongside other eligible funding sources, or offer additional funding to increase the impact of an existing project.

Full project funding

In some cases, we can fund the full capital cost of a nature recovery project.

This option is suitable for projects that:

- Deliver clear and measurable benefits for nature recovery.
- Do not have a commercial benefit
- Range from small community-led initiatives through to large landscape-scale projects.

Match funding

We can provide funding alongside other funding sources to help make projects possible.

This can:

- Complement funding you have received from other sources
- Help bridge funding gaps and enable projects to proceed.
- Strengthen funding packages by demonstrating support from multiple partners.
- Improve project viability and value for money.
- Increase the overall scale and impact of a project.



Top-up funding for greater impact

We can provide additional funding to expand or enhance an existing project.

Top-up funding could be used to:

- Increase the scale of habitat creation or restoration.
- Extend a project's geographical reach.
- Add innovative elements that provide additional benefits for nature.
- Deliver outcomes that would not be possible within the original project budget.

The key requirement is the additional investment must deliver a clear increase in nature recovery outcomes and represent good value for money

Examples of effective top-up funding:

Examples of how top-up funding might be used include:

- Expanding a pond restoration project by creating surrounding wildlife-rich habitat and linking it to nearby woodland.
- Increasing the area of grassland restoration to deliver greater ecological benefits at a landscape scale.
- Adding new wetland features to a chalk stream project to help filter pollutants before they reach the watercourse and to demonstrate approaches that could be used elsewhere.

When considering match or top-up funding, applicants should clearly explain how Big Chalk funding will add value and deliver additional benefits beyond those already secured through existing funding.

What makes a grant 'exceptional'?

We may consider grants of more than £100,000 for projects that can clearly explain in their application that there are significant benefits for nature at a larger scale.

Exceptional projects are likely to demonstrate one or more of the following:

- Landscape-scale impact, benefiting large areas or multiple sites.
- Strategic connectivity, helping to strengthen links between important habitats or supporting nature recovery across wider landscapes.
- Innovation at scale, testing new approaches that could be replicated elsewhere.
- Strong partnerships, bringing together multiple organisations, land managers or funding sources to achieve greater impact.
- Excellent value for money, delivering significantly greater benefits for nature per pound than typical projects.

What sort of work will Big Chalk fund?

Capital projects only

The Big Chalk Nature Recovery Fund supports capital projects that create, restore or improve assets that deliver long-term benefits for nature.

This includes projects that:

- Create or restore wildlife-rich habitats.
- Support the recovery of rare or threatened species.
- Provide infrastructure or equipment that enables nature recovery work to take place and enable long-term management of habitats.

We cannot fund routine running costs or other revenue expenditure.

Staff costs may be eligible where they are directly linked to the delivery of a capital project, such as obtaining the required legal consents, overseeing habitat creation, managing specialist contractors or delivering specific capital works.



What we cannot fund

As the Big Chalk Nature Recovery Fund is a capital fund, there are some types of costs and activities that are not eligible for support.

Revenue costs:

We cannot fund day-to-day running costs or ongoing operational expenses, including:

- Utility bills, rent or office overheads.
- Staff costs that are not directly related to the delivery of a capital project.
- Training courses, conferences or professional development activities.
- Vehicle running costs, including fuel, insurance, servicing and maintenance.

Maintenance and repair:

- Repair of existing infrastructure
- Maintenance of existing assets
- Replacement of equipment or infrastructure on a like-for-like basis
- Renovation works that do not deliver a significant enhancement for nature recovery.

Non-capital activities:

- Stand-alone research projects, feasibility studies or strategic planning exercises.
- Monitoring activities that do not require the purchase of new equipment or the creation of a capital asset.
- Land management activities that are not capital investments.

Visitor and educational infrastructure:

- Visitor access facilities
- Interpretation boards and signage
- Educational or visitor-focused infrastructure

If you are unsure whether a particular item or activity is eligible, please discuss it with the Fund Managers before applying. We recognise some projects involve a mix of capital and non-capital costs, and we are happy to help applicants understand what may be eligible for funding.

How to apply

Applications are assessed on a rolling basis. We encourage you to **submit an Expressions of Interest** as early as possible, as funding is limited and grants will be awarded throughout the year to eligible projects.

Application process:

1. Submit an Expression of Interest outlining your project idea.
2. Initial eligibility check (typically within 2 to 5 working days).

If eligible, you will be invited to **discuss your proposal with a Fund Manager**. This helps us identify any issues early and provide advice on developing a strong application.

3. You will then be **invited to complete the online application form** and submit the required supporting documents.
4. **Full assessment**, with timescales depending on the size and complexity of the grant requested.
5. **Decision notification**, normally within 48 hours of a funding decision being made.
6. **Grant agreement and due diligence checks**. Successful applicants will receive a grant agreement once any required due diligence has been completed.



Required documentation

All applications:

All applications require:

- Three competitive quotes (for any single cost item over £5,000) unless otherwise agreed (see Grant Rates overleaf)
- Site map showing project location with associated Rural Land Registry field number or grid reference
- Land ownership/permission evidence
- Activity permissions/consents (including planning permission where required)
- Baseline habitat condition assessment to support management objectives.
- Details of other active funding agreements for the project area, if applicable.

Enhanced documentation for larger or more complex projects:

- We may request additional information to support our assessment, such as evidence of successfully delivering similar externally funded capital projects, evidence of appropriate insurance, or further information about governance and financial management.
- We will normally undertake enhanced due diligence, which may include reviewing governance arrangements, financial controls, risk management and delivery capacity. We may ask to meet with senior representatives before making a decision.

While we anticipate taking some or all of these extra verification steps for exceptional grants over £100k, as appropriate, we might also ask for this sort of additional information if a smaller grant request is unusually complex or raises particular issues.

Additional documentation for top-up funding applications:

If you are applying for top-up funding, please also provide:

- Details of existing funding, including the source, value and activities covered.
- A clear explanation of how the additional funding will increase the project's impact.
- An integrated project plan showing how the existing and proposed funding will work together.
- Evidence the additional investment will deliver proportionately greater benefits for nature recovery.

How decisions are made

Assessment criteria

All applications are assessed using our 40/20/20/20 scoring framework, which balances the likely impact of the project with its delivery, value for money and long-term benefits.

1. Project outcomes (40%)

Nature recovery impact and measurable benefits – How well does the project contribute to Big Chalk's priorities? Can you clearly explain what the project will achieve, and how you will measure success? Will it help create more wildlife-rich habitat, improve habitat condition, strengthen connections between habitats, or support the recovery of rare and threatened native species? We will assess both the expected outcomes and the monitoring arrangements you have in place to demonstrate that those outcomes have been delivered. (15)

Strategic value – Does the project contribute to wider nature recovery objectives, such as Local Nature Recovery Strategy priorities, landscape-scale conservation, habitat enhancement or improved ecological resilience? Projects that support long-term nature recovery and contribute to the ambitions behind 30by30 are particularly welcomed. (10)

Innovation potential – Does the project test new approaches, develop new techniques or generate learning that could benefit others? (5)

Benefits beyond the site – Does the project help build skills, knowledge, capability, capacity, best practice, partnerships or collaboration that will support future nature recovery work? (5)

Benefits for people and communities – Where relevant, does the project improve access to quality green space, increase volunteering opportunities, support enhanced skills, confidence and wellbeing, strengthen community involvement or foster local pride in the landscape? (5)

Expectations are proportionate to the size of the grant requested. Larger grants will be expected to demonstrate a greater scale of impact and wider strategic benefits.

2. Value for money (20%)

We want to ensure funding delivers the greatest possible benefit for nature and represents good value for public money.

Cost-effectiveness - Does the project deliver strong outcomes relative to the funding requested? (5)

Funding rates - Are the costs and grant rates requested broadly in line with comparable Defra-funded schemes? Where higher rates are proposed, is there a strong and well-evidenced justification? (5)

Reasonable and justified costs - Are all costs necessary, realistic and clearly explained? (5)

Leverage and additionality - Where match funding or top-up funding is involved, does our investment increase the overall impact of the project and help unlock additional benefits? (5)

3. Sustainability and legacy (20%)

We want to support projects that deliver lasting benefits and continue contributing to nature recovery long after the grant has been spent.

Long-term security – Does the area have protection for at least 20 years through legal or other effective arrangements? (5)

Management and control – Does the applicant have the ability, permissions and commitment needed to manage the site and achieve the intended conservation outcomes? (5)

Future management – Does the application demonstrate clear and realistic management planning for habitats and species after project delivery? For example, how will newly created grassland be grazed or managed, and how will newly planted trees be maintained? Where the project creates physical infrastructure, such as fencing, water supplies, scrapes or other conservation assets, are there plans and resources in place to maintain them? (5)

Long-term legacy – Will the project create lasting benefits for habitats, species, organisations, partnerships, communities or future conservation activity? (5)

All funded projects will be expected to maintain the assets created through the grant for a minimum of five years.

4. Delivery capacity (20%)

We need confidence projects can be delivered successfully and applicants have the capacity to manage public funding responsibly.

Relevant experience and expertise – Do you have the skills, knowledge and experience needed to deliver the project and sustain both the funded works and their benefits over the longer term? Or do you have access to people who do? (5)

Project planning and timescales – Is there a realistic delivery plan, including any permissions, procurement and seasonal constraints? We recognise that ecological and operational factors may sometimes require flexibility. (5)

Risk management – Have the main risks been identified, and are appropriate mitigation measures in place? (5)

Financial management and governance – Do you have appropriate financial controls, governance arrangements and oversight for a project of this size? Where relevant, do the project partners have clear roles and responsibilities? (5)

If you are successful

Grant payments and monitoring

Grant payments will be made in stages, as agreed in your grant agreement. The payment schedule will be tailored to the needs of your project and linked to agreed milestones.

You will normally need to provide:

- Invoices and receipts for relevant expenditure.
- Photographic evidence of completed work.
- Progress updates and project reports, where required.
- Any other evidence agreed as part of the grant agreement.

Reporting requirements

Our monitoring and reporting requirements are proportionate to the size and complexity of the grant.

- **Small grants (£1,000 to £9,999):** A short completion report and photographs demonstrating delivery of the project.
- **Standard grants (£10,000 to £100,000):** Quarterly progress reports during delivery
- **Exceptional grants (over £100,000):** Enhanced monitoring arrangements, which may include more detailed reporting, project review meetings and site visits.
- **All grants:** Grant recipients may be asked to provide follow-up information after project completion to demonstrate funded assets continue to be maintained and deliver the intended outcomes.

Asset maintenance: All assets created, restored or purchased through the grant must be maintained for a minimum period of five years or as specified in the grant agreement.

Grant recipients must keep appropriate records relating to funded assets and notify the Fund Managers of any significant changes that may affect the project's outcomes.

Adaptive management

Nature recovery is a long-term process, and successful projects often require management to adapt over time.

We encourage grant recipients to take an adaptive management approach. This means monitoring how a project is performing, learning from the results and making changes where needed to achieve the best outcomes for nature.

For example:

- Grazing levels may need to be adjusted if a restored grassland is not developing as expected.
- Water levels may need to be managed differently if a pond or wetland is not delivering the desired habitat conditions.
- Habitat management techniques may be refined as new information becomes available.

We provide ongoing support

We aim to provide support throughout the life of your project, from application through to delivery and beyond.



During your project

Support available includes:

- **Technical advice and guidance** from Fund Managers and partner organisations where appropriate.
- **Monitoring and evaluation support**, including advice on establishing habitat and species baselines and measuring project outcomes over time.
- **Knowledge-sharing opportunities**, helping you connect with other funded projects and organisations across the Big Chalk partnership to exchange ideas, experiences and good practice.
- **Adaptive management support**, helping you assess what is working, learn from monitoring results and refine your approach where needed.
- **Practical support to overcome delivery challenges**, where issues arise during project implementation.
- **Promotion through Big Chalk networks**, including opportunities to showcase your project and use Big Chalk branding where appropriate.

After project completion

We are interested in the long-term impact of the projects we support and encourage recipients to stay connected with the wider partnership.

After your project has been completed, we may:

- Work with you to understand and record longer-term outcomes for nature recovery.
- By agreement, feature successful projects as case studies to inspire and inform others.
- Invite you to share your experiences, lessons learned and examples of good practice with other grant recipients and future applicants.

We see the Fund as more than a source of funding. It is an opportunity to become part of a wider network of organisations, land managers and communities working together to support nature recovery across the chalk and limestone landscapes of southern England.

Together, we're building a movement for nature's recovery across the chalk and limestone landscapes of southern England - restoring wildlife, connecting places, and creating a future where nature and people thrive.

This fund is made possible through the [Protected Landscapes Partnership](#) and [Defra](#), enabling us to take bold steps towards a more connected, resilient and nature-rich future.



Submit your
Expression of Interest