

## **Opening Remarks by Natural England Chairman - Andrew Sells**

Thank you for the invitation to join you today. It's a great pleasure to be with you here in Newcastle. I've always been a great lover of landscape and it was one of the main attractions for me when I applied for the job at Natural England.

The landscapes of England – both in the countryside with its vast tracts of open country, along our stunning coastline and in our great towns and cities – are a source of huge pride.

From awe-inspiring mountains, moors and dales; picture-perfect villages rich in history; lakes, waterways and rivers; seascapes and beautiful beaches; wildflower meadows, rolling downs and ancient forests; town greens and city parks – England has it all.

Our landscapes and seascapes are part of our culture, our history, they provide us with a sense of place, and shape our identity. And it's right that many of them are recognised and protected by law. I'm proud of Natural England's historical role in designating the series of National Parks and AONBs. And I'm delighted that so many people are getting to experience and enjoy the sense of beauty and tranquillity, adventure and exploration that these stunning places offer.

Our research suggests that England's 34 AONBs received 154 million visits in 2013, which generated around £1.9 billion in visitor expenditure. These are serious numbers. And underline the vital economic role that these places play in sustaining local communities. The Cotswolds AONB, where I live, has an estimated GVA of £337m and supports 9270 jobs.

I'm proud too of the ongoing role we play in conserving landscapes both through our green farming schemes and through our response to thousands of planning consultations every year, working with planning authorities to enable appropriate development, and when necessary to step in to question the wrong development in the wrong place.

Alongside the advice we give on landscape, we've focussed on enabling others to integrate landscape thinking in their decision making. Last year we published the final batch of the 159 National Character Area profiles, which set out the geological, ecological, historic and cultural factors that combine to each distinctive landscape characters of England, and enable decision makers to better shape their local patch.

I am pleased to hear that these profiles are being widely used to help manage change. They are informing Countryside Stewardship targeting, landscape and land use planning, community engagement, investment planning and education. Last year we had nearly 80,000 hits on our website by people wanting to use the NCA profiles.

My view is that conservation initiatives are at their most successful when they are locally designed and locally managed and when partners and local people come together to restore their landscape and shape their natural environment.

Conservation needs innovation – we need strong local partnerships to develop and agree solutions that meet their needs and aspirations. Finding new ways of managing the land, and new ways of securing and capitalising on the goods and services the natural world provides.

And I'm proud of the work we do with local communities and partners to shape and create new landscapes, through the £400 million each year invested in the countryside through green farming schemes, and the support we've given to Nature Improvement Area partnerships.

As well as being an important connection to our past, landscapes are vital to our future. They are living, breathing, and evolving systems – shaped both by human hand and natural processes. They provide many of the essential services on which we all depend like clean air and clean water.

So the biggest question for us all, as landscape lovers, is where next for the landscape movement?

We all agree, I think, that our engagement with “landscape” needs to be so much more than an academic exercise (with all the associated jargon), but what does that mean in practice. How do we best ‘deliver’ more valued and better landscapes?

We agree too that all landscapes matter. How do we ensure that landscapes remain understood and relevant in the context of the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? There were around 1.3 billion visits to the natural environment last year for health or exercise reasons. I know there are promising signs of alignment between the landscape sector, the health and wellbeing sector. But how do we go beyond alignment to joined-up delivery. Build the natural health service to support our national health service.

All the policy talk at the moment is of ‘landscape-scale conservation’ and the need to safeguard ecosystems for all the essential services they provide. What is the role of ‘landscape’ in this? And how do we demonstrate that investing in landscapes is not luxury spending. It is cost-effective, and efficient and makes a difference to everyone in the country. By managing landscapes well, we are also managing all its related ecosystems.

Landscapes offer carbon storage and water management; premium branding for high quality sustainably-produced food; a role in low-carbon energy produced; art and crafts and rural entrepreneurship; an ecologically friendly tourism and recreation sector, and provide a sense of place to underpin prosperous and healthy local communities.

Through an understanding of our landscapes we can provide some of the answers to the big national challenges of the day – balancing production and protection, enabling development that enhances local character and identity, restoring a sense of local place and identity.

And finally how do we deliver for people and for landscapes at time of constraints on public sector funding?

We all agree that there is an important landscape role for the public sector. But what is the role of the private sector, the third sector and of local communities? I'm particularly interested in the role of conservation covenants – encouraging private landowners to commit their land to the public good

in perpetuity. We need to explore new mechanisms and new incentives so that we can shape the landscapes of the future.

These are just some of the big questions that I hope we'll address today.

Thankyou.