

THIS IS A WORKING DRAFT

Future of Farming

Background

National Parks England (NPE) established a Member-led task and finish group to provide advice to the NPE Board on the strategic priorities in relation to farming post Brexit to ensure environmentally sustainable farming in national parks and the pursuit of National Park purposes. The group is chaired by Jim Bailey (North York Moors) and its members are Sir Sebastian Anstruthers (South Downs), Neil Heseltine (Yorkshire Dales), Robin Milton (Exmoor), Adrian Shepherd (Yorkshire Dales) and Kevin Bishop (Dartmoor).

This report provides a progress report to NPE Directors, outlines initial thinking and seeks views on our vision.

Progress

The intention of the group is to produce a draft report for National Park Authorities to comment on in March 2017 before presenting it to Directors for approval and potential submission to Defra. The timescale should enable us to have a common position and ideas to contribute as part of the consultations that we envisage will take place around the forthcoming Green Papers on the Environment and Food, Farming and Fisheries.

The focus of the report is on recommendations for post EU exit arrangements for investing in land management within the English National Parks and we have outlined below our initial ideas. The report will not design a new support or agri-environment scheme but outline principles and the potential structure for such a scheme with the aim of securing Ministerial and officer support in Defra and beyond to develop our ideas.

Farming or land management? We have used the phrase farming but in so doing are cognisant that we are talking about land management by land owners and farmers (who might be tenants, owner occupiers and/or commoners).

Most land in the English National Parks is used for farming and it is predominantly the impact of agriculture on the natural features of these areas that has shaped the present landscape and led to their designation as National Parks. However, history tells us that farming systems are not always environmentally benign and it is important that the policy and financial framework within which farming operates is clearly focused on sustainability in environmental, economic and social terms. Despite a significant public investment in farm and agri-environment support over the last 30-40 years there are issues of:

- Degraded soils
- Falling biodiversity
- Lower resilience to flood and drought
- Marginal returns for traditional farm systems
- Increasing disconnect between 'town' and 'country' / 'people' and 'nature'

Farming is a key part of the economy of our National Parks. Public investment in agri-environment schemes in the English National Parks accounted for £67m in 2016 (this excludes Basic Payment Scheme payments). If this public investment were reduced it could have a significant impact on our rural communities and the cultural traditions that are part of the social fabric of our National Parks.

EU exit will mean that the £3bn plus annual investment in farm support by the taxpayer will be under much closer scrutiny than ever before. Farming will be 'fighting' for public support along with health, education, defence etc. There will be many who see an opportunity to reduce this expenditure and deliver better value for public:

- We know that officials are already asking questions about whether it is best to focus investment in the uplands (and other remote rural areas) or the urban fringe – areas closer to people who will benefit
- The ideas of re-wilding are seen by some as offering environmental improvement and financial savings
- There is also the discussion about creating markets for ecosystem services but we are still a long way from creating a market for such services and pricing the priceless.

Our starting point is that we want to see our National Parks remain as living, working landscapes where sustainable farming systems are playing an active role in delivering a wide array of public benefits and the farmers or land managers doing this work are rewarded for these services. It is important that future agri-environment/land management schemes encourage and enable farmers to be effective stewards or custodians of our National Parks – harnessing their expertise so that the environment is as much a part of their farm businesses as high quality food production.

We have outlined below our initial thoughts regarding a future support/investment scheme.

National Park Custodian Scheme

This could be in the form of a 'certification scheme' – voluntary for farmers, active managers to sign up to. It would replace the Basic Payment Scheme and be equivalent to a broad and shallow agri-environment scheme. In return for a base level payment there would be certain management obligations (tailored to each National Park) and some cross compliance. The Scheme would seek to build the National Park brand ie those signing up can use the National Park logo to symbolise that they are contributing to the management of our NP landscapes, this could also help to develop the National Park food economy (ie links to 8 Point Plan for National Parks). We envisage soil condition being a key building block for the custodianship scheme.

People who enter into this scheme would also be eligible for farm business advice. We envisage a farm plan (linking environment and business) to be the baseline for this scheme. This builds on the experience of the Dartmoor and Exmoor Hill Farm Projects and the work Yorkshire Dales and North York Moors on farm business plans and innovation. It integrates economy and environment which is key theme of our initial thinking.

There is an opportunity to promote this Custodian Scheme (and the locally-led agri-environment scheme) through our National Park Centres – communicating and reinforcing the role that the farming/land management community are playing in managing the National Parks for the benefit of all.

Such a scheme could be part of a wider national scheme (but with specific National Park measures/requirements) or standalone.

Locally-led Agri-environment or Sustainability Schemes

As well as the entry level Custodian Scheme (open to all farmers/land managers) which is focused on ensuring a base level of good environmental management and husbandry there would be locally-led sustainability or agri-environment schemes.

These schemes would be focused on delivering multiple environmental benefits with options that allow for delivery of:

- Landscape
- Biodiversity
- Carbon management
- Water management
- Woodland management (and creation)
- Historic environment
- Access and education
- Whilst also facilitating the production of high quality food through sustainable farming systems

The scheme should:

- include the potential for capital as well as revenue payments (eg capital payments for key landscape features such as stone walls and hedgerows)
- be outcome focused and avoid management by prescriptions. Aim should be to engage with farmers and involve them in agreeing environmental outcomes that they will deliver through the schemes, allowing them the opportunity to design the management to deliver and be engaged in monitoring (either directly or by commissioning the monitoring)
- evidence-based
- offer multi-year agreements (at least five year agreements and ten for common land to reflect complexities of getting agreement on commons)

The local approach provides an opportunity for: savings through greater ownership of schemes (ie less risk of failing agreements); lower administration costs; a focus on public payments for public benefits; and local communication of this and innovation.

Within this locally led approach there is the opportunity to develop new systems:

- Environmental tenders – whereby farmers bid to deliver rather than sign up for certain management options, this could help reduce costs and reward collective or landscape scale action
- Payment by results – building on the work in the Yorkshire Dales
- Incorporating private payments alongside public investment (eg for water and carbon management)

Wider rural development

Part of our vision for locally-led agri-environment schemes should be our ability to deliver integrated, place-based solutions. This would mean us having resources for wider rural development (the Leader type model of community-led local development building on our experience of the Sustainable Development Fund). This might be in the form of grants but could also be loans (ie a revolving fund rather than one-off injections of capital). There should also be the opportunity for revenue spend.

We believe that this approach can help re-inforce the role of the National Park Management Plan as partnership plans for the place – priorities for locally-led schemes would emerge through this planning process.

Role of the National Park Authority

We envisage the Authorities having a role focused on scheme development, facilitation and advice ie working with the farming community to develop and run the schemes but not being the paying agency. Our role would be of 'environmental broker' – helping to co-design (with the farming and land management community) schemes, encourage their take up, demonstrate that they are working (or not), work to secure new sources of funding for environmental services and promote the benefits of these schemes to those who visit and enjoy our National Parks. This could operate via a service level agreement with Natural England if they retain overall responsibility for delivery of agri-environment post EU exit. We would also need to consider the resource implications ie what staffing such an approach would require.

Conclusion

This report outlines our initial thinking and we would welcome any comments about the 'direction of travel'. In particular, we would like the views of Directors on our vision as this is central to our thinking:

We want to see our National Parks remain as living, working landscapes where sustainable farming systems are playing an active role in delivering a wide array of public benefits and the farmers or land managers doing this work are rewarded for these services. It is important that future agri-environment/land management schemes encourage and enable farmers to be effective stewards or custodians of our National Parks – harnessing their expertise so that the environment is as much a part of their farm businesses as high quality food production.

This vision does not seek to preserve our Parks in aspic or prevent innovation - they need to evolve and change but in a planned and managed way that reflects their designation as national assets for the benefit of all.