

External FAQs

Landscape Designation Programme – Frequently Asked Questions.

General Questions:

Q. What is Natural England’s landscape designation programme / what have we announced?

Natural England are today (24th June 2021) announcing an ambitious new programme to assess four areas for possible designation as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). We will work with stakeholders in two new areas of England – the Yorkshire Wolds and the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, and in areas adjacent to two existing AONBs – Surrey Hills and the Chilterns - to consider whether these qualify for AONB status. We are also announcing we will develop new approaches to driving nature (wildlife and landscape) recovery and people’s access to nature, especially in environmentally deprived areas in and around our towns and cities where the pandemic has highlighted significant inequalities. We are working closely with Defra officials to explore and develop these proposals and we envisage them being part of the thinking that will contribute to the Green Paper on new nature designations, announced by the Secretary of State earlier in June. We are particularly interested in bringing together wildlife, landscape and heritage designations, and in developing approaches that work in urban as well as in rural landscapes.

Q. Why is Natural England undertaking this programme?

A. Natural England is Government’s Statutory Advisor on landscapes in England, with wide ranging landscape duties and powers, including in relation to landscape designations. These include a specific duty to consider which areas meet the criteria to be designated as National Parks (NPs) and to designate them, and a specific power to designate or vary AONBs.

Government has committed to responding to the climate and nature crises, to levelling up across the country, and to providing access to nature for all. This includes a commitment for more National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty made in the Government’s Manifesto and more recently in the PM’s Ten-point plan for a Green Industrial Revolution.

The independent Landscapes Review, published in September 2019, set out a compelling vision for more beautiful, more biodiverse and more accessible National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Natural England has welcomed many of the recommendations made in this review. This ambitious landscape designation programme will support the delivery of some of its recommendations.

Natural England’s ambitious designation programme will contribute substantially towards this Government’s commitment to protect 30% of our land for nature by 2030.

Q. Are we working with stakeholders in undertaking the landscape designation programme?

A. Yes – Natural England actively engages with stakeholders for many of its activities and duties. Specifically, for the Landscape Designations Programme, we’ve worked with stakeholders to develop a more collaborative and swifter process for new designations / variations to existing designations, complementing formal consultation requirements. We will be seeking the engagement and support

from stakeholders and partners across England, for the development of new landscape approaches and an assessment of where might benefit most from traditional designation or new approaches.

Q. What is the timescale for the landscape designation programme?

A. Natural England currently has a one-year financial settlement so the rate of progress with the programme beyond 2021/22 will be dependent on future years' funding settlement.

During this financial year we will begin considering designation of four areas as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. A national landscape designation (AONB/ National Park) is a significant undertaking requiring robust evidence gathering, engagement and consultation with local and national communities and stakeholders and is therefore rightly not a quick process. We expect each designation to take 2-3 years. Previous designations have taken three to five years from commencing technical assessments to the submission of a designation order for confirmation by the Defra Secretary of State. The time until the Minister confirms an order varies according to several factors including whether a public inquiry is deemed necessary.

We also plan to develop the new landscape approaches by autumn so that we have proposals that can inform the Green paper announced by the Environment Secretary to help meet the government's target of protecting 30% of land by 2030. We plan to start scoping the All England Strategic Assessment this financial year.

Q. Will all four designation proposals start at the same time?

A. Each designation proposal is at a different stage in terms of establishment of a partnership and collaborative working with local partners so they will not all start at the same time. Work will begin on all four designations this Financial Year (2021/22) with the detailed timescale and sequencing being discussed and agreed locally.

Q. Are there opportunities to consider improving the designation process and speeding it up?

A. We have developed a more collaborative and swifter designation approach to the designation process with the Surrey Hills AONB partnership which also makes better use of local stakeholder evidence and knowledge to support the designation assessment. We will apply this new approach to each of the other designation proposals and anticipate this will result in time savings.

Q. What else is Natural England doing for landscape?

A. Natural England works with many partners to conserve and enhance landscapes and enable people to enjoy the many benefits they provide. Examples of our work include

- Working with the Ordnance Survey, National Parks and other partners to provide information on responsible access to the countryside and promote the refreshed Countryside Code.
- Developing with stakeholders a shared evidence base on the "State of" Designated Landscapes to underpin improved delivery against policy outcomes, alongside the development of a landscape indicator to support the delivery of 25 Year Environment Plan goals.
- Providing landscape planning advice on development proposals affecting designated landscapes, on major developments under the National Planning Policy Framework and on strategic plans.

- Refreshing National Character Area (NCA) profiles as a nationally consistent series of accessible, up to date environmental information for communities and local decision-making.
- Collaborating with National Parks England (NPE) and the National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (NAAONB) through a joint agreement identifying shared delivery priorities to tackle the nature, wellbeing and climate crises. Further information can be found in this [blog](#).

Questions relating to the Prioritisation of AONB/ NP designations and boundary variations

Q. How has Natural England identified which four areas to be assessed?

A. We have taken an evidence-led approach to prioritise which proposals to assess, based on potential contribution to government policy objectives. Starting from a list of firm AONB / NP designation and boundary variation proposals, received from partners across England, we carried out an evidence-based prioritisation analysis of policy objectives agreed with Defra.

Q. What is the outcome of the prioritisation analysis?

A. The prioritisation analysis identifies the Yorkshire Wolds new AONB, the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge new AONB and the Chilterns AONB extension as the areas likely to achieve the most against the key policy objectives. This is in addition to the Surrey Hills AONB extension that was previously agreed by NE Board. These areas have been approved by Natural England's Board for consideration to designate. The prioritisation analysis does not make any judgment on whether these proposals will meet the statutory natural beauty/recreation designation criteria.

Q. How was the list of proposals established?

A. The list consists of the known firm pressures for and interest in landscape designation submitted to Natural England by partners and stakeholders. This has been compiled over several years while Natural England has delivered its previous designation.

Q. How was the analysis carried out against the policy objectives?

A. Natural England and Defra agreed a set of key policy objectives to guide the prioritisation process, listed below. This assessment was not whether proposals might meet formal designation criteria and will not prejudge which areas or the extent to which they might qualify for AONB or National Park status. For each policy steer we developed a set of measures, or proxy measures, informed by a wide range of datasets, GIS analysis and mapping. Each proposal was analysed against these measures, with the proposals best delivering against the measure being prioritised. The measures were not weighted. The policy objectives and measures were:

- 1) Nature Recovery and delivery of the 30 x 30 agenda
- 2) Levelling up across the country
- 3) Supporting access to nature

Q. What data was used to inform the key policy objectives

- A.** Data used included:
- Area of land being newly designated
 - Area of priority habitat in candidate area
 - Total area of all designated land is over 500km² includes all designations
 - Location of new designation in relation to other designations
 - Proximity to areas of deprivation

- Levels of deprivation within the candidate area
- Proximity to centres of BAME populations
- Number of large settlements within 15 miles of the candidate area
- Accessibility by bus and rail
- Length of National Trail or national Cycle Network within the candidate area
- Length of Public Rights of Way within the candidate area

Q. Is an assessment of natural beauty considered in the prioritisation exercise?

A. No - natural beauty has not been considered as part of the prioritisation exercise. A full technical assessment of natural beauty and desirability will be required for each of the prioritised areas to determine whether it meets the statutory designation criteria and the exact extent of new area to be designated.

Q. Has the prioritisation analysis been shared with stakeholders and partners?

A. Yes - The prioritisation approach is supported by Defra and has been discussed with a range of stakeholders including National Parks England, National Association of AONBs, Natural Resources Wales, CPRE, Campaign for National Parks and the National Farmer Union.

Q. Have all the suggestions from the government’s independent Landscape Review (the “Glover Review”) been included?

A. Natural England only considered proposals where it has been requested to undertake a designation/variation by the relevant local stakeholders. This did not include all the areas mentioned in the Glover Review. However, all these areas will be considered as part of the development of an ‘All England Strategic Assessment’

Q. What will happen to those areas not selected for designation consideration at this time

A. Designation proposals not taken forward at this time will be considered as part of a new approach to assessing and valuing England’s landscapes. There will be an opportunity for stakeholders and partners to contribute to the assessment. We will consider what mechanisms might be used to recognise and support local communities to improving quality of life and place, addressing inequalities in access and connection to the natural environment. Through our assessment, we will identify with stakeholders where in England would benefit most from new mechanisms or from existing designations.

Q. What will happen to additional proposals submitted now onwards?

A. Any proposal that has been or is received following this prioritisation analysis will be considered as part of our new approach to assessing and valuing England’s landscapes. We will invite stakeholders and partners to contribute to the development of this assessment and will provide more information on this in due course.

Q. Why is Natural England not designating a new National Park or converting an existing AONB to a National Park?

A. Natural England has not received any proposals for a new National Park and only one proposal to extend an existing National Park. The proposals received for re-designating existing AONBs as National Parks and the NP extension were considered as part of the prioritisation analysis. As mainly already designated areas of land, these areas did not score highly in providing added value against the agreed policy objectives such as adding to the nature recovery network or levelling up across the

country. We are also awaiting the Government's response to the Landscapes Review which includes several recommendations which could alter the perceived benefits of re-designating an AONB as a National Park. This includes recommendations to review NP and AONB purposes and to enhance the statutory planning responsibilities of AONBs. As part of extending the Chilterns AONB, Natural England will work with the Chilterns Conservation Board to consider the potential for strengthened management and governance arrangements.

Our planned All England Strategic Assessment (see questions below) will enable us to identify any potential opportunities to create new National Parks under the current legislation or extend existing ones.

Questions relating to new landscape approaches and the All England Strategic Assessment

Q. What are new landscape approaches?

A. Natural England will be exploring how new landscape approaches could drive nature (wildlife and landscape) recovery and improve people's connection with nature, focusing on our towns, cities and peri-urban areas. We will examine how new approaches might improve quality of life and place, address inequalities in access and connection to the natural environment - which have been well-evidenced through the Covid pandemic. We are working with partners and with Defra to explore how such new approaches might operate. Whilst a new designation is one option, designation may not be appropriate or wanted and other mechanisms such as accreditation, drawing on examples such as National Park Cities or Community Forests could be more suitable.

Q. What are the benefits of new landscape approaches?

A. We envisage these new approaches would build a network of urban and rural green spaces that people can access and where nature can thrive. They would connect through to existing designated landscapes, joining up opportunities for accessing green spaces close to where people live and work, with those further afield. They would be designed to deliver multiple benefits for health and wellbeing, for nature recovery and for greener, more attractive and investable places, boosting green jobs, mitigating noise and air pollution, and importantly making places that are more resilient to climate change, flooding and contribute to net zero.

Q. What is an All England Strategic Assessment?

A. Natural England aims to create a visionary map for England in the 21st Century, reflecting the spirit of the Hobhouse Map which led to the establishment of the first National Parks 70 years ago. The new assessment and map will identify landscape conservation and enhancement needs across England, including any remaining places suitable for future National Park or AONB designation and those places where new landscape designation and approaches will be more appropriate and are wanted by local communities.

Q. Where will new landscape approaches be delivered? Is NE going to decide where these places will be?

A. An All England Strategic Assessment will identify opportunity areas for new style approaches. This will be an evidenced based approach. Along with national and local evidence to identify areas that might benefit, we will work with local communities to ensure they inform development of new approaches and are central to their implementation.

Q. How will new landscape approaches be resourced?

A. Funding models will be developed as part of the work.

Q. Why not simply designate these areas as NPs or AONBs?

A. There are very specific criteria set in legislation determining what can be designated NP or AONB. New approaches will provide opportunities to complement National Parks and AONBs which celebrate our finest landscapes, by driving nature (wildlife and landscape) recovery and improving people's connection with nature.

Q. Will new approaches be developed and delivered in partnership?

A. We will work in partnership with key partners and Defra to develop new landscape approaches. We will work with local communities to ensure they inform development of new approaches and are central to their implementation.

Q. Will new landscape approaches be established through legislation and have defined purposes?

A. We are working closely with Government to explore and develop these proposals and any legislative measures that this new, complementary landscape system may require.

Q. Why does NE want to undertake such an assessment and what will it be used for?

A. We want to move to an evidence-based approach for identifying places in need of landscape intervention. We envisage a network of urban and rural green spaces that people can access and where nature can thrive. They would connect through to existing designated landscapes, joining up opportunities for accessing green spaces close to where people live and work, with those further afield. They would be designed to deliver multiple benefits for health and wellbeing, for nature recovery and for greener, more attractive and investable places, boosting green jobs, mitigating noise and air pollution, and importantly making places that are more resilient to climate change, flooding and contribute to net zero.

Q. How will NE undertake the assessment?

A. During 2021/22 NE will work collaboratively to define a robust methodology to identify desirable outcomes and places that might best take advantage of these, and to make an initial assessment using existing data and where possible mapping from other initiatives and projects. We will work with national and local partners and communities to ensure they inform the assessment.

Q. Will NE undertake this assessment in partnership?

A. Yes - We will work in partnership with many national stakeholders and partners from a broad range of interests.

Q. Are any other UK countries undertaking such an assessment?

A. We recognise that NE will need to liaise with sister agencies in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland especially around cross border issues. Natural Resources Wales are leading a similar assessment of where new landscape designations might be located in Wales, working with the Welsh government.

Q. Will NCAs be used in this assessment?

A. National Character Areas (NCAs) are a key landscape framework and we envisage the assessment will become an integral part of the NCA framework.

Questions relating to AONB and National Park Designation and variation

Q. What is an AONB?

A. An [Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty](#) (AONB) is land protected by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW Act). It protects the land to conserve and enhance its natural beauty. The CROW Act sets out the roles and responsibilities that different organisations must follow to manage AONBs. There are currently 34 [AONBs in England](#).

Q. What is a National Park?

A. A National Park is land protected by the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act (1949). It protects the land to conserve and enhance its natural beauty and also to promote opportunities for its understanding and enjoyment by the public. Separate National Park Authorities manage the protection and enjoyment of the 11 English National Parks, working with other organisations and communities. The Broads was identified under separate legislation and has similar functions and purposes.

Q. Who makes the decision regarding designation?

A. Natural England has the statutory responsibility to decide whether an area is of outstanding natural beauty and if it is desirable to designate, the Secretary of State (Defra) is responsible for confirming the designation order.

Q. What is the existing process for designating National Parks and AONBs?

A. The designation process is framed in legislation and involves Natural England deciding if a proposal meets the natural beauty criterion, if it's desirable to designate for the purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty and defining a detailed boundary. There are other procedural requirements to the [process](#).

Q. Are there opportunities to improve the lengthy designation process?

A. Natural England has worked with Surrey Hills AONB partners to develop a more collaborative and swifter designation process that makes better use of local stakeholder evidence and knowledge to support the designation assessment. We will be applying this new approach to take forward each of these designation proposals.

Q. How will local people be able to engage?

A. Natural England will work collaboratively with local partners to ensure there are good engagement opportunities throughout the process. This could include opportunities to contribute to the evidence gathering as well as through informal consultation.

Q. How will AONB designation affect planning?

A. All planning decisions continue to be made by the existing local planning authorities, with specific policies which reflect the national importance of the AONB. There is no presumption against development in an AONB and nor are there any changes to access rights over and above those that already exist. Some Permitted Development Rights may be withdrawn, requiring affected proposals to be subjected to the full planning approval process prior to determination by the local planning authority.

Q. How will designation affect landowners and other land managers?

A. Ownership of land remains unchanged within an AONB, and there is no restriction on how land can be farmed. There is also no impact on payments to farmers.

Q. How will designation affect nature conservation?

A. The natural beauty of an AONB encompasses both its natural and cultural heritage features. Future management of the area will thus seek to ensure that the internationally important wildlife and habitats that are so intrinsic to its natural beauty, are both conserved and enhanced. The integrated management approach taken by the AONB Partnership will also assist with the management of any potential conflicts which may arise between wildlife and recreation.

Q. What will change as a result of designation as an AONB?

A. The provisions of the Countryside & Rights of Way Act will immediately apply i.e.:

- S84 (4) specifically provides for a local authority whose area consists of or includes the whole or any part of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty to have the power to take all such action as appears to them expedient for the accomplishment of the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area.
- S85(1) confers a General Duty to have regard to the purpose of AONB designation as follows: "In exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in an area of outstanding natural beauty, a relevant authority shall have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty."
- S85(2) defines 'relevant authorities' for these purposes as encompassing any Minister of the Crown, any public body, any, statutory undertaker and any person holding public office.
- S89 (2) places a duty on relevant local authorities to prepare and publish a plan which formulates their policy for the management of the AONB and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it and a further duty to review the plan at "intervals of not more than five years". An AONB Management Plan sets out the policy for the management of an AONB and includes an action plan for carrying out activity in support of the purpose of designation. The Management Plan plays an important role in supporting and co-ordinating the action of the organisations that make up the AONB Partnership, including setting the work programme of the AONB team.

Questions relating to Farming in Protected Landscapes

Q What is the FiPL Scheme?

A The Farming in Protected Landscapes programme will provide additional investment in these places to allow farmers to work in partnership with Protected Landscapes to deliver bigger and better outcomes for the environment for people and for the place.

Protected Landscapes can make an important contribution to:

- **Climate** – delivering net zero with nature and nature-based solutions to help communities adapt to the unavoidable effects of climate change;
- **Nature** – playing a leading role in the delivery of the Nature Recovery Network and achieving the PMs commitment to protect 30% of land by 2030;
- **People** – providing a natural health service that will improve the nation’s public health and wellbeing through increased access to nature across all parts of society, as part of our green recovery.
- **Place** – creating centres of excellence and green innovation that are flourishing places to live and work, each with a strong identity and cultural heritage, and high recognition as attractive visitor destinations

Q What role will NE have?

A The programme will be project based and take a bottom up approach - this means that funding will support individual projects proposed by farmers, and approved by Local Assessment Panels, which will support Protected Landscapes’ local priorities. Natural England will sit on these Local Assessment Panels as part of the decision-making process.

Questions relating to National Nature Reserves

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Q. Why is the Written Ministerial Statement about the Glover Landscapes Review saying things about National Nature Reserves (NNRs)?

A. The Glover Landscapes Review highlights the important role that NNRs can play within and alongside landscape designations and encourages closer working between relevant organisations. Though on very different geographical scales, NNRs and National Parks have much in common. They were sister designations with complimentary purposes in the 1949 Act. The NERC 2006 Act introduced a recreational purpose to NNRs, caveated with a statement based on the Sandford Principle. NNR is a relatively straightforward and simple designation to use in situations where landowners/managers wish to see land of sufficient bio- or geodiversity importance established and recognised as nature reserves in the long term/in perpetuity.

Q. What is an NNR?

A. NNRs are declared by Natural England under legislation stemming from the National Parks & Access to the Countryside Act 1949. Their primary purpose is nature conservation with two other core purposes of science and people.

- ..to manage areas of national importance for biodiversity and/or geodiversity as nature reserves. NNR status is not a protective measure; rather, it is a statement of intent to manage the land for the purposes defined in the long term/in perpetuity.
- environmental research;
- engaging with people.

Q. What is new about what the Written Ministerial Statement is saying about NNRs?

A. Current NNR selection principles use SSSI status to define national importance. Existing NNRs are fully/in large part SSSI or land with potential to become SSSI. Some NNRs have non-SSSI land included for reasons such as habitat restoration/connectivity or to better enable management eg lay-back land for livestock, or car parking.

NE are currently reviewing NNR Selection principles in order to better enable NNRs to contribute to evolving conservation and nature recovery strategies, for example through habitat creation, restoration of natural processes and trialling/demonstrating new techniques.

In this broadening of the selection principles, we need to preserve the 'national importance' aspect of the NNR designation, as per the phrase in the statutes. A general principle might therefore be that non-SSSI areas being proposed as NNR need to be large - so that they would be/could become 'nationally important', whereas a site which has already passed through the SSSI process could already be shown to be nationally important and therefore might be smaller. Natural England has started to develop this thinking.

Q. How many new NNRs might there be as a result of what the WMS is saying?

A. NE estimates there are 50-80 potential new/extended NNRs, ranging from proposals to more speculative ideas, which collectively could approximately double current NNR area as a contribution to Government's 30x30 commitments.