

Written evidence submitted by National Parks England (PEG0235)

Summary

1. National Parks England (NPE) exists to provide a collective voice for the nine English National Park Authorities and the Broads Authority. NPE is governed by the Chairs of the ten Authorities. Our response to the [BEIS Call for Evidence](#) represents the collective view of officers who are working within the policies established by the National Park Authorities (NPAs). Individual NPAs may submit separate comments, which will draw on the specific issues for their particular area.
2. Our statutory purposes, programmes and links with our local communities means we have a very grounded understanding of the impacts of Covid-19 on the rural economy. We have set out our response to the questions posed in the call for evidence in the following pages. In summary, NPE has witnessed the severe impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on rural economies and communities and urges BEIS to collaborate with National Parks to provide support to sectors under its remit. We stress three key points:
 - a. The immediate impact of Covid-19 on rural economies is not yet fully understood, but based on current observations, is likely to be very significant. There will be both risks and opportunities in these changes, but they come on top of existing factors such as poor access to public services, lower wages, and Brexit. Any recovery package must work for our rural economies.
 - b. The domestic tourism market is a key economic driver for the rural communities that exist in National Parks. We would like to see additional funding to support the domestic tourism market. An early demonstration of the commitment to the tourism sector would be for Government to fund the repurposed version of the award winning English National Park Experience Collection.
 - c. The impact to the rural economy because of Covid-19 has been severe, and Government support to deliver a green, resilient, and inclusive rural recovery is critical. We would like to see BEIS work with National Parks to design and deliver programmes and funding for rural communities. Working closely with Local Authorities and Local Enterprise Partnerships in their areas, NPAs could pilot a rural recovery fund, delivering rapid, targeted support direct to rural businesses with flexibility and low transaction costs.
3. If you require any more information or have any questions regarding this evidence please contact us.

1 What core/guiding principles should the Government adopt/prioritise in its recovery package, and why?

- 1.1 The Government should support a green, inclusive rural recovery, that heals both people and places in its Covid-19 recovery package.
- 1.2 The Covid-19 pandemic is having a far-reaching and profound impact in rural England. Rural economies have been hit hard, there is long-term uncertainty for the visitor economy, and personal health and well-being has been impacted, especially for vulnerable peoples

and key workers. This once-in-a-lifetime event has impacted the Nation's health and economy in an unprecedented way. Indeed, Prime Minister Johnson, highlighted the need to 'act like a wartime government and do whatever it takes to support our economy'¹.

1.3 The Government should prioritise three core areas in its recovery package:

1.3.1 **Helping the wider rural economy** and rural communities bounce back through a resilient and sustainable green recovery.

- Covid-19 and the lockdown have had a huge impact on the communities and economies of National Parks, which represent 10% of England. It is vital that rural economies, and SMEs are not neglected in national recovery planning or 'left behind'.
- National Parks are national assets, and investment in them yields myriad benefits for society, including economic benefits. There are over 25,000 businesses located in England's National Parks providing around 170,312 jobs and contributing £13.7 billion turnover. The Gross Value Added to the economy from this activity is equivalent to a city the size of Leicester. In a typical year, National Parks welcome over 98 million visitors who spend more than £5.5bn in the National Parks and immediate areas surrounding them.
- It is essential that Government departments have an integrated and joined up approach to Green Recovery so that policy changes in one area do not have a negative or unintended impact on the potential for long term and sustainable growth. Decisions being made now to support recovery should not focus on short term gain without a longer-term vision. For example, while a 'build, build, build' approach may temporarily boost the economy, accompanying policies which would have the effect of reducing the amount of affordable housing in protected landscapes, will push the younger and working age population out of the very centres which need their work.

1.3.2 **Supporting the visitor economy** through a domestically focused sustainable tourism programme.

- As a result of the international Covid-19 lockdown, global travel has been significantly disrupted. As the Nation as a whole exits lockdown, the public are looking to National Parks as key destinations for domestic holidays. Tourism, a key driver of rural economies in National Parks, has undoubtedly been impacted by the international lockdown. Rural communities are keen to 'restart' their economies, and domestic tourism is a powerful and effective mechanism to support local communities and businesses. This includes businesses diversifying from farming and forestry, who have seen their non-agricultural income streams collapse during lockdown. Such an approach can also support Government measures to level-up by ensuring deep rural areas, where inequalities are often hidden, benefit too.

1.3.3 Restoring **health and wellbeing** through experiences in nature for essential workers, those disproportionately affected by lockdown, and vulnerable peoples and those with disabilities, and their families.

- The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to public and political attention the huge value that the public places in accessing green and blue spaces. The pandemic has also brought into sharp relief inequalities such as in access to green space and fresh air. The National

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-coronavirus-17-march-2020>

Park idea was born at the same time as the NHS, stating “there can be few national purposes which, at so modest a cost, offer so large a prospect of health-giving happiness for the people”². Connecting to nature, both on the doorstep and through visiting a National Park is a holistic experience which benefits both mental and physical health.

2 How can the Government borrow and/or invest to help the UK deliver on these principles?

2.1 As referenced in 1.3.1.2, rural economies contribute significantly to the economic prosperity of the Nation. National Parks are, where they can, already repurposing current funds to redirect them to recovery from Covid-19. National Park Authorities and the Broads Authority will be leveraging existing and establishing new partnerships to help deliver on the offers detailed below. However, to provide the most effective support for the Nation’s recovery, National Parks are looking to Government to pump prime financial support, which can in turn help leverage additional investment to support these key offers.

2.2 National Park Authorities and the Broads Authority are uniquely placed to provide opportunities for people to reconnect with nature and help restart the economic engines of the communities that exist within them. The intrinsic special qualities of these natural landscapes are an asset that can be capitalised upon in this period of post-pandemic, driving value to local businesses and communities.

2.3 National Park Authorities and the Broads Authority, as rural focused Local Authorities, with Local Plans and Management Plans built through partnerships, are uniquely positioned to support Government in achieving balanced, sustainable and inclusive green economic recovery of rural communities.

2.4 The Government could invest in the following ways to help the UK deliver on the principles outlined under question 1:

2.4.1 **To support a green, inclusive rural recovery:** To help to ensure a green recovery where sustainability, climate action, low carbon businesses, and local food use is important, NPE recommends that BEIS works with National Park Authorities and the Broads Authority in the design and delivery of any new stimulus package to ensure that it will reach rural economies.

- National Parks are well placed to use their local networks to deliver targeted rapid, efficient, and flexible funding that promotes a shift towards a green sustainable economy and maintains and enhances natural capital. National Parks could work closely with Local Authorities and LEAs in their areas to deliver a pilot rural recovery fund (through the proposed Shared Prosperity Fund) direct to SMEs with flexibility and low transaction costs. Such a pilot could test the principles for a subsequent England-wide support package for rural areas. For example, if the funds earmarked as part of the Shared Prosperity Fund are directed via National Park Authorities and the Broads Authority this could make a real difference on the ground, as many of our rural businesses are SMEs or micro-enterprises and can struggle accessing large or complex support packages.

² Ministry of Town and Country Planning, National Parks in England and Wales: Report by John Dower, Cmd, London, HMSO, 1945

2.4.2 To support the visitor economy, providing funding for the English National Park Experience Collection, as well as support to build consumer confidence in domestic travel, which is expanded upon under question 3.

- The Government commissioned an independent review of Landscapes, led by Julian Glover that reported last year. We agree with recommendation 14 from the Landscapes Review³ that landscapes should be leaders in sustainable tourism. NPE recommends that funding be delivered for investment in a repurposed, and award-winning, English National Park Experience Collection⁴ (ENPEC) that focuses on domestic visitors, and then positions National Parks for tourism success once international borders fully reopen. In order to deliver on this ambitious agenda, a bid for c. £300k has already been submitted to Visit England, under the Discover England Fund. National Parks are looking for Visit England and BEIS full support on this. National Parks will also work closely and secure support or resources from local Destination Management Organisations.

2.4.3 To restore health and wellbeing, providing funding to support a specific National Park health and wellbeing programme which offers experiences in nature for essential workers and their families, those disproportionately affected by lockdown, and vulnerable peoples and those with disabilities. In order to reach deep rural areas, this should be in addition to the £5 million recently announced⁵ for social prescribing.

- This proposal builds upon the national health and wellbeing approach for National Parks in England, developed in collaboration with Public Health England. It will reach across England's National Parks and beyond, work with urban and rural audiences and bring in partners from the public, private and third sector, including local health providers.

3 What measures and support will businesses need to rebuild consumer confidence and stimulate growth that is sustainable, both economically and environmentally?

3.1 Businesses will need both funding and guidance/tools from Government to rebuild consumer confidence, in order to stimulate environmentally and economically sustainable growth.

3.1.1 **Supporting domestic tourism through funding:** In times when international travel is complicated or not possible, National Parks are even more important as breathing spaces with world-class landscapes and facilities. This will generate both opportunities, such as a changing demographic of new visitors, and new pressures, as can be seen from the recent increase of visitors to honeypot locations in some National Parks. National Parks are keen to adapt to this new reality and see 'slow tourism' – deep, authentic, cultural and experiential tourism - as a way to evolve. Slow tourism will allow for a deeper understanding of people and places they visit, as well as contributing towards a circular economy which supports a sustainable tourism agenda.

- Government support to bolster the 'slow tourism' agenda, through funding of the English National Park Experience Collection experiences, as discussed in 2.4.2.1, will be an important contribution to helping rebuild the economy in an environmentally sustainable way. Providing funding for the ENPEC will also help National Parks to understand the

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-landscapes-national-parks-and-aonbs-2018-review>

⁴ The English National Park Experience Collection (ENPEC) is a collaboration between nine English National Parks. The project has developed experiential tourism within the National Parks, by creating a collection of 72 immersive experiences, supported by 85 local accommodation providers.

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/5-million-for-social-prescribing-to-tackle-the-impact-of-covid-19>

potential changing pressures on heritage and tourism in National Parks, including the potential for greater engagement of larger numbers and different types of visitors.

- 3.1.2 **Supporting farm businesses through a clear transition to the Environmental Land Management scheme:** Farming in our National Parks is an essential part of the local economy, and also supports jobs and growth in the broader rural and visitor economy. A clear road map for the transition period from Countryside Stewardship to ELM is crucial to ensure resilient rural economies and that natural and cultural assets, and rural skills are not lost. National Park Authorities are well placed to play a central role in shaping the future of farming and land management in the Parks and to do this in ways that lead to a ‘triple dividend’: enhanced environment, improved productivity and more vibrant communities.
- 3.1.3 **Supporting businesses through providing tools:** The opportunity of enhancing our domestic tourism offer can support our recovery, particularly for the rural economy which is already under strain and for which tourism represents a significant contributor. Initiatives such as the ‘stay safe’ charter mark⁶ will be important innovative tools to support businesses to build consumer confidence in the sector. Aligning this charter closely with the messages on the Countryside Code will allow business the confidence that they can offer a safe welcome and communities the confidence that businesses also care about it being a safe place to live.
- 3.1.4 **Supporting business through collaboration:** Rural and sometimes isolated businesses benefit considerably from collaborative approaches for training and skills, information exchange, and developing new ideas and innovation. There are many examples across National Parks but the Dartmoor Hill Farm Project is a good example of a single focused collaboration whereby 500 farmers receive newsletter, training and skills development and opportunities to collaborate on new ventures which supports social interaction. This could be replicated through a multi-disciplinary approach with wider benefits for local supply chains and supporting the wider rural community (which is something that has been identified by local businesses as part of Covid-19 recovery). This collaboration needs to be at a local level with trusted officers who understand business, can foster support and bring people together.

4 Whether the government should give a higher priority to environmental goals in future support?

- 4.1 Yes, environmental goals should be the cornerstone of future support for rural economic recovery. To enhance our capacity to overcome future environmental shocks, Government should ensure that any investment builds environmental resilience and supports the Government’s 25-year Environment Plan. Government’s reference to a ‘new covenant with nature’⁷, and the Prime Minister’s desire for a ‘cleaner and greener future’ as outlined in his COP 26 launch⁸, is especially welcome.
- 4.2 Due to the impacts of Covid-19, we have a unique opportunity to work with BEIS to capitalize on the changes caused by the ongoing pandemic. With Government’s commitment to net zero emissions by 2050, we believe this is a key area where Government

⁶ https://www.visitbritain.org/sites/default/files/vb-corporate/Documents-Library/documents/helping_the_tourism_industry_recover_from_covid_4_may_2.pdf

⁷ <https://twitter.com/zacgoldsmith/status/1247463367482183680?lang=en>

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-at-cop-26-launch-4-february-2020>

can capitalize on investing in green jobs and capital to deliver a stronger, cleaner and more sustainable economy after this pandemic.

4.3 National Parks sit at the heart of the nation's nature recovery network; we are places where wildlife flourishes, habitats are maintained, restored, and expanded and where nature and wildlife can be seen and experienced at their best. National Parks are experts in the nature recovery field, across ecologists, planners, environmental scientists, and rangers, we know National Park landscapes in depth and the impacts that climate change and biodiversity loss is having on them.

4.4 Investment in green infrastructure, including shovel-ready projects such as the construction of shared-use paths or cycle-lanes, are a key way to reduce emissions, improve public health, whilst providing green jobs and opportunities for economic growth. This has already been proven through previous investment in schemes, such as the Peak District's 2013-2016 Pedal Peak II Project, whose evaluation report revealed there was great value provided to the rural economy as well as major uptake in use of the paths created, and Dartmoor's A-38 Corridor Project which has similarly seen take-up from both visitors and those in the local community.

4.4.1 The knock-on effects of investing in green infrastructure, including points of transport such as for e-bikes or e-charging points, is critical for post-pandemic growth. It will not only provide additional transportation methods for visitors and local residents, but will reduce the need for in-commuting, and contribute to more sustainable, affordable, and thus resilient rural communities.

4.5 NPE supports government's recent investment in 'green jobs'⁹, and National Park Authorities will be working with partners in Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations to bid for funding. NPE supports the dual purpose aims of creating new jobs, while protecting nature. NPAs are already working with partners to establish and roll out a number of apprenticeship standards.

5 Whether the Government should prioritise certain sectors within its recovery package, and if so, what criteria should it use when making such decisions? What conditions, if any, should it attach to future support?

5.1 The Government should prioritise an inclusive, green rural economic recovery, that supports the healing of people and places.

5.2 **Prioritising rural areas in a green recovery:** NPE believes the Government should prioritise rural communities, rural land-based industries and economy, and the rural visitor economy.

5.3 **Rural communities** should be provided with tailored focus and support. NPA are well placed to provide this support given their long-lasting and close relationships with their local communities. NPAs aim to promote a shift towards a green sustainable economy and maintaining and enhancing natural capital in rural areas. We are keen to develop a new approach to rural development that uses the assets of our National Parks to contribute to wider economic growth and productivity, whilst supporting vibrant and thriving communities in and around the Parks.

5.4 **Land based industries**, such as farming and forestry, as well as heritage and tourism providers are fundamental to the management of National Park landscapes and critical to a

⁹ <https://deframedia.blog.gov.uk/2020/07/01/40-million-announced-to-fund-green-jobs/>

green recovery. However, it is important to recognize that in some cases, organisations in these sectors who responded to previous government overtures to diversify their income have been the ones most penalised. For example, public facing services, such as Destination Management Organisations and National Park Authorities who proactively sought to diversify funding and be more commercial in approach have been the ones that were most impacted by Covid-19 through lost income.

- 5.4.1 It is worth noting the contribution of heritage and tourism sectors to the British economy. The *Heritage Counts: Heritage and the Economy* survey published in 2019 highlights that the heritage sector produced a total Gross Value Added (GVA) of £31 billion, provides over 464,000 jobs, and in 2018, heritage-related construction activities generated £7.1 billion in GVA in England employing over 100,000 people. A UK National Parks survey revealed that 52% of UK residents visited a National Park last year, and that tourism accounts for £4,368,445 million towards the English economy. Further, 35% of UK citizens “totally agree” that the presence of cultural heritage influences their choice of holiday destinations, and in 2018, £17 billion was spent on heritage-related visits and trips. Covid-19 will invariably have a large impact to the sector long term.
- 5.4.2 Digital content and a green recovery: A key way we see the sector evolving is through its use of digital content. The significant interest in ongoing digital engagement (which for some organisations was in the region of an 800% increase) as shown by the “#Outdoors, Indoors” social media campaign¹⁰, has demonstrated the importance and potential of engaging with nature, even if accessed online, to contribute towards people’s resilience and well-being in times of crisis.
- 5.4.3 Further, the use of new websites (such as www.peakdistrict.gov.uk/carparkstatus) have enabled National Parks to better manage visitors. This digital solution has been introduced by several National Parks. However, in its current format requires “boots on the ground” to keep it live and up to date. National Parks England would welcome the opportunity to work with BEIS to make this a fully digital offer, enabling a more agile and efficient service that we can embed into our work. Digital connectivity in rural areas remains a barrier to accessing these resources. Ensuring plans for increased connectivity take into account the needs of the visitor economy in a post-Covid world will also be important.
- 5.5 **Supporting rural visitor economies:** In times when international travel is complicated or not possible, National Parks may become even more important as breathing spaces. Tourism, as noted in 5.4.1, is a key economic driver for rural communities, and in the post-Covid context will be critical to the future of our National Parks and Park communities. National Park tourism will and has already been generating both opportunities, such as a changing demographic of new visitors, and new pressures, as can be seen from the recent inundation of visitors to honeypot locations in some National Parks. National Parks are keen to adapt to this new reality and see ‘slow tourism’ – deep, authentic, cultural and experiential tourism - as a way to evolve.
- 5.6 **Criteria to use when making decisions to support green recovery:** Government should ensure that funding that is delivered to rural areas and rural businesses contributes to

¹⁰ The ‘#OutdoorsIndoors’ campaign, created by Northumberland NPA and used by several NPAs, has used social media to connect people with nature in their gardens and provided an avenue to share online education materials and host virtual social interactions such as online quizzes.

achieving net zero, climate resiliency, or nature recovery, whilst being adaptable and flexible to local needs and conditions.

- 5.6.1 Funding will be a key way that BEIS can support innovation to deal with future challenges. Further, as our understanding grows, flexibility and adaption in the level and types of support response will be key. Support is likely to be needed for much longer than the active measures for preventing the spread of Covid-19, as the true impacts will take some time (even years) to work through the system fully. For example, BEIS could provide better access to a wide range of funding support for the evolution of heritage and tourism businesses as they adapt, reimagine, and redesign operating models, particularly where this represents a move towards greater local enterprise and partnership.

6 How can the Government best retain key skills and reskill and upskill the UK workforce to support the recovery and sustainable growth?

- 6.1 NPE supports the government's investment in green jobs, and believes that a focus on building 'green' skills will facilitate job creation in the environment and heritage sectors. Having more people employed in the green sector or with 'green skills' will in turn help support the government's net zero agenda as well as the goals and ambitions of the 25 Year Environment Plan.
- 6.2 National Parks see themselves as having a collective role to be 'innovation engines for a green recovery'. We are working together and with partners to create large scale projects that test new approaches to generating sustainable growth in the wellbeing of people, landscapes, nature, culture, social institutions and the economy.
- 6.3 Timely investment in green jobs could deliver a long-term boost to our economy. Indeed, the Local Government Association projects that 700,000 direct jobs could be created in England's low-carbon and renewable energy economy by 2030, rising to more than 1.18 million by 2050¹¹. Supporting a transition to those jobs and investing in the infrastructure to make this transition is important.
- 6.4 National Park Authorities can provide opportunities for youth, unskilled workers, those seeking apprenticeships or experience, and the like, to upskill. Furthermore, with support from Government, this would help create additional employment opportunities, and thereby boost the economies, of England's rural areas.

7 Is the Industrial Strategy still a relevant and appropriate vehicle through which to deliver post pandemic growth?

- 7.1 The Five Foundations (Ideas, People, Infrastructure, Business, Environment and Places) set out in the UK Industrial Strategy are still relevant. However, the way they are addressed and the supporting policies and programmes need to be fundamentally reviewed in the light of the impact of COVID-19 and the need for a green recovery.
- 7.1.1 **Ideas:** to become the world's most innovative economy, the rural economy and National Parks in particular need to be at the forefront of green initiatives that encourage regenerative agriculture, increased local food production and consumption, and carbon neutrality. These are all highly complex technical challenges which will require a highly skilled rural workforce.

¹¹ https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/5.84_Charging_up_the_green_recovery%20WEB.pdf

- 7.1.2 **People:** to provide good jobs and greater earning power for all, people, especially young people, in rural areas require better access to education and training than is currently available in rural areas. There is often a 'brain drain' towards bigger towns and cities where high skilled and better paid jobs can be found. Covid-19 has already, and we anticipate will continue to, exacerbate this problem.
- Further, Government policies such as affordable housing and transportation options need to be joined up in order to support those working in rural communities. A Green Recovery should take into account long-term sustainable solutions, which, for example, enable younger and working age people to live in the communities that they work in, thereby contributing to their local economy, and contribute to more resilient rural communities.
- 7.1.3 **Infrastructure:** Natural Capital should be recognised and properly invested in as a key and essential part of the economic infrastructure of the nation. Covid-19 provides a unique opportunity for the nation to invest in and provide a major upgrade to the UK's green infrastructure, contributing towards a more resilient climate for the future whilst stimulating the economic engines of our country.
- It is critical that future infrastructure investment goes towards green infrastructure. More detail can be found under questions 4 and 5.
- 7.1.4 As mentioned in 5.4.3, National Parks England would welcome the opportunity to work with BEIS and DCMS to provide a more agile and efficient broadband service for rural areas. Digital connectivity in rural areas remains a barrier to accessing online resources. Ensuring plans for increased connectivity take into account the needs of the visitor economy in a post-Covid world will also be important. Better digital connectivity could be a significant opportunity to help support the economic recovery of our rural areas and more innovative ways of working.
- 7.1.5 As mentioned in question 4.5, investment in green infrastructure, including shovel-ready projects such as the construction of shared-use paths or cycle-lanes, are a key way to reduce emissions, improve public health, whilst providing green jobs and opportunities for economic growth. NPE would like to work with BEIS and DfT to ensure opportunities are provided to improve green transport infrastructure, which will be of great value to the rural economy as well as have major uptake in use.
- 7.1.6 **Business Environment:** Covid-19 is already impacting normal ways of 'doing business'. Most employees are working from home where they can and many companies have had to take their operations online in order to accommodate the needs of remote workers and the need for socially distanced activities. There is already some evidence that post-Covid-19 there may be a degree of "ruralisation" as people relocate from cities and/or commute less into cities and work from home or locally. Any future initiatives or spending to make the UK the best place to start and grow a business should take this new landscape into account.
- 7.1.7 **Places:** as described under question 1, rural economies are being severely impacted by Covid-19. To ensure prosperous communities across the UK, there will need to be additional focus provided on rural issues including but not limited to shortage of affordable housing, poor transport and digital connectivity.

8 How should regional and local government in England, (including the role of powerhouses, LEPs and growth hubs, mayoralities, and councils) be reformed and better equipped to deliver growth locally?

- 8.1 NPE believes that the natural capital approach should be viewed as a key element underpinning health and wellbeing of both people and economies. It should become a key part of the focus of economic development and regeneration agencies. Capitalising on the strengths of National Park local relationships in this context represents a key opportunity. NPAs' and the Broads Authority's relationships and partnerships with businesses, local authorities, and partners makes them key influencers in rural communities. This makes them well placed to deliver sustainable development locally and help deliver Government objectives within National Parks and surrounding areas.
- 8.2 National Parks already work closely with Local Authorities and Local Enterprise Partnerships to seek investment in our rural economies. We are keen to develop a new approach to rural development that uses the assets of our national parks to contribute to wider economic growth and productivity, whilst supporting vibrant and thriving communities in and around the Parks.
- 8.3 **National Parks providing localized, specialized data:** Through NPA business networks and projects and a bespoke survey, we can provide BEIS with much finer grained data on the impacts of COVID-19 and the needs of businesses than is possible through the LEPs and Local Authorities (which necessarily have to aggregate data across rural and urban areas, SMEs and major sectors).
- 8.3.1 Using this evidence base and insight, National Parks can work alongside BEIS to champion rural issues with other key departments (Defra, MHCLG and DCMS) and inform the design and delivery, ensuring appropriate reach to rural economies.
- 8.4 **National Parks providing targeted, efficient funding:** Providing National Parks the ability to pilot a recovery package will enable targeted and efficient reach of those funds, which will lessen the burden often imposed by centralised funding schemes.

September 2020