



## **Consultation on the Local Plans Expert Group ‘Call for Evidence’**

### **A response by National Parks England**

**23 October 2015**

#### **Introduction**

1. National Parks England supports the policy-making process by co-ordinating the views of the nine English National Park Authorities and the Broads Authority. It is governed by the Chairs of the ten authorities. Our response represents the collective view of officers who are working within the policies established by the National Park Authorities (NPAs) and Broads Authority and follows internal consultation amongst the officers. We are happy for our response to be made publicly available and would be happy to discuss any of the points we make further if that would be helpful.

#### **Summary**

- The Government’s NPPF reaffirms the protection afforded to National Parks and the Broads and this is supported. The profile of the *English National Parks and the Broads Circular* (2010) should be increased to assist understanding amongst local planning authorities adjoining National Parks and the Broads to fulfil their statutory duty to have regard to National Park purposes in preparing their own Local Plans, and in discussions between authorities under the Duty to Co-operate.
- The role of the independent examination in the Local Plan-making process is supported, and there may be opportunities to reduce the time taken in examining Local Plans by providing further support to the Planning Inspectorate.
- The English National Park Authorities and the Broads would welcome further clarification over the approach to meeting strategic housing requirements within nationally protected landscapes. The current ‘policy-off’ method for objectively assessing housing needs within protected landscapes is creating significant challenges for National Park Authorities in taking their Local Plans forward to submission.
- Continuing changes in national planning policy have potentially the greatest impact on plan-making. Whether these are introduced through the online National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) resource, through Written Ministerial Statements, or through national Permitted Development Rights, they have the effect of slowing the preparation of Local Plans and should be acknowledged.

## Consultation questions

- a. **Content of Local Plans:** The nine English National Park Authorities and the Broads Authority specifically support a number of areas of the NPPF, including (i) the clear acknowledgement of the protection afforded to National Parks and the Broads (paragraph 14 and 115); (ii) the cross-reference to the [English National Parks and the Broads: UK Government Vision and Circular 2010](#) for further guidance and information about their statutory purposes and other matters (footnote 25, page 27).

Linked to this, we would welcome further measures to highlight the importance of the Circular as a clear statement of Government policy on National Parks. The Circular is relevant to the preparation of not only Local Plans in National Parks and the Broads, but also to neighbouring authorities to inform their decisions on how to meet their statutory duty to have regard to Park purposes in exercising their planning functions. It would also help facilitate discussions between authorities under the Duty to Co-operate.

- b. **Local plan preparation process:** The Local Plan-preparation process has been amended in recent years in an attempt to reduce the time taken to progress through the previous three-step *Issues & Options – Preferred Options – Submission* process. However while this aim is laudable, the current regulatory framework requiring consultation on the *preparation of a Local Plan* (Regulation 18) and then on the *publication of a Local Plan* (Regulation 19) is arguably too great a step for planning authorities and communities. In practice the majority of local planning authorities publish a non-statutory draft Local Plan between these two requirements to enable consultees to make representations to inform the final stages of Plan-making.

A quicker plan-making process is in everyone's interests, but will also require the support and resourcing of the Government's Planning Inspectorate. The experience of National Park Authorities and the Broad Authority is that it can take around 9 months for Local Plans to be formally adopted following submission to the Inspectorate for examination. The independent examination plays an important role in assessing Local Plans and giving them further credibility and weight in the eyes of local communities and in order for this to continue the Planning Inspectorate must be adequately resourced.

- c. **Agreeing strategic requirements:** As confirmed in the *National Parks and the Broads: UK Government Vision and Circular (2010)*, the Government recognises that National Parks are not suitable locations for unrestricted housing and has not therefore provided general housing targets for them. "*The expectation is that new housing will be focused on meeting affordable housing requirements...*" – paragraph 79. Having confirmed that National Parks have the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty in the NPPF, it would be useful to have a strategic acknowledgement that they are not appropriate locations to meet strategic housing requirements. Such clarity will assist in discussions locally and speed up plan making.

The method for calculating housing need is also proving challenging for National Park Authorities. It is recognised that current national policy requires Strategic Housing Market Assessments to be conducted as an objective, policy-off analysis and to take no

account of land supply or development 'constraints'. Government statements, including those from the [Planning Minister in December 2014](#), that area-specific issues such as the landscape protection afforded to National Parks should be factored in to translating housing need figures into policy are welcomed. The combination of the current 'policy-off' method of assessing strategic housing needs, coupled with this recognition is creating difficulties, however, for National Parks. At a time of considerable financial pressure on public budgets, there is a need to be clear what the purpose of the assessments is in areas of recognised constraint. The assessments themselves, can also take longer caused by problems of data not being cut to the boundaries of National Parks.

- e. **Observations:** Continuing changes in national planning policy have potentially the greatest impact on plan-making, as evidenced by the recent situation with the threshold for seeking affordable housing and other contributions from smaller developments. Currently national planning policy can be amended through the National Planning Practice Guidance online resource or through Written Ministerial Statements and these changes that come into immediate affect have significant implications for National Park Authorities' Local Plans and their central role in the British planning system.

National Park Authorities – as with all planning authorities – have been progressing with the preparation of their Local Plans to ensure the National Parks continue to have up-to-date planning frameworks in place, but this has proved challenging with continuous amendments to some core planning principles contained within the National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) and changes to national Permitted Development Rights (some of which exempt National Parks) which have, in some cases, undermined clear policies seeking to conserve and enhance our National Parks.

Finally, we believe greater consideration needs to be given in the preparation of national planning policy, on the potential effects on rural areas and protected landscapes in particular. A number of recent policy / guidance changes have not, in our opinion, given sufficient weight to the implications for National Parks. This means that once changes are introduced, it can cause significant difficulties at a local level in seeking to implement the change and stay true to the statutory purposes for which the designations were created by Parliament.

National Parks England  
23 October 2015