

CLIMATE ACTION IN AONBS

Framework

October 2022



Table of contents

I. Purpose & context	2
<i>Why produce a Climate Action Framework and Toolkit now?</i>	3
<i>For whom?</i>	4
<i>Resourcing</i>	4
<i>Statement of commitment from AONB chairs on Climate Action</i>	4
II. Where do we stand?	5
<i>Overarching position</i>	6
<i>Agriculture and Climate Change</i>	8
<i>Nature-based Solutions</i>	9
<i>Building Design & Planning</i>	11
<i>Renewable Energy</i>	12
<i>Sustainable Tourism & Transport</i>	13
Image references	15

I. Purpose & context



Why produce a Climate Action Framework and Toolkit now?

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are designated for the nation. The combined climate and biodiversity crisis is one of the biggest challenges we face and whilst AONB teams have moved forward on nature recovery in recent years, the AONB Family was not in any position to clearly state what contributions it brought to facing climate change issues as a collective until recently. **Responding to climate change is however fundamental to the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty.**

Whilst AONB teams are small and cannot alone address the challenge, they cannot ignore it. With their partnerships they can generate influence and help move entire communities in the right direction. Through the orientation of their actions they can also give more weight to the AONB designation.

To do so, AONB teams and partnerships must have clarity on what climate change means for them and what role they can play in addressing it. They need to be able to convey this ambition to their stakeholders and they need practical guidance to deliver results with their communities and partners.

The present Framework & Toolkit is the foundation to support this process. It is the result of a sustained collaborative endeavour involving close to 40 people from 18 different AONBs. They have come together drawn by a sense of urgency and a need for clarity.

This Climate Action Framework & Toolkit is not meant to be set in stone nor take dust on a virtual shelf. It is meant as a working document and will be added to with further contributions and collaborative activities. AONB staff as well as their partners are strongly encouraged to provide feedback and challenge.

The Framework

The Climate Action Framework establishes five topic-specific narratives as well as an overarching narrative on the role of AONBs in facing climate change. These narratives hold several purposes:

- To set the level of ambition of climate action in AONBs and generate consensus on an AONB position on climate change;
- To convey our collective position to our partners and communities;
- To help inform AONB Management Plan reviews and any other strategic/business plan.

The Toolkit

The Climate Action Toolkit is a separate document. It contains useful information on relevant policy and targets, a rich glossary of relevant terms and concepts, AONB case studies on various aspects of climate action, and a set of targeted guidance and tools to support AONB teams and their communities.

For whom?

The Framework is aimed both internally and externally as it sets out AONB positions on key climate change related issues. The Toolkit is primarily aimed at AONB staff teams but they are strongly encouraged to share it with their partners as well as volunteers and to use specific pull-out versions to support farmers, communities, planners and other relevant stakeholders in planning their own climate actions.

Resourcing

The 40 people involved in developing this Framework & Toolkit did so in addition to their daily, local responsibilities. The effort they have produced collectively is valuable, but AONB climate action cannot rely solely on the will-power of dedicated AONB staff.

The Framework and Toolkit was coordinated by the National Association, notably with the support from Natural England funding in the last quarter of the 2021-22 financial year.

The NAAONB is now actively engaging with Natural England to explore further funding opportunities to coordinate further collaborative climate action and tangibly increase our capacity to deliver on our ambition.

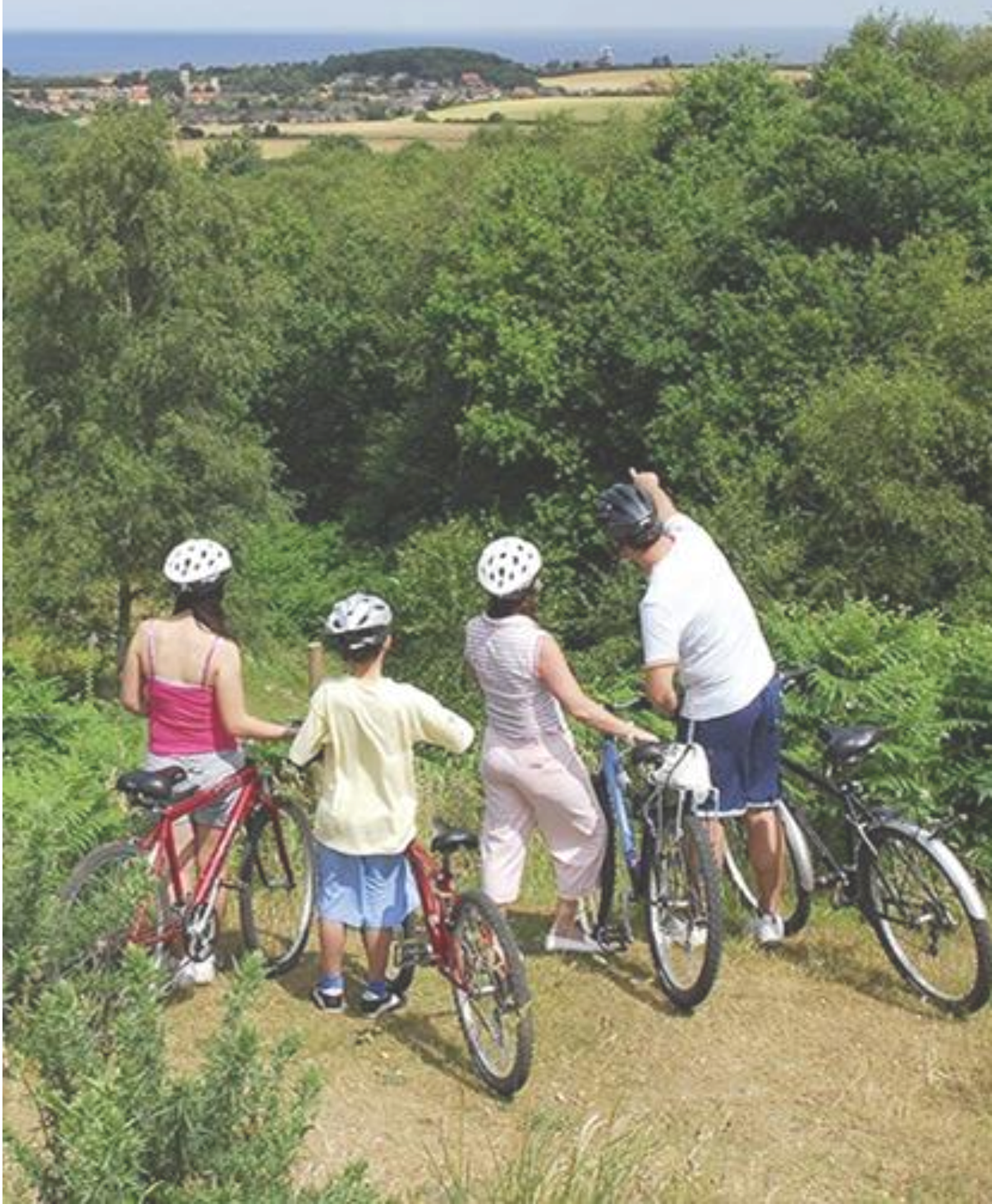
Transformational delivery to address climate change will however only happen if the need for resources in AONBs is met to the level set out in the Landscapes Review. The present Framework and Toolkit is therefore also the evidence of what AONB teams and partnership can deliver to contribute to the nation's fight against climate change, and a call for resources to allow them to meet this need and ambition.

Statement of commitment from AONB chairs on Climate Action

Through co-ordination from the NAAONB, AONB chairs have come together to draw a series of commitments they will fulfil in order to contribute to AONB climate action delivery. Through their Statement, they endorse the present Framework & Toolkit and commit to promoting it to partnership members and using it to inform strategic priorities.

The Statement of commitment from AONB chairs is currently being reviewed and signed by AONB chairs. It will be made available on the AONB website and the list of signatories will be updated in due course.

II. Where do we stand?



Overarching position

“If we don’t act now to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change on our landscapes, there will soon be nothing left to conserve and enhance.”

“Addressing climate change is the only thing we should really be doing. If we’re not doing this, we might as well do nothing at all.”

These are the words of two AONB staff currently involved in developing collaborative climate action. This is not meant to sound sensational – rather, it simply and truly conveys **the urgency and the scale of the challenge ahead** for AONBs. This includes the teams and partnerships who work to conserve and enhance natural beauty, but also the protected landscape policy and resourcing strategy. Although they can be a driving force, **climate change is not for AONB staff alone to address**.

Impacts from climate change can be felt across many parts of society but it is not our intention to propose solutions for every issue that arises. Instead, we have focused our attention towards the aspects of climate change on which we can have **direct impact and / or influence**. Collaborative AONB climate action is therefore broken down into five workstreams as follows:

- **Agriculture and Climate Change:** How can we support AONB farming communities to move towards more sustainable practices whilst maintaining food production and security?
- **Nature-based Solutions:** How to integrate climate and nature recovery action through nature-based solutions in AONBs when there can be no one-size fits all solution?
- **Building Design and Planning:** How can AONB teams contribute to solving the multi-faceted challenge of making existing and future homes and buildings resilient to climate change whilst minimising GHG emissions?
- **Renewable Energy:** How can we reconcile landscapes with renewable energy deployment and serve both objectives in a coherent way?
- **Sustainable Tourism and Transport:** How can we reduce the negative impacts of tourism and transport in AONBs whilst maintaining access to our landscapes?

Each of these major questions calls for **coordinated action** ranging from research, data analysis, evidence collection and actual planning of actions. This is the work that our **five collaborative climate change sub-groups** have initiated, with their outputs forming the basis of the present Framework and Toolkit. Further work and resources will however be needed to fully answer these questions and support further delivery in AONBs.

A cross-cutting theme addressed within each of these five workstreams is that of **behaviour change**. AONB teams and partnerships can have a strong and positive influence to reach a wide audience, from communities and landowners to businesses and local policy makers. We have yet to fully comprehend our varied audience and how best to engage and are actively working with [Climate Outreach](#) on the matter.

The five workstreams must also address **both adaptation to and mitigation of climate change**. They both form a necessary part of any strategic climate action plan.

Finally, the five workstreams will be relevant to AONBs **at varying degrees** and whilst they should all be considered, it is up to each team and partnership to **focus efforts** on the aspects where they can have the greatest impact. In parallel we must continue our collective, national advocacy across all five themes to contribute to **necessary policy changes** supporting our delivery.

The circle diagram below illustrates the **integrated manner** in which we envision the five workstreams to **support not only climate action, but also nature recovery and inclusive engagement with people, around the holistic concept of place.**





Agriculture and Climate Change

Agriculture is a major use of land in almost all AONBs, and while providing us with food as one of our most basic needs, it is a significant influence on nature and landscape as well as a significant source of carbon emissions.

A lot of attention is now being paid by the industry to **lowering greenhouse gas emissions** (which include methane and nitrous oxide as well as CO₂) and improving carbon storage and sequestration. These measures are valuable and must be accelerated and rolled out more widely, but **need to take into account nature and other environmental factors**, which could be harmed just by looking at land in relation to carbon. **Regenerative and agro-ecological farming** techniques are likely to be highly compatible with nature recovery and the special qualities of AONBs and should be supported and encouraged by AONB organisations at policy and practical levels.

Farming is an important part of the cultural landscape of most AONBs, which owe some or much of their character and value to past relatively sensitive agricultural practices. They are working landscapes which make up 15% of England and Wales, but they retain qualities which are easily eroded by unsympathetic land management. **Continued food production and food security are important considerations of adaptation to climate change.** Food production will remain important in most or all AONBs but should aim at the highest environmental standards. In many ways **protecting the long term ability to grow food aligns with environmental goals**, especially in relation to **retaining soil and enhancing soil quality and condition**, availability of pollinators etc. Soil is an important carbon store but this is released by soil disturbance, hence a big rise in no-till and minimum till practices.

The **maintenance of many semi-natural habitats** such as grasslands, heaths and moorland relies on appropriate agricultural management, including grazing. **Farms also often hold valuable networks of habitat including hedgerows, woods and ponds.** Achieving the best nature and climate value from a farm alongside its production requires an **integrated planning** approach. Squeezing production out of marginal land by high inputs and physical modifications is not likely to be the optimum solution. **Degraded peatlands** for example should be a high priority for rewetting and renaturalisation. **Woodlands and tree cover** in many AONBs could be expanded but consideration needs to be given to existing habitats and food production. These areas mentioned relate strongly to the strand of our work on **Nature-Based Solutions.**

Changes in agricultural policy and practice, along with change in food tastes by consumers and markets for non-food land uses will result in **change to AONB landscapes.** **With care, these changes can be beneficial.** Existing, often degraded, landscape character should not be a reason to oppose changes in farming practices that benefit climate, nature and future resilience.

AONB teams and partnerships have strong connections to their local farming communities, and their role is currently expanded through the **Farming in Protected Landscapes programme.** Further priority needs to be given to **sharing knowledge and upskilling members of AONB teams on climate aspects of agriculture and land use.** We need to make the most of the remaining period of the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme and work with Defra to explore **future roles for AONB organisations in relation to ELM.**



Nature-based Solutions

The NAAONB's [Colchester Declaration](#) sets out an ambitious mission and targets for AONBs in terms of nature recovery and climate change, and therefore relates to nature-based solutions.

How best to go about nature-based solutions in AONBs:

- **The integration of nature-based climate solutions with actions for nature recovery is vital.** We must be “nature positive and carbon negative” at the same time. Measures adopted will often have other ecosystem benefits such as flood attenuation and also climate change adaptation benefits to improve resilience. They also connect with climate change mitigation and adaptation through agriculture and forestry – we must look at nature-based solutions holistically. Land (and water) delivers many benefits and services and must not be thought of just in terms of carbon.
- Nature-based solutions have an important role for tackling climate change, but they **aren't a way of avoiding the necessary deep cuts in emissions in all sectors.**
- Nature-based solutions can help to sequester further carbon from the atmosphere, but the **existing carbon storage in soils and vegetation** is already considerable, especially in semi-natural habitats, but this store is vulnerable and maintaining it by **conserving habitats in good condition is an important starting point.**
- Peat in poor condition is a major source of carbon emissions. However, the size of carbon sink in our peat is huge and the further sequestration potential of peatlands in good condition is significant. Some of the larger upland AONBs with large areas of blanket bog have large scale activity on peatland conservation and restoration, with multiple benefits including for climate. Lowland deep peats are less well represented within the AONB network, but we need to pay attention to the under-recognised shallow and pockety peat areas in a variety of AONB landscapes. **All peatlands can make a contribution for climate and we should be aiming for all to be in good condition.**
- All AONBs can benefit from increased tree cover, but the scope and potential will vary. **Tree cover expansion must be done in ways appropriate to nature recovery and landscape context.** Survival of trees to maturity matters as much as planting, so maintenance and where necessary control of damage by squirrels and deer is important.
- **Other habitats** including permanent grasslands, heathlands and coastal habitats are also important for carbon and in some of these, additional significant tree cover may not help. Where **livestock** are used to manage these habitats, the **emissions** from these will typically be **the most significant factor** in the carbon flux of the land.

The role of designated landscapes and AONB partnerships in relation to nature-based solutions

- Through their statutory AONB Management Plans, partnerships with broad representation, and small specialist staff teams with local knowledge, **AONB organisations collectively are an important deliverer of nature-based solutions** and integrated land management, and have a strong track-record. See <https://landscapesforlife.org.uk/about-aonbs/Nature-recovery/nature-recovery-solutions>.
- However, with current resources and capacity, AONB teams and Partnerships are nowhere near fulfilling the potential of their areas for nature-based solutions. **AONB teams and other delivery bodies need additional support to fulfil this potential**, both in terms of up-skilling and through additional resources.
- The protection conferred by the AONB designation alone is not sufficient to ensure that all semi-natural habitats are well managed and in good condition. **Enhancing this protection and increasing resources for pro-active management will therefore contribute directly to climate change mitigation and adaptation**, as well as nature recovery and other benefits.
- Understanding of management of land for carbon storage and climate change mitigation is developing rapidly, and **ongoing collaboration and knowledge sharing to broaden and deepen understanding is vital** to achieving more on the ground.
- AONB teams and Partnerships **contribute on nature-based solutions by engaging with land managers and with local communities, and by co-ordinating the activity of partners**, as well as by direct delivery themselves. They also have a role to raise public awareness and understanding.
- The **integration of nature-based climate action into the Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes** will be important, and in the shorter term, the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme delivered by AONB teams and National Park Authorities provides a good additional mechanism in these areas.
- **The forthcoming review round of AONB Management Plans** provides an important and timely opportunity to further embed climate change and nature-based solutions within AONB work.



Building Design & Planning

AONB teams are faced both with an important challenge and an opportunity when it comes to reducing GHG emissions from buildings and houses in AONB landscapes.

The **pressure from housing development is ever-increasing** and **affects AONBs at varying degrees**. Responding to housing needs in AONBs must be done at the appropriate scale and in a way that does not harm the area's landscape nor the environment. The need to bring our communities towards **resilience and sustainability with energy efficient buildings** is also more urgent than ever.

There are **many organisations involved** in responding to these challenges. Local authorities in particular have both a statutory duty to deliver planning and building control as well as policies to help mitigate and adapt to climate change. AONB teams have an **opportunity to influence planning decisions and policy making** and to **encourage better practices**. To do so they must support each other through the development of common guidance and positions.

In terms of **building design**, many AONBs contain large stocks of older buildings in rural, village and small town settings. These houses often contribute significantly to landscape character but they also tend to be energy inefficient. **Retrofitting measures can be complex to navigate** and lead to negative impacts if buildings are not assessed correctly first. We therefore need to **help the owners of this historic housing stock** find the most effective and appropriate ways to improve energy efficiency.

Our first objective is to **showcase energy efficiency and GHG emission reduction measures for the historic built environment** whilst maintaining the character of older buildings and reducing home heating inequity. We are combining existing protected landscape experience with that of Historic England to produce useful guidance for all AONBs.

In terms of planning, we want to **encourage new housing developments to be as sustainable as possible**. This will be achieved via **influence on planning policy** and **through individual planning development consultation responses**. To do so, we will articulate what sustainable modern housing looks like within a protected landscape.

Our second objective is therefore to **describe a new modern vernacular that respects the local vernacular of the AONB where development is taking place and responds to the need for affordable housing**, while providing dwellings that **minimise greenhouse gas emissions** and are **resilient to climate change**.

Beyond these two priorities, AONB teams also crucially need to raise awareness **on the impact of building in a sensitive landscape and in vulnerable locations**, both in terms of damage to the AONB designation, and in terms of risks to buildings and communities.

Data, capacity and substantial resource are required for AONB teams to make a significant impact in building design and planning issues, but the weight given to the AONB designation must also meet the purposes these special landscapes have been set up to fulfil.



Renewable Energy

The AONB designation and input from AONB teams to the planning process seek to protect the special qualities of our landscapes but **may be seen as a barrier to the development of renewable energy solutions**. As the urgency of rapid transition to renewables increases, with renewed interest for on-shore wind deployment showed by central government, **AONBs must remain part of the solution**. Whilst it is not suitable to open the door to unlimited renewable energy deployment across our special landscapes, we must accept that AONB landscapes will need to play their part.

Renewable energy developments are guided by national and local planning policies, and decisions are made by local authorities (except for appeals and call-ins), while AONB Management Plans and AONB partnerships have some influence. **There are forms and scales of renewable energy that can be compatible with AONBs**, including microgeneration, woodfuel and biomass using agricultural by-products. **Community low carbon initiatives** may combine renewable energy with energy saving and create more sustainable solutions with local support.

However there remains a problematic conflict especially between AONB landscapes and large scale solar and wind developments. Solar potential is quite evenly distributed across UK land and so there is a reasonable rationale to avoid large ground-mounted solar farms within AONBs and **focus action on building-mounted panels instead**. Wind energy potential is associated with high ground and so some AONBs will have more theoretical potential than their surrounding areas. Scale of developments can refer to the size of turbines as well as the number, and a position commonly seen in AONB Management Plans favouring small turbines is at odds with the much greater technical and cost efficiency of larger turbines and may not provide a realistic solution. There is however in the UK a substantial area of **land with wind energy potential outside protected landscapes**. Current national policies against onshore wind are likely to be reviewed, and opposition to developments can be high anywhere. The situation is evolving quite rapidly.

National planning guidance is for local authorities to develop a **strategy to deliver renewables where environmental impacts are acceptable**. Where this is not done adequately, AONBs may be at risk from inappropriate developments, and time and effort can be wasted in conflict. Planning for renewable energy means **defining potential and what makes an area suitable and what potential harm is acceptable**, underpinned by solid **landscape sensitivity assessments**. AONB teams and partnerships can contribute to pro-active policy and guidance, and also have a role to comment on applications. The impact must be assessed in terms of **landscape character and ecological value and functionality**, along with archaeological and amenity value, and other aspects.

We also need to **initiate a national conversation** across AONB staff, AONB partnerships and local communities to define a new narrative on renewable energy in the context of the Climate Emergency. Some AONB partnerships have renewable energy position statements which need updating, and this challenge will need to be addressed by the upcoming round of **Management Plan reviews**. An updated **NAAONB position statement on renewable energy** in protected landscapes may also help local teams to appropriately respond to consultations. There is value in AONB teams coming together and tapping into external expert knowledge **to develop skills and understanding and establish guidelines and methods** which can then be adapted locally. Our objective is to **help inform such strategic thinking and conversations by developing skills and understanding rapidly**.



Sustainable Tourism & Transport

Tourism and transport are key sources of GHG emissions across our landscapes. They are also the cause of dramatic impacts to nature and biodiversity. Both sectors are part of the challenge **and** the solution when it comes to fulfilling the AONB Family's commitments on nature recovery and climate change (referring to the [Colchester Declaration](#) targets).

Sustainable tourism and sustainable transport hold solutions for protecting landscapes and nature and reducing emissions, whilst also strengthening the connection between people and the special places for which we care. **AONB teams and partnerships cannot solve everything** but can contribute to **changing transport and tourism behaviours and influence key stakeholders** to generate positive impact.

Sustainable tourism and transport can only be achieved through cooperation between actors from both sectors. **Addressing the impacts from tourism and transport on the natural environment requires strategic solutions across entire landscapes and at a national level.**

Our objective should be **to limit and reduce the impact of transport and tourism on landscapes whilst maintaining availability and access for all.** Greater levels of active travel (walking and cycling) will have also significant co-benefits of health and wellbeing to individuals, as well as greater connection to nature.

Outputs from the Sustainable Tourism and Transport sub-group, in the form of evidence, best practice and guidance, will be made accessible to all AONB staff and partners. They will directly inform the development of joint pledges and common policies for AONBs where most appropriate and impactful.

To achieve this, AONBs face four challenges:

- AONB teams and partnerships can help reduce impact but they cannot fix the bigger issues. **The main driver for change is influence and collaboration** with local authorities, transport providers, Destination Management Organisations and other key players.
- Transport and tourism are linked but also encompass separate issues – **a better dialogue between both sectors can be a source of integrated solutions.**
- Sustainable tourism and transport require a **combined transition of infrastructure and behaviours** towards net-zero and carbon positive practices. This means infrastructure developments must go hand in hand with awareness raising on the impacts of transport and tourism and the ways to reduce them. There is a high risk of developing infrastructure such as public transportation networks without encouraging the accompanying behaviour to favour public transport over cars.
- **The solutions AONBs will champion must be underpinned by solid evidence,** highlighting the need to commission research, test ideas and develop understanding in both sectors. What this looks like still needs to be unpacked.
- Last but not least, AONBs differ greatly in size of land and population, in number of visitors and types of landscapes and tourism. **There can be no one size fits all when it comes to transport and tourism, and solutions as well as strength of impact will necessarily be deeply anchored in the local context.**

In this context, **making sense of and harnessing existing best practice from AONBs and from others** is a necessary first step. AONB teams will engage with other protected landscapes in the country and abroad. Our focus will be on:

- Successful examples of influencing or partnering with relevant players to support or develop major infrastructure solutions, finding ways to replicate what works
- Successful examples of direct delivery by AONB teams around both infrastructure development and behaviour change, finding ways to replicate what works
- Whole-AONB interpretation strategies to influence behaviours in a more holistic way
- Impact measurement methods to qualify and quantify impact of successful activities

Image references

Section I title page: Shropshire Hills AONB

Section II title page: Norfolk Coast AONB

Agriculture and Climate Change narrative : Nidderdale AONB © Paul Harris

Nature-based Solution narrative: Picture by North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership – Resized Tynehead fell stone dams and bags of brash restoration cumbria LIFE UAV

Building Design & Planning narrative: Northumberland Coast AONB

Renewable Energy narrative: Shropshire Hills AONB

Sustainable Tourism & Transport narrative: Shropshire Hills AONB

Section III title page: Clwydian Range & Dee Valley AONB