

Planning for Housing in National Landscapes (AONBs) in England



Guidance for Local Planning Authorities

National Landscapes Association, with the National Landscapes Planning and Placemaking Panel

Briefing May 2026

Supporting LPAs' housing planning decision-making processes

This Briefing¹ has been produced to support local planning authorities in making appropriate decisions about the levels, scale and distribution of housing in National Landscapes² in England and their settings. Appropriate decisions support the purposes for which they were designated as nationally important landscapes, i.e. to conserve and enhance natural beauty.

National Landscapes are living, working landscapes and delivering appropriate new housing development that is compatible with the purpose of designation is a key part of local planning policy for local authorities in those National Landscapes. This Briefing intends to give local planning authorities the confidence to plan for an appropriate scale of development within or affecting the setting of National Landscapes. It highlights the evidence that national planning policy does not require development that causes harm to nationally designated landscapes. The Briefing also provides advice on the provision of affordable housing in National Landscapes.

This Briefing aims to offer practical, easy-to-follow guidance and includes:

- **Key messages**
- **Legislative context – an overview**
- **National policy context**
- **Local Housing Need and housing requirement**
- **Assessing & allocating housing sites in a National Landscape**
- **Housing sites in the setting of National Landscapes**
- **Affordable housing in National Landscapes**
- **Information sources**

¹ This Briefing updates and replaces the *Position Statement Planning for Housing within Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) in England* published by the National Association for AONBs (now National Landscapes Association) on 06 December 2019.

² From November 22nd 2023, [all AONBs in England are known as National Landscapes](#). The statutory designation remains an area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB) and is currently referred to as such in legislation. Where appropriate, this document uses the term AONB.

Key messages

National Landscapes are landscapes whose distinctive character and natural beauty are so outstanding that it is in the nation's interest to safeguard them. The statutory purpose of their designation is to *conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area*.

National Landscapes are living and working landscapes, and some degree of new housing is likely to be required to meet local needs. It is important that this housing is planned for and delivered in a way that is compatible with – and positively contributes to – the purpose of designation.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF 2024) sets out that:

- The scale and extent of development in National Landscapes should be limited.^a
- The housing requirement that goes forward in a Local Plan does not necessarily have to be as high as Local Housing Need (calculated using the standard method).^b
- There is a presumption that planning permission should be refused for major development in National Landscapes, other than in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest.^c

The National Planning Practice Guidance clarifies that:

- Policies for protecting National Landscapes may mean that it is not possible for Local Plans to meet Local Housing Need in full.^d
- National Landscapes are unlikely to be suitable areas for accommodating unmet needs arising from adjoining, non-designated, areas.^e
- National Landscape Management Plans, whilst not forming part of the statutory development plan, do help to set out the strategic context for development. They provide evidence of the value and characteristics of natural beauty in these areas and contain information which is relevant when preparing plan policies, or which is a material consideration when assessing planning applications.^f

^a NPPF para 189

^b NPPF para 69 and para 11 (b)(i): where the application of policies in the NPPF that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a strong reason for restricting the overall scale, type or distribution of development in the plan area. The assets referred to are listed in footnote 7 and include National Landscapes.

^c NPPF para 190

^{d, e} NPPG Paragraph: 041 Reference ID: 8-041-20190721

^f NPPG Paragraph: 040 Reference ID: 8-040-20190721

Key implementation advice:

- Local planning authorities should carry out a transparent assessment demonstrating how they have sought to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the specific National Landscape in deciding the level of housing provision proposed, the type of homes and the distribution of those homes.
- National Landscape (AONB) Management Plans are key documents for understanding the natural beauty of an area, and therefore what characteristics need to be conserved and enhanced when deciding the location, scale and extent, and design of new development.
- Decisions on allocating sites within National Landscape should be 'landscape-led', based on a robust understanding of landscape including the history and settlement pattern, informed by site-specific landscape and visual sensitivity and capacity studies, Landscape Character Assessments and Historic Landscape Characterisation, for example.
- Local planning authorities also need to consider the cumulative impact of development of proposed sites and such development occurring within multiple Local Plan areas in a National Landscape.
- Housing delivery in National Landscapes should be focused on the provision of affordable housing that meets the needs of local communities.

Introduction

Local planning authorities (LPAs) are tasked with accommodating housing within the context of UK Government aspirations to deliver 1.5m homes by 2029, as part of addressing the range of complex issues with the UK housing market. It is important to recognise that, amidst the continued Government focus on increasing housebuilding, national planning policy on National Landscapes has not been weakened in any way. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) requires that the scale and extent of development within National Landscapes should be limited, and sets out the circumstances in which local housing needs do not necessarily have to be met in full, while the National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) also includes clear advice that National Landscapes are unlikely to be suitable areas for accommodating unmet needs from adjoining (non-designated) areas.

National Landscapes are outstanding, iconic landscapes whose distinctive character and natural beauty are so precious that they are safeguarded in the national interest. They are of immense value to the nation, offering a wide range of public goods and services. The NPPF sets out that National Landscapes (along with National Parks and the Broads) have the 'highest status of protection' in relation to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty. As landscapes protected for their natural beauty, including their distinctive landscape quality, cultural heritage and historical character, it makes sense that the scale and extent of development within these areas should be limited, as set out in the NPPF.

However, appropriate new housing in National Landscapes can make an important and positive contribution to support vibrant and thriving rural communities, and provide affordable housing based on local needs. Local Plans should include strategies to support the delivery of high-quality and landscape-led new housing, of appropriate scale and location, with a mix of housing sizes and types that respond to local needs (including the specific requirements of land-based workers and affordable housing), which is compatible with, and does not compromise, the character and natural beauty of the National Landscape.

Legislative context

The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 made provision for the designation of National Landscapes (AONBs) and National Parks to 'preserve and enhance natural beauty'. The Countryside Act 1968 stated that 'the preservation of the natural beauty of an area shall be construed in the same way as references in the Act [1968] to the conservation of the natural beauty of an area.' The Environment Act 1995 updated the statutory language for National Parks to 'conserve and enhance'.

The legal framework for National Landscapes is provided by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW) 2000, which confirmed their purpose is to 'conserve and enhance' natural beauty. This Act includes (amongst other sections):

- Section 82, which allows for the designation of an area as an 'area of outstanding natural beauty' for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area.
- Section 85 (as amended by the Levelling-Up and Regeneration Act³ in December 2023), which now sets out that 'relevant authorities', in exercising or performing any function that affect National Landscapes in England, "***must seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.***"⁴ Relevant authorities are generally all public authorities and statutory undertakers. Within the planning context, relevant authorities include the local planning authorities and the Planning Inspectorate, along with Parish Councils producing Neighbourhood Plans. The duty applies to all aspects of the planning process, including

³ Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 ([section 245](#)).

⁴ Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 ([section 85](#)).

decisions relating to site allocations in Local Plans. More information for LPAs on the section 85 duty is available at [CRoW-s.85-duty-guidance-for-LPAs_NLA-Briefing-Nov-24.pdf](#)

National planning policy context

- Paragraph 189 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2024 sets out that ‘**great weight**’ should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Landscapes, which (along with National Parks and the Broads) ‘**have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues**’. It also sets out that ‘**the scale and extent of development within these designated areas should be limited**’ and that ‘**development within their setting should be sensitively located and designed to avoid or minimise adverse impacts on the designated areas.**’
- Paragraph 190 of the NPPF sets out that within National Landscapes, 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.
- Paragraph 69 of the NPPF sets out that strategic policy-making authorities should establish a housing requirement figure for their whole area, which shows the extent to which their identified housing need (and any needs that cannot be met within neighbouring areas) can be met over the plan period.
- Paragraph 11 (b) (i) of the NPPF sets out that local planning authorities should provide for objectively assessed needs for housing and other uses, as well as any unmet needs from neighbouring areas, unless “**the application of policies in this Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a strong reason for restricting the overall scale, type or distribution of development in the plan area**”. The assets referred to are listed in footnote 7 and include National Landscapes (the relevant policies in the Framework are 189 and 190).

Also relevant are:

- Paragraph 187 of the NPPF, which sets out that planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by [inter alia] protecting and enhancing valued landscapes in a manner commensurate with their statutory status.
- Para 188 of the NPPF, which sets out that planning policies and decisions should distinguish between the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites, and allocate land with the least environmental or amenity value, where consistent with other policies in the Framework.

Local Housing Need and housing requirement

LPAs with land in National Landscapes must calculate local housing need using the national standard methodology (as detailed in the December 2024 edition of the NPPF). However, this does not mean that this is the number of homes that should be provided in a local planning authority’s area or planned for in its Local Plan. **Local housing need (calculated using the standard method) is not necessarily the same as the housing requirement that goes forward in a Local Plan. Specifically, the NPPF sets out circumstances in which the housing requirement figure can be less than the local housing need figure.** (paras 11 and 69)

It is important to recognise that it is mandatory to use the standard method when assessing housing need but it is not mandatory for the Local Plan housing requirement figure to meet, or exceed, the housing need figure.

This was confirmed in the [Government response to the proposed reforms to the NPPF](#) (Government response for Questions 1 and 2) published 20th July 2024, which stated:

“The standard method identifies the minimum number of homes needed and local planning authorities are expected to plan to meet their housing needs in full. However it is recognised that there may be local constraints on land and delivery that could justify a lower housing requirement figure.” (N.B. Underlining added for emphasis).

That response also clarified that the NPPG had been updated accordingly. The NPPG (Housing and Economic Needs Assessment) confirms that:

“The standard method set out below identifies a minimum annual housing need figure, ... It does not produce a housing requirement figure.” (Paragraph: 002 Reference ID: 2a-002-20241212)

and that:

“The housing requirement is the minimum number of homes that a plan seeks to provide during the plan period. Once local housing need has been assessed, as set out in this guidance, authorities should then make an assessment of the amount of new homes that can be provided in their area. This should be justified by evidence on land availability, constraints on development and any other relevant matters.” (Paragraph: 040 Reference ID: 2a-040-20241212)

This is confirmed in the NPPF, in para 69, which advises that strategic, policy-making authorities should establish a housing requirement figure for their whole area, which shows the extent to which their identified local housing need can be met over the plan period, and in para 11 (b) (i), which allows for **strategic policies in Local Plans to provide for less than the housing need where the application of other NPPF policies that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a strong reason for restricting the overall scale, type or distribution of development in the plan area.** Footnote 7 confirms that NPPF policies related to National Landscapes (i.e. 189 and 190) are in the list of such policies.

Therefore the appropriate ‘housing requirement’ taken forward in Local Plans will also need to take into account other factors/assets such as the existence of designated National Landscapes within the Plan area, that could reduce the number of homes and other development that can be accommodated without harming those assets. Of course, there may be Plan areas with only minimal land within, or in the setting of, National Landscapes who are able to fully meet their local housing need.

The NPPG (Natural Environment) further clarifies:

*“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.) (N.B. bold text added for emphasis)

National Landscapes, along with National Parks and the Broads, have the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty⁵. For National Parks *“the Government recognises that the Parks are not suitable locations for unrestricted housing and does not therefore provide general housing targets for them. The expectation is that new housing will be focused on meeting affordable housing requirements, supporting local employment opportunities and key services”*.⁶ In accordance with NPPF para 189, this principle should apply equally to National Landscapes but, in the absence of

⁵ NPPF para 189

⁶ English national parks and the broads: UK government vision and circular 2010 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-national-parks-and-the-broads-uk-government-vision-and-circular-2010>

a similar document for National Landscapes, this relies on paragraph 11 of the NPPF being applied robustly to ensure that the scale and extent of development proposed does not harm the purposes for which these areas were nationally designated.

Assessing and allocating housing sites in a National Landscape

General approach

As described above, for LPAs with land in National Landscapes, the overall development strategy in a Local Plan will need to take account of the fact that the NPPF sets out that the scale and extent of development within National Landscapes should be limited, and site allocations need to be considered within this context. LPAs also need to consider the cumulative impact of proposed sites, and of such development occurring within multiple Local Plan areas in a single National Landscape.

Part of the consideration of the appropriate level of housing within a National Landscape will be assessing potential sites for allocation. This will normally be undertaken as part of the Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (HELAA) process. For sites within a National Landscape this assessment will need to take into account the impact of potential sites on the purposes of the designation, i.e. to conserve and enhance natural beauty, taking into account the relevant National Landscape (AONB) Management Plan.

National Landscape (AONB) Management Plans are key documents to understanding the natural beauty of the area and therefore what characteristics or features of natural beauty need to be conserved and enhanced when deciding the location, scale and design of new development. The Management Plan for each National Landscape is a statutory document, which will have been adopted by the local authorities (or by the relevant National Landscape Conservation Board) and which '*formulates their policy for the management of the area and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it*'.⁷ It is the principal vehicle for ensuring that the statutory purpose of the specific National Landscape is met, it helps to set the strategic context for development, and it is a material consideration in the planning process.⁸

National Landscape (AONB) Management Plans are often supported by additional guidance documents that provide more detailed advice as well as position statements, relating to subjects such as design, dark skies, and the setting of the National Landscape, which should also be considered in the local plan-making process.

It is important to remember that 'natural beauty' is holistic. Natural beauty is not just the look of the landscape (or 'the view'), but includes landform and geology, plants and animals, landscape features, and the rich history of human settlement over the centuries.⁹ It comprises multiple elements such as the landscape and scenic quality, natural heritage (geology, species and habitats), wildness (including sense of remoteness), tranquillity and dark skies, and cultural heritage (including the built environment and cultural traditions and associations)¹⁰ which, taken together, justify an area's designation. It is the conservation and enhancement of all these aspects of natural beauty (described in the specific, statutory National Landscape (AONB) Management Plan) that is the primary purpose of designation.

Decisions to allocate sites within National Landscapes should be 'landscape-led', as implied by the 'great weight' to be given to conserving and enhancing National Landscapes and the 'highest

⁷ Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, [s.89\(2\)](#).

⁸ NPPG Paragraph: 040 Reference ID: 8-040-20190721

⁹ Countryside Commission (2001) [Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A guide for AONB Partnership members. CA24.](#)

¹⁰ *The 'natural beauty criterion'*. Natural England (2017) [Areas of outstanding natural beauty: designation and management.](#)

status of protection' given by para 189 of the NPPF. This requires a robust understanding of landscape, including the history and settlement patterns of the wider landscape, drawing on the Management Plan along with Landscape Character Assessments and Historic Landscape Characterisation – see advised site assessment steps set out below.

Advised site assessment steps

To assess sites for housing in National Landscapes, we recommend LPAs will need to:^{11,12}

- **Establish the facts about the natural beauty of the area, especially with reference to the statutory Management Plan for the specific National Landscape.** Identify what comprises the specific natural beauty of the area, using:
 - descriptions of natural beauty, which can include Statements of Significance, or description of key characteristics or features, as set out in National Landscape (AONB) Management Plans; and
 - the reasons for designation as a National Landscape (AONB).
- **Understand the key aims, objectives, outcomes (and policies, where relevant) in the statutory Management Plan for the specific National Landscape,** which give an indication of which actions or approaches will further the purpose of designation. These objectives:
 - relate to the applicable legislative purposes;
 - are evidence-based;
 - have been agreed between local partners, in a process convened by the National Landscape team;
 - include, but are not limited to, national or locally apportioned government targets and outcomes.
- **Undertake landscape and visual sensitivity or capacity studies¹³** as advised in the NPPG,¹⁴ to assess the sensitivity of each site to the type and scale of development that is being considered. It is critical that these studies are completed prior to allocation, to inform the allocation process, not post-allocation. These studies should:
 - Form part of the Local Plan's evidence base;
 - Accord sites in National Landscapes the highest 'value' in the assessment process¹⁵, to reflect their national designation status and the provisions of para 189 of the NPPF;
 - Be informed by the specific characteristics of the natural beauty of the area as described in the statutory Management Plan for the National Landscape;
 - Be used to assess whether the principle of development of the site is appropriate, in terms of impacts on the specific natural beauty of the National Landscape;
 - Be undertaken on a site-specific basis rather than as part of a broad-brush sensitivity assessment covering a wider area and assess the sensitivity of these sites to types and scales of development being considered;
 - Consider both the landscape and the visual sensitivity of the sites, again with reference to the Management Plan;
 - Be used to inform the amount, location and nature of development, and extent of site coverage, that may be appropriate - for clarity, this should then be incorporated into any policy allocating the site for development;
 - Identify any mitigation measures, such as landscape buffers and building height parameters, or any other site-specific issues, that might make development of the site acceptable in

¹¹ NPPG Paragraph: 037 Reference ID: 8-037-20190721

¹² <https://national-landscapes.org.uk/resources/guidance-for-local-planning-authorities-on-crow-s-85-duty/page3>

¹³ [An approach to landscape sensitivity - Natural England 2019](#)

¹⁴ NPPG Paragraph: 037 Reference ID: 8-037-20190721

¹⁵ [Landscape Institute's GLVIA3 paras 5.19-5.23 and GLVIA3 Notes & Clarifications 5\(7\)](#)

- terms of impact on the specific natural beauty of the National Landscape; again, these should then be incorporated into any policy allocating the site for development; and
- Ensure any mitigation measures themselves would not harm the specific natural beauty of the National Landscape, e.g. would not introduce uncharacteristic landscape features in the locality. Also, in recognising the holistic nature of natural beauty, it should be noted that mitigation measures will not always be sufficient to overcome harms to the National Landscape.

Development on previously developed land (PDL)

Within a National Landscape or its setting, it might be appropriate for a different approach to be taken to the redevelopment of previously developed land (PDL) – as per the definition in the NPPF glossary - than would be taken for greenfield sites. However, the strong policies within the NPPF for conserving and enhancing National Landscapes, along with the statutory requirement for LPAs and others to seek to further the purposes of National Landscapes, mean that there should be no presumption in favour of the redevelopment for housing of PDL sites in National Landscapes and their settings. The landscape context of a site in a National Landscape is just as important for a PDL site as it is for any site.

When considering PDL sites in a National Landscape in the context of plan-making or development management, the following should be considered, in addition to the advised site assessment steps described above:

- Any ecological and/or historical significance of the site, or parts of the site, especially (but not limited to) that which relates to the natural beauty of the National Landscape, noting that such significance may not be immediately obvious without appropriate surveys.
- The existing or former use of the site and any of its structures, and whether that use was generally compatible with the natural beauty of the National Landscape (for example, agricultural barns and horticultural infrastructure that might be considered an accepted and typical part of the rural landscape, or might contribute to the rural, land-based economy) and might usefully be retained or revived, at least in part.
- Whether any existing structures or hard standings are incongruous in the landscape to the extent that redevelopment would represent an enhancement, including consideration of contamination of land or water, and the stability of land.
- The extent to which the introduction of residential development on the site would increase or exacerbate any existing impacts of the PDL on the natural beauty of the National Landscape.
- Whether the site or its structures could (in part or as a whole) be better put to a different use, other than residential development, that contributes to or delivers the purposes of the National Landscape designation, or another use that meets local development needs, especially where this would be suited to a rural location.

In view of the above, early engagement with the relevant National Landscape team, to understand the site and the relationship with its context, is encouraged.

Major development

Paragraph 190 of the NPPF sets out that, within National Landscapes, **planning 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.** It also sets out the following:

“Consideration of such applications should include an assessment of:

- a) the need for the development, including in terms of any national considerations, and the impact of permitting it, or refusing it, upon the local economy;*
- b) the cost of, and scope for, developing outside the designated area, or meeting the need for it in some other way; and*

- c) *any detrimental effect on the environment, the landscape and recreational opportunities, and the extent to which that could be moderated.*"

Footnote 64 clarifies that, for the purpose of paragraph 190, whether a proposal is 'major development' is a matter for the decision maker, taking into account its nature, scale and setting, and whether it could have a significant adverse impact on the purposes for which the area has been designated or defined.

Whilst paragraph 190 specifically refers to planning permissions, it has also been considered relevant by Local Plan Inspectors to allocations within Local Plans.¹⁶ Legal advice provided to the South Downs National Park Authority by Landmark Chambers in 2017 also concluded that "*it would arguably amount to an error of law to fail to consider paragraph 116 (now 190) at the site allocations stage of plan making for the National Park. The consequence of doing so would be to risk allocating land for major development that was undeliverable because it was incapable of meeting the major development test in the NPPF*".¹⁷

Considerations 'a' and 'b' of NPPF para 190 are indeed more appropriate to determine at plan-making stage when the needs for development are established and alternative options for provision fully considered.

The starting point of the policy is that major development should only be permitted in a National Landscape "**in exceptional circumstances, and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest**". This is a primary and separate requirement to the considerations 'a'–'c' below and is a very high bar. In many areas, particularly in southern England, high levels of housing need are the rule rather than the exception, while the public interest must also take into account the value that people place on nationally important, designated landscapes.

It should be noted that exceptional *need* does not necessarily equate to exceptional *circumstances*.¹⁸ When applied at Local Plan stage, consideration 'a' should not assume that general housing needs must be met within the National Landscape. To seek to justify major development on the basis of meeting local housing need for the local planning authority area is a circular argument at plan-making stage, because the impact of the scale and distribution of development on the National Landscape should be taken into account in deciding the level of housing provision (the housing requirement) (NPPF paras 69 and 11(d)(i)). If such housing levels can only be achieved by allocating major development in the National Landscape, which by definition will have "a significant adverse impact on the purposes for which the area has been designated" then this is a good indicator that the impact on the National Landscape provides "a strong reason for restricting the overall scale, type or distribution of development in the plan area" as provided for in NPPF paragraph 11.

Rather, the assessment for consideration 'a' should be based on robust evidence that directly relates to the National Landscape and relevant settlements within it. This is supported by the findings of the Inspector for the West Oxfordshire Local Plan in 2018, who recommended deleting four allocations in the Burford–Charlbury sub-area, which forms part of the Cotswolds National Landscape, on the basis that there was no housing need figure for this specific sub-area and that "*soundly-based decisions on the balance of the benefits and harms of further housing development in this area can*

¹⁶ For instance, in the Vale of White Horse Local Plan examination in 2016, the Inspector considered two proposed sites located within the North Wessex Downs AONB for 550 and 850 dwellings against the major development tests set out in paragraph 116 of the NPPF (now incorporated into paragraph 190 of the NPPF). He concluded that the specific need for housing to be provided within the AONB had not been demonstrated and the sites were subsequently deleted. [Vale-of-White-Horse-Local-Plan-2031-Part-1-Inspectors-Report-FR.pdf](#) More recently, in 2019, the Inspector appointed to examine the Wealden Local Plan also considered it appropriate to assess the approach to development against the exceptional circumstances and public interest tests set out in para 116 of the previous NPPF.

¹⁷ 10 October 2017 Toby Fisher, Landmark Chambers

¹⁸ This principle is recognised in relevant case law (R (Mevagissey Parish Council) v Cornwall Council [2013] EHC 3684, paragraph 52): 'Even if there were an exceptional need ... that would not necessarily equate to exceptional circumstances for a particular development, because there may be alternative sites that are more suitable because development there would result in less harm to the AONB landscape'.

only reasonably be reached based on the detailed evidence submitted as part of specific planning applications".¹⁹

Consideration 'b' should robustly explore all available options outside the National Landscape, and whether the need can be met in another way, such as on smaller sites within the National Landscape. Consideration 'c' can be harder to apply at Local Plan stage when the details of a specific scheme are not known, but sites that are significantly constrained by environmental, landscape or recreational factors should be avoided. Again, landscape capacity or sensitivity studies can be useful tools to inform this consideration alongside other relevant evidence such as ecological and heritage studies.

Housing sites in the setting of National Landscapes

National planning policy and guidance make clear that land within the setting of National Landscapes often makes an important contribution to maintaining their natural beauty.

The NPPG (Natural Environment) says of National Landscapes:

"Land within the setting of these areas often makes an important contribution to maintaining their natural beauty, and where poorly located or designed development can do significant harm. This is especially the case where long views from or to the designated landscape are identified as important, or where the landscape character of land within and adjoining the designated area is complementary. Development within the settings of these areas will therefore need sensitive handling that takes these potential impacts into account" (Paragraph: 042 Reference ID: 8-042-20190721).

Development being proposed in areas outside of, but close to the boundary of, National Landscapes can include significantly expanded existing towns and villages, and the creation of wholly new settlements, sometimes branded as 'Garden Villages'. Again, decisions on allocating sites within the setting of National Landscapes should be 'landscape-led', to reflect the requirements of NPPF para 189 that development within the setting of National Landscapes should be '*sensitively located and designed so as to minimise impact*', based on a robust understanding of landscape including the history and settlement patterns of the wider landscape, using site-specific landscape and visual sensitivity studies.

Impacts on the setting of a National Landscape can be direct or indirect, and might include:

- Visual effects, where there is a clear intervisibility between the site and the National Landscape, and therefore the site makes a positive contribution to the setting of the National Landscape, for example where the development of a site would result in an abrupt change of landscape character in close proximity to the National Landscape, and a loss of natural landscape contiguous with it. Also, for example, where the relationship between the particular National Landscape and an adjacent designated heritage asset such as a Conservation Area or Listed Building is a fundamental part of the setting of the particular National Landscape, perhaps due to topography or cultural significance.
- Effects on settlement character, particularly for proposed 'Garden Villages' attached to existing settlements, where these would not relate well to the established and historic pattern of development in the area, and would subsume and overwhelm the existing village, significantly altering its character and landscape setting, and creating large new urbanisations adjacent to National Landscapes.
- Physical effects, for example, on habitats (especially woodland) or watercourses with functional connectivity with the particular National Landscape, and on species e.g. on foraging opportunities and behavioural impacts.

¹⁹ West Oxfordshire Local Plan 2031 Inspector's Report, August 2018 Issue 9 paras 214-224 [west-oxfordshire-inspectors-report.pdf](#)

- Impacts on the sense of naturalness, remoteness, tranquillity and dark skies of the particular National Landscape and the way it is experienced and enjoyed.
- Impacts of increased population close to the specific National Landscape boundary, for example significant increase in traffic movements on roads within and / or along the boundary of the National Landscape, increased recreational pressure, increased demands on natural resources.

Again, all these potential impacts should be considered against the natural beauty of the area, especially with reference to the statutory Management Plan for the specific National Landscape, and the key aims, objectives, outcomes (and policies, where relevant) therein.

Affordable housing in National Landscapes

Affordability of housing is often an issue within National Landscapes, particularly for younger people and those who work in land-based industries such as agriculture and forestry, and this has important implications for the future land management of National Landscapes and for sustainable rural communities. This issue is addressed in Circular 2010⁵ with regard to National Parks, where similar issues exist.

As such, the provision of affordable housing that meets the needs of local communities, including the provision of housing that is affordable in perpetuity, should be a high priority in National Landscapes. Planning policies should seek to deliver high-quality and landscape-led new housing, including affordable housing and workspace, to support thriving rural communities, and which does not compromise the character and natural beauty of National Landscapes.

Local Plans need to plan for and engage positively with mechanisms capable of delivering affordable housing in National Landscapes. This might include housing tailored to the specific needs of land-based workers for rural housing needs, in order to support sustainable land management, the land-based economy and the aims, objectives, outcomes (and policies, where relevant) of National Landscape Management Plans.

In this regard, we would expect local planning authorities with land in a National Landscape to take up the opportunity provided in para 65 of the NPPF, regarding thresholds for affordable housing in 'designated rural areas' (defined in the NPPF Glossary as including National Landscapes). This says LPAs can include policies in their Local Plans requiring provision of affordable housing in residential developments of five units or fewer within National Landscapes.

Innovative mechanisms to deliver affordable housing in National Landscapes, for local people, including land-based workers, are recommended. Such mechanisms might include developing local criteria for key workers, exploring local thresholds for First Homes, and supporting local Community Land Trust ambitions. In recent years, community-led housing schemes have become more common across the country, often led by Community Land Trusts that are run by local people and provide genuinely affordable housing in perpetuity to meet local needs.

Rural exception sites

Rural exception sites are small sites used for affordable housing in perpetuity where sites would not normally be used for housing, i.e. outside the development boundaries of settlements.

Accommodating rural exception sites within National Landscapes without adversely impacting on landscape character can be difficult, and decisions on allocating or accepting such sites within National Landscapes still need to be considered in the context of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the specific National Landscape (as per NPPF 189).

As with any site allocation, this requires a robust understanding of landscape including the history and settlement patterns of the wider landscape, taking into account National Landscape (AONB) Management Plans, which are key documents to understand the natural beauty of the area, and

therefore what needs to be conserved and enhanced when deciding the location, scale and design of a rural exception site. Local planning authorities also need to consider the cumulative impact of the proposed sites in that National Landscape.

Information sources used in the preparation of this Briefing

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- Defra Guidance for relevant authorities on seeking to further the purposes of Protected Landscape (Dec 2024) [Guidance for relevant authorities on seeking to further the purposes of Protected Landscapes - GOV.UK](#)
- [National Planning Policy Framework](#)
- NPPG [Natural environment - GOV.UK](#)
- NPPG [Housing and economic needs assessment - GOV.UK](#)
- English national parks and the broads: UK government vision and circular 2010 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-national-parks-and-the-broads-uk-government-vision-and-circular-2010>
- Natural England 2019 An approach to landscape sensitivity assessment – to inform spatial planning and land management. Available at [An approach to landscape sensitivity - Natural England 2019](#)
- Landscape Institute 2023 Notes and Clarifications on Aspects of Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment Third edition (GLVIA3) [LITGN-2024-01-GLVIA3-NC_Aug-2024.pdf](#)

If you require general assistance in understanding or interpreting a specific National Landscape (AONB) Management Plan, please contact the relevant [National Landscape \(AONB\) team](#), who will be able to offer you further guidance.

About National Landscapes Association

We are a registered charity that supports the mission to conserve and enhance natural beauty in National Landscapes and other protected areas. National Landscape teams across the UK work to achieve a sustainable balance of priorities at the landscape scale. One of our key aims is to support and develop a network of ambitious National Landscape teams and partnerships that have a strong collective voice and a positive impact on the places for which they care.

About this Briefing

National Landscapes Briefings offer a summary of key findings and recommendations arising from National Landscapes' action and insight. This Briefing has been informed by the Planning and Placemaking specialist panel of representatives from across the National Landscape network.

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