

Natural England Standard

Landscape: why we do what we do



1:0 An introduction

Strategic standards for 'why we do what we do'

We have a set of standards for 'why we do what we do' for each of the main areas of our work where we help deliver environmental outcomes. These are: Access, Biodiversity, Climate Change, Ecosystem Approach, Engagement, Landscape, Land Management, Land use and Marine. They describe the relevant legislation and Government policy, our role, and the principles that we apply to our work.

The standards are for all our staff and will provide:

- a common framework to help us work more consistently
- a coherent picture of our role, Government policy and how we deliver for the natural environment, people and places
- a clearer and shared understanding of our role as a science-led, impartial delivery body
- our customers with a better understanding of what we do and why.

A number of common themes are listed below which run through the principles in the standards. As such they illustrate key attributes that will be evident across our work and our contribution to national and local priorities.

1. Gathering, interpreting and providing evidence and information that those making decisions and choices need.
2. Practical advice that helps secure a high quality and diverse natural environment, which provides services of benefit to people and the economy and is resilient to climate change.
3. Enabling and supporting people to act for and engage with the natural environment.
4. Ensuring that the natural environment contributes to green growth and quality of life.
5. Working with and through others.
6. Responsive to local circumstances and customer needs.

2:0 Landscape strategic standard - definition and scope

Landscapes provide the physical and the cultural context to everyday life; they require thriving communities and well managed biodiversity, geodiversity, soils and historic environment in order to provide a wide range of ecosystem services for people and reinforce the relationship between people and the places in which they live and work. Similarly, our seascapes are important to society both culturally and economically.

We use the European Landscape Convention (ELC) definition of landscape as ‘***an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors***’ to frame the scope of our work. This definition, also recognised by our partners, is a helpful way to express landscape in broad and inclusive terms. This includes the underpinning influence of geodiversity and soils, and consideration of spatial, physical, ecological, cultural and temporal dimensions as a whole. The ELC applies to land, inland water and marine areas (our seascapes).

The term *landscape character* refers to the distinct and recognisable pattern of elements that occur consistently in a particular type of landscape, making one landscape different from another, and contributing to a sense of place. We recognise that landscape character and landscape characteristics are valued by people for a wide range of reasons, and the way people perceive and experience landscape needs to be considered alongside physical and ecological processes, so we take an integrated approach to landscape conservation and enhancement.

Some landscapes, valued for their outstanding natural beauty, are designated as National Parks or Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Designated areas, such as protected landscapes, geological Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and Scheduled Monuments provide significant economic, environmental and social benefits which are highly valued by society and play an important role in landscape conservation and enhancement. In addition, we recognise that there are many undesignated landscapes and features that are equally appreciated by people.

The rich variety of England’s landscapes is evident through our identification of 159 National Character Areas (NCA) which are based upon geological, ecological, historic and cultural factors and are mapped and described at a scale of 1:250,000. Within this framework, using landscape character assessment, landscapes can be characterised at a range of scales, from the intimate patchworks created by enclosed farmland, open wild places in the uplands, to townscapes with open spaces and parks. Our diverse seascapes including coastal, estuarine and offshore waters also provide unique environments of varied character.

3:0 Government policy and statutory context

Legislation, regulations and policies relevant to landscape conservation and enhancement, relate mostly to designated areas, spatial planning, and environmental protection. The key statutes and directives are:

- **The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act (1949)** sets out the statutory provisions for the conservation and enhancement of outstanding natural beauty and of landscapes that provide opportunities for open-air recreation (including understanding and enjoyment by the public). This includes a duty of regard to the purposes of National Park designation on all ‘relevant authorities’ (including Natural England). The Act also introduced SSSIs.

- **Countryside Act (1968)** requires the Government and public bodies to: ‘have regard to the desirability of conserving the natural beauty and amenity of the countryside.
- **Environment Act (1995)** introduced independent National Park authorities and gave Natural England a number of statutory consultee roles associated with National Park governance.
- **Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000)** places responsibility on the relevant local authorities for the production of statutory AONB management plans, and places a duty on all public bodies and statutory undertakers to ‘have regard’ to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of AONBs.
- **Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006)** sets out Natural England’s overall statutory purpose to include ‘conserving and enhancing the landscape’ as well as promoting nature conservation, defined to include geodiversity, and extends our purpose to specifically include the cultural and historic elements of the landscape.

The Government is a signatory to the **European Landscape Convention (ELC)** which came into effect in England on 1st March 2007. The ELC is the first international treaty devoted exclusively to the management, protection and planning of all landscapes in Europe. Its overall aim is for the physical, natural heritage and cultural qualities of all landscapes to be fully recognised and integrated into policies and decision making and for people to have a greater democratic role in the future management of landscapes in which they live. The management and protection of the historic environment is also an integral part of ELC implementation.

The Natural Environment White Paper [The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature \(2011\)](#) makes a commitment to working at a large-scale across broad areas of land, reinforcing the importance of our diverse and living landscapes and their contribution to the aspirations of local communities. [Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England’s wildlife and ecosystem services](#), also aims to strengthen ecological connectivity and resilience working through an ecosystem approach creating the opportunity for integration with landscape conservation and enhancement objectives.

The **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)** 2012 contains core planning objectives that recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside as well as policies for the protection of National Parks and AONBs. The NPPF also recognises the importance of landscape character (and landscape characteristics) across rural and urban areas, and along the coast.

4:0 Natural England’s role

We are the Government’s adviser on landscape (and seascape), which means that we provide leadership on landscape conservation, enhancement and monitoring, recognising that landscapes change in response to a range of influences and at different timescales. As

part of this role we lead on the promotion and implementation of the ELC in England on behalf of Defra.

We have a number of specific statutory powers and duties in relation to protected landscapes. These encompass:

- designation and any variation of boundaries
- monitoring effectiveness in respect to the purpose of designation
- advising Ministers on management and governance.

We also bring to the attention of the Secretary of State and local planning authorities the effect of developments, or types of developments, that are likely to be prejudicial to the natural beauty of National Parks or AONBs.

We are a statutory consultee under a range of planning and transport legislation and we provide landscape advice on land use planning including development plans, nationally significant infrastructure proposals, Strategic Environmental Assessments and Environmental Impact Assessments (involving assessment of landscape/seascape and visual impacts). Through our involvement in green infrastructure and local partnerships we contribute to the aims and delivery of the Natural Environment White Paper and Biodiversity 2020.

Our role in conserving and enhancing the English landscape goes wider than conserving natural beauty; it also encompasses geodiversity, biodiversity, cultural and historic interests, recognising that a wide range of man-made features contribute to the landscape, including for example field boundaries, monuments, buildings and sub-surface archaeological features.

We provide advice on, and deliver, landscape conservation and enhancement through our delivery of the Rural Development Programme, in particular the Environmental Stewardship Scheme.

We develop and share our experience, our practical knowledge of landscape conservation and enhancement, and our evidence on landscape character and change. We translate these into information and advice which others can use to inform local action.

5:0 The principles we apply to our work

LA1 Driving implementation of the ELC

To secure the appropriate protection, management, and planning for landscapes and seascapes, we will work with partners to embed the aims of the ELC into national and local policies and plans. Our focus will be to conserve and enhance the distinctive landscape character, diverse contribution to quality of life, and the range of benefits landscapes can provide. For example, through our ELC Action Plans and advice to others we reinforce links with *Biodiversity 2020* and the *UK Geodiversity Action Plan* to demonstrate how an integrated approach to spatial planning, land use and land management can be informed by

landscape quality objectives. Also, working through initiatives such as Environmental Stewardship, and large-scale conservation projects (including Nature Improvement Areas) we show how landscape conservation and enhancement can be delivered on the ground.

LA2 Using landscape to understand and manage change

Putting places in their physical and cultural context and understanding how they have changed over time can help guide the management of our natural and built environments in the present and planning for their future. Landscape and seascape character assessment and other landscape related tools, such as historic landscape characterisation, are key means for doing this. The understanding they build can inform environmental management decisions, raise awareness of landscape issues and promote integration with the ecosystem approach and other interests, including the marine environment. We help to develop and promote use of these tools. The updated NCA profiles support this work, especially at the local level. In addition, we ensure that we have advisers and specialists so we are better able to share knowledge and understanding of landscapes with partners.

LA3 Working through protected areas to demonstrate integrated delivery of a wide range of public benefits associated with a healthy natural environment

Through the Designations Strategy we take a proactive and collaborative approach to articulating what a protected area system should look like and what it should deliver in the 21st century (particularly National Parks and AONBs, which expressly aim to conserve outstanding natural beauty). We advise others on how protected areas can strengthen nature conservation, improve connectivity and linkages across the wider countryside, for example through our advice on protected landscape management plans. Building on past achievements and through working with the English National Park Authorities Association through our joint Shared Outcome Agreement, we collaborate on how National Parks can support the implementation of the ELC and Biodiversity 2020, adapt to climate change and help meet other environmental, economic and social objectives of society.

LA4 Putting people at the heart of landscape conservation and enhancement

We work to reinforce the connections between people, place and local identity, to ensure that England's landscapes continue to provide the characteristics and functions that society values. We promote local landscapes and green spaces as gateways for people's interest in, and understanding and enjoyment of, the natural environment. Local landscapes contribute significantly to sense of place and local distinctiveness, and people are often most aware of change at the local scale. For example, through our work in local partnerships and embedding the updated NCA profiles we proactively encourage community planning and other approaches for the public to engage with the natural environment and participate in local decision making about their landscape.

LA5 Providing advice and information that supports the delivery of landscape objectives

Landscape and seascape can be affected by decisions about management, development and design across a range of sectors. We provide information and advice to help others:

- carry out and apply landscape and seascape character assessments for plans and development projects

- set landscape quality objectives, for example, for land use development plans, landscape management and green infrastructure strategies
- develop landscape and seascape strategies and guidelines, linked to land management activities and spatial/marine planning policies that support green growth
- take a character-based approach to landscape planning and design, and incorporate the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity and geodiversity and access within green infrastructure.

LA6 Developing, and making accessible to the public and others, our landscape and seascape evidence including research and monitoring

Landscapes are subject to many influences and forces for change over time. To inform decisions made by others about the natural environment, we gather, analyse and make available evidence about how and why our landscapes are changing. For example, we will develop National Character Areas as a framework for our evidence gathering about changes in the character, and quality of England’s landscapes, taking into account the analysis of ecosystem services. By supporting the framework we help secure the future integrity and health of our distinctive landscapes in a way that also supports sustainable land use, and economic and social policies based upon local decisions. We also gather evidence about how people experience and perceive the landscape to help understand the impact of landscape change on local communities.

Quick reference	
Type of standard	Strategic standard
Purpose:	Explains why we do what we do across our main work areas and sets out the principles that all staff are expected to apply to their work
Sign-off:	Natural England Directors and Heads of Profession
Publication:	Publication catalogue - external
Review date:	March 2014
Issue number:	Final v1.0
Updated:	May 2015 – version updated to current template