

The future of National Landscapes

For people, for nature, for good

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Summary

National Landscapes are places where people and nature thrive together, benefitting one another in a range of diverse and often compounding ways. These legally protected areas combine landscape-scale thinking, local connections and proven delivery of national priorities, while supporting biodiversity, climate resilience, community wellbeing and helping to create sustainable local economies. This Briefing highlights our latest thinking on these benefits, outlining how targeted investment can create a vision of prosperity for the future for National Landscapes, with positive impacts for the rest of the UK:

1. **Setting the scene for the future** – what could National Landscapes be and do in 2050?
2. **The value provided by National Landscapes today** – their environmental, economic, and social contributions.
3. **A vision for 2050** – where thriving, connected, resilient landscapes can continue delivering for nature, people, and prosperity in the UK.
4. **Why 2050 needs investment now** – the funding gap, the urgency of action, and the significant opportunity.
5. **Investment pathways 2025 to 2050** – how targeted investment in nature, climate, community prosperity, and inclusion will yield measurable return.
6. **Joining forces for good with partnership working** – why partners should act now to make this vision a reality.

1. Setting the scene for the future

Imagine the UK in 2050: wetlands teeming with life, woodlands flourishing, rivers running clear and grasslands vibrant and strong. Farming and nature are deeply integrated, and the soil is healthy and resilient. Towns and villages are supported by strong local services, accessible housing, sustainable food systems and diverse opportunities for everyone. Communities are healthier, more prosperous and more equal. Public places within National Landscapes are truly accessible to people from both urban and rural locations and everyone feels safe and welcome. Sustainable landscape tourism and heritage also attract visitors locally and globally, supporting small businesses and boosting economies. Children grow up connected to nature and heritage and have access to sustainable, locally grown food.

Contrary to what we often see in the media this future is still possible, but only if we invest both time and resources now. Expert and dedicated teams from across 46 National Landscapes (Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are already working to make this future a reality. Covering 15% of the land area, these national designations, protected for the nation's benefit, are positioned to further benefit people, nature and society at scale.

Central question: *What kind of landscapes do we want to pass on in 2050 and how do we get there?*

2. The value provided by National Landscapes today

Environmental benefits

- **Tackling climate change through carbon capture:** It is estimated that National Landscapes store at least 17.5% of England's total soil carbon (448 million tonnes)¹. They encompass 20% of England's total woodland cover and 30% of its ancient woodland². England's peatlands alone store 580 million tonnes of carbon³, yet degraded ones emit 3.7m tonnes annually⁴. 27% of England's blanket bog can be found in the North Pennines National Landscape⁵.
- **Regulating air quality for a healthy world and population:** keeping National Landscapes healthy improves air quality by protecting and restoring habitats such as woodlands, wetlands and grasslands, all of which naturally filter pollutants. According to the Office for National Statistics⁶, in 2023 UK ecosystems removed nearly 1.37m tonnes of harmful air pollutants, reducing respiratory illness and saving an estimated £15m⁷ in healthcare costs.
- **Providing space for nature hotspots to meet global targets:** due to their reach and geographical spread, National Landscapes serve as biodiversity reservoirs that radiate out across the country, safeguarding some of the UK's richest and most threatened ecosystems, overlapping priority habitats and protected sites, and providing vital refuges for nationally important species, many of which are in decline.

Economic benefits

- **At the core of tourism and leisure:** in 2024, over £300m of UK tourism spend was attributable to natural capital⁸. National Landscapes host 166,000,000 visits per year⁹. In areas such as the Cotswolds, nature-based tourism alone provides thousands of jobs which are vital to local people and economies.
- **Delivering for local economies¹⁰:** National Landscapes contribute an estimated £49 billion to the UK economy. 800,285 people work in National Landscapes with 122,000 business, of which 91% constitute 'microbusinesses' of nine or fewer employees. National Landscapes are at the core of supporting farming, small businesses and rural supply chains in these areas.
- **Volunteer contributions:** in 2023, National Landscapes teams brought people together for 37,000 volunteer days, worth £3.7 million¹¹. These efforts strengthened communities, offered hands-on experience and helped tackle loneliness through shared purpose and connection.
- **Natural capital asset value:** according to the Office for National Statistics, the UK's ecosystems have an estimated natural capital asset value of £1.8 trillion (2022)¹². National Landscapes hold a disproportionate share due to their richness in priority habitats and cultural services.

¹ Soil carbon audit conducted by Cranfield University on behalf of National Landscapes, 2022

² <https://naturalengland-defra.opendata.arcgis.com/>

³ <https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2019/08/12/peat-pilots-set-to-revive-english-peatlands/>

⁴ <https://iucn.org/fr/node/16144>

⁵ <https://naturalengland-defra.opendata.arcgis.com/>

⁶ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/uknaturalcapitalaccounts/2024/relateddata>

⁷ https://www.protectedlandscapespartnership.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Socio-economic-research-Technical-Report_FINAL_clean.pdf

⁸ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/uknaturalcapitalaccounts/2024>

⁹ https://www.protectedlandscapespartnership.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Socio-economic-research-Technical-Report_FINAL_clean.pdf

¹⁰ https://www.protectedlandscapespartnership.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Socio-economic-research-Technical-Report_FINAL_clean.pdf

¹¹ https://www.protectedlandscapespartnership.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Socio-economic-research-Technical-Report_FINAL_clean.pdf

¹² <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/uknaturalcapitalaccounts/2024>

Social and cultural benefits

- **Supporting the NHS through health and wellbeing:** according to a report from the Office for National Statistics, health benefits from recreation made the largest contribution to the total asset value of UK ecosystem services, at £489 billion in 2022¹³. National Landscapes provide accessible green and blue spaces that improve physical and mental health, reduce stress, and enhance quality of life.
- **Championing education and heritage:** these landscapes act as living classrooms and cultural anchors, offering environmental education, skills development and the preservation of local heritage and identity. As part of Generation Green 2, National Landscapes teams delivered 2,700 outdoor experiences for young people in just ten months, including 600 farm visits, 900 residential experiences and 1,200 day experiences¹⁴.
- **Accessibility and connection:** two-thirds of the population of England lives within 30 minutes of a National Landscape¹⁵, making them highly inclusive, providing people from all backgrounds with the opportunity to visit.

3. The vision for 2050

With forward-thinking and targeted investment, these benefits could be scaled up to better serve the whole of the UK. National Landscapes teams have strong networks and relationships with landowners and multiple stakeholders across their areas, and existing convening power and knowledge to inject investment where it can have the greatest impact. With strong foundations, established partnerships, and proven experience already in place, increasing investment in National Landscapes (and other protected areas) offers greater value and impact than attempting to build similar capacity elsewhere from the ground up.

By 2050, National Landscapes could:

- **Be places where people live in harmony with nature:** nature should be woven throughout the whole of UK, with no empty patches. By 2050, National Landscapes could be vibrant hubs of energy and connection, places where a thriving natural world includes people, and the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature is realising its full potential.
- **Nature is restored and thriving:** by 2050, National Landscapes could teem with life, from pollinators to healthy soils. This abundance would not only restore nature but also secure the natural systems that underpin our food production, making the UK's landscapes both ecologically rich and food secure.
- **Deliver climate resilience:** peatlands, woodlands, grasslands and wetlands should be at the core of efforts to generate land-based carbon reductions and maintain carbon storage. According to the National Soil Map written by Cranfield University (updated in 2016), soils in National Landscapes currently store 448m tonnes of carbon, accounting for 17.5% of England's soil carbon storage. With one third of peatlands in National Landscapes already in recovery, there is great work to build on, and the knowledge and skills to make an even bigger contribution by 2050. The Government's Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework earmarks several of these habitats for targeted improvement, so baselines and monitoring will be in place. These areas should be central to the green economy, acting as hubs of activity for green jobs, sustainable farming and eco-tourism, supporting resilient local economies.

¹³ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/uknaturalcapitalaccounts/2024>

¹⁴ https://national-landscapes.files.svdcn.com/production/assets/images/Documents/Reports/NLA_Year-End-2024-to-2025-spreads.pdf

¹⁵ https://mendiphills-nl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/So_much_more_than_the_view1.pdf

- **Provide universal access to all for health and recreation:** every person throughout the UK, regardless of background, could be benefiting from high-quality green spaces. By 2050, National Landscapes could have provided enormous savings for the NHS through preventative medicine and green prescribing, while providing crucial natural infrastructure to improve the UK's ever-increasing mental health crisis, in a way that is both impactful and cost-efficient
- **Be places of education and enriched culture:** National Landscapes have the potential to strengthen national identity and foster a deep sense of place, community and shared heritage. By 2050 these benefits could be woven into the everyday lives of communities and individuals across the UK.

4. Why 2050 needs investment now

Natural England's 2024 *State of Natural Capital*¹⁶ report confirms many UK habitats remain in poor condition, with funding far below what is needed to meet biodiversity and climate targets. But this work cannot happen in isolation; habitats need nature-rich connectivity at a landscape-scale to see significant improvements. In this context, targeting investments towards National Landscapes makes sense.

- **Return on investment:** every £1 spent on natural capital yields multiple economic returns in myriad ways including decreased health costs, reduced flood damage, pollination and increased tourism revenue. Investment in National Landscapes provides tangible and holistic benefits for all of society, public services, and the economy, creating a better environment for people and businesses to thrive.
- **A ready-to-scale network:** National Landscapes already bring together multiple institutional and individual partners, trusted community connections and proven delivery methods. Working with National Landscapes provides access to a network of knowledgeable and experienced teams. Innovative and agile, these teams are used to delivering a lot with only a little – including the deep collaboration needed to secure delivery of their statutory purposes. While excellent partnerships have been developed, expanding and strengthening these collaborations will be vital to meet the increasing and ever-changing challenges we face.
- **Benefitting all and respecting public opinion:** according to a study produced by Wildlife and Countryside Link in March 2022, 74% of the public want the government to give National Landscapes more money to help them restore nature¹⁷. This level of support represents not only the high use that many National Landscapes experience; it also represents the positive emotional and practical connections that people have with these special places.

5. Investment pathways 2025 to 2050

To support this vision, we have identified four key themes for investment in National Landscapes to deliver the most for people and nature in 2025.

1. **Nature recovery** – supporting large-scale habitat restoration and species recovery, using landscapes approaches to ensure that people and nature recover together.
2. **Climate action** – supporting peatland, woodland and floodplain restoration and regenerative farming, preserving the approximate stocks of 448 million tonnes of carbon, while reducing flood damage costs. Sequestering and maintaining storage of more carbon through tree and hedgerow planting and growth and other habitat creation.

¹⁶ <https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/6683489974616064>

¹⁷ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/people-want-englands-national-parks-and-aonbs-to-be-richer-in-nature.asp>

3. **Community prosperity** – supporting rural enterprise, eco-tourism and nature-based jobs. This targeted investment could create thousands of new green jobs whilst strengthening existing communities and businesses, resulting in a measurable uplift in local economies.
4. **Access and inclusion** – creating programmes and opportunities that prioritise equity, diversity and inclusion will ensure that all individuals can experience and benefit from nature and the outdoors. Expanding fair access to green environments will contribute to improved wellbeing and greater social equity.

6. Joining forces for good – with partnership working

Then

In 1949, the Government passed the *National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act*, a landmark piece of legislation that shaped the landscapes we cherish today. It laid the foundations for National Landscapes (Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) and National Parks, recognising the vital role that access to nature plays in people's lives, health and wellbeing.

In 1956, the Gower peninsula became the first National Landscape, recognised for its sweeping coastal beauty and vibrant natural heritage. It was soon followed by the Llŷn peninsula and the Quantock Hills. Today, 46 areas across England, Wales and Northern Ireland hold this designation with the most recent being the Tamar Valley, straddling the Devon and Cornwall border.

The National Landscapes Association was established to bring this growing family together. As a national charity, we unite and support the UK's National Landscapes and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty by strengthening local teams, sharing knowledge, and building partnerships that turn shared ambition into lasting impact.

Now

Our vision is beautiful landscapes where nature and people thrive together.

Our mission is to lead and champion collective action across the National Landscapes network by protecting and restoring the UK's most outstanding places and ensuring that everyone can access and benefit from them.

We are working at the intersection of nature recovery, climate resilience and social equity. Together with partners, we are driving practical solutions: from restoring peatlands that lock away carbon, to supporting communities facing coastal erosion, to opening up green and blue spaces for public health and wellbeing.

Every collaboration strengthens our impact. Every investment in partnership accelerates progress, unlocking innovation, efficiency and shared success across local and national levels.

For good

We have an opportunity and a responsibility to act together for lasting change.

By joining forces with partners who share our values and vision we can create a future where:

- Coastal communities adapt to rising seas with nature-based resilience.
- Rural communities thrive through sustainable land use and rich nature.
- Urban communities enjoy equitable access to green and blue spaces that enhance health and wellbeing.

National Landscapes are more than beautiful places; they are part of the living infrastructure of our nation's future. They store carbon, prevent flooding, nurture wildlife, sustain livelihoods and provide places where people can experience joy and wonder.

Investing in National Landscapes will help to secure a sustainable future in social, environmental and economic terms.

Because when we work together, across sectors and beyond boundaries, nature recovers, communities thrive and quality of life improves.

Together, we can create landscapes for life. For people, for nature, for good.

About this Briefing

National Landscapes Briefings offer a summary of key findings and recommendations arising from National Landscapes' action and insight.

About the 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

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