

# Protected landscapes: What's needed next for nature?

12 April 2024

This briefing is on behalf of nature coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)).

## Executive summary

Protected landscapes in England are important places for nature, but these designations are not currently delivering enough for nature's recovery. The Government has recognised their potential and given itself powers in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 to strengthen the legislative framework for National Parks and National Landscapes to enable and drive nature recovery in these landscapes.

To boost nature in protected landscapes and enable them to make a significant contribution to achieving environmental targets, the Government must swiftly publish guidance and secondary legislation to enact the promised changes to protected landscapes' duties and Management Plans.

In this briefing, we set out what the guidance and regulations should include to ensure the remit, targets, plans, tools, and resources are in place for protected landscapes to deliver a step change for nature in these areas.

## Introduction

England's protected landscapes, National Parks and National Landscapes (previously Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty), are important places for nature, but these designations are not currently delivering enough for it.

Protected landscapes have vast potential to support nature's recovery and to make a significant contribution to delivering the Government's 2030 nature goals, including legally-binding Environment Act targets and their commitments in the Environmental Improvement Plan, such as 30x30, halting the decline of species abundance by 2030, and the recovery of protected sites.

The Government has recognised this potential and the need to strengthen the legislative framework for protected landscapes to support nature's recovery in these areas.

We welcome the Government's amendments in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 (LURA) to strengthen the legislative framework of National Parks and National Landscapes for nature recovery by:

- Creating a power for the Secretary of State to lay regulations which could require Management Plans to contribute to Environment Act targets, set out how Plans must contribute to meeting these targets, and outline how Plans must further the statutory purposes of National Parks and National Landscapes.
- Strengthening the duty on all public bodies to require them to contribute to the preparation, implementation and review of National Park and National Landscape Management Plans.
- Strengthening the duty on relevant authorities to 'seek to further' the statutory purposes of National Parks and National Landscapes.

The Government has also recently published the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework, which sets out the national ambition for protected landscapes' contribution to three Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) outcomes, with 10 targets covering topics including biodiversity, climate, and access to nature.

To effectively and swiftly implement these changes to National Parks and National Landscapes and make a genuine difference for nature recovery in these areas and 2030 targets, the Government must:

- Ensure the **apportionment of the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework** to individual protected landscapes adds up to their expected contribution towards meeting national targets, including 30x30.
- Quickly bring forward **regulations promised in the LURA<sup>1</sup>** to link National Park and National Landscape Management Plans to all Environment Act targets and EIP commitments (such as 30x30), strengthened duties to contribute to Plans, and strengthened duty to 'seek to further' the statutory purposes (see below for more detailed asks).

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<sup>1</sup> As committed to during Third Reading of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act:  
<https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2023-09-21/debates/D64EE898-237E-4D9F-99B0-7E8524434B08/Levelling-UpAndRegenerationBill#>

- Publish **interim guidance on the LURA changes** to set out and clarify how the regulations, the strengthened duty to contribute to Management Plans, and strengthened duty to ‘seek to further’ the statutory purposes should be implemented.
- Publish updated **guidance on Management Plans** which clearly sets out how Plans must:
  - contribute to Environment Act targets and other national environmental commitments, and implement the Outcomes Framework,
  - further protected landscapes statutory purposes, and
  - how public bodies must contribute to preparing, implementing and reviewing Plans.
- Support protected landscapes with **more funding resources**.

In this briefing, we set out what is needed in guidance on the new LURA duties and the promised LURA regulations to ensure the remit and tools are in place for protected landscapes to better support nature’s recovery in these areas.

### [The case for guidance on strengthened duties and Management Plans for protected landscapes](#)

The Government should swiftly publish interim guidance on the changes to protected landscapes passed in the LURA 2023, in particular on the strengthened duty for all relevant authorities to ‘seek to further’ the statutory purposes of National Parks and National Landscapes.

This duty came into force on 26 December 2023 and is already being tested, for example in the case of the proposed dualling of the A66. The Government should as a priority publish interim guidance to clarify how the strengthened duty should be applied in order to ensure that its interpretation is consistent and reflects the intent of Parliament to drive a step change in delivery in protected landscapes.

The Government should also publish guidance on the other changes brought in via the LURA 2023, namely on how to apply the strengthened duty on all relevant authorities to contribute to delivering the Management Plans of protected landscapes and how National Park and National Landscapes teams should embed Environment Act targets and Environmental Improvement Plan targets in Management Plans.

The guidance should then help inform the updated Management Plan guidance being developed by Natural England.

### The need for the regulations promised in the LURA 2023

It is essential that the Government uses the powers in the LURA 2023 to bring forward regulations to give statutory weight to the above guidance which sets out how Management Plans should be strengthened and how relevant authorities should contribute to delivering the Management Plans.

The Government committed to bringing forward regulations during the passage of the LURA and more recently in the publication of the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework.

This secondary legislation would not be a duplicate of the Outcomes Framework, rather it is an essential complement to it. The targets in the Outcomes Framework are non-statutory and wide ranging but also omits crucial Environment Act targets, such as the target to halt the decline of species abundance by 2030. Authorities will have up to 18 months to agree how they will contribute to them, and through which vehicle. Secondary legislation would give statutory weight and more focus to Management Plans, requiring that Management Plans contribute to meeting specific targets set under the Environment Act 2021.

Given the urgent need for regulations to maximise the outputs of Outcomes Framework activities, and the fact that the first target in the Environment Act (halting the decline in species abundance) falls in 2030, the Government should swiftly introduce secondary legislation that will require relevant authorities to help develop and implement management plans for protected landscapes.

### What should be in the guidance and regulations?

The guidance and regulations should cover four key areas and the detailed content set out below.

On compliance with the strengthened duty to 'seek to further' the statutory purposes of National Parks and National Landscapes, the guidance and regulations should:



- Test if an activity, plan, or project could harm or hinder the purposes, and if yes, not proceed with any activities, plans or projects that harm or hinder a purpose.
- Be specific about expectations for particular bodies and their planning and processes, especially those set out in law (e.g., water companies, Forestry England, Environment Agency, Ofwat, local authorities, National Highways).
- Include an explicit 'call-in' mechanism by which protected landscape bodies or others can take action should a public body not be complying with the duty.
- If the regulations include 'may,' they must be very specific and limited about the scenarios this applies to.

On requiring Management Plans to include targets, the guidance and regulations should:

- Specify all the Environment Act 2021 targets and accelerate achievement on terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity, including species, and water priority areas.
- Make provision for targets for people's enjoyment of, and access to, nature.

The Outcomes Framework currently includes the three EIP goals that best fit what protected landscapes can deliver. However, this should not preclude actions to contribute to the achievement of other goals and this should be made clear in regulations. For example, actions to improve water quality (EIP goal 3) should be planned and delivered at catchment level, this should not preclude actions to restore aquatic and riparian habitats in protected landscapes such as spawning beds and nursery habitat for endangered Atlantic salmon and lamprey.

On setting out how Management Plans must contribute to both meeting the targets and furthering the purposes, the guidance and regulations should:

- Include interpretation on the definition of the purposes to bring out emphasis on (first purpose) nature recovery and (second purpose) equality and wellbeing.
- Include interpretation on the Sandford Principle for cases where there is conflict within the first purpose to prioritise wildlife and natural beauty over cultural heritage.
- Clearly set out ambition and requirements for 30x30.
- Clearly set out an accountability, reporting and scrutiny and escalation mechanism to ensure contribution of the partners in a) formation of the plan and b) delivery of the plan.
- Be explicit about the role of Defra, Natural England and the OEP in accountability.

On requiring a relevant authority to contribute to the preparation, implementation or review of Management Plans and what they may or must do, the guidance and regulations should:

- Provide direction explicitly for the bodies which must always be part of the Management Plan process in all cases (e.g., water companies).
- Provide direction to Natural England and its role in providing evidence and scrutiny to review Management Plans.
- Provide direction to the Responsible Authority or other Supporting Authorities for Local Nature Recovery Strategies.
- Provide direction to the local planning authority in the case of National Landscapes.
- Include requirements to ensure levels of competence in targets/purposes from all parties involved in plan making (supporting governance reforms).

## Conclusion

Taken together, the forthcoming statutory link from environmental targets to Management Plans and the strengthened duty to contribute to delivery of Management Plans and overall purposes of protected landscapes will provide a robust governance framework for ambitious action to be taken for nature's recovery in protected landscapes.

This new governance framework must be supported by swiftly bringing forward the regulations, clear and robust guidance for protected landscapes teams and other public bodies, and further resources to deliver on their potential for nature.

Strengthening protected landscapes for nature will be an essential part of delivering on the Government's environmental goals and the wider ambition for protected landscapes is further elaborated in the [Nature 2030 policy asks](#) for the next Parliament.

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Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 82 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world and animals. Wildlife and Countryside Link is a registered charity number 1107460 and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales number 3889519.

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The following organisations have inputted into this briefing and support:

Bat Conservation Trust

Campaign for National Parks

Institute for Fisheries Management

National Trust

Open Spaces Society

People's Trust for Endangered Species

Plantlife

Rewilding Britain

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)

Seal Research Trust

The Wildlife Trusts

Woodland Trust

Zoological Society of London (ZSL)