

# LANDSCAPES REVIEW September 2019<sup>1</sup>

## SUMMARY

### **Our priority: working together**

The underlying argument of our review, which covers England, is that our system of national landscapes should be a positive force for the nation's wellbeing. Big ambitions are made possible by these 44 areas working together in new ways to become more than the sum of their parts.

We want this to happen not as an end in itself but because more must be done for nature and natural beauty. More must be done for people who live in and visit our landscapes. And a lot more must be done to meet the needs of our many fellow citizens who do not know the countryside, or do not always feel welcome in it, but should be able to enjoy it. Our landscapes are open and free to all, but can seem exclusive.

We think this can only happen if we are honest about what doesn't work at the moment and put in place a system which can do better.

Today, we have a system which is fragmented, sometimes marginalised and often misunderstood. Indeed it is not really a system at all, but 10 National Parks, who do not always work together effectively, and an entirely separate network of 34 less powerful Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). They have different purposes from National Parks, vastly less money, but sometimes greater pressures; and yet cover areas that are more visited, sometimes more biodiverse and are just as beautiful.

We believe this duplication wastes resources and diminishes ambition.

That is why our central proposal is to bring National Parks and AONBs together as part of one family of national landscapes, served by a shared National Landscapes Service (NLS) which will give them a bigger voice, bigger ambition and a new way of working to meet new challenges.

Within this family, of course not every member will be the same. Local identity matters. National Parks need to keep their titles, at least their current levels of funding, and local autonomy, especially over planning.

The current system of governance for National Parks (and, as we'll explore later, AONBs) should be reformed substantially. Time after time we have heard and seen that National Park boards are too big, do not do a good job in setting a strategic direction and are deeply unrepresentative of England's diverse communities.

Of the almost 1,000 people on National Park and AONB boards today, the great majority are male, many are of retirement age and a tiny fraction are of black, Asian or minority ethnicities. This is wrong for organisations which are funded by the nation to serve everyone.

We also think what are now AONBs should be strengthened, with increased funding, governance reform, new shared purposes with National Parks, and a greater voice on development.

We think the current cumbersome title 'AONB' should be replaced. Our suggestion is that they should be called National Landscapes.

We would also like to see the encouragement of a wider range of non-designated systems of landscape protection, which should be members of the national landscapes family and served by the NLS.

This ought to include new areas of forest, along the lines of the successful National Forest in the East Midlands, and we give our strong support for proposals for new urban National Parks, such as the one proposed for the West Midlands and the one already underway in London. We also praise

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<sup>1</sup> Commissioned by the UK government in response to the 25 Year Environment Plan (A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment)

the impressive work being done to bring the South Pennines together as a regional park and to create a marine park in Plymouth.

Our overriding conclusion is that without structural reform and greater shared ambition and status, our national landscapes will always struggle to do more than make an incremental difference.

### **Summary Findings**

We have focused our review on five areas and they form the detail of the report which follows. They are:

1. Landscapes Alive for Nature and Beauty
2. Landscapes for Everyone
3. Living in Landscapes
4. More Special Places
5. New Ways of Working

They are not separate but part of one ambition: to strengthen the natural beauty of England's landscapes in order to serve the country better by improving their biodiversity, and the lives of people who work in them, live in them and enjoy them.

For clarity when reading this report, we refer to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) as AONBs, and use 'national landscapes' to refer to the two designations of National Parks and AONBs together

### **Summary 1. Landscapes Alive for Nature and Beauty**

"The United Kingdom is now among the most nature-depleted nations in the world", the former Secretary of State, Michael Gove, said in a speech in July 2019. This is the context for our National Parks and AONBs.

The 2010 *Making Space for Nature* review and the most recent 2016 *State of Nature* report are explicit about the crisis of nature and what needs to be done to bring about a recovery. There is no need, in this review, to restate the excellent and mostly chilling analysis they contain, except to say that we agree and we want to see national landscapes lead the response.

There is much debate, and not enough data to say for certain, whether the state of nature in national landscapes is better, or no better, or even worse than it is elsewhere.

In the end, this is a fruitless discussion. While it is good news that in a small, heavily populated and very urban island we have retained places of great natural beauty, sometimes alive with wild species – which the policies and staff of our national landscapes have been instrumental in – what can be agreed is that what we currently have is not good enough. That the natural beauty which led to their protection in the first place is being lost.

Ultimately, while much effort has gone into protecting pockets of the special and the rare, encouraged by structures such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), which try to save what is left, what was once common has become rare.

Why has decline continued? The answer is partly one of influence. Our system of landscape protection has been hampered by having little influence over the things which have done most harm to nature. This includes a system of farming subsidies which, although it has improved, for decades rewarded intensification regardless of the consequences.

Climate change and pollution have also put huge pressure on designated and undesignated landscapes alike. It shouldn't really surprise us that the simple fact of designation hasn't held back natural decline.

Our landscape system hasn't been helped either by the so-called great divide, which left landscape separate from other action to protect nature, seeing National Parks and AONBs in one box, and SSSIs and National Nature Reserves (NNRs) in another.

But the confusing array of designations is not the main issue. The basic fact of failure is. As the National Trust put it, in its submission to our call for evidence, "We believe that National Parks and AONBs are not currently delivering on their duty in relation to nature".

What answers do we set out in this report?

We want a new commitment to recovery which puts natural beauty at its core to make all these places special.

They should be exemplars of the very best, improving not degrading. They should look and feel special. Even if we only managed to restore diminished biodiversity to levels taken for granted in 1949 when the law to create National Parks and AONBs was established, we would have achieved something extraordinary.

To do this, we first want to renew the purposes of national landscapes to meet the modern challenges of restoring natural beauty – it must be more urgent about recovery, not just conserving what we have. It must also be applied equally to National Parks and AONBs.

Critically, alongside this, our national landscapes must be supported by a new National Landscapes Service, bringing together these 44 disparate bodies to deliver for nature across boundaries, driving ambitious action and holding them to account for delivery.

A key mechanism for this will be strengthened Management Plans, with clear targeted actions to recover nature, underpinned by robust assessments of the state of nature and natural capital in our national landscapes.

We would like to see these plans set ambitious proposals to support the climate challenges we face, not least on tree planting and peatland restoration, as well as how to support wilder areas. They will contain bold plans for national landscapes to become leaders in Nature Recovery Networks, thinking across and indeed beyond their landscapes, as no individual landowner or non-government organisation can do. As John Lawton's *Making Space for Nature* review said so clearly, we need "more, bigger, better and joined up sites".

To do that, they need to act as and be one family, and work in partnership with others, since they are not significant landowners or grant givers. We've seen in particular how AONBs have become good at partnership working; lacking any resources of their own, they have had to be.

Our landscapes should also be bold about the potential of subsidy reform, with the forthcoming Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS). We think all national landscapes should be priorities for ELMS payments delivering nature recovery and other benefits through farming.

Recovery of nature and natural beauty, and indeed fulfilment of the wider purposes of our landscapes, also requires changes to the role of our national landscapes in our planning system.

National Parks carry out a complex and difficult role and have fought to sustain natural beauty in the face of immense pressure. We do not propose changes in the way they do this.

We do however want to see AONBs given greater status in the planning system. They should become statutory consultees, and we set out later how we think this can work. They should also, where appropriate, be supported to work towards local plans for their areas, prepared in conjunction with local authorities. For larger AONBs, especially those we highlight as candidates for possible National Park status, this plan should have statutory status, in place of the multitude of local authority plans.

We also want to see public bodies recognise the status of national landscapes, as they do not always do so at present. The existing duty of 'regard' is too weak. We believe public bodies should be required to help further their purposes and the aims and objectives of individual national landscapes' Management Plans.

## Proposals

Proposal 1: National landscapes should have a renewed mission to recover and enhance nature, and be supported and held to account for delivery by a new National Landscapes Service

Proposal 2: The state of nature and natural capital in our national landscapes should be regularly and robustly assessed, informing the priorities for action

Proposal 3: Strengthened Management Plans should set clear priorities and actions for nature recovery including, but not limited to, wilder areas and the response to climate change (notably tree planting and peatland restoration). Their implementation must be backed up by stronger status in law

Proposal 4: National landscapes should form the backbone of Nature Recovery Networks – joining things up within and beyond their boundaries

Proposal 5: A central place for national landscapes in new Environmental Land Management Schemes

Proposal 6: A strengthened place for national landscapes in the planning system with AONBs given statutory consultee status, encouragement to develop local plans and changes to the National Planning Policy Framework

## Summary 2. Landscapes for Everyone

“There can be few national purposes which, at so modest a cost, offer so large a prospect of health-giving happiness for the people,” John Dower argued in the closing words of the report which led to the system we have today.

He wrote those words on 12 April 1945, as Allied forces closed in on Berlin. But Dower pushed on, arguing that the Britain which would follow the war would be happier and healthier if our finest landscapes were kept safe for everyone and for all time.

From the Dower report, and the work of others which followed, much good has come. When you gaze across Morecambe Bay from Arnside; when you sit in the solitude of the Iron Age hillfort at Nordy Bank in Shropshire or cycle through the lanes of the Isle of Wight; or follow the Pennine Way over the northern moors; you are part of the world it helped secure.

This natural beauty matters, wrote the campaigner John Muir, because “everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul.”

In a technological age, when global travel is easy and digital systems provide instant entertainment, it is reassuring that people still find spiritual and physical enrichment from beautiful places. Indeed it is perhaps because the rest of our lives have changed so much that the tranquil, the raw, the wild and the special matter even more today.

In the course of this review, around 1,000 people and organisations took the trouble to send in photographs which they felt captured what these landscapes meant to them. They are images of enjoyment and natural beauty and some are included in this report.

What needs to change?

National Parks were created in part to provide a healing space, both mentally and physically, for the many who had given so much to protect our country during the Second World War. They were meant for everybody.

Much has changed in the 70 years since. Modern Britain is a very different place socially and demographically. Today we recognise diversity as the mark of a healthy and resilient society. However, many landscape bodies have not moved smartly enough to reflect this changing society, and in some cases show little desire to do so.

We are all paying for national landscapes through our taxes, and yet sometimes on our visits it has felt as if National Parks are an exclusive, mainly white, mainly middle-class club, with rules only members understand and much too little done to encourage first time visitors.

Public funding is not a given for any organisation and decisions ultimately rely on public support. Although we were pleased with the response to our call for evidence, the relative lack of interest and engagement from particular and significant communities that make up modern Britain should be a warning call to all those involved in national landscapes. They must reach out with determination and urgency to those for whom they are currently an irrelevance.

Further, although there are already examples of links with the National Health Service – we saw them in the New Forest, for instance – there is no overall agreement about how these two great institutions from the post-war settlement might work together.

Our national landscapes are national and that means they should be places for everyone.

What answers do we set out in this report?

We want our nation's most cherished landscapes to fulfil their original mission for people, providing unrivalled opportunities for enjoyment, spiritual refreshment and in turn supporting the nation's health and wellbeing.

This requires a new mission in law putting this at the heart of what they do, with AONBs equally charged with delivering for people.

In turn, we want to see our national landscape bodies doing much more to reach out and welcome people in. An important way of getting interest across all of society is of course to inspire our younger generations. This is why we set out a proposal for every child to spend at least one night in a national landscape. We think that seeing and knowing our country is the best way to respect and save it. There are many good examples of working with schools, but we want to see more done.

We also want to see long-term programmes established to reach out to black, Asian and minority ethnicity communities, picking up and going further than the previous and successful, but short-lived and small-scale 'MOSAIC' programmes. The same for volunteering.

Active work to support the nation's health and wellbeing is also needed. With leadership from the National Landscapes Service, social prescribing and a wider preventive approach to managing health have huge potential to improve physical and mental health at low cost.

We also recommend a number of measures to improve the welcome and visitor experience, not least through a National Landscapes Ranger Service, present in all our national landscapes.

Lastly, we make recommendations which aim to maximise the most of what we have, strengthening links with other designations, bringing National Trails into the national landscapes family, and considering further open access rights in our national landscapes.

## **Proposals**

Proposal 7: A stronger mission to connect all people with our national landscapes, supported and held to account by the new National Landscapes Service

Proposal 8: A night under the stars in a national landscape for every child

Proposal 9: New long-term programmes to increase the ethnic diversity of visitors

Proposal 10: Landscapes that cater for and improve the nation's health and wellbeing

Proposal 11: Expanding volunteering in our national landscapes

Proposal 12: Better information and signs to guide visitors

Proposal 13: A ranger service in all our national landscapes, part of a national family

Proposal 14: National landscapes supported to become leaders in sustainable tourism

Proposal 15: Joining up with others to make the most of what we have, and bringing National Trails into the national landscapes family

Proposal 16: Consider expanding open access rights in national landscapes

### **Summary 3. Living in Landscapes**

Our system of national landscapes works best when it works with people on its side. We can all agree that a village that is lived in, with an active school, people who work, and who are part of a living tradition, is better than a sterile place that is full of shuttered homes, empty pubs and derelict shops.

More than that, traditions such as Herdwick sheep breeding, Derbyshire well-dressing, or the pattern of commoners in the New Forest, matter in themselves and are part of the reason these places are designated.

In almost every place we visited, we heard similar warnings about the challenges communities face. Residents are getting older. Public transport links are being cut back.

In particular, we have heard repeatedly that local communities see housing costs climb while not much affordable housing is built to add to the supply.

If we are serious about demonstrating the value of 'lived in' landscapes to the global family of national landscapes, then we need to be serious about the people who live in them, and show how it's possible to offer meaningful social and economic support for them.

What answers do we set out in our report?

First, we want to see renewed commitment by those managing our national landscapes to make local communities stronger. We have seen many excellent examples of work being done. But we would like to see more.

We therefore propose that the existing duty required of National Parks, to seek to foster the social and economic wellbeing of local communities in their area, be strengthened by making it a third statutory purpose, in support of the first two, which should then apply to all national landscapes not just National Parks.

Second, we propose a new National Landscapes Rural Housing Association to build affordable homes for rent. We heard often that sites could be found for small numbers of homes, and that communities were keen to see them built, but that builders did not come forward. Government schemes, while available to rural communities, are often focused on pressing needs and larger sites in cities.

Third, we have heard repeatedly about the pressures on transport, and the challenge of traffic congestion. These do not, of course, apply only to national landscapes. But traffic spoils tranquility and poor access keeps people who should be able to visit away.

We therefore propose that national landscapes, especially National Parks with their existing role in planning, take on a more active role in coordinating and promoting low-carbon, accessible forms of transport.

### **Proposals**

Proposal 17: National landscapes working for vibrant communities

Proposal 18: A new National Landscapes Housing Association to build affordable homes

Proposal 19: A new approach to coordinating public transport piloted in the Lake District, and new, more sustainable ways of accessing national landscapes

#### **Summary 4. More Special**

Almost a quarter – 24.5% – of England is already covered by national landscapes. Should this grow?

We were asked to look at this, and the process of designation, as part of the review.

We heard impressive arguments from those in favour of giving particular areas protection and many enthusiastic calls for change, including with regard to our marine and coastal areas.

We have also been impressed by work being done to promote the idea of a new West Midlands National Park, and to make London a National Park City. These are not asking for new laws, or powers, but exist as a way of getting people to act and think differently. We applaud them.

If we want our national landscapes to serve the nation as it is today, then new structures may be needed. It does not always make sense to have forms of designation which have remained largely unchanged for decades.

What answers do we set out in our report?

We think there is a case for several larger AONBs to take on National Park candidate status, as well as for a new AONB (or National Landscape as we propose they are called in future).

The success of the National Forest is also a model which should be replicated.

We also think that a changing nation needs new ways to come together to support natural beauty and access.

We think there is a very strong case for putting energy and goodwill into new forms of cooperative landscape improvement, especially in areas close to towns and cities – and we make a proposal about increasing nature in our green belts.

We also want to see the process for creating designations and changing boundaries made simpler, easier and quicker.

#### **Proposals**

Proposal 20: New designated landscapes and a new National Forest

Proposal 21: Welcoming new landscape approaches in cities and the coast, and a city park competition

Proposal 22: A better designations process

#### **Summary 5. New Ways of Working**

Repeatedly, from those involved in national landscapes and those who live in them and work in them, we heard huge support for the things they are supposed to achieve. At the same time, we heard frustration at one of the things which holds them back: a lack of coherence, limited ambition and too little collective working or challenge.

We want our landscapes to focus on enhancing natural beauty, supporting communities and visitors. But to do it better, we think they need to change and work together more.

What answers do we set out in our report?

First, as we set out at the start of this summary our central proposal is for a new way of bringing our many varieties of national landscapes together to work in a new, more ambitious way through a National Landscapes Service.

Second, as we set out in various chapters, and bring together in this final chapter, we think the statutory purposes of our landscapes should be renewed. We think it wrong that AONBs only have a single purpose, which refers to 'natural beauty', and, unlike National Parks, have no stated role in public enjoyment or to support communities and sustainable economic activity.

We want to see a single set of expanded national landscape purposes. And in turn, a stronger duty imposed upon others for supporting these ambitions.

We want to see AONBs strengthened beyond their statutory purposes too.

We also make proposals to simplify and strengthen governance of National Parks and AONBs, while leaving a strong place for local identity and decision making especially on planning issues.

We recognise that any increase in ambition will need to be matched with funds. All calls for more public money to be spent will face scrutiny. Budgets are tight for a reason.

That is why we want to see our landscapes funded from a wider range of sources. Our new National Landscapes Service must be an entrepreneurial body, able to fundraise ambitiously, enter into commercial partnerships and make efficiencies across the system.

As Dower wrote in 1945, "if National Parks are provided for the nation they should clearly be provided for by the nation".

At the very least we want to see existing budgets for National Parks secured in real terms and sustained for at least a further five year period, so they can plan ahead with confidence. Annual changes stand in direct contradiction to the sort of long term thinking about landscape we recommend. Any new national landscape designations must be funded with additional money, not from the current budget.

And budgets for AONBs need increasing and likewise making more secure if they are to deliver for the nation as we propose.

## **Proposals**

Proposal 23: Stronger purposes in law for our national landscapes

Proposal 24: AONBs strengthened with new purposes, powers and resources, renamed as National Landscapes

Proposal 25: A new National Landscapes Service bringing our 44 national landscapes together to achieve more than the sum of their parts

Proposal 26: Reformed governance to inspire and secure ambition in our national landscapes and better reflect society

Proposal 27: A new financial model – more money, more secure, more enterprising