

The National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty's Response to the questions posed in the "Government Response to the Landscapes Review"

Consultation Open: 15 January – 09 April 2022

"National Landscapes: the hidden big idea"

The reforms necessary to deliver a transformative and contemporary approach to statutory designated landscapes are all present in the government response. But, the way the document is structured means that this 'big idea' is hidden. It is the sum of all these parts, not each proposal individually, which is the truly exciting proposition.

Proposal 24 of the Glover Review recommended that: 'AONBs be strengthened with new purposes, powers and resources, renamed as National Landscapes'

Purposes: The extension and revision of purposes to reflect contemporary priorities for AONB. Natural beauty with a strengthened link to nature recovery on a landscape scale and the importance of cultural heritage. A second purpose to support sustainable communities and promote understanding and enjoyment of the area.

Powers: Catalyse the shared endeavour which delivering for nature, climate and people demands by strengthening the 'duty of regard' linked to strengthening the status of the Management Plan. A formal role in planning and development management to better deliver on the purposes.

Resources: Secure core team activity through a dynamic and progressive funding formula which reflects ambition and future needs. A strong core which can attract the partnerships and finance to boost delivery and impact.

Governance: A robust minimum governance standard which provides sufficient independence to guarantee the integrity of the designation, dynamic and more representative of the wider UK population.

National Landscapes: Invest in a name change to leverage the full benefits of a new brand which reflects the step change and renewal of AONB.

This combination of modest and uncontested reforms to AONB will deliver more for climate, nature and people – looking forward, but built on the legacy and learning from 70 years of AONB. This is what a contemporary statutory designated landscape designation, by design, looks like.

Questions

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Do you want your responses to be confidential? | No |
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This response has been prepared by the National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (NAAONB). The NAAONB supports and develops the network of 46 ambitious AONB partnerships to have a strong collective voice and a positive impact on the places for which they care.

The NAAONB is a charity with three primary objectives:

1. to promote the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty in and around AONBs and other similarly protected areas;
2. to advance the education, understanding and appreciation of the conservation and enhancement of the countryside; and
3. to promote the efficiency and effectiveness of organisations promoting or representing Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

A stronger mission for nature recovery (p10)

An extension and revision of purposes to reflect contemporary priorities for AONB; natural beauty with a strengthened link to nature recovery on a landscape scale and the importance of cultural heritage. A second purpose to support sustainable communities and promote understanding and enjoyment of the area.

6. Should a strengthened first purpose of protected landscapes follow the proposals set out in Chapter 2?

YES

AONBs are part of a global network of protected areas and have served the nation well since their creation by the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act and refresh by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. They have withstood the test of time, are trusted, locally and nationally, have proved themselves capable of adapting to changed circumstances and acting as the focus for innovation. AONBs comprise biologically rich and complex landscapes. They are an integral part of England's ecological network, providing strongholds for some of the nation's most important and threatened wildlife sites and habitats. AONB partnerships - acting together and with others - play a vital role in the conservation of biodiversity, enhancing the coherence and resilience of natural and semi-natural habitats.

We believe that amendments to the first purpose will help to strengthen the alignment of effort towards nature's recovery by protected landscapes bodies and all bodies subject to the 'duty of regard'. However, it would be misguided to believe that the current purpose has resulted in nature depletion, where the key driver for historical nature depletion across these landscapes has been the policy-driven support for the industrialisation of agriculture through agricultural support payments.

The designated landscapes have shown similar declines in both quantity and quality of nature as seen across the rest of the country. Given their importance for both wildlife and public engagement with the natural world, greater emphasis should be put on restoration of natural processes, looking at more holistic and regenerative management practices.

In this way the conservation management role of designated landscapes will also deliver on climate change adaptation and mitigation, for example, through promoting and supporting the enhancement of green infrastructure and providing targeted support for projects designed to restore key ecosystems including wetlands and upland peats.

The primary purpose of the AONB designation as provided for in the 1949 Wildlife and Countryside Act is to 'conserve and enhance natural beauty.' A series of legal decisions and policy statements since this date have made it clear that the phrase 'natural beauty' is not just scenery but includes landform and geology, plants and animals, the historic environment and cultural heritage.

AONBs should have two clear purposes relating to:

- maintaining the landscape quality for which they were designated
- to support people's engagement with that landscape

We believe the inclusion of natural capital in the purposes would be misplaced. Tying purposes which need to endure in the long term to a term more recent and poorly understood term, more commonly associated with a monetary valuation tool, is not particularly helpful.

Whatever the final wording of this legal purpose/s it will be essential to produce authoritative and clear guidance to describe the policy intent which must reinforce the intent for 'natural beauty' to encompass landscape quality and landscape function.

7. Which other priorities should be reflected in a strengthened first purpose e.g. climate, cultural heritage?

We welcome the move to add clarity to the purposes but just changing the wording is not going to change the outcomes. There is a need for clear and explicit linkage to other powers and responsibilities in particular the Duty of Regard and the need to mandate the implementation of Management Plans. Statutory undertakers must show greater awareness of their actions in relation to protected landscapes.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are listed as Category V Protected Landscapes under IUCN definitions:

"A protected area where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant ecological, biological, cultural and scenic value: and where safeguarding the integrity of this interaction is vital to protecting and sustaining the area and its associated nature conservation and other values."

AONBs are cultural landscapes in that their designation reflects the value placed on these areas by and for thy nation. They include some of the nation's most important historic heritage. For example, 23% of England's Scheduled Monuments and 27% of England's Protected Wreck sites lie within AONBs. Research, protection and education about the historic and cultural heritage appears in all AONB management plans and a number of AONBs have worked to produce design guidance that supports the continuation of local vernacular architecture in a contemporary context.

The term 'cultural landscape' has more recently been posited by some as being in conflict with nature recovery. Yet, AONBs are important areas for wildlife; despite covering only 15% of England they hold 25% of England's SSSIs, 24% of England's most important wildlife habitats 20% of England's total woodland cover and 30% of England's Ancient Woodlands. They include important areas of upland peatlands and lowland wetlands which in addition to their biological richness have a critical role in carbon sequestration and water management.

Importantly, many AONBs have been able to go beyond a relatively limited view of 'culture' to a more inclusive interpretation which extends from vernacular buildings to the more dynamic and sometimes ephemeral contemporary cultural forms – ranging from oral history to music and sports which are so important in community life and amongst young people. In order to remain relevant to future generations, more work must be done to ensure contemporary cultural values are reflected in AONB management plan objectives. AONB partnerships should then optimise the benefits of their proximity to towns and cities to become more representative of society. Increased participation and better representation will result in greater legitimacy and help strengthen links between identity and place.

We believe natural beauty remains a powerful, valuable and enduring concept which should remain as the crux of the purposes. The use of more direct language to clarify the definition of natural beauty to include cultural and built heritage, and extending to cultural assets linked to the land such as customs, dialect and language, would add to the clarity of the purpose/s.

Finally, consideration should be given to better enabling designated landscapes to engage where appropriate with offshore management of the marine environment, giving them a role in achieving the co-ordinated management of the coastal and marine environment.

Agricultural transition (p12)

8. Do you support any of the following options as we develop the role of protected landscapes in the new environmental land management schemes? Tick all that apply.

- Designing the environmental land management schemes in a way that works for all farmers and land managers, including the specific circumstances for those in protected landscapes, recognising that farmers in these areas are well-placed to deliver on our environmental priorities.
- Using Local Nature Recovery Strategies to identify projects or habitats within protected landscapes.
- Monitoring the effectiveness and uptake of the new environmental land management schemes in protected landscapes. Using this to inform whether further interventions are needed to ensure we are on track for wider nature recovery ambitions.
- Creating a clear role for protected landscape organisations in the preparation of Local Nature Recovery Strategies. Our recent LNRS consultation specifically asks for views on the role of different organisations in the preparation of LNRSs, including protected landscapes.
- Building on FiPL, empowering protected landscapes to support decision-making and delivery against agreed priorities, including through dedicated project coordinators and advisers.

YES to all, but where the AONB Management Plan should also be critical in identifying priorities in the area.

9. Do you have any views or supporting evidence you would like to input as we develop the role of protected landscapes in the new environmental land management schemes?

From the open moorlands of the North Pennines, Nidderdale, and the Forest of Bowland, through the undulating grasslands of the Chilterns and Cotswolds, to the more intimate wooded landscapes of the High Weald and Kent Downs, each AONB is the product of farming practice, and their value to the whole nation is largely dependent on sympathetic future land management.

We believe the protected landscape management organisations should have specific roles in targeting, prioritising and delivering Environmental Land Management schemes (ELM). The future Environmental Land Management schemes should recognise the special needs of protected landscapes and the value of fully integrating the national landscape teams in designing and delivering a programme that combines national and local priorities with the flexibility to add local decision making

The Farming in Protected Landscapes scheme was designed as part of the agricultural transition plan and has been successfully rolled out across the AONB network. It has demonstrated that national landscapes – when given the opportunity and resources – can deliver a successful and constructive programme that delivers for nature, climate and people.

The Landscapes Review (Proposal 5) argued for a central place for national landscapes in the new environmental land management schemes. We fully support this recommendation and would like to see this reflected in the design of the new schemes.

Benefits demonstrated by FiPL include:

Integration - Facilitates an integrated approach that reflects the statutory purposes of our protected landscapes with four priority themes: nature, climate, people and place. It has the potential to link environment and farm business. It appears likely that ELM may only focus on two of these themes (nature and climate) which limits its potential to help manage and enhance our protected landscapes; reduces the scope to deliver value for money. Rather than ‘stacking’ public benefits that can be achieved on a holding there will be an artificial limit.

Advice and Facilitation - Embeds local advice and facilitation at the heart of the programme and thus plays to the strength of protected landscape teams in terms of their role as ‘place shapers and convenors’. It should help build and/or relationships between protected landscapes and the farming/land management community.

Not-prescription or points based - FiPL provides funding for projects. It is not limited to a set of prescriptions; applicants can design their own projects within the National Framework. This will help promote innovation and integration.

Local priorities - Provides funding which helps implement AONB Management Plans, highlighting and enhancing the relevance of these plans and the value of farmer/land manager engagement in the development/review of such plans.

Local decision-making - The Local assessment Panels provide a framework for local decision-making and involvement of a range of stakeholders in the panels. Panels include representatives from the farming and land management community, environmental NGOs and statutory bodies. This has the potential to improve partnership working, give a clearer understanding of national priorities and how these relate to local priorities and issues.

Regardless of the roles of the AONB teams, the protected landscapes must be prioritised for enhanced investment through ELM, in order to help the Government achieve its 30x30 target. ELM is the most significant public investment stream in public goods arising from the land; if Government is to fulfil its obligations under the duty of regard it should recognise and respond to the need for greater public investment in the management of the fabric of the majority of the land area within these landscapes with a view to delivering public goods for the nation.

A stronger mission for connecting people and places (p14)

10. Should AONBs have a second purpose relating to connecting people and places, equivalent to that of National Parks?

YES, but not 'equivalent to that of National Parks'. We believe new legal purposes for AONB should be suited to the circumstances of AONB and not tied to a more arbitrary measure of 'equivalence' to a different designation. AONBs are the nation's nearby countryside. With over two thirds of the population of England living within half an hour's journey time of their nearest AONB they are by far the most visited of the landscape designations.

Please give reasons for your answers

AONBs are a vital resource for active leisure, provide the opportunity for getting outside, and offer mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing for people of all ages and backgrounds. Evidence clearly suggests that an emotional connection with nature is more beneficial than Page 14 of 20 contact alone and ultimately leads to pro-environmental behaviour. Meaningful connection to nature delivers enormous individual and social benefits.

The proximity of many AONBs to large conurbations means that they generally offer easier access for more people both in terms of distance and transport links than National Parks. They also have extensive, though variable, networks of footpaths and bridleways, are traversed by 10 National Trails and feature significant areas of Open Country, Registered Common Land or Section 16 Dedicated Land, (around twice the proportion of the English countryside in general). As a consequence, AONBs today attract 156 million visitors each year compared to around 90 million visitors for National Parks.

AONBS are cultural landscapes, where restoration and celebration of natural beauty is not possible without engaging with, and including, a diverse audience. AONB management teams are already expected to operate in this sphere, by their local governance bodies, their local businesses (particularly those in the visitor economy) and their communities.

Without a formal recreational purpose, AONB teams only have a weak basis for managing access and recreation, which will continue to be driven by significant but ad hoc initiatives to build links with underrepresented or excluded groups in adjacent urban areas. Participation will continue to be driven by wider social forces including advertising (mountain bikes, outdoor clothing) designed to grow the outdoor recreation market and will remain significantly skewed in social and economic terms.

11. Should a strengthened second purpose of protected landscapes follow the proposals set out in Chapter 3 to improve connections to all parts of society with our protected landscapes?

YES

The current purpose of the AONB designation doesn't recognise the importance of AONBs in providing opportunities for recreation. AONBs are the nation's nearby countryside. With over two thirds of the population of England living within half an hour's journey time of their nearest AONB they are by far the most visited of the landscape designations. A second purpose provides both recognition of this immense benefit for the nation and provides a consistency in the expectation across all of the AONBs.

AONB teams do recognise their responsibilities to nearby communities and work hard to secure project funding to enable people, especially those currently underrepresented in the countryside, to access these precious spaces.

The NAAONB supports the proposal that the wording of the second purpose should be more up to date and inclusive than the existing 'enjoyment and understanding' purpose of the National Parks.

12. Are there any other priorities that should be reflected in a strengthened second purpose?

The policy intent should be clarified to support the role of protected landscapes in delivering for people's health and wellbeing. The constituents of AONB are both the nation and local communities. Whilst their needs may overlap, consideration should be given to how a revised purpose could be framed to ensure the designation reflects the needs of sustainable local communities.

Managing visitor pressures (p16)

The AONBs are visited by more people than the National Parks. While this question is based on the current purposes and therefore only applies to the National Parks, the potential addition of a second purpose to AONBs would make this question relevant to the AONBs as well and this should be borne in mind when making any decisions.

The role of AONB teams in planning (p18)

Catalyse the shared endeavour which delivering for nature, climate and people demands by strengthening the 'duty of regard' linked to strengthening the status of the Management Plan. A formal role in planning and development management to better deliver on the purposes.

18. What roles should AONBs teams play in the plan-making process to achieve better outcomes?

OPEN

Management Plans

Land has multiple uses and the protected landscape management plans are the best way of balancing the competing interests within the framework identified by the AONB purposes.

The writing of management plans is a statutory duty, however the implementation of them is not.

Current legislation provides only that the relevant local authorities should 'have regard' for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of that part of the AONB that falls within their area, for which they must produce a management plan and review this every five years. This latter function may be delegated to an AONB partnership (particularly where several local

authorities are responsible for an AONB) but the means whereby this is to be achieved is not prescribed.

Most importantly, there is no statutory duty on AONB partnerships or local authorities to implement their management plans and delivery is currently largely undertaken by the AONB teams with individual partnerships in many cases being reduced to stakeholder fora. This can be immensely frustrating and counter-productive.

AONBs are national and cultural designations and the management plan should recognise this, using national priorities to respond to local situations. Guidance on the management plans should be updated regularly to reflect the changing national and international priorities that relate to these landscapes.

The work within AONBs on the production of Nature Recovery Plans has demonstrated the importance of spatial data for understanding the threats and opportunities present and how they relate to the landscape. Land managers have found the production of visualisations to be extremely useful in understanding both the scale of the problem and the potential for solutions. Producing management plans to this level of detail will require resources, including GIS capacity, that many AONB teams do not have.

We recommend there should be:

- A mandate to deliver the Management Plan as well as develop it, with checks and balances to ensure that the ambition and scope of the Management Plan is not tempered by this process
- An outcomes framework to provide oversight and scrutiny of delivery against aspiration

Major Development and Exceptional Circumstances

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 177 says that, when considering applications for development in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, permission should be refused for major development other than in exceptional circumstances, and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest.

The Glover Review concluded that the policy and/or guidance on major developments in AONBs needs to be strengthened. AONBs are nationally important landscapes, equivalent in value to National Parks, that we hold in trust for future generations to enjoy. Where we have to develop parts of them it should be worth the cost to those future generations, for truly exceptional reasons, not due to a collection of generic and commonplace benefits that could be achieved anywhere in the country.

One solution could be to amend the NPPF to refer to 'wholly exceptional reasons' (as for irreplaceable habitats in paragraph 180c) and to then footnote it with clarification on what this means.

We recommend:

- Amend NPPF 177 to 'wholly exceptional circumstances' and clarify that this means that at least one factor must be exceptional in its own right – i.e., is a rare circumstance that is unlikely to recur in a similar fashion elsewhere.

Setting of AONBs

The inclusion of a sentence in NPPF 176 relating to the setting of AONBs is welcomed, but does not go far enough as currently worded. Some AONBs are particularly vulnerable to damage from development in their setting due to their physical characteristics. Open and high landscapes like the Kent Downs directly overlook the undesignated landscape at their foot and are increasingly being impacted by large developments close to the boundary. Similarly coastal AONBs like South Devon are narrow and sinuous, following the contours of river valleys inland, and large scale development on the fringes can have a significant impact on their character.

The current wording says “development within their setting should be sensitively located and designed to avoid or minimise adverse impacts on the designated areas” but does not give any guidance as to scale. In a context where large urban extensions and new settlements of hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of homes are being proposed adjacent to AONB boundaries this is a serious omission as no amount of good design will successfully mitigate their impact.

We recommend:

- Amend NPPF 176 to say “development within their setting should be of an appropriate scale and sensitively located and designed to avoid or minimise adverse impacts on the designated areas”.

Housing Numbers and AONB-wide Local Plans

Debates about exceptional circumstances usually focus on housing and those local planning authorities that have housing supply or delivery issues. There are two different terminologies for housing numbers in a planning context:

- ‘Objectively Assessed Need’ (OAN) which is calculated using national methodology and does not take account of constraints such as AONB; and
- ‘Housing requirement’ which is the proposed provision of housing in a local plan which should take account of constraints and also opportunities to contribute to the unmet needs of neighbouring local planning authorities.

If a local planning authority cannot demonstrate a five year supply of housing land against either an up to date local plan figure or the OAN, or it fails the ‘housing delivery test’ then this can trigger a ‘presumption in favour of sustainable development’. Where they don’t have an up to date plan (i.e. it is more than 5 years old) then the supply and delivery is measured against the OAN.

At local plan stage, local authorities with a large proportion of AONB should take account of that in setting their housing requirement. Planning Practice Guidance, revised July 2019, states “The National Planning Policy Framework makes clear that the scale and extent of development in these areas should be limited, in view of the importance of conserving and enhancing their landscapes and scenic beauty. Its policies for protecting these areas may mean that it is not possible to meet objectively assessed needs for development in full through the plan-making process, and they are unlikely to be suitable areas for accommodating unmet needs from adjoining (non-designated) areas. Effective joint working between planning authorities covering designated and adjoining areas, through the preparation and maintenance of statements of common ground, is particularly important in helping to identify how housing and other needs can best be accommodated...”

Paragraph: 041 Reference ID: 8-041-20190721.

However, the experience at local plan examinations is quite different, with Inspectors appearing to take the view that local planning authorities must meet their OAN, and in many cases also accommodate unmet need from adjacent local planning authorities. Failure to do so, even where the area is heavily constrained by AONB or Green Belt, can lead to local plans failing the 'duty to cooperate' test at the first stage of the examination, or failing the 'soundness' test later on in the examination (see Wealden, Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Malling etc).

This is a particular issue in the South East where OAN figures are very high due to the affordability multiplier built into the national calculation, and where there are high proportions of protected landscapes and Green Belt (30% of the old SE region). There is a domino effect of local plans failing at examination because most local authorities are not able to meet their own OAN without damaging environmental assets and are therefore unable to help out neighbours with their own deficits.

Increasingly the response from local authorities is to seek to meet their OAN, with a 'buffer' to contribute to neighbours, even where this requires release of Green Belt or major development in AONBs. This approach is considered to be less risky and more likely to result in a local plan that succeeds at examination. Inspectors do not tend to challenge this approach because they too are under pressure to maximise the housing numbers in local plans. The result is significantly increased pressure on AONBs which are expected to accommodate very large volumes and scales of housing development which conflict with the purpose of their designation to conserve and enhance natural beauty.

This contrasts with the approach taken in National Parks. In the south east the two National Park Authorities - South Downs and New Forest – have both been successful in recent years in achieving local plans that have a housing requirement that is significantly lower than their OAN.

In large, complex AONBs which cover multiple authorities, this debate is played out in up to 15 local plan examinations, with significant resource implications for both AONB Units and local authorities.

We recommend:

- Short term: the NPPF and PPG be amended to say that local authorities with land in an AONB should work together to prepare an AONB-wide Local Plan with levels of development which properly reflects the purpose of the designation.
- Medium term: amend the governance of at least the larger AONBs so that they can prepare and make decisions on AONB-wide local plans themselves, subject to independent examination

19. Should AONB teams be made statutory consultees for development management?

YES

The granting of statutory consultee status to AONB partnerships was recommended by the Glover Review to ensure that they are notified of all relevant planning applications and that their advice on those proposals is given weight. Statutory consultee status offers the potential to improve participation on planning decisions, especially by enabling AONBs to determine what they are consulted on (and have recourse if they are not consulted) and raising the profile of submissions. However, statutory consultee status comes with responsibilities e.g. requirements to provide a substantive response and to report on responses made. This additional burden must be recognised in a new burdens assessment.

Statutory Consultee status only applies to planning applications and thus will not solve all the problems currently being experienced across the AONB network. There remains a need for better policy in the NPPF, application of various national and local development orders, and statutory standing in preparation of local/neighbourhood plans.

AONBs are cultural designations, and in this regard they should not be a no-go area for development. It's important that the narrative on protected landscapes shifts away from thinking of them as 'constraints' on development. Instead they must be recognised for the vital parts of local and national social, economic and environmental infrastructure that they are. Here, development takes place, but it is development which is consistent with the nature of landscape as infrastructure. Development shouldn't take place that undermines the integrity of the landscape.

Advice from AONB teams with regard to planning should be made independently and in the interests of the designation and its statutory purpose, without fear or favour and based on the NPPF and the AONB Management Plan. There are recorded instances around the country where this independent approach has created a high degree of tension between an AONB team and one of its partnership's local authorities. This position and independence should be reinforced through Government guidance and potential reform to governance and status associated with AONBs.

20. If yes, what type of planning applications should AONB teams be consulted on?

- AONB teams should formally agree with local planning authorities which planning applications should be consulted on.

The Cotswolds Conservation Board has developed a clear protocol for what the Board expects to be consulted on and it is likely that similar measures will be needed by other AONB partnerships to manage the workload. They may also need to triage the applications that they are consulted on to see which require individual responses and which can receive standing advice. Natural England operates such a system at the moment so it would also work for AONB partnerships if they are statutory consultees.

Another model for consideration, which could be interpreted and applied either nationally or locally, is that of the Mayor of London who is consulted on all applications which have 'potential strategic importance', and has power to direct refusal on any of the applications referred to him. This means only applications over a prescribed threshold are caught – ensuring focus is on those with strategic impact and minimising impact on existing resources.

Local governance (p20)

A robust minimum governance standard which provides sufficient independence to guarantee the integrity of the designation, dynamic and more representative of the wider UK population.

We do not accept the assertion in the consultation that government has only limited scope to influence or reform the governance of AONB.

Dedicated AONB staff teams whether based on Local Authority structures or in Conservation Boards provide AONB partnerships with delivery capacity, long term credibility and local expertise; they provide flexibility, the ability to react quickly to opportunities and enable partnerships to 'punch above their weight'.

The flexibility in AONB governance structures have the benefit of being able to be tailored to local circumstances. However, this may not always reflect or respect the national importance and integrity of these designations and are sometimes only partially effective and should be strengthened.

AONBs require robust governance structures that reflect both local and national interests which are appropriate to deliver the desired outcomes.

We support the Glover review recommendations that AONBs should have better governance structures. Strengthened governance and accountability for all AONBs would be achieved by:

- AONB partnerships being granted a legal status and a statutory duty to implement management plans with associated scrutiny and accountability.
- All relevant authorities being given a duty of 'due regard' and a statutory adviser to government appointed with the responsibility to ensure that this duty is carried out.
- Government giving more weight and emphasis to statutory designated landscape management plans as a local delivery vehicle. This should be embedded in the emerging Environment Act.
- Enhanced status through improved terms of reference and training for members and the use of national appointees

AONB teams are collaborative by nature, working through partnership to deliver for their unique landscapes. They balance national and local such that national priorities are able to inform local decision making. To be able to achieve these aims they need a flexible yet robust governance structure that responds to the local needs – a strength of AONBs is that their governance models are adapted to suit to local circumstances and achieve wide local 'ownership'.

21. Which of the following measures would you support to improve local governance? Tick all that apply.

- Improved training and materials
- Greater flexibility over the proportion of national, parish and local appointments
- Merit-based criteria for local authority appointments
- Reduced board size
- Secretary of State appointed chair

There are a number of areas where governance could be strengthened. More robust and representative governance arrangements would be strongly welcomed by AONB teams. Their frustrated ambition and skills and expertise were noted in the Landscapes Review.

Only two AONBs – the Cotswolds and the Chilterns – have statutory Conservation Boards. In all other cases, AONB partnerships are non-statutory and are hosted by a local authority. Current legislation provides only that their relevant local authorities should 'have regard' for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of that part of the AONB that falls within their area, for which they must produce a management plan and review this every five years.

As a consequence of the local focus and responsibility, the AONB status as a nationally important landscape is often overlooked in decision-making, and the role of guardianship on behalf of the nation often not considered.

AONBs require sustainable governance structures in place that reflect both local and national interests that are appropriate to deliver the desired outcomes.

- Reform the Conservation Board model to be simpler to implement and more responsive to local needs
- Add Secretary of State appointees to deliver on the national/local balancing
- Create smaller executives to enable effective decision making and leadership within a wider partnership to broaden investment in the outcomes
- Improve Government guidance to include Member training, decision making and values
- Increase accountability and scrutiny through an Outcomes Framework

The government should provide robust minimum governance standards which provide sufficient independence to guarantee the integrity of the designation, enable a dynamic governance style which responds to the needs of the landscape and be more representative of the wider UK population.

A clearer role for public bodies (p22)

22. Should statutory duties be strengthened so that they are given greater weight when exercising public functions?

YES

The existing duty of regard is widely known to be weak, and is one of the main factors which limit the ability of these landscape designations to fulfil their expectations. We welcome the proposal to strengthen this legal duty for public bodies and statutory undertakers. This duty on relevant authorities should also extend to supporting the delivery of the AONB management plan and a requirement to report on steps taken. This reporting, to avoid additional burdens, could be integrated into existing reporting arrangements. It is also worth exploring ways for requiring any investment/spending plans within a protected landscape to be published and to demonstrate how it furthers the purposes and the priorities in the management plan. This would provide greater transparency on the level of public finance in an area and influence it to align better with the management plan.

Current legislation provides only that the relevant local authorities should ‘have regard’ for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of that part of the AONB that falls within their area, for which they must produce a management plan and review this every five years. This latter function may be delegated to an AONB partnership (particularly where several local authorities are responsible for an AONB) but the means whereby this is to be achieved is not prescribed.

This has significant advantages in permitting AONB governance models, and the mechanism by which the designation’s purposes are delivered, to reflect local requirements and we believe that this flexibility should be retained. However, it sometimes means that the AONB may not be a high priority for its partnership organisations in consequence of which the partnership may lack sufficient authority to address key governance issues including performance.

Strengthened governance and accountability for all AONBs would be achieved by:

- AONB partnerships being granted a legal status and a statutory duty to implement management plans with associated scrutiny and accountability.

- All relevant authorities being given a duty of 'due regard' and a statutory adviser to government appointed with the responsibility to ensure that this duty is carried out.
- Government giving more weight and emphasis to statutory designated landscape management plans as a local delivery vehicle.

23. Should statutory duties be made clearer with regards to the role of public bodies in preparing and implementing management plans?

YES

It should extend to supporting the delivery of the AONB management plan and a requirement to report on steps taken. This reporting, to avoid additional burdens, could be integrated into existing reporting arrangements. It is also worth exploring ways for requiring any investment/spending plans within a protected landscape to be published and to demonstrate how it furthers the purposes and the priorities in the management plan. This would provide greater transparency on the level of public finance in an area and influence it to align better with the management plan.

25. If you have any further comments on any of the proposals in this document, please include them here. [FREE TEXT]

Secure core team activity through a dynamic and progressive funding formula which reflects ambition and future needs. A strong core which can attract the partnerships and finance to boost delivery and impact.

AONB teams need to be adequately resourced to support the delivery of their statutory purposes. The funding allocated to just one National Park - the South Downs National Park – is more than the funding for all 34 English AONBs put together.

AONB delivery is likely to continue to depend on a business model involving a mix of public, private and voluntary-sector resources. This can be a significant strength, ensuring that delivery is aligned with contemporary priorities. However, secure core funding is essential to safeguard the future of these national assets, and should be aligned with the effective delivery of revised statutory purposes (including recreation and enjoyment, together with a social duty), and mechanisms need to be reinstated to address the issue of vulnerability arising from the relationship with host local authorities whose total budgets will have been cut by an average of 50% since 2010.

In addition, there needs to be adequate funding of any new burdens arising from the reform proposal, including on Town and Country planning activity, to allow designated AONB unit planning officers to effectively manage major planning applications and a new statutory consultee responsibility

The reforms necessary to deliver a transformative and contemporary approach to statutory designated landscapes are all present in the government response. But, the way the document is structured means that this 'big idea' is hidden. It is the sum of all these parts, not each proposal individually, which are the truly exciting proposition.

Proposal 24 of the Glover Review recommended that: 'AONBs be strengthened with new purposes, powers and resources, renamed as National Landscapes'

Purposes: The extension and revision of purposes to reflect contemporary priorities for AONB. Natural beauty with a strengthened link to nature recovery on a landscape scale and the importance of cultural heritage. A second purpose to support sustainable communities and promote understanding and enjoyment of the area.

Powers: Catalyse the shared endeavour which delivering for nature, climate and people demands by strengthening the 'duty of regard' linked to strengthening the status of the Management Plan. A formal role in planning and development management to better deliver on the purposes.

Resources: Secure core team activity through a dynamic and progressive funding formula which reflects ambition and future needs. A strong core which can attract the partnerships and finance to boost delivery and impact.

Governance: A robust minimum governance standard which provides sufficient independence to guarantee the integrity of the designation, dynamic and more representative of the wider UK population.

National Landscapes: Invest in a name change to leverage the full benefits of a new brand which reflects the step change and renewal of AONB.

This combination of modest and uncontested reforms to AONB will deliver more for climate, nature and people – looking forward, but built on the legacy and learning from 70 years of AONB. This is what a contemporary statutory designated landscape designation, by design, looks like.

The Government response to the Landscape Review proposes the formation of a National Landscape Partnership. We recommend that the Government seeks to enhance the partnership option by requiring the involvement of other relevant departments, strengthened by a contractual/transactional arrangement through which Protected Landscapes are funded to deliver the objectives of other government departments (in addition to Defra core funding).

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