Farming with Nature Landscape Projects

Project proposal scoring criteria

Date: November 2026

Introduction

This guidance is for reference only and should be read in conjunction with the Applicant Guidance. Farming with Nature Landscape Projects Applicant Guidance | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

This guidance provides the criteria we will use to assess proposals for Landscape Projects.

You should use this guidance to complete the Online application form . The questions you will need to answer for each criterion are included in this guide.

Landscape Projects: Criteria

We will assess your application against *4 criteria*, with a total of *100 points*.

Your application will be assessed by a panel of DAERA subject matter experts.

If it fails one of the criteria or does not meet the passing threshold, your application will not progress.

Landscape Projects focus on two main environmental objectives:

- Improving biodiversity and
- Improving habitat connectivity

on agricultural land across Northern Ireland.

Applicants must demonstrate how their project will deliver across both biodiversity improvement and habitat connectivity. These objectives are central to the Landscape Projects Scheme, reflecting its core purpose of delivering meaningful, long-term nature recovery at a landscape scale through coordinated action across multiple farms and landholdings.

Table 1: Criteria summary

C1. Project readiness	Pass or fail
C2a. Primary environmental objective 1: Improving biodiversity How your project will manage and create habitats for biodiversity: • the maintenance or restoration of protected site features, within SACs, SPAs, RAMSAR sites, and ASSIs towards favourable conservation condition. • the creation, restoration, or continued positive management of wildlife-rich habitats outside protected sites, enhancing specific priority species or priority habitats on farmed landscapes in the project.	30 points
C2b. Primary environmental objective 2: Improving habitat connectivity How your project will improve habitat connectivity through; • the creation of wildlife corridors, habitat stepping stones, or other measures that improve connectivity between fragmented habitats and strengthen ecological networks across the landscape, including around designated sites and surrounding habitats, particularly where habitat fragmentation is placing species and habitats at risk.	30 points
C3. Secondary environmental objectives: environmental co-benefits and resilience How your project will manage and create habitats to enhance co-benefits including: - air, soil, and water quality - hydrological and ecological function - landscape and heritage	20 points

- climate mitigation and resilience

- risk reduction - for example, from flooding, drought, fires, erosion, or invasive species

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C4. Value for money 20 points

How you have demonstrated value for money and assessed costs

Scoring Guidance

Criterion 1: Project Readiness

Scoring

This is a pass or fail criterion. You must explain how you meet the following requirements.

1. Why is your project suitable for Landscape Projects?
2. Have you completed and attached the Land Manager support forms for all farm businesses currently going to participate in the project. Participants must demonstrate that they have management control of the land or obtain consent from those with such control for the period covered.
3. What are the responsibilities of your project members during the development phase? How will they work together?
4. What are the main risks to the project's success and how do you plan to use the development phase to reduce them?

Guidance for applicants

You must explain why:

- Your project proposal is suitable for Landscape Projects
- Your project proposal is unlikely to be delivered through other funding.

Focus on the distinguishing features of Landscape Projects:

- Landscape-scale delivery, addressing environmental issues across a coherent geographic area.
- Collaboration between, multiple farmers and land managers to achieve shared environmental outcomes.
- Bespoke locally developed actions tailored to environmental priorities of the project.

Scoring

You should provide evidence of,

- The level of commitment and engagement from prospective participating farmers and land managers; with at least five farm businesses (with Category 1 or 2 Business IDs) across the project area demonstrating support of your project. With the Land Manager support forms signed and submitted. Plans to recruit more farmers, if appropriate, in the development stage and plans to maintain participation throughout the project.

- Demonstrate how participating farmers and land managers will work together to achieve shared environmental outcomes and how that could not reasonably be delivered by individual holdings acting alone.
- That your project is ready for enrolment and the project development phase.
- That you will make good use of the funding and support available, demonstrating that you have taken a strategic, evidence-based approach and have the required monitoring and evaluation approach built in.

When you detail the responsibilities of project members during the development phase, you will need to include evidence:

- Of the proposed single legal entity/constituted group (please see applicants' guidance for further information) who will act on behalf of your project and be the signatory to the agreement with DAERA
- Of the capacity and expertise available to deliver the project, including how it will be managed, what relevant experience you have, and how you will secure project management expertise if needed.
- Of the robustness of the project governance, a framework to ensure project members understand their responsibilities, such as a memorandum of agreement and decision-making arrangements.

Criterion 2: Primary Environmental Objectives

Primary environmental objectives

How will your project deliver against the primary environmental objectives of Landscape Projects?

Landscape Projects will focus on two primary environmental objectives:

- Improving biodiversity and habitat connectivity both within and beyond protected sites.

Applicants must demonstrate how their project will deliver across both biodiversity improvement and habitat connectivity improvements.

Primary environmental objective 1: biodiversity

Biodiversity is the measure of species variety, the more species in a habitat the greater the biodiversity. A habitat provides the basic needs for species such as food, shelter and places to reproduce.

Improve biodiversity through:

- The maintenance or restoration of protected sites or features, especially SACs, SPAs, RAMSAR sites, and ASSIs towards a favourable conservation condition
- The creation, restoration, or continued positive management of wildlife-rich habitats, outside protected sites

Primary environmental objective 2: habitat connectivity

Habitat connectivity is the degree to which habitats are linked, allowing species to move between them.

Improve habitat connectivity through:

- The creation of wildlife corridors or habitat stepping stones, and the creation, expansion or buffering of priority habitats, with the intention of improving connectivity between priority habitats, particularly those associated with designated sites, across the landscape.

Guidance for applicants

Applications should provide clear, evidence-based justification for the environmental outcomes that will be delivered and explain why the proposed actions are appropriate, necessary and likely to achieve long-term benefits.

To score highly against the primary environmental objectives, you must state how you have considered the below points.

- **Biodiversity Improvement**

- What biodiversity assets are currently present?
- What biodiversity problem or opportunity does the project address?
- What will change as a result of the project?
- How many hectares of habitat will be protected, restored or created, where relevant?
- Which priority habitats or species will benefit?
- Why are the proposed interventions appropriate?
- Why is this a significant biodiversity outcome?

The central question applicants should address is:

How much will biodiversity improve as a result of this project?

- **Habitat Connectivity Improvement**

When describing habitat connectivity outcomes, consider the following:

- What habitats currently exist and where are there gaps or fragmentation issues?
- What does the project connect?
- How will the proposed actions improve connectivity?
- Is the connectivity structural, functional, or both?
- Which species or ecological communities are expected to benefit?
- Why is the scale of intervention sufficient to make a meaningful difference?
- Does the project connect habitats across multiple farms or landholdings?

The central question applicants should address is:

How much will habitat connectivity improve as a result of this project?

Applicants should note that connectivity is not limited to the physical joining of habitat patches. The scheme recognises both structural connectivity (the physical arrangement and linking of habitats) and functional connectivity (how species are able to move through and use the landscape).

Suitability of Location

Applicants should explain why their proposed project area is well suited to delivering the stated environmental objectives.

Projects should demonstrate how interventions will address identified environmental problems or opportunities within the locality. Greater environmental benefit may be achieved where projects support existing high-value environmental assets, such as designated sites, priority habitats, ecological networks or areas supporting threatened species. Projects that contribute to the recovery of species of conservation concern through targeted, bespoke actions should clearly explain the expected benefits.

Scale and Contiguity

Applicants should justify the scale of the proposed interventions and explain why it is sufficient to deliver meaningful environmental outcomes.

The scale of the project should be proportionate to the biodiversity and habitat connectivity objectives being targeted. Where project areas are not wholly contiguous, applicants should explain how any gaps will not compromise the intended environmental outcomes and how ecological function will be maintained across the wider landscape.

Additionality

Applicants must demonstrate that the environmental benefits delivered by the project are additional and are unlikely to have occurred without scheme funding.

It is not necessary to predict baseline trends for all environmental objectives. However, applicants should clearly explain why the anticipated environmental gains are directly attributable to the proposed project and represent a meaningful enhancement beyond existing management or regulatory requirements.

Important Considerations

Applicants should not assume that a larger project area, a greater number of actions, or participation by more farmers will automatically achieve a higher score.

Assessment will consider:

- Ecological need
- Suitability of location
- Quality of proposed interventions
- Scale and extent of delivery
- Habitat connectivity and ecological function
- Additionality

- Likely longevity and sustainability of outcomes

Scoring

Applications that provide a clear, evidence-based justification of the environmental need and demonstrate how the proposed actions will deliver lasting biodiversity and habitat connectivity benefits at a landscape scale are likely to score more highly.

The scoring approach is based on the principle that applications should be assessed according to the likely environmental impact of the proposed project, rather than simply the number of actions proposed, or the area of land involved.

Each application can score up to 60 points across two environmental objectives:

- Objective 1 – Biodiversity improvement: 0–30 points.
- Objective 2 – Improvement of habitat connectivity: 0–30 points.

The objectives should be assessed separately. A project does not need to score equally against both objectives, but it should demonstrate a credible contribution to each.

As biodiversity improvement and habitat connectivity are both fundamental objectives of the scheme, a three-part threshold will apply:

- Minimum 15/30 for biodiversity improvement.
- Minimum 15/30 for habitat connectivity improvement.
- Minimum 40/60 overall.

This prevents a project from compensating for making no contribution to one objective by scoring highly against the other. It also ensures that projects which only just meet the minimum for both objectives are not automatically competitive.

Your project will not progress if

- If you score below 40 (out of a possible 60)
- it has a negative impact on the natural environment
- it increases local vulnerability to risks from climate change

Table 2: Primary environmental objectives scoring

Assessment against primary environmental objective – Biodiversity Improvement	Score
Likely to have a negative impact on the objective *The proposed actions are expected to result in habitat loss, degradation, fragmentation, or other adverse effects on species, habitats, or ecological condition within the project area.*	Fail
Little or no potential to deliver positively against the objective *Little provided evidence that the project will improve biodiversity or that the proposed actions are appropriate to the biodiversity needs of the area.*	1 - 5
Likely to deliver a moderate positive impact on the objective *Clear biodiversity benefits, but relatively limited in scale, quality, targeting or likely significance.*	6 - 10
Likely to deliver a strong positive impact on the objective *Substantial biodiversity improvements that clearly respond to identified ecological needs. Proposed management, restoration or creation is appropriate and likely to result in meaningful improvements.*	11 - 20
Likely to deliver a very strong positive impact on the objective *Substantial and strategically important biodiversity improvements. Clear ecological need, appropriate design and scale, and strong prospects for significant, lasting and additional benefits.*	21 - 30

Table 3: Primary environmental objectives scoring

Assessment against primary environmental objective – Habitat connectivity improvement	Score
Likely to have a negative impact on the objective *The proposed actions are expected to reduce, fragment, or weaken connections between habitats, limiting the movement of species across the landscape.*	Fail
Little or no potential to deliver positively against the objective *No meaningful improvement in habitat connectivity is demonstrated.*	1 - 5
Likely to deliver a moderate positive impact on the objective *Local improvement by linking, buffering or expanding habitats, but with limited overall network benefit.*	6 - 10
Likely to deliver a strong positive impact on the objective *Substantial contribution to ecological connectivity by connecting important habitat areas or reducing significant fragmentation.*	11 - 20
Likely to deliver a very strong positive impact on the objective *Creation or substantial strengthening of a strategically important ecological network, linking multiple priority habitats, including those associated with designated sites, at an appropriate landscape scale through the creation of wildlife corridors, habitat stepping stones, and the creation, expansion or buffering of priority habitats*	21 - 30

Criterion 3: Secondary Environmental Objectives

How will your project deliver against the secondary environmental objectives of the Landscape Projects Scheme?

Guidance for applicants

Secondary environmental objectives are the additional environmental benefits your project will deliver beyond its primary objectives of biodiversity improvement and habitat connectivity.

You should explain how your project will manage, restore or create habitats in ways that provide wider environmental benefits. These may include improvements to:

- Air, soil and water quality
- Hydrological and ecological function
- Landscape and heritage
- Climate mitigation and resilience
- Risk reduction, for example from flooding, drought, wildfire, erosion or invasive species

You do not need to contribute to every secondary objective to score highly. However, you should clearly describe all relevant environmental co-benefits and explain how these will be achieved through the proposed project activities.

Air, Soil and Water

For example, projects may:

- Reduce ammonia emissions or deposition on sensitive habitats.
- Reduce particulate air pollution.
- Improve soil health and soil protection.
- Reduce diffuse pollution through catchment-scale or sub-catchment-scale interventions.
- Improve water quality through habitat restoration or natural water management.

Hydrological and Ecological Function

For example, projects may:

- Increase the resilience of habitats and species to climate change impacts such as flooding, drought, wildfire, extreme temperatures or coastal erosion.
- Improve natural hydrological processes.
- Reduce the impacts of invasive non-native species on habitats and species.

Landscape and Heritage

For example, projects may:

- Enhance landscape character and quality.
- Restore or protect important environmental or cultural heritage features.
- Improve the ecological value of the wider landscape.

Climate Mitigation and Resilience

For example, projects may:

- Sequester and store carbon through nature-based solutions.
- Increase ecosystem resilience to climate change.
- Support long-term adaptation to changing environmental conditions.

Other Environmental Benefits

Projects may also deliver other significant environmental benefits that are specific to the local area and are not captured within the categories above. Applicants should explain the relevance and significance of any additional benefits.

Scoring

20 points are available across all secondary environmental objectives.

The assessment will consider the extent, significance and likely effectiveness of the environmental co-benefits delivered by the project. Applicants should not assume that including a large number of benefits will automatically result in a higher score. Greater weight will be given to clear, well-evidenced outcomes that are relevant to the project area and are likely to deliver lasting environmental improvements.

Table 4: Secondary environmental objectives scoring

Assessment against secondary environmental objectives	Score
Little or no potential to deliver positively against any objectives *No significant secondary environmental benefits are identified.*	Fail
Likely to deliver a moderate positive impact on one objective *Delivers a moderate but limited positive impact against one secondary environmental objective.*	1 - 5
Likely to deliver a moderate positive impact on at least 2 objectives *Delivers moderate measurable positive impacts against at least two secondary environmental objectives.*	6 - 10
Likely to deliver a strong positive impact on 3 or more objectives *Delivers strong, meaningful and demonstrable positive impacts against three or more secondary environmental objectives*.	11 - 20

Criterion 4: value for money

How does the funding requested represent good value for money and support the delivery of the project's environmental outcomes?

Guidance for applicants

You must provide a breakdown of the costs associated with developing and delivering your Landscape Project proposal. Complete and upload the costings template to your online application.

The assessment will consider whether the costs are reasonable, realistic and proportionate to the scale, complexity and anticipated environmental benefits of the project.

Costs may include activities required to develop and support the project, for example:

- Project management plan
- Habitat mapping, surveys and baseline assessments
- Development of bespoke actions (habitat management and restoration proposals)
- Monitoring and evaluation planning
- Stakeholder engagement and collaboration activities
- Steering group meetings
- Risk assessments
- Requisite consents, permissions and approvals
- Specialist technical, ecological or professional advice
- Core project staff

This list is not exhaustive.

. For each cost item, applicants should:

- Explain why the activity is necessary and the duration of the activity in months.
- Demonstrate how the activity supports the delivery of the project's environmental objectives.
- Provide sufficient detail to justify the amount requested.
- Ensure costs are realistic and reflect prevailing market rates where applicable.
- Ensure it is not listed as an ineligible cost in Annex 2 of the Applicant Guidance. .
- Ensure you can recover all VAT elements relating to your costs if you are VAT registered.

Evidence that may be used to justify costs includes:

- Staff time, daily rates and estimated effort required.
- Quotes, estimates or market comparisons.
- Benchmarking against similar projects or schemes.
- Previous experience of delivering comparable activities.
- Relevant industry or professional rates.

As context to your proposal, please state whether any part of your project activities will be funded by other sources. This is so that we can understand why you do not need funding from Landscape Projects for this. It could include work:

- Funded by your organisation
- Funded by a partner organisation or another grant scheme
- Delivered through in-kind contributions

We will assess the project development costs form to decide whether each of your proposed costs is eligible. If your application is successful, your eligible costs will be confirmed during enrolment.

The project development grant will fund 100% of eligible costs during the project development phase.

Scoring

We will use the project costs template to assess value for money. If your application is successful, activities and costs may be refined during the enrolment phase.

In assessing value for money, we will consider:

- Whether the costs are reasonable, realistic and clearly justified.
- Whether the funding requested is proportionate to the scale and complexity of the project.
- The relationship between the funding requested and the anticipated environmental outcomes.
- The significance and likely longevity of the expected benefits.
- The extent to which the project is likely to deliver outcomes that would not otherwise occur without scheme support.

Projects will not score highly simply because they request less funding. Higher scores will be awarded where applicants can demonstrate that the funding requested is proportionate, justified and represents a worthwhile investment in delivering significant environmental outcomes.

Tables 5 sets out how applications will be scored. Costs or activities that are unreasonable, inadequately justified, ineligible, or disproportionate to the anticipated benefits may result in a lower score or, where significant concerns are identified, lead to the application being unsuccessful.

Table 5: Individual costs scoring

Assessment	Score
Fails to demonstrate value for money *Costs are inadequately justified, unreasonable, or include activities that do not clearly contribute to delivering the project's objectives. This would suggest a lack of engagement with, or understanding of, the need to demonstrate value for money. Applications may also fail where costs are excessive compared to similar proposals, or where the scale of funding requested is disproportionate to the anticipated environmental benefits*.	Fail
Limited evidence of value for money *The proposal demonstrates some value for money, but there are concerns regarding the justification, eligibility or proportionality of certain costs or activities. This may be because the rationale for particular activities is insufficiently explained, or because one or more costs appear ineligible, disproportionate, or inadequately evidenced. Where applications receiving this score are taken forward, applicants may be required to provide additional supporting information and revise specific cost items.*	1 - 5
Good value for money *The proposal demonstrates that costs are broadly justified, proportionate and aligned with the delivery of the project's objectives. All requirements have been met, although in some areas the supporting evidence may not be as thorough or convincing as it could be. Where applications receiving this score are taken forward, applicants may be required to provide additional supporting information and, where necessary, revise specific cost items*	6 - 10
Strong value for money *The proposal provides clear evidence that costs are necessary, proportionate and likely to deliver significant environmental outcomes. All requirements have been met, and the evidence suggests that most proposed activities add meaningful value and are justified in relation to the funding requested. It is likely that the project could not be delivered to the same standard or extent with substantially less funding. Where applications receiving this score are taken forward, applicants may be asked to provide additional supporting information and, where necessary, revise specific cost items.*	11-15

Excellent value for money 16-20

The proposal provides compelling evidence that all costs are fully justified and represent the most effective use of funding to deliver environmental outcomes. All requirements have been met thoroughly, and the evidence demonstrates that every proposed activity adds meaningful value to the project. The costs are clearly linked to the anticipated outcomes and are proportionate to the scale and ambition of the proposal. It is likely that the project could not be delivered to the same standard or extent with substantially less funding. Where applications receiving this score are taken forward, it is unlikely that substantial additional evidence or significant revisions to costs will be required.
