

# Initial recommendations of the Designated Landscapes Expert Group for Wales

## Executive Summary

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) recognises protected areas as the cornerstone of biodiversity conservation. National Parks and National Landscapes (formerly Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) form part of the UK's protected area network and are key to delivery of the CBD target that at least 30 per cent of land, freshwater and seas are effectively conserved and managed by 2030. These areas have an important role to play in Wales' response to this global commitment.

As part of the Welsh Government's Biodiversity Deep Dive, this interim report outlines progress towards the commitment to unlock the potential of Designated Landscapes to deliver more for nature and 30 by 30. Our work had seven themes which:

- considered the global context within which Designated Landscapes operate and explored the added value of adopting global good practice.
- developed a strategic framework for all Welsh Designated Landscapes to add impact at pace to their focus on nature recovery.
- explored a Team Wales approach and how better collaboration could drive increased effectiveness.
- considered legislative levers, opportunities and constraints
- piloted an approach to opportunity mapping for nature.
- considered the role of Designated Landscapes in supporting farmers and land managers to deliver more for nature.
- discussed the importance of diversity and inclusion in driving innovation, behavioural change and effectiveness.

National Landscapes and National Parks are collectively known in Wales as Designated Landscapes. The term "landscape", as it applies in environmental management, has different meanings and multiple applications. It is a term that is not always applied coherently and is usually contested. This has been further complicated by the ambition to conserve and enhance natural beauty, and for this aim to become the foundation for how we define the purpose of Designated Landscape management.

Although physical and sensible, in that they can be perceived through the senses, landscapes are the outcome of processes, driven, defined, and understood culturally by people. They have their roots in social conscience, and different social groups can appropriate the same space in different ways. Designated Landscapes are contested spaces, over which the exercise of power creates discernible territories, both material and symbolic. Landscape is a medium of cultural expression that has the power to reinforce values and a sense of identity. It is equally capable of creating discomfort, alienation and isolation. Those empowered with its management therefore hold significant responsibility.

Landscape is a meeting ground between nature and culture, geology and geography, past and present, and between tangible and intangible values. Its

expression in policy terms is therefore complex, but ultimately ripe with progressive potential.

As we work to address the existential crises of climate change, nature loss and wider environmental degradation, the relationships between environmental, social, and economic policy have become clear. 'Landscape' as a nexus is not only an effective antidote to the reductionist approach to environmental management that has exacerbated the problems we face today, but could be the central mechanism by which people can engage with the natural world.

An attempt to reflect the complexity of 'landscape' frames this initial report. Brevity is important, but so is a recognition that the problems we face are 'wicked', policies are interdependent, and the systems to which they apply, interconnected.

Wales' protected areas will be fundamental to nature recovery.

National Parks and National Landscapes are globally recognised as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Category V protected areas<sup>1</sup>. They form part of a global suite of protected areas. Whilst it is important to define protected area objectives and understand the role they can play in contributing to wider global targets, the central issue is their effectiveness in conserving and restoring biodiversity.

Designated Landscapes in Wales are in a prime place to learn from the thinking surrounding two United Nations programmes – the CBD and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), both of which are naturally brought together through the Landscape Approach<sup>2</sup> framed in Wales by the Wellbeing and Future Generations Act and for which the IUCN's Category V Protected Area management guidelines<sup>3</sup> provide the governance mechanism.

There are many global initiatives that either directly or indirectly can help realise Welsh Government's ambition for Designated Landscapes. References in this report to the work of the IUCN, and that surrounding the CBD and the SDGs is important but not exhaustive. Expanding our global perspective on protected area management will support innovation, challenge cultural biases, and ultimately improve the effectiveness of Designated Landscapes in Wales.

The CBD has three main objectives: the conservation of biological diversity; the sustainable use of the components of biological diversity; and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilisation of genetic resources. The

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<sup>1</sup> Crofts, R., Dudley, N., Mahon, C., Partington, R., Phillips, A., Pritchard, S., & Stolton, S. (2014). Putting nature on the map: A report and recommendations on the use of the IUCN system of protected area categorisation in the UK. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN. Available at: <https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/44891>.

<sup>2</sup> Sayer, J., Sunderland, T., Ghazoul, J., Pfund, J.-L., Sheil, D., Meijaard, E., Venter, M., Boedhihartono, A. K., Day, M., Garcia, C., van Oosten, C., & Buck, L. E. (2013). *Ten principles for a landscape approach to reconciling agriculture, conservation, and other competing land uses*. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 110(21), 8349-8356. Available at: <https://www.pnas.org/doi/abs/10.1073/pnas.1210595110>.

<sup>3</sup> Phillips, A. (2002). *Management guidelines for IUCN category V protected areas: protected landscapes/seascapes*. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN. Available at: <https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/8170>.

integrated approach to management planning adopted by National Parks and National Landscapes is ideally suited to advancing these objectives in a way that reflects their interdependences.

Management planning is a participatory process that integrates national strategic priorities with local need. They are plans for the area, not the authorities, and are revised every five years.

The expert group highlighted the importance of two upcoming documents – Natural Resources Wales’ emerging management planning guidance, and a Wales-wide strategic framework, in development by Tirweddau Cymru Landscapes Wales (TCLW), that explores a set of integrated goals designed to increase the pace of delivery and impact change at a systems level. These documents will help frame decision-making during this period of change.

Additionally, the group highlighted the importance of State of the Landscape reports. These would provide a snapshot of the current baseline condition, feedback on the efficacy of existing policies, and model future scenarios.

In Wales, Section 62 of the Environment Act 1995 and Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 impose a duty on relevant authorities to “have regard” to the purposes for which National Parks and National Landscapes (Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) are designated, respectively. This “Duty of Regard” is a central statutory pillar in delivering the objectives of Designated Landscapes.

The Duty of Regard means that relevant authorities, e.g. utility companies need to take guidance into account, and to ‘have and give clear reasons’ for any departure from it. The Duty of Regard applies to all functions, not just those relating to planning, and is applicable whether a function is statutory or permissive.

Importantly, the Duty of Regard is process rather than outcome-orientated, e.g. the focus is on whether or not a relevant authority has thought about the purposes of designation, rather than how it can work in partnership to further them through its decision-making. The group assert that the efficacy of this duty is currently insufficient.

The group recommends establishing a National Relevant Authorities Forum to work collaboratively at a strategic national scale to drive systemic change and provide the context for individual Designated Landscapes management plans.

Recognising that the Duty of Regard has been recently strengthened in England with a requirement to be more proactive, there is value in monitoring the impact of this change with a view to assessing the need for legislative change in the next Senedd term.

Designated Landscapes, as IUCN Category V protected areas, are “areas where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant ecological, biological, cultural and scenic value”<sup>4</sup>. Recognising and respecting this interaction is paramount to their effective management. Consideration

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<sup>4</sup> Dudley, N., Stolton, S., & Shadie, P. (2013). *Guidelines for applying protected area management categories including IUCN WCPA best practice guidance on recognising protected areas and assigning management categories and governance types*. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN. Available at: <https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/30018>.

of access, inclusion, equity, and justice forms an integral element of environmental decision-making. This is essential to unlocking the motivation, innovation and practical action required to drive nature recovery in Designated Landscapes. The group support the approach set out in the Just Transition Framework consultation document<sup>5</sup>.

A Team Wales approach was recognised as key to unlocking the potential of Designated Landscapes. A high degree of collaboration is already taking place, but simplified, faster, more efficient processes and relationships with key conservation delivery partners is essential. Addressing issues around permitting and consenting is a priority. A Team Wales approach to shared governance, streamlined delivery, and risk management is essential if we are to unlock the potential of Designated Landscapes to deliver more for nature and 30 by 30.

Through TCLW the group explored the use of freely accessible datasets to better understand how nature recovery mapping can be used by Designated Landscape teams to target nature recovery activity as efficiently as possible.

This work, piloted over the course of this report, generated nature recovery maps for two Designated Landscapes. This iterative and highly collaborative process resulted in a finalised series of Prioritised Nature Recovery Action maps that highlighted conservation priorities, landscape scale nature recovery opportunities and priorities, and where to target nature-based solutions. Adopting this approach across all Designated Landscapes will be key to addressing nature recovery at scale and pace.

The Welsh Government is currently developing new legislation for statutory biodiversity targets. Among the public bodies who would be subject to these targets are NPAs and Local Authorities. The prioritised nature recovery maps for Designated Landscapes will be a key way for NPAs and National Landscape teams to both target delivery and demonstrate progress against any new statutory targets.

National Park Authorities and National Landscape partnerships have worked collaboratively with farmers since their creation, recognising that agriculture is the dominant land use and a key delivery mechanism by which the nature and climate emergencies can be effectively addressed. A resilient and sustainable incentive system to support farmers and growers is therefore crucial.

Designated Landscape management plans provide a locally led, strategic assessment of the character and qualities of places recognised as national assets. The plans articulate what constitutes valued and valuable landscape, endorsed by expert input and public opinion. The Designated Landscape management plan provides a key integrating framework to deliver across the range of recommendations set out in the [Designated Landscapes Biodiversity Deep Dive action plan](#).

The development of the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) for Wales provides an opportunity to integrate the purposes of Designated Landscapes with incentives for positive agro-ecological practice, reflect the importance and value of investing in their special qualities, and support the delivery of the socio-economic and well-being duties.

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<sup>5</sup> Welsh Government. (2024). *Just Transition Framework*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/just-transition-framework>.

Designated Landscapes bodies can, through participatory management planning, facilitate local conversations with farmers, growers and land managers to co-create a compelling vision for future food and farming at a landscape scale. Teams can offer a strategic approach to achieve this vision, aligning positive land management with nature recovery and other components of natural beauty. Their detailed understanding of the area, coupled with strong local relationships provides the ability to guide and optimise the relationship between Sustainable Farming Scheme outcomes and delivering on the 30 by 30 target.

Designated Landscape teams are also well placed to identify how enablers such as the Integrated Natural Resources Scheme (INRS), Nature Networks Fund, philanthropic givers, and opportunities for blended finance could support, and further develop, momentum for change.

The group therefore recommended support for specialist advisors, embedded in Designated Landscapes but working in partnership through TCLW, to enable a consistent approach to farmer and land manager engagement. They would facilitate sharing of knowledge and expertise to enable action to be tailored to individual landscapes. Local knowledge, tailored support, prescription, and intervention that translates national priorities into locally relevant opportunities is key to achieving effective management and nature recovery.

As at early 2025, funding has been secured to commence a dedicated scheme, Ffermio Bro: Farming in Designated Landscapes, set to go live in financial year 2025/26. This scheme will seek to deliver on the opportunities outlined above.

Public participation in planning and decision-making is fundamental to effective Designated Landscapes management. Not only does this help build consensus around co-created plans of action, but it can help address issues of justice and equity. Participatory dialogue is an essential precursor to meeting climate and nature emergency targets. It will help drive the necessary behavioural change required alongside legislation and ensure the cultural nature of Wales' Designated Landscapes is reflected in planning and decision making.

The decisions people make, and the behaviours they adopt, lie at the heart of unlocking the potential of Designated Landscapes to deliver more for nature and 30 by 30.

## **Recommendations**

The group make 9 key recommendations at this stage:

- **Recommendation 1:** Designated Landscapes should actively engage with, contribute to, and learn from global good practice in defining, planning and monitoring protected area management effectiveness.
- **Recommendation 2:** Natural Resources Wales' (NRW) 'Updated Management Plan Guidance' should provide a renewed focus and ambition and define the framework within which Deep Dive recommendations can be delivered.
- **Recommendation 3:** 'State of the Landscape Reports' should be explored as a mechanism to identify baselines, support objective setting, scenario plan, and target activity.
- **Recommendation 4:** The duty of regard is currently sub-optimal. The group recommends setting up a National Relevant Authorities Forum supported by

an update of the current Environment Act 1995 s62/ CRow 2000 s85 guidance in order to coordinate a more strategic response to exercising the duty

- **Recommendation 5:** Geographical Information System (GIS) capability needs to be strengthened within Designated Landscapes, potentially through a collaborative programme and staff resource.
- **Recommendation 6:** The breadth and depth of collaboration by Designated Landscapes needs to be widened, with consideration of access, inclusion, equity and justice forming an integral element
- **Recommendation 7:** A Team Wales approach to shared governance, streamlined delivery, and risk management is essential if we are to tackle the technical challenges associated with consents, permitting, and grant funding.
- **Recommendation 8:** The development of the SFS provides an opportunity to integrate the purposes of Designated Landscapes with incentives for positive farming practice. Specialist advisors, embedded in Designated Landscapes but working in partnership through TCLW, would enable a more consistent approach to farmer and land manager engagement.
- **Recommendation 9:** Further work is required to create a culture of respect, cooperation, and connection with Wales' natural environment, fostering a sense of stewardship and pro-environmental behaviour. Increased promotion of the Countryside Code, building on the new Countryside Code Strategy and Action Plan for Wales, and Welsh Government's Access Reform Programme have important roles to play here.

The group proposes to continue building on the work undertaken to date, by focusing on several workstreams outlined below. The group will consider if wider representation is required to undertake the workstreams and will continue to work closely with the other Deep Dive expert groups.

### **Proposed workstreams**

#### **1. Defining a role for Designated Landscapes in the Sustainable Farming Scheme**

Recognising the fundamental importance of supporting farmers and land managers deliver for nature and the climate, Designated Landscapes intend to define their role in SFS and work to optimise their input. This will involve a collaborative bid to the Integrated Natural Resources Scheme.

#### **2. Realigning National Park and National Landscape Management Plans with the nature and climate emergency**

In response to emerging Management Plan guidance, the group intends to look at how the Management Planning process can better reflect the nature and climate emergencies, how State of the Landscape reports can better inform objective setting, and how best to define and promote effective management, robust monitoring and reporting mechanisms

#### **3. Nature Mapping**

The group intends to continue working closely with NRW to explore how best to roll out nature mapping work across all Designated Landscapes. Work will

include further consideration of datasets, SSSI condition mapping, targeting and prioritisation.

#### **4. Building Collaboration**

Building on the Team Wales approach, the group will explore how to promote Designated Landscapes as 'Landscapes for Everyone', to include strategic and tactical proactive communications around nature and climate to support positive behavioural change. Work will include training and learning in climate and nature literacy and a programme of work to raise awareness with PSBs and other strategic bodies.

#### **5. Resourcing action**

Work will include exploring Green Finance opportunities and gearing up to embed this in resource streams. Providing evidence and argument to NRW and Welsh Government to ensure Designated Landscapes bodies are funded adequately, sustainably, and flexibly to deliver nature recovery

#### **6. Improving processes**

Work will continue with NRW to consider issues around consenting and permitting, and Welsh Government around updating national planning policy guidance and permitted development.

#### **7. Working fairly**

The group will consider how the 'Just Nature Transition' concept might be more formally incorporated into the wider Just Transition to net zero decarbonisation framework. Additionally, the group will explore how the forthcoming Anti-racist Wales Action Plan for the environment, climate change and rural affairs and other wider assessments, actions or reporting requirements are better integrated and simplified.

#### **8. Considering legislation**

The group will consider the need for legislation in the next Senedd to reform the statutory purposes, duties and governance arrangements for Designated Landscape bodies to equip them better to drive nature's recovery

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