

National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty – response to the findings of the Designated Landscapes Review



23 September 2019



"I am delighted the report recognises the immense value and potential of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and sets bold ambitions for their higher profile within the urgent imperatives of nature recovery and improving the health of the Nation. The National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty will work to ensure the Report is prioritised in the widest of policy contexts in the coming months and years. It is of the highest importance that the challenging but very positive messages of the Report are not lost sight of in the welter of pressures facing Government and Parliament. Indeed,

fulfilment of the Report's recommendations offers an unequivocally decent and positive focus for public and political dialogue and an opportunity to reunite a divided Nation"

Philip Hygate FRSA

Chairman

The National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

The National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty welcomes the findings of the Designated Landscapes Review. We are pleased that the Review team have recognised the value of the AONB designation and the hard work that AONB staff and members carry out to conserve and enhance these special areas. We are also heartened that the Review team recognise that, given adequate resources, there is so much more we can deliver for nature and society. We particularly welcome the recommendation that government provides the resources and policy framework to support local Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty teams to do this. We would like to thank Julian Glover, Dame Fiona Reynolds, Sarah Mukherjee, Jim Dixon, Ewen Cameron and Jake Fiennes for their time and commitment and for producing a challenging but fair report.

The central proposition that AONBs are strengthened with new purposes, powers and resources, and renamed as National Landscapes, is a powerful and fundamentally important step in ensuring the benefits of the AONB designation are optimised. The NAAONB looks forward to working with Defra, Natural England, and all 34 AONB partnerships to ensure this proposition becomes reality.

In this, the 70th anniversary year of the passing of the legislation which paved the way for the setting up of our Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks, the Review was particularly welcome. Society has changed beyond recognition since that pioneering legislation was put into place. The demands placed on our designated landscapes have never been greater, demands matched only by our increased human need for natural beauty, wild spaces and tranquil places.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty teams are acutely aware of the need to significantly **increase the scale and pace of nature conservation activity** in their areas – indeed the AONB Partnerships are already taking steps to make this happen. After making a declaration for nature – ‘The Colchester Declaration’ at their conference earlier this year, a steering group has now met to set an ambitious direction of travel. Such is the energy and commitment to this that the steering group was

well oversubscribed – a selection of members has been chosen to reflect the huge variation in landscape types represented across AONBs.

The Colchester Declaration sets out specific ambitious, stretching targets specially designed to protect what remains and, crucially, recover what has been lost in our natural environment. This will build on the significant, and often unpublicised work that AONB teams have been carrying out to restore nature: from Anglesey, where the Source to Sea project restored polluted waters to create habitats for fish and other wildlife; to Suffolk Coast and Heaths where the precious saltmarsh habitat for fish fry and birds has been restored; and valuable carbon capturing Peatland Restoration work has taken place across the country – in Cornwall, North Pennines and Forest of Bowland AONBs.

We welcome the recommendation that **Designated Landscapes become leaders in the government’s planned Nature Recovery Networks**; one of the earliest commitments of the Colchester Declaration is for each AONB to create an initial Species Action Plan for a species in their area in order to increase numbers such that at least 30 native species can be taken off the red list of endangered species by 2030. AONB Partnerships have a strong track record in this regard as demonstrated by the wide range of projects showcased in our [70@70 project](#), and in countless other examples.

We welcome the recommendation that designated landscapes **take a lead in the national response to climate change**. Climate change and the crisis in nature that we are seeing across the UK are two sides of the same coin. The depreciation of natural environments affects not only our native species, but also our national finances, amplifying the effects of climate change as evidenced by the many recent extreme weather events, from flooding to grassland fires. We welcome the recommendation that designated landscapes **develop landscape scale, long term strategies to assess and improve natural capital in the areas they oversee**. Many of the AONB teams’ host authorities have taken the step of declaring climate emergencies and are actively seeking ways to achieve net zero.

We believe that the AONBs’ Colchester Declaration takes us one step further, joining up all of these dots.

AONB Partnerships are committing to:

- achieving net zero by 2050 by incorporating meaningful actions in AONB Management Plans in their next cycle (2024);
- embedding an ecosystems services approach – maximising the benefits that nature can provide through carbon sequestration and flood alleviation, and
- actively working to restore habitats and re-establish species on a landscape scale through strong connections with their local landowners. The Colchester Declaration commits AONB Partnerships to specific ambitious targets to be achieved by 2030:
 - at least 200,000 ha of SSSIs in AONBs will be in favourable condition
 - at least 100,000 ha of wildlife-rich habitat outside of protected sites will have been created/restored in AONBs to further support the natural movement of plants and animals
 - at least 36,000 ha of new woodland will have been planted or allowed to regenerate in AONBs following the principle of the right tree in the right place

We are proud of how much has been achieved with very little: AONBs receive around 20p per person in the UK per year. We are very conscious of how much more there is to do and recognise the pivotal role AONBs and National Parks will play in jointly improving the health and wellbeing of the nation.

It is important to note that while we have the proven knowledge and capability to deliver what is needed, AONBs are important landscapes that are, on the whole, in private ownership. Much of the richness these places have to offer is the product of the stewardship of generations of farmers and landowners. Whilst accessible to many, they are the working 'factory floor' of the UK's food and timber production and support a growing and important domestic tourism industry. AONB teams, therefore, work in established partnerships with their local landowners: farmers, large estates, charities, local authorities and other conservation organisations such as Natural England, the National Trust and the RSPB to effect positive landscape change. We are therefore very pleased to see the recommendation that **designated landscapes be prioritised for the new Environmental Land Management systems**. The new schemes present a more simplified way to incentivise landowners to manage their land to maximise benefits for public good including nature, and we believe, with their existing relationships with local partners, that AONB teams are ideally placed to be able to support delivery of these systems.

The recommendation that **AONBs become statutory consultees in planning applications** is also welcome. We don't believe that our areas need to be preserved in aspic: ensuring that affordable housing is available for local and younger people is critical for the continuing success of local businesses and communities; however, development in keeping with the local landscape is also key. The built environment contributes greatly to the overall sense of place and the emotional response of residents and visitors alike. Providing housing that is both affordable and in keeping with the look of an area is eminently possible, yet too often we find a lack of understanding of this in local planning department decisions.

We welcome the recommendation that AONBs and National Parks work more closely, under a dynamic **National Landscapes Service**. The AONB Family has always had a strong commitment to collaboration – both with the local partners who make up AONB Partnership formal Joint Advisory Committees (local representatives of other nationwide conservation bodies such as Natural England, RSPB, National Trust, local conservation groups, landowners, farmers, parish councils, user groups such as the Ramblers, and local business representatives) and across AONBs. The National Association for AONBs has recognised the value of closer connections between AONBs and to this end has spent the last twelve months creating closer ties through the Future Landscapes project, a National Lottery Heritage Funded programme bringing together staff from across AONBs and giving them time and space to work on visionary task and finish projects to benefit all AONBs. We know through experience that sharing learning, and more directly on the ground, ensuring that conservation work crosses organisational 'boundaries' which are of course invisible to nature, is the most effective way of maximising what we can achieve for wildlife and habitats. A more unified, strategic vision across all our designated landscapes, which currently cover a quarter of England's land area, will greatly amplify what we can achieve. We therefore hope that government will support the NAAONB in extending its considerable experience in developing collaborative behaviours beyond the AONB network where its influence has already been clearly impactful and measurable.

We accept the finding that not enough is being done to **support first time visitors to our national landscapes**. Cuts to public transport services have created additional problems, but we recognise that our need to do more to support people in knowing how to access the countryside predates many of these cuts. Many urban schools serving more deprived communities struggle to fund transport into designated landscapes, but there are still some fantastic examples of outreach work across many AONBs. For instance, the Chichester Harbour Education Centre, on average, works with 580 people every week, and over the past 20 years we've worked with over 150,000 school children

from across the South East. With the recommended increase in funding and resources, there is much more we could deliver, and quickly. With around two thirds of the UK population living within a half hour journey of an AONB, we are acutely aware that our designated landscapes are not serving many of the groups virtually on our doorsteps and we want to take steps to address this. We would like to develop closer working relationships with other designated landscapes that have strong track records in attracting people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Groups to their areas to learn best practice actions to put into practice within our own areas.

We have recently secured funding from Arts Council England specifically for the purpose of finding ways to attract new audiences to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty by connecting people with the landscape on an emotional level, and crucially to inspire them to return and explore. This is a programme of work we are committed to for the long term and we already have good examples of how arts projects can support people to spend time in our landscapes and to reap the health and wellbeing benefits. North Pennines AONB has regularly staged large scale outdoor art works and the Wye Valley River Festival is a key event in the calendar of the Welsh borders, attracting a diverse audience each year.

We strongly welcome the assertion that there is a clear case for increased funding for AONBs. AONB Partnerships were only given their limited powers in the year 2000, fifty-one years after the act that brought them into existence. Now is exactly the time to bring the 'founding zeal' to life. We have the all energy, skills, ambition and strong partnerships needed to deliver, and we call on Westminster to provide us with the power and resources to enable us to do so.