

Northumberland National Park Management Plan DRAFT

Working together for a healthier National Park

Introduction

Every National Park must have a Management Plan. It is the single most important document for the National Park as it sets out a long-term vision for the Park and a plan to progress towards this vision five years. The Management plan blends national and local priorities and explains how National Park purposes will be delivered. It is a high-level strategy with shared aims and objectives that influence not only the work of Northumberland National Park Authority (NNPA), but also the many organisations that have an interest in the National Park. This is a Management Plan for the National Park as a place, not as an organisation.

While Management Plans span across a five-year period, we are taking the opportunity to create a long-term strategy to set the direction of travel until 2040-45.

Context, Challenges and Ambitions

Like all rural areas, National Parks are currently facing unprecedented changes and challenges, ranging from fundamental shifts in farm payments and land use, declining biodiversity and lack of infrastructure, to severe storms as climate change affects weather patterns, which have tested the resilience of our rural areas.

Changes are being made to phase out direct support payments to farmers by 2027 and replacing them with a new Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme based on the principle of offering public money for “public goods” – such as better air and water quality, soil health, thriving wildlife, and mitigation and adaptation to climate change. This transition could be a significant driver of landscape change in Northumberland National Park.

We also recognise the many challenges facing rural communities including an aging population, loss of services, access to connectivity (including power, mobile coverage and broadband), a lack of jobs and difficult access to further education and training. Supporting our communities is at the heart of this Plan.

As we emerge from the pandemic, increasing numbers of visitors are coming to explore our beautiful landscapes and heritage, with all the health and wellbeing benefits spending time in nature can provide. However, this is not without its challenges, and highlights further the scale of investment needed in transport, digital and physical infrastructure which provide visitors with a warm welcome, the right facilities and services to enjoy their time within and beyond the National Park boundaries. We would like the National Park to be more accessible and welcoming to everyone, and to ensure that future generations will appreciate and cherish it for a long time to come.

At the same time, we need to protect and enhance the tranquillity, dark skies and natural beauty that visitors tell us¹ are amongst their main reasons for coming.

The pandemic has greatly accelerated how we use digital technologies to live and work in completely new ways. How we access our culture, and our many unique heritage sites has also changed and will continue to evolve, with new attractions coming onstream. This could present exciting opportunities to create and grow businesses and develop our tourism offer, however there is also a very real threat of our communities getting left further behind compared to urban areas, when 10% have no access to mains power, and many more have slow or unreliable mobile and broadband networks.

To meet the challenge of climate change, our ambition is to reach net zero as a National Park Authority by 2030, and for the National Park as an area by 2040. Our aim is for the National Park to become a carbon sink, absorbing more carbon than we emit.

Giving nature the space to recover, protecting peatlands, halting the decline in biodiversity², allowing watercourses to support nature corridors and alleviate floods, whilst actively playing our part to create more wooded areas. Given the lack of public transport and capacity within energy and power networks, combined with energy-inefficient buildings, this is a massive challenge, which will require visitors, communities, farmers, landowners, businesses, universities, local authorities, Government and many others to play their part in finding solutions.

If our communities are to not only survive but thrive, ways must also be found to improve and create opportunities to strengthen our infrastructure. The provision of high-speed digital connectivity, the introduction of carbon neutral ways to travel, heat and power our homes, finding balance in how we use land to grow food or timber whilst also making space for nature will all create the right environment for businesses to set up and grow. Providing employment for our young people, conserve and celebrate our heritage, while also finding sustainable, creative ways to showcase our landscape and culture to visitors.

These are the broad challenges that the National Park currently faces and that we would like to start and tackle, working together to achieve these desired goals. We have seen from our work in drafting this Plan that local partnerships are strong, delivering high quality projects and there are many opportunities for all by sharing good practice. Our partners have highlighted the role that the National Park as an Authority plays in advocacy, pulling partners together to achieve common aims and this will be essential to address the future challenges faced by Northumberland National Park.

Northumberland National Park's Special Qualities

¹ 2011 Resident survey; 2018 Visitor survey

² UK Biodiversity Indicators 2021 revised (publishing.service.gov.uk)

The following are this National Park's defining special qualities that create a unique sense of place:

- True Sense of Tranquillity.
- A Rich Cultural Heritage.
- Distinctive Landscape Character.
- A Landscape rich in Biodiversity and Geology.

The special qualities outlined in the 2016 Management Plan have been reviewed and updated. It is considered these four special qualities remain important and relevant to the National Park's local distinctiveness. They are not presented here in any order of priority, but rather are all important to contributing to the unique character of Northumberland national Park and enhancing it for the future.

A True Sense of Tranquillity

“A place of great beauty, for the health and wellbeing of everyone”

In this tranquil corner of England, you will find a true sense of peace and quiet, space and freedom. Often in Northumberland National Park, it is possible to spend time in the landscape and see no other signs of human life.

With a population of just under 2,000 people, Northumberland National Park is one of the most tranquil places in England. It is England's last real wilderness, with far-reaching views stretching out across the rugged landscape. Its pristine dark skies mean it is also England's first and largest International Dark Sky Park (Gold tier).

For those who live and work in the National Park and those who choose to visit, the peace and tranquillity is of utmost importance. It is a place which nurtures and stimulates the senses of every person lucky enough to experience it, bringing a feeling of calm and a connection to landscape and nature which leaves both body and mind restored and invigorated.

A Rich Cultural Heritage

“A world class cultural heritage”

The past is everywhere in Northumberland National Park and includes evidence of human activity over 5,000 years, from Iron Age hill forts, Neolithic rock art and the homes of Bronze Age farmers. It includes the central section of Hadrian's Wall, a World Heritage Site, and the landscape of kings at Ad Gefrin, an Anglo-Saxon royal residence. It is a landscape forged by thousands of years of farming and of conflict, a borderland, a frontier between kingdoms.

Past and present have shaped the identity of people and of place, creating and maintaining a rich cultural heritage, an expression of human spirit rooted in the landscape, inspiring generations of creativity and Northumbrian folklore, traditional music and spoken language. It is this relationship that gives the place a character and soul allowing us to connect with and discover our past.

Distinctive Landscape Character

“A landscape with a character of its own”

The dynamic landscape of Northumberland National Park is the result of both natural forces and human activity. Together this has produced a landscape treasured for its natural beauty, distinctive character and unique sense of place and why it is recognised and protected for the benefit of the nation now, and in the future.

Northumberland National Park has many notable features, which include the high rounded hills of the former volcanic Cheviot region and the watercourses which run through it, the Border ridge, the iconic Simonside hills (which can be seen from the urban conurbation of Tyneside), the North Tyne and Rede river valleys, and the distinctive sloping geology of the Hadrian’s Wall area.

The National Park features a natural landscape that shows the imprint of human activity over thousands of years, including hillforts, Roman camps and bastle houses set amongst small settlements, farmsteads and dry-stone walls that border onto wide open moorland.

The impacts of the climate emergency and mitigation measures being deployed threaten to speed up this pace of change; while activities that follow on from the century-long drive for timber production has seen hillsides and river valleys carpeted in conifers that now cover 20% of the National Park³.

A Place Rich in Biodiversity and Geology

“A wealth of habitats and wildlife”

The underlying geology of Northumberland National Park, alongside natural processes and human activity have combined to create the hugely varied landscape we experience today. These processes have created unique conditions for rich and diverse ecosystems to thrive; many nationally and internationally important habitats and species flourish within Northumberland National Park. 31% of the National Park is considered to be priority habitat and around 12% is designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)⁴.

The Management Plan will include objectives as to how these special qualities will be protected, enhanced and celebrated and new opportunities for nature to come first.

How we are creating this Plan

In preparing this Plan - which embodies National Park purposes - we have considered relevant national, international and local policies and strategic documents.

The statutory purposes of English National Parks are set out in Section 61 of the Environment Act 1995, as follows:

³ State of the National Park report 2015

⁴ State of the National Park report 2021

- To conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the National Park.
- To promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the area by the public.

National Parks also have a duty, when pursuing these purposes, to “Seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities within the National Park.”

The 2019 Glover review included a proposal to amend and strengthen these two statutory purposes; this has been taken into consideration in preparing this plan.

Other documents considered include:

- 2019 Glover review [DEFRA - Landscapes Review - Final Report 2019 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)
- HMG response (Jan 2022) [Landscapes review \(National Parks and AONBs\): government response - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- Environment Act 2021 with proposed nature recovery networks and Local Nature Recovery Strategy (expected in 2024) [newbook.book \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)
- A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment (2018) HMG [25 Year Environment Plan](#)
- Northumberland National Park Authority’s own Natural Environment Vision (2014-35). [Natural Environment Vision - Final.pdf](#)

At a regional level we have worked closely with Northumberland County Council, North of Tyne Combined Authority and current initiatives such as the Borderlands Growth deal, NE Local Enterprise Partnership, National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise and many others. A full list of organisations can be found on our website.

We have considered natural capital and have undertaken an initial natural capital accounting exercise for the National Park. However, the development of robust, high quality, local and up-to-date data is needed to give a more accurate picture in some areas, particularly in respect of the state nature. The government response to the landscapes review and proposals to establish Local nature recovery strategies are set to improve our baseline information and we are following developments closely and will use this as a tool to inform future action.

We are also very interested in the work being done to develop cultural capital valuations, and again will keep this under review and integrate into future action plans as and when that becomes feasible.

Progress to date

Northumberland National Park Authority members agreed on important outline themes for the Plan in December 2020. Since then, these have been developed and refined by working with over 50 organisations, scrutinised by a steering group made up of senior representatives from Northumberland County Council, Natural England, Historic England, North of Tyne Combined Authority, plus experts on health, natural capital and culture. These partners have agreed the following themes:

- Nature recovery
- Climate action
- Valuing culture and heritage
- Welcoming Park for all
- Thriving communities

We then held workshops and canvassed the opinions of a wider group of partner organisations to develop strategic aims and objectives for each theme. These are overarching strategic priorities, so do not cover the detail, which will come forward later in action plans.

Strategic Themes: Aims and Objectives

These aims all overlap, with some issues like climate action cutting across all topics. The themes, aims and objectives are not therefore in any order of priority We are looking at how best to present this in a visual way in the Plan.

1. Nature Recovery

As biodiversity continues to decline, the Glover review proposed that “National landscapes should have a renewed mission to recover and enhance nature....” and “.....should form the backbone of Nature Recovery Networks, joining things up within and beyond their boundaries.”

Glover also proposed using a natural capital accounting approach to measure the current situation and monitor progress. NNPA has begun this process, which will be developed further in business and action plans.

Within this theme, our partners felt strongly that simply by allowing more “fuzzy edges” to develop in land use that nature corridors will form, and that the scale and speed of action required should not be under-estimated; there is no time for a modified version of business as usual.

Aim: To restore, conserve and enhance nature at a landscape scale through sustainable productive land management and partnership working.

- Expand, improve and connect networks of diverse, high quality, resilient, wildlife-rich habitats., employing a nature-first approach.
- Restore degraded peatland to mitigate the climate crisis and aid ecological recovery.
- Promote expansion of native broadleaved woodland to achieve a more diverse, nature-rich wooded landscape.
- Enhance abundance and distribution of key species.

Examples of how we could achieve this:

- Work with farmers and landowners to promote and support high nature value farming and participation in the forthcoming Environmental Land Management Schemes.

- Work with partners to gather and analyse current data and use this to inform decision making. Enabling a natural capital accounting approach to be used to monitor progress on a regular basis.
- Work with landowners to diversify existing forestry stands, restore afforested peatland, recover nature, and actively promote the creation of new native broadleaf woodland, ensuring a more species rich wooded landscape, acting as a long-term living carbon store for the future.
- Guided by the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, support landscape scale, nature first land management initiatives that will restore whole ecological systems and provide the backbone to nature recovery within and beyond the National Park boundary.
- Work through the Northumberland Peat Partnership to identify, survey and restore degraded peatland habitats to realise the carbon value of these sites, and enhance their ecological, water quality, flood resilience and landscape properties.

2. Climate Action

“The climate crisis is a serious threat to England’s National Parks, their special qualities, communities, biodiversity, and natural environment. We are already beginning to see the impacts of the climate crisis in our National Parks and the wider countryside. However, our National Parks are not just passive recipients of climate change, they can and should be powerful drivers of the solution. Protecting the special qualities of our National Parks from the impacts of climate change and helping them adapt is central to fulfilling our statutory purposes, as is helping others understand how they can help. We see National Parks as a critical element of driving a national step-change in behaviour and inspiring collective action that meets the scale of the challenge we face.”

(National Parks England, 2019 Climate Change Position Statement)

Aim: Inspire, enable and empower climate action to create a net zero National Park by 2030, ensuring the distinctive landscape and rich biodiversity of Northumberland National Park is there for communities to live and work in, and for all to enjoy, now and for decades to come.

- Enable nature recovery actions that support mitigation and adaptation in response to the effect of climate change (Biodiversity change)
- Work together to minimise climate change risks that impact on communities and businesses to improve their resilience (Flooding, Storm Damage, Drought)
- Support the creation of a net zero National Park by 2030
- Enable and promote net zero, then carbon positive, resident and visitor experiences.

Examples of how we might achieve this:

- Identify opportunities to measure and increase appropriate carbon sequestration for example through funding schemes and networks, peatland restoration, tree planting, soil enhancement and as a carbon sink.

- Support our land management community to work together to measure their baseline carbon work towards becoming net zero, then carbon positive, while enhancing nature recovery.
- Work with partners to develop opportunities to improve business and infrastructure resilience within NNP
- Work with partners to develop support and encourage residents to improve insulation, energy efficiency and low carbon energy in rural properties.
- Work with partners to create pilot net zero holiday packages, including transport options.

3. Valuing Culture and Heritage

Our culture and heritage are very distinctive, helping to create a unique sense of place both within the National Park and surrounding areas. We and our partners are keen to protect, promote and celebrate all aspects of this unique culture, whether that be by protecting our built heritage sites, ensuring heritage skills are not lost, or that access is open to everyone.

Aim: Conserve, enhance, explain and celebrate our historic environment and rich cultural heritage by connecting people and place

- Protect integrity of historic environment as one of the special qualities of Northumberland and as part of a resilient, dynamic landscape
- Develop understanding through active research, promote enquiring minds and foster greater public participation
- Maintain and improve skills and training which contribute to a resilient heritage sector
- Recognise, nurture and celebrate the unique and distinctive sense of place our culture and heritage create
- Access to culture and heritage is equal, enabled, and without barriers to participation

Examples of how we might achieve this:

- Work with partners to develop and implement practical approaches for the effective conservation of cultural heritage, historic environment and historic landscapes; help secure resources to achieve them.
- Contribute to a programme of research into the public benefits of cultural capital and develop mechanisms for valuing it as a driver for economic growth and investment.
- Develop and implement opportunities to increase participation with cultural heritage, particularly among young people and people from different backgrounds and communities.
- Work with partners to identify, assess and produce strategies for better managing archaeological sites and landscapes and built heritage at risk from climate change

- Work with partners to develop digital approaches to research, conservation and engagement of cultural heritage.
- Support the creative and cultural sector, communities and visitors to interpret, celebrate and enjoy the rich cultural heritage, archaeology and dark skies of the National Park through programmes of landscape and land-based arts and culture, performance and exhibitions.

4. A Welcoming Park for All

Through the development of The Sill: national landscape discovery center, Northumberland national park has since 2014, been on a clear mission to engage more and different people with our Park. We recognise that landscape can be a ‘positive force for the nation’s wellbeing,’ and that more needs to be done to provide opportunities for all of society. The last two years have demonstrated this to be true, as more and different people seek access to, and new connections with, nature. As a result, the nation has a new appreciation of the enormous benefit from “having access to nature-rich landscapes” (Landscapes Review, Government Response, Jan 2022). It is important that our Management Plan understands and responds to this demand - our National Park has been a vital resource for many, but now more can and must be done to make it accessible to all.

Aim: To be a welcoming place, full of beauty and biodiversity, offering enjoyment and exploration of the landscape in a creative, accessible, and open way whilst acting as a positive force for wellbeing.

- Understand and creatively communicate the intrinsic benefits of connecting with nature and heritage for physical and mental health, so the National Park is recognised as an outstanding place for wellbeing.
- Provide a consistent Warm Welcome across the Park for all audiences, recognising this will involve more than words but enhancement of physical infrastructure and the range of access opportunities.
- Develop smart and innovative infrastructure to support a range of access needs across the National Park.
- Create engaging and accessible information packages to empower people to connect with the National Park on their own terms.
- Develop integrated and varied access opportunities which cater for a more diverse range of visitors.
- Celebrate and champion Young People and their role as future custodians of the National Park

Examples of how we might achieve this:

- Research and publish how engaging with landscape has a positive impact on wellbeing; identify best practice and create a knowledge sharing network.
- Create, offer and promote a wide and diverse range of engaging opportunities and activities that deliver on wellbeing.
- Develop a strong network of local partners delivering on a shared ethos.

- Create a quality mark and training package for local businesses.
- Audit and assess existing provision, including physical access, and identify opportunities for investment.
- Develop and create well connected routes and experiences which enable visitors to engage and experience the full spectrum of special qualities that the National Park offers.
- Develop innovative and imaginative digital tools to take the National Park to the people, for those who cannot visit.
- Communicate visit information in an easily accessible format, in a range of styles which are meaningful and relevant to the specific needs of different audiences, so that they are empowered to visit the National Park responsibly and safely.
- Create inspiring participation pathways to support and enable diverse audiences to connect, protect, care, and enjoy the wonders of the National Park.

5. Thriving communities

Given the many challenges facing rural communities, this is very much a cross-cutting theme. a national park in the UK are cultural landscapes, and communities are therefore very much at the heart of this Plan.

Aim: To have engaged, resilient and balanced communities in a unique living, working landscape

- Continue to work and support land managers as a key priority, recognising the important role farming and land management plays in our thriving communities, particularly during times of transition and land use change.
- Enhance and enable all forms of connectivity (power, broadband, mobile) to create resilient, innovation-ready networks.
- Clearly connected transport network with innovative solutions to encourage active travel, city to country links and final mile solutions.
- Improve our tourism offer from 'doing no harm' to 'putting back more than it takes.'
- Encourage skills development and a diverse business portfolio which maximises our natural assets and Special Qualities.
- Helping communities to thrive, and encourage a balanced demographic, by ensuring ability to create places to live and work.

Examples of how we could achieve this:

- Work with Government, Northumberland County Council and others on initiatives to improve communications throughout the National Park, especially the most hard-to-reach areas
- Work with Northumberland County Council to create a network of hubs that act as a “green travel” gateway to the county’s most popular visitor destinations within the National Park (Cheviots, Hadrian’s Wall).
- Develop an exemplar programme to showcase the transition to more walking and cycling, for both essential journeys and recreation, in a rural setting.
- Creation of experiential packages that allow visitors to contribute as part of their visit through climate offset, conservation or visitor payback.
- Develop or support projects to upskill local businesses and enhance collective working, branding, productivity and sales.
- Achieve housing targets for approving planning permissions for new housing (currently eight per year) in the Park in line with the adopted Local Plan.
- Regularly review planning policies to ensure housing and employment needs can be met without compromising the special qualities of the National Park.

Overlapping themes

It has been evident throughout the theme workshops that there are clear crossovers between themes, which will be highlighted throughout the Plan. Thus, there is a need to emphasise:

- Ensure a clear landscape vision for the Park.
- Ambition, pace and scale needed, particularly for climate and nature recovery
- The opportunities that strong, diverse and effective partnerships offer for working together.
- High quality data sets and detail behind theme areas.
- Need to capture unique sense of place, nature and cultural capital linked to Special Qualities.
- Ambition for attracting investment in training, skills development and infrastructure.

What we want from you and when

We are now seeking your views on our work so far. We are keen to hear, from you:

- whether you agree with the Theme, Aims and Objectives of this Draft Plan?
- what, if anything, is missing?

- Is the ambition, pace and scale sufficient?
- what is important to you and what isn't?
- have we got the overall approach right or how might we approach it differently?

Please submit your comments to us by 15 May 2022 so that we can consider the responses and make any necessary changes to the draft Plan.

Questions: To be completed as an online form with option to download form and submit separately. (Link to online survey to be inserted once finalised)

Attached to the Draft Consultation Plan: List of partners and stakeholders who have been involved in the process to date.

Glossary to be included in Draft Consultation Plan