

**Statement on Designated Landscapes on 13 March 2018
- Hannah Blythyn AM, Minister for Environment**

Gower AONB Partnership Steering Group – 26 March 2018

Back in June 2017 this Assembly debated the role of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks when members spoke with passion about what these landscapes meant to them and their constituents. We agreed unanimously that our designated landscapes should play their part in the sustainable management of natural resources to protect nature and support vibrant rural communities.

During both that debate and preceding reviews the future protection of these areas under this Government has been called into question.

Today I confirm unequivocally that all the existing designated landscapes will be retained and their purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty will not be weakened.

I welcome the thorough and thought provoking reviews and reports of Professor Marsden and his panel and Lord Elis-Thomas and the Future Landscapes working group. I speak for both myself and my predecessors, as I place on record today my thanks to them and all stakeholders for their significant time and efforts.

Designated landscapes have been in a state of review since a draft policy statement was consulted on in 2013.

Today I want to begin answering some of the key questions on the Government's position and to give this Assembly the opportunity to gain a sense of my priorities. In the coming months I intend to publish a policy statement which will bring the review process to a close.

Withdrawal from the European Union brings considerable uncertainty, but with it comes the opportunity to improve our land management and the resilience of our landscapes. It changes the context for our designated landscapes and how we must now interpret the findings of these past reviews.

The Cabinet Secretary for Energy, Planning and Rural Affairs has set out the Welsh Government's principles for future land management support and there is an important role for both AONB Partnerships and National Park Authorities. They need to play their part in supporting farmers and other land managers to remain on the land as well as making a key contribution to the priorities within the national Natural Resources Policy.

If we are to address the environmental challenges we face, we must recognise that designated landscapes must do more to identify, safeguard and realise the benefits from the public goods they protect for all the people of Wales.

And when I say for all the people of Wales, I mean for all the people of Wales. I want to see a more diverse and wide ranging cross section of Welsh society feeling they have a stake in these nationally important landscapes and recognising the benefits we derive from them.

I have seen first hand how this can happen. The Clwydian Range and Dee Valley AONB sits on the edge of my constituency and with Welsh Government funding they have supported the Actif Woods project. This partnership with the Alzheimer's Society and Macmillan has used woodland activities across Denbighshire, Flintshire and Wrexham to improve the physical, mental and social well-being of vulnerable people who wouldn't otherwise have engaged with this landscape. This is only one example of the wide range of opportunities that can be realised and the importance of our environment's contribution to our health and prosperity as a nation.

All Parks and AONBs can and must do more to reach out beyond their traditional audience and realise their full potential.

It is in this context I have considered the proposals in Marsden and Future Landscapes. I have based my consideration on three principles.

First, any proposals must not undermine the standard of protection given to these valued landscapes and should provide for greater parity for AONBs with National Parks.

Second, any change should reduce the administrative burden on authorities and partnerships, letting them focus energy and resources on delivery.

Third, they should support continued development of effective collaboration.

The weight of comment triggered by the review has been on whether there should be a change to the statutory purposes of Wales' designated landscapes. This has led to a significant debate on the place of the Sandford Principle.

The Sandford Principle, which applies only in National Parks, gives primacy to the conservation of natural beauty in the event there is a conflict with the promotion of the enjoyment of the Park's special qualities. The debate has focussed on the continued relevance of this principle in the context of our legal framework within the Environment (Wales) Act and the principles for the sustainable management of natural resources.

There has been widespread support during the review for the Welsh ambition on the sustainable management of natural resources within the legislation which is recognised as a global exemplar. Leading from this is a recognition designated landscapes are well placed to take this agenda forward in their areas because of the diversity of natural resources found within their boundaries, their experience and expertise, and their extensive connections with communities of interest, including people who live and work within their boundaries..

However, no consensus has emerged on whether it is necessary to change the purposes of Parks or AONBs to achieve this.

While I do not discount the symbolism of a new economic purpose, I have seen insufficient evidence that the existing purposes are a barrier to practical delivery. For that reason, and given the uncertain context, I am not prepared to pursue a change of this nature at this time without broader support.

Therefore I intend to retain the existing purposes of National Parks, along with the “Sandford Principle”, and retain the existing purpose of AONB.

This doesn’t mean that there is not a need for Park Authorities or AONB partnerships to pursue activity which supports the social and economic resilience of communities in their areas. They should, and there is no barrier to them doing so with their existing purpose.

That said, there is a need to improve the connection between the existing purposes, including biodiversity conservation, and the framework within the Environment Act.

To achieve this, I am minded to introduce legislation at a future opportunity to require the Park Authorities and AONBs to apply the principles of the sustainable management of natural resources, in particular when preparing their statutory Management Plans.

I also wish to strengthen the status and scrutiny of the Management Plans, requiring the Plans to identify the special qualities.

I believe this approach will align the Parks and AONBs with our legislation here in Wales and the international obligations from which it is drawn, in a way which brings them fully on board with the contemporary understanding of ecosystems and landscapes whilst recognising the enduring value of their original purpose.

It will strengthen the importance of the special qualities in decision making across all activities in both National Parks and AONBs.

With a difficult financial settlement to manage, I am sympathetic to the argument put forward by the Park Authorities to reduce their administration costs and I intend to remove some of this burden insofar as is consistent with good governance. In addition I will support their efforts to maximise their revenue from appropriate commercial activity – our National Parks can do more to reach out without compromising their principles.

Parity for AONBs with National Parks broadly exists in terms of planning policy but is lacking when it comes to status, profile and resourcing. Both Marsden and Future Landscapes observed this. Whilst I acknowledge that flexibility of governance and partnerships in AONBs may be a strength, it is also a potential weakness in terms of the stewardship of these equally valuable landscapes. I intend to continue the discussion with AONBs on what can be done here.

My intention, in the next few months, is to set out the detail on improving delivery and accountability in ways consistent with Environment Act and the national Natural Resources Policy in Wales.

The process of review has ingrained a new way of working between Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and stakeholders where they now share a much greater understanding of the challenges and priorities which they can help to address by working together; particularly bringing their collective experience to bear to halting the decline in nature whilst recognising the need for economic resilience in our rural communities.

I am committed to ensuring Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks are valued for their natural beauty by our people, communities and country – and, that our designated landscapes deliver rich ecosystems, vibrant and resilient communities and opportunities for outdoor recreation for all of the people of Wales.

Hannah Blythyn AM, Minister for Environment