

A PROSPECTUS FOR A DORSET NATIONAL PARK

Summary

Dorset is a very special county. We have stunning countryside, a World Heritage coast, outstanding biodiversity and cultural heritage that is gold standard. We have many thriving businesses, a growing digital economy, two well respected universities and a major land-based college. Dorset's sun, sea, sand and land at the heart of the South Coast, with rail accessibility from London and the Midlands, help to make this one of the nation's favourite and most-photographed counties.

Dorset's environment is our greatest economic asset and underpins our prosperity now and in the future. But our environment and biodiversity are under threat from landscape degradation, species decline and water catchment pollution. The heritage of Thomas Hardy remains threatened. Current organisations have not, despite their efforts, been able to reverse this decline in our natural capital. Dorset's productivity, skill and wage levels are too low and there are too few affordable homes. Despite our great environment, research shows that we undersell ourselves and have not created a strong enough Dorset brand nor attracted the investment opportunities Dorset's qualities merit.

A National Park can help make Dorset the natural place to visit and do business. It offers a unique opportunity to help reverse the decline in our environment, make Dorset the home for ambitious and innovative businesses and help our farmers and land managers to diversify and thrive in new market and farm funding conditions. Our economic prospects and future would be strengthened through a NP working in partnership with the Dorset Council, the LEP, LNP and other key stakeholders to invest in Dorset's natural capital, environment, heritage and communities.

Together, we can establish a National Park that will promote, celebrate and protect Dorset's very special environment and heritage, work for and benefit our communities and economy, and help us all safeguard and pass on this fine heritage for the benefit of future generations and the nation.

Introduction. The current national Review of Designated Landscapes gives Dorset the opportunity to seek stronger national recognition of its outstanding landscapes and heritage, and for greater national resources to conserve, enhance and promote our environment and benefit Dorset's economy and communities. This can be achieved by upgrading the existing Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty to a National Park, with wider purposes, powers and greater funding.

While all National Parks work within the same legislative framework, they can implement their powers and duties in different ways. This paper suggests how a National Park should work for the benefit of all of Dorset. It reflects inputs from a range of organisations, businesses, landowners, farmers and local people. We seek further views on this draft prospectus, so the Government's review team can be better informed on what we seek for Dorset.

Overall purposes. The National Park would have three main purposes:

- To conserve and enhance Dorset's outstanding landscape, biodiversity and cultural heritage
- To promote open-air recreation, health and enjoyment of that heritage
- To foster the economic and social well-being of the people and communities who live and work in the National Park.

Partnership. The National Park should work closely and supportively in partnership with public authorities and communities, the private, public and not-for-profit sectors. It should act as a catalyst for a living, working, thriving and sustainable Dorset by helping to promote action to benefit the environment, heritage, communities and the economy.

Geographic scope. The National Park should include as much of rural Dorset as meets Natural England's designation criteria. It would be the first National Park to have a significant coastal area - the World Heritage Jurassic Coast - and potentially the first to have an off-shore role, thus bringing together in a coordinated way on-shore and off-shore designations.

Benefit all of Dorset. The National Park should benefit the economy and communities throughout the county, bringing additional resources and promoting investment. It should be an asset and close partner for the Dorset Council. The National Park would pay the Dorset Council for the services that it buys in, thus freeing Council resources for other priorities across rural Dorset. Where appropriate, the National Park should work beyond its boundaries, for example in developing a Dorset-wide tourism strategy, providing a strong Dorset brand for enterprises and assisting those who wish to be included in agri-environment schemes whatever their location.

Landscape, Biodiversity and Cultural Heritage. The National Park should work with all partner organisations to conserve and enhance Dorset's outstanding landscape, biodiversity and cultural heritage. It would invest in Dorset's natural capital, and tackle long-standing issues of landscape degradation, species decline and water catchment pollution. It would promote landscape-scale conservation and connectivity in southern England, working with other NPs, AONBs, farmers and landowners, and conservation organisations within and beyond Dorset.

Recreation and Health. The National Park should promote recreational opportunities and enjoyment both locally and nationally, fully inclusively connecting more people with the natural environment and enhancing the health and wellbeing of local people and visitors.

Tourism. The National Park should develop a Dorset-wide Sustainable Tourism Strategy. This should benefit the whole of Dorset, extend the tourism season, promote eco and heritage tourism and visitor diversity, encourage increased visitor spending, widen the areas visited and lead to higher value tourism and increased skills in the tourism industry. This Strategy, plus the funding of a comprehensive ranger service, should help communities, landowners and others to manage the pressures which can arise from some tourism and recreational activities.

Farming and Agribusiness. Landowners and farmers are central to Dorset and the health of its living landscapes. The National Park should work in partnership with landowners, farmers and agribusinesses through a Land Managers Group (as in the

South Downs) including to develop funding proposals which deliver a range of benefits. This should include agri-environment solutions suited to the character of the county, taking full account of farmers' expertise in order to improve farm productivity and resilience, enhance income and reduce costs. It could support farm clusters to share expertise and bid for additional public benefit funding. Through policies that are sympathetic to farm diversification and the adaptation of farm and forestry buildings and through raising public awareness of the importance of farming, it should help the long-term viability of our agribusinesses.

Business Growth and Economic Development. The National Park should work in partnership with the Dorset Council and the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to promote Dorset-based businesses, products and services, to attract further growth businesses and innovation and to support investment in appropriate infrastructure including public transport. It should attract young families who value what Dorset can offer in terms of a high quality of life, health and wellbeing. It should support the work of the LEP and LNP and work with the LEP in the development and delivery of a Rural Economic Strategy for Dorset, for example through the Government's "Shared Prosperity Fund".

Planning. The National Park should work with the Dorset Council to create a shared planning team, develop a joint Local Plan for rural Dorset and provide a one-stop-shop service for planning advice as part of a streamlined customer focussed approach. The National Park should be proactive in facilitating homes for local people (including truly affordable homes), and help retain and attract young people, families and growth businesses.

Governance and funding. The National Park Authority should be constituted in accordance with the practice that some 50% of its members would be from the Dorset Council, around 25% from Town/Parish councils and 25% local volunteers appointed by Ministers to reflect other key interests and expertise. Core funding for the National Park provided by the Government should be adequate for the job.