

Northumberland National Park Authority

Business Plan 2023 to 2026 - Draft for approval

Introduction

The National Park Authority's Business Plan represents a clear link between the shared vision set out in the National Park Management Plan and the individual workplans of our staff. The Business Plan sets out our medium term aims of the Authority and ensures we maintain our focus on agreed priorities.

National Park Statutory Purposes and Duty

The statutory purposes of English National Parks are set out in Section 61 of the Environment Act 1995. These are:

- 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.

The Authority also has a duty to foster the economic and social well-being of communities within its boundaries.

Our Mission and approach

Northumberland National Park Authority (NNPA) aims to continue its role as a strategic leader, co-ordinator, and enabler in working towards the delivery of the National Park Management Plan. We will demonstrate clear, evidence based and where necessary brave leadership in addressing the current and future challenges which face the National Park and its special qualities.

Our mission is to inspire people to care for this special place thus safeguarding the National Park for future generations.

Our culture – we will be known as an organisation that is;

- **Open and Connected:** with the residents, businesses, visitors, and partners we work with and serve.
- **Smart:** A professional and expert organisation which engages the right skills, is evidence led, and employs smart systems which enable us to work effectively and efficiently.
- **A Leader:** willing to deliver brave and inspirational leadership on the things that count for the National Park.
- **Learning:** actively supporting personal and organisational review, learning and development.
- **Welcoming and caring:** a truly welcoming organisation that cares for people in an open and inclusive way.
- **Trusted:** to deliver what we say we will do as a collaborative and supportive partner.
- **Achieving:** delivering outcomes for nature, climate, people, and place.

Our values:

- Customer focussed and outcome driven.
- Safeguarding our natural and cultural heritage.
- Equality and inclusion.
- Integrity and openness.
- Innovative and enterprising.

A message from the Chair and Chief Executive

(To include in published version)

Northumberland National Park Management Plan 2022

In October 2022 Northumberland National Park Authority (NNPA) adopted our most recent National Park Management Plan.

The Management Plan which sets a long-term vision and ambition for the future of one of England's finest landscapes to 2045, was developed through close working with all partners and stakeholders who have an interest in the future of the National Park. As such it blends national and local priorities.

Management Plan Vision

Northumberland National Park will be a place where people and nature can thrive. As a living working landscape the National Park will lead the way on climate action, with resilient communities, enabling an accessible and welcoming park for all.

The Management Plan sets out five key long-term outcomes:

- 1 Nature recovery
- 2 Climate action
- 3 Culture and heritage
- 4 A welcoming park
- 5 Thriving communities

It is a plan for the National Park as a whole and not just for the National Park Authority. However, it sets the framework to guide the work of the Authority as well as the many organisations, businesses and communities that have an interest in the Park.

Northumberland National Park Authority Business Plan 2023 to 2026

Our Business Plan 2023 – 2026 sets out how the NNPA will play our part in delivering the ambition and priorities set out in the Management Plan 2022.

The key themes of the Management Plan have been used as the basis for developing the Authority's Business Plan, with an additional corporate outcome of 'An Authority Fit for the Future'. As the Authority is unable to undertake all the expectations of the Management Plan, this Business Plan sets out the Authority's priorities and approach.

The Business Plan is for three years, recognising the time of change and uncertainty, particularly regarding the policy context and resources for national parks and land management more generally.

This Business Plan will therefore be revised in 2026 ahead of the next review of the Management Plan in 2027.

Northumberland National Park Authority is a small public body, with less than 100 employees and core government grant of just over £2.6m per annum and an annual revenue budget of circa £5m. We are nevertheless ambitious and we have a strong track record of delivery.

Looking Back (2017 – 2022)

Over the period of our Business Plan 2017 to 2022 we achieved the following key outcomes:

- **Growing visitor numbers:** Within two years we had achieved our target of growing visitor number to the National Park from 1.47m (2016) to 1.62m, achieving 1.73m visitors by March 2020. These numbers were impacted in the next two years by the Covid pandemic and have since recovered.
- **The Sill:** Successfully opened and operated The Sill: National Landscape Discovery Centre as one of the leading new visitor attractions in the North of England. We have consistently achieved well above our 100,000-visitor number target.
- **Education:** We engaged with 70 schools, with over 34,000 activity participants during the six years of the Business Plan.
- **Planning and advocacy:** Through advocacy, policy influencing and direct funding and advice, we supported the growth of local businesses and employment in the Park and supported the retention and enhancement of essential community infrastructure. We consistently delivered timely planning decision with close to 100% being within government target timescales and over 98% of planning applications being approved.
- **Heritage:** We reduced the proportion of scheduled monuments at risk in the National Park from 53 (12%) in 2016 to 33 (7%) in 2022, however this fell short of our target of 21 (5%). We did however implement a Traditional Farm Buildings project which secured investment of over £1.5m to protect 21 of our traditional farm buildings in the National Park.
- **Land management:** We had anticipated a reduction in the proportion of farmland in the Park managed under agri-environment schemes, predicted to fall from 85% to 70% as we transitioned to a new scheme. Due to delays in the introduction of the new scheme we have been able to maintain and in fact increase agri-environment coverage with 89% of farmed land being included within a scheme by March 2021.

We tested natural capital approaches to land management in the National Park and piloted new demonstrator approaches to upland management. We led the Border Upland Demonstrator Initiative, hosted Defra Test and Trials programmes to inform future ELM schemes, supported the initiation of the Hepple Estate rewilding initiative, and initiated a Nature First project at our own landholdings at Greenlee Lough National Nature Reserve as part of a wider ambition for a landscape scale nature recovery initiative.

- **Climate:** We are working to achieve a net zero Authority by 2030 and have started to implement a programme of activity to further reduce the Authority's carbon footprint. Our emissions grew significantly with the opening of The Sill National Landscape Discovery Centre in 2017 to 199tCO₂e. By 2022 we had reduced our total emissions to 145tCO₂e* (*scope 1&2 only).
- **Nature:** We have progressed a number of species and habitat restoration projects, whilst collaborating with land managers and partners including RSPB to survey and manage land for nationally declining waders including curlews. These include the Curlew LIFE project, which has identified areas along Hadrian's Wall where 24 farms and nearly 5000 hectares are being surveyed and habitat improved.

We have planted 200 willows over 38 areas within the National Park, this provides habitat for pollinators, particularly bumblebees, increasing the number of known tetrads for mountain and moss carder bumblebees.

A Hen Harrier Protection Partnership has been established and works with partners to increase the number of breeding hen harriers to 7 pairs fledging 22 young in 2022 in Northumberland.

We have protected and surveyed areas of waxcap grassland, discovering new sites and species including nationally rare species such as Butterscotch waxcap, highlighting Northumberland National Park as one of the best areas in the country for this type of grassland.

- **Landscape Enhancement:** Working with utility companies we have undergrounded overhead line infrastructure at Harbottle and Rochester, informed the sensitive location of new mobile phone communication masts at Greenhaugh and in the Coquet, Grasslees and Harthope Valleys and worked with partners including Natural England and Forestry Commission to ensure the appropriate siting of new woodlands and the restructuring of existing commercial forestry at sites such as Harwood, Wark and the Cheviots Forests.
- **Self-generated income:** We exceeded our target to grow self-generated income from £242,000 to £922,000 by over 100%, generating £1,185,400 (excluding project funding) by March 2022, thus generating important resources to invest in the National Park against a backdrop of cuts in government grant to the National Park.
- **Staff, members and volunteers:** Due to ongoing reductions in government funding the size of our team had reduced during the past six years. We have nevertheless successfully supported our team throughout the Covid pandemic and have trialled hybrid working arrangements. We achieved consistently high levels of staff engagement with only 0.93% sick days per year against a local government average of 3% and a private sector average of 1.9%. We met our target of growing volunteer days from 1,823 p/a in 2016 to over 4,000 p/a by March 2020. In 2022 we were awarded the North East Chamber of Commerce Award for Medium Employer of the Year – Inspiring Women.

Moving Forward – The Next Three Years (2023 -2026)

We will continue to strive towards being an excellent organisation, investing well beyond the resources provided by government, through raising our own commercial income and generating programme and project funds from a wide variety of sources.

Whilst ambitious, this Business Plan is grounded in realism. It will see the Authority do less or lose areas of work as we adjust to real terms cuts in funding. Over the Business Plan period the Authority will need to make ongoing year on year savings from our base budget by March 2026. Where possible, however, we will aim to grow and expand our work over the course of the Business Plan as new resources become available.

As the National Park Authority owns just 0.23% of the overall land area of the Park, it is important that we work in partnership with farmers and land managers, landowners, and other stakeholders to achieve our shared ambitions. Partnership working is important beyond land use, and we will continue to work closely with a wider range of local, regional, and national partners.

Our Corporate priorities:

- **Nature Recovery** (Putting nature first and seeking to work at a landscape scale).
- **A National Park for All** (Engagement of people with the national park, including through visitor centres and visitor facilities).

- **Landscape enhancement and woodland creation** (to retain the distinctive sense of place and tranquillity of the National Park).
- **Safeguarding the historic environment** (taking a cultural capital approach).
- **Raising self-generated income and embedding our use of volunteers** (to help us achieve more for the National Park).

Outcome 1: Nature Recovery

Management Plan Aim: To restore, conserve and enhance nature and its resilience at a landscape scale through a proactive nature-first led approach to sustainable land management and partnership working.

NNPA Business Plan targets and actions:

- Map and restore priority peatland habitat within the National Park to mitigate the climate crisis, enhance water quality and management and aid overall ecological recovery within the Park.
- Increase woodland cover and the proportion of native and broadleaf woodland in the National Park to enhance the landscape and important wildlife habitat.
- Remove or restructure existing commercial coniferous forests to enhance the landscape and biodiversity.
- Develop and support projects to protect and enhance the abundance and distributions of curlew and red squirrel in the National Park.
- Continue to lead the Hadrian's Wall Recovering Nature project which will deliver a nature first approach at a landscape scale to restoring a functioning wetland ecosystem in an area of up to 5,000 ha in the Hadrian's Wall area centred on the Authority's land at and beyond Greenlee Lough National Nature Reserve.
- To inspire and enable action by others on nature recovery.

What we will do:

- We will collect baseline information and data to ensure we have a sound basis for future action and for monitoring progress on key habitats and species.
- We will work as key members of Northumberland Peatland Partnership to map opportunities for peatland restoration in the Park and will bring forward funding ready projects with landowners and land managers, linking them with external finance through initiatives such as the Great North Bog.
- We will work in partnership with the Great Northumberland Forest to identify and bring forward opportunities for small and medium scale on farm native woodland planting in the Park.
- Work as a consultee and partner to encourage and enable the removal or restoration of some large tracts of commercial forestry in the Park.

- Continue as lead partner to deliver the Hadrian’s Wall Recovering Nature project, securing funding, establishing baseline data, and securing the support of partners and landowners.
- The Authority will lead the delivery of peatland restoration and other habitat and species recovery projects as appropriate.
- Engage communities, businesses, and volunteers to inspire them to lead, embed and lead nature recovery.

Measuring performance

- 2,000 hectares of peatland habitat in the National Park will be restored by March 2026.
- 300 hectares of new broadleaved and native woodland will have been created in the National Park by March 2026 (100 ha per year).
- 1,000 ha of existing commercial coniferous forests will have been removed or restructured by March 2026.
- SSSI condition in the National Park will have improved by 2026 from a baseline of 33% of SSSI land in ‘favourable’ condition in ‘recovering’ condition 66% in 2021.
- Red squirrel distribution will be conserved in key locations including Hareshaw Dene, the North Tyne, Simonside, Wark Forest and Coquetdale.
- All Curlew occupied areas in the National Park will be maintained and Curlew productivity increased in Hadrian’s Wall area.
- Breeding pairs of Hen Harriers will have further increased in Northumberland by March 2026.
- Methodology, baseline data and a monitoring framework for hydrology, species recording, and natural capital opportunities on the HWRN project in place by 2026.

Outcome 2: Climate Action

Management Plan Aim: Empower, enable, and inspire climate action to work towards a net zero National Park by 2030. Beyond 2030 we will be working towards the National Park being a carbon sink.

NNPA Business Plan targets and actions:

- Work towards a net zero National Park Authority by 2030.
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- Deliver zero emission vehicle charging points across all our key visitor and access sites.
- Deliver a programme of active travel and net zero visitor experiences within the Park.
- Deliver a net zero Sill project to act as an exemplar zero carbon visitor facility within rural Northeast England.
- Lead the way and inspire climate action by others.

What we will do:

- We will complete the next phase of our net zero National Park Authority programme, significantly reducing emission from our estate and corporate travel.
- We will work with Northumberland County Council, local communities, land managers and businesses to work towards a net zero National Park by 2030.
- Work in partnership to initiate a network of vehicle charging points across the Park.
- We will develop a number of active travel and net zero visitor experiences linked to gateway hubs across the Park.
- Work with partners and funders to design and deliver a net zero Sill project.
- Demonstrate action and inspire climate action through projects, engagement, exhibitions and partnership working.

Measuring performance:

- Reduce our emission as a National Park Authority to 52 tCO₂e by March 2026 and offset a maximum of 63 tCO₂e by March 2026.
- A minimum of 20 EV charging points in place at NNPA sites in key visitor locations by March 2026.
- 5 new active travel visitor experiences in place by March 2026.
- Net Zero Sill project completed by March 2026.

Outcome 3: Culture and Heritage

Management Plan Aim: To conserve, enhance and celebrate our historic environment and rich cultural heritage by connecting people and place.

NNPA Business Plan targets and actions:

- Ensure the rich historic and cultural heritage of the park is valued, cared for and enhanced.
- Support initiatives which celebrate the rich cultural heritage of the National Park and its communities and support engagement with the Park with new and diverse audiences.
- Maintain the unique levels of tranquillity and pristine dark skies in the National Park.

What we will do:

- We will ensure that historic and cultural heritage is safeguarded through the planning system and in our role as an advocate for the park.
- We will implement a Heritage at Risk programme to safeguard heritage, through training and equipping a skilled team of volunteers.
- Work with communities and partners to develop programmes to interpret, enjoy, celebrate, and enhance access to and engagement with the rich cultural heritage of the park.

- We will continue to map tranquillity levels and dark sky pollution to inform future development.

Measuring performance

- Less than 21 (5%) of scheduled monuments are considered at risk by March 2026 from baseline of 33 (7%) in 2023.
- Three projects which enhance access to and engagement with the cultural heritage of the National Park completed each year to March 2026.
- Northumberland International (Gold Tier) Dark Sky Park status maintained, and the National Park independently verified the most tranquil part of England.

Outcome 4: A Welcoming Park for All

Management Plan Aim: To be a welcoming place, offering enjoyment and exploration of one of our finest landscapes and to support wellbeing.

NNPA Business Plan targets and actions:

- Develop a more accessible National Park for All, engaging and empowering diverse audiences to connect to the special qualities of the National Park on their own terms.
- Use the National Park and our expertise to deliver opportunities to enrich education and engagement.
- Continue to operate The Sill and curate a programme of events, activities, and exhibitions to engage more and different people with the National Park.

What we will do:

- We will work with Northumberland County Council to maintain the rights of way network within the National Park.
- We will implement a Visitor Development Strategy to establish a network of fully accessible visitor hubs across the National Park.
- We will continue to develop our education programme in and beyond the Park.
- We will continue to develop and expand our engagement programme for new audiences, including people who access the Park for their health and wellbeing.
- Deliver a programme to enhance access and facilities for people of all physical abilities across the National Park.
- Operate The Sill as a flagship Landscape Discovery Centre attracting over 100,000 visitors each year.
- Tell the story of the National Park Authority through The Sill, our engagement programme and our corporate communications.
- Engage young people with the work of the Authority through a series of training and placement opportunities.

Measuring performance

- Four visitor hubs (Wooler and the Cheviots, Rothbury and Coquetdale, Bellingham and North Tyne, The Sill and Hadrian's Wall), each with public transport access, accessible facilities, and easy access and information will be in place by March 2026.
- 80% of the rights of ways within the National Park consistently (annually) assessed as easy to use.
- Deliver at least 25 km of new accessible to all (miles without stiles) routes and a minimum of three additional changing place facilities in the National Park by March 2026.
- Deliver an annual programme of learning engagements reaching 27,000 participants by 2026.
- Deliver an annual programme of public engagement activity reaching 6,000 participants by 2026. (75% of participants will state that their wellbeing has improved due to their engagement with the National Park).
- Support 6 partner lead projects for learning and underserved groups by 2026.
- People from underserved groups visiting or engaging with the National Park will increase by 10% from the baseline developed in 2023 by March 2026.
- Attract 120,000 visitors to The Sill in year one, 125,000 in year two and 127,500 by year three, with over 25,000 engaging annually with our exhibition programme.
- 90% of all visitors to the National Park will rate their experience as good or excellent.
- Deliver a minimum of 10 training or placement opportunities for young people each year.

Outcomes 5: Thriving Communities

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

NNPA Business Plan targets and actions:

- Encourage more working families to live in the National Park.
- Support farmers and land managers in the National Park in pursuit of thriving communities and the delivery of park purposes.
- Work with partners on the delivery of a stewardship and growth focussed Rural Investment Plan for Northumberland.

What we will do:

- We will continue to deliver a positive and proactive planning service which supports appropriate sustainable development, enables the development and retention of essential infrastructure to enhance the connectivity of the Park, and safeguards the special qualities of the National Park.
- In 2025 we will begin a review of the Local Plan for the National Park.

- We will continue to provide the Authority's farming and rural enterprise service and will broaden the remit of the service to include business advice, natural capital assessment and green and business investment support.
- The delivery of the Farming in Protected Landscape Grants Scheme will continue until March 2025.
- We will play an enabling and delivery role for initiatives which drive economic growth for communities by working with partners to deliver rural growth initiatives in the National Park.

Measuring performance

- Deliver the new housing target of up to 8 new homes per year in the Park.
- Deliver a farming and rural enterprise service engaging at least 150 farm businesses and providing direct business support to at least 50 farm businesses by March 2026.
- 50 farm business projects supported and £635K capital grant delivered through the FiPL programme by March 2025.
- Pilot an integrated area-based approach to rural development in the National Park as part of the Northumberland Rural Investment Plan.

Outcome 6: An Authority Fit for the Future

Aim: To continue to be an effective and efficient organisation, fit for the future.

NNPA Business Plan targets and actions:

- Continue to develop and support our staff, members, and volunteers.
- Work to enhance the diversity of our staff and governance.
- Implement new ways of working to support hybrid, remote, and 364 day working as a flexible and modern organisation.
- Review our Authority owned land and built estate to ensure it remains relevant and efficient in its delivery of our corporate priorities.
- Continue our journey in growing self-generated income.
- We will continue to research, understand, and communicate our value.

What we will do:

- We will continue to develop and refresh our Organisational Development Strategy to support the training and development of staff, members, and volunteers.
- We will amend recruitment and training practices to offer opportunities to a wider demographic and refresh our governance framework to enable involvement of young people and more diverse voices in the Authority.

- We will implement new ways of working to embed hybrid working and to provide for 364 day working as a customer facing business, employing systems which support new and efficient ways of working and which enhance our business resilience.
- We will take a strategic approach to land purchase and property disposal in line with the priorities in this Business Plan.
- We will continue to grow our self-generated income and develop strategies which enhance the financial resilience of the Authority to help resource our priorities.
- We will continue to fundraise to support core and priority projects as outlined in this Plan.
- Develop digital and data and smart systems to establish baseline information, measure our impact and demonstrate our value.
- Help a wide range of audiences to understand and appreciate Northumberland National Park as a unique and special place and a valued asset for our region and beyond, sharing stories which highlight the five themes in the Management Plan for the Park.
- Create a systems approach which shapes our digital transition ensuring that we embed digital tools and skills across all our areas of work. Adopting a cloud first approach to make processes more efficient, improve access and secure our digital assets.

Measuring performance:

- Short-term staff sickness to remain below 2.5 days per annum throughout the Business Plan period.
- New ways of working and work patterns established by March 2024, to embed hybrid working and provide 364 day working.
- New cloud based finance system implemented by March 2024.
- At least five opportunities will be offered in each year of the Plan which enhance diversity in our staff and governance.
- We will grow annual self-generated income (excluding project funding) to over £1.7m by March 2026.
- Achieve a social media audience growth rate of 2% a month over the life of the plan
- Increase unique users to the website by 20% each year over the life of the plan.
- Grow the number of people signed up for our communications by 20% each year over the life of the plan.
- Grow our NNPA led volunteer days 10% from the 2022 baseline figure of 1,700

Delivering and Resourcing the Business Plan

Supporting and overseeing delivery

In each of the three years of this Business Plan we will prepare an Operational Plan setting out more detail of our activities in that particular year, and we will publish an Annual Review on what we have done at the end of each year and its impact on the State of the National Park.

The actions set out in this Business Plan are underpinned by a range of statutory and supporting functions. In addition to our role as the planning and open access authority for the National Park, the Authority also has a number of core support services such as Finance, Corporate Support, HR, Digital and Data, Estates, Fundraising and Communications which are critical to the day-to-day operation of the Authority and the delivery of this Business Plan.

Financial resources

(Indicative budget for each outcome to be included in the published Plan once the budget has been agreed).

Key measures of Success:

(An infographic of the key outcomes to be achieved by 2026 to be included)

Proposed key outcomes by March 2026 – limited to 9 only:

- Increase visitors to Northumberland National Park to 1.85m per annum (STEAM survey data).
- People from underserved groups visiting or engaging with the National Park will increase by 10% from the baseline developed in 2023.
- Create four new gateway hubs to the National Park.
- Reduce the number of scheduled monuments at risk to 21 (5%).
- Retain IDSP status and Northumberland National Park to remain the most tranquil part of England.
- 2,000 hectares of peatland habitat in the National Park restored.
- 300 hectares of new broadleaved and native woodland created.
- National Park Authority CO2 emissions reduced to 52 tCO2e and offset a maximum of 63 tCO2e by March 2026.
- Grow annual total self-generated income to over £1.7m by March 2026.