

Landscapes review (National Parks and AONBs): government response (published 15th January 2022)

Local governance

We need local governance that creates the conditions for consistently high standards of collaboration towards shared strategic priorities but that is flexible enough to adapt to local circumstances. Local governance structures should create a careful balance of democratic accountability, essential skills, and diversity of experience.

National Park Authorities, the Broads Authority and AONB Conservation Boards

Board members bring time, energy and expertise. Despite the passion and commitment of these individuals, the review (proposal 26) found that these boards do not always function as well as they could, sometimes due to the restrictive legislation they operate within. To support boards to deliver their full potential, we are developing a flexible package of statutory and non-statutory measures to achieve the following improvements, which we will develop in consultation with board members.

Improved performance

Setting clear performance standards and agreed expectations will get the best out of board members and deliver better outcomes. This could include a standard role profile, a shared code of conduct, regular skills audits, and improved training. To empower boards to address poor performance, these measures should be supplemented by performance reviews, fixed-term appointments, and a streamlined process for removing underperforming members.

Strengthened local partnerships

We would like to see greater integration of advisory panels into the development and implementation of statutory management plans by providing specialist expertise and ensuring local voices are heard on decisions that impact local communities.

Skilled, diverse and representative boards

We agree that for protected landscapes to benefit all parts of society, their boards must better reflect that society. The review highlighted a need for greater diversity, and we have begun to address this through improvements to the Secretary of State public appointments process. This has significantly increased the proportion of candidates who are female and/or from an ethnic minority background. There is still more to do, and we will continue to embed diversity, equity, and inclusion best practices into our public appointments.

While we are seeing positive change in our national appointments, these comprise a minority of the overall board members. We disagree with proposal 26 that all members be appointed nationally given the important role locally elected members play in giving the boards democratic legitimacy. Instead, we are considering removing the strict legislative requirements for a specific ratio between appointment types. Boards would still need national, parish, and local authority members but they would have more flexibility to balance diversity and expertise with strong democratic oversight in accordance with the needs of their specific area.

Another option would be to introduce a more merit-based approach to local nominations, encouraging local authorities to put forward their best candidates considering similar desirable

criteria as Secretary of State appointees. This would retain vital democratic accountability while helping to identify the best local representatives to create engaged, diverse, and appropriately skilled boards.

Improved efficiency

Reducing board sizes would simplify decision-making processes, boost efficiency and follow best practice governance models. Proposal 26 recommended capping boards at 12 members, but this may not be appropriate in areas with large numbers of local authorities. We are already in discussion with a number of National Park Authorities about potential board reductions on a case-by-case basis. Reductions should not be at the expense of the skills, expertise and diversity needed. In cases where a large board is necessary or advantageous, clear guidance on structuring and organization may boost efficiency.

Strategic alignment

Currently, boards select a chair from amongst their members. Proposal 26 suggested that the chair should be appointed by the Secretary of State, in line with Defra's public bodies, which we believe could provide greater continuity, strategic direction, and accountability.

<https://consult.defra.gov.uk/future-landscapes-strategy/government-response-to-the-landscapes-review/consultation>

Local governance

Before answering, please see the section titled 'Local governance' (above)

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

- Improved training and materials
- Streamlined process for removing underperforming members
- Greater use of advisory panels
- 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

Other (please state)

Please give reasons for your answer: