The South West Coast Path Association on behalf of the National Trails Alliance, a collaboration of all National Trails, seeks to provide evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006.

How well has Natural England fulfilled the mandate that it currently has?

Natural England’s general purpose is to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced and managed for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development. And specifically (d) promoting access to the countryside and open spaces and encouraging open-air recreation.

The role of Natural England has significantly reduced since 2010, and appears to be continuing to decline. In the early years of the agency, Natural England was very proactive at encouraging people to get out and enjoy the outdoors, and working with other government agencies to develop schemes such as:

- ‘Walk the Way to Health’ initiative to establish a national network of health walk groups across the country and established new partnerships with Primary Care Trusts and local authorities to enhance the evidence base on the health benefits of the natural environment.
- Secured £25 million from the Big Lottery Fund Changing Spaces programme for Access to Nature, a grant scheme managed by Natural England on behalf of a consortium of 12 national environmental organisations, to provide new opportunities for people to enjoy the natural environment.
- Developed an engagement programme to give one million children a high-quality learning experience in the natural environment, with 250,000 involved each year over the next three years.
- In 2010 awarded nearly £10 million under the Access to Nature, Aggregates Levy and Natural Assets schemes, benefiting 160,000 children, and another 531,000 countryside visitors.
- Developed a programme of outdoor learning activities for 400,000 Scouts and Cubs and launched the ‘Language of Landscape’, with Ordnance Survey, to benefit 750,000 11yr old school children.

As evidenced by the work it delivered to promote access in the early years, Natural England has the powers to be the government lead on public access, but in recent years, probably due to reductions in its budget, it is currently failing in many ways to do this.

This is evidenced by:

- **The lack of apparent leadership on countryside access matters.** Natural England’s Board Members do not include a countryside access specialist or anyone with interest in promoting public access. The Operations Director responsible for Access has changed four times in 1.5 years. The health and wellbeing benefits that
countryside access provide are well evidenced, as are the economic benefits that help sustain many rural communities. Both of these benefits were in the past championed by the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC). Natural England do produce the Monitoring Engagement in the Natural Environment (MENE) research which is very useful and referenced extensively as for the first time it delivers robust evidence of how many people visit the countryside. However there is little evidence of Natural England using this research to influence other government departments to invest in countryside access. Natural England is currently failing to provide strategic leadership to the many organisations that deliver countryside access at a local level or to provide them with a link with other government agencies to use countryside access as a tool to deliver Health & Tourism / Economic priorities. This is evidenced not only by the lack of cohesive countryside access strategy within Defra and Natural England, despite the strong evidence for it, but also by failures to influence other departments/agencies including DCLG - Local Economic Partnerships / Coastal Community Teams, DCMS - Sport England and Visit Britain/England.

- **The lack of a sustainable strategy for National Trails in England, including the England Coast Path** There are 13 National Trails across England, and 2 in Wales, stretching over 2,600 miles providing opportunities for visitors to walk, cycle and horse ride through some of the UK’s finest landscapes. The England Coast Path will be the newest National Trail and when completed in 2020 will be one of the longest coastal walking routes in the world. The Trails are national assets, improving the health, wellbeing and prosperity of the UK as well as inspiring people to value our natural environment. However:
  - Natural England has reduced its funding to National Trails by 30% since 2012. The entire National Trail maintenance budget is now just £1.69 million per annum.
  - Natural England tried to impose a further 50% in year funding cut in June 2016 which would have effectively closed many National Trails. Thankfully Defra reversed this proposal. Since that time Natural England continue to threaten further funding cuts at every meeting with National Trails.
  - Natural England wants National Trails to become less reliant on public sector funding in the future. Natural England have commissioned an independent report on the Income Generation strategy for National Trails including the England Coast Path. This report is not yet published but the findings conclude that there is no body or income source to replace maintenance funding of National Trails and for the National Trail family to be more effective at income generation they will require more investment, from Natural England, not less.
  - Natural England has significantly reduced its National Trail staff levels to the point that their role as National Trail Champion is ineffective. This is evidenced by the fact that Natural England have not published a National Trails Annual Report since 2013/2014 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-trails-annual-report
• Natural England has declined to confirm its role as National Trail Champion and what this includes due to its reduced staffing levels and own funding uncertainty.

• Natural England created a ‘New Deal’ three year agreement with Trail Partnerships in 2013, this expired in 2016 and has not be replaced/updated or renewed. Effectively leaving National Trails without an agreement.

• The New Deal agreement by Natural England included a three-year funding cycle has not been forthcoming and although Defra has committed funding until 2017-2018, future funding past this date is currently unclear. This leaves National Trails ‘trading insolvently’ when the annual maintenance grant is not confirmed by the 1st January each year, it is typical for Natural England to leave this confirmation of funding until very close to or after the start of the financial year. This prevents National Trails from effectively planning ahead, thereby getting greater value for money and using the funds to leverage further funding. This appears to be at odds with Conservation 21 which aims to work in trusted, shared plans .. that look to the longer term.

• Natural England have committed the funds to create the England Coast Path but not to maintain it. The pressure of maintaining more National Trail with no additional funding puts existing and new National Trails, including the England Coast Path, in jeopardy.

The solution

In the short term, to ensure the future of the National Trails is safeguarded, National Trails ask that:

• DEFRA upholds the Natural England agreement and commits to an ongoing three year funding cycle
• Defra maintains the total investment of £1.69 million each year for the 13 existing National Trails until 2021
• Defra provides staged funding for the England Coast Path as it opens: (2017/18 £0.13 million; 2018/19 £0.89 million; 2019/20 £1.39 million; 2020/21 £1.49 million)

And in the medium term Defra and Natural England work with National Trails to ensure there is an effective countryside access body and National Trail Champion in the future

KEY FACTS

• There are 14 National Trails in England including the new England Coast Path due to be complete in 2020*
• The England Coast Path will be the longest walking trail in Europe**
• The public can enjoy 2,600 miles / 4,160 KM of high quality access through the finest landscapes along National Trails*
The National Trials pass through 6 National Parks, 15 AONB, 2 UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, 7 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, 10 English Cities and 33 National Nature Reserves*

83 million people visit the trails each year – both local and international visitors*

Visitor spend is worth £533 million each year to the economy*

Volunteers spend 3,000 working days per year on the trail, which has been valued at £300,000*

The National Trails website has 2.6 million visitors per year which supports 4,260 businesses*

Walking and riding on the National Trails could save the NHS £167 million through improved health and wellbeing*

93% of visitors left calm and relaxed after a trip to one of the National Trails*

There is growing public demand, for example there has been a 21% increase in visitors to the Norfolk Coast Path in 2016-2017****

The National Trails are award winning with the South West Coast Path being awarded Outstanding Contribution to Tourism and the South Downs Way being recognised as one of the top 10 mountain bike routes in the world*

Trails represent value for money, with government spending on National Trails standing at only 3p per person per year*

£1.6 million Government funding levers in additional funds, doubling spend

Management of all Trails is overseen by a Partnership of stakeholders including charities, highway authorities, user groups and others, e.g. Ramblers, CLA

Nobody in England is more than 52 miles away from a National Trail***

* National Trails Infographic background data

** [www.nationaltrail.co.uk](http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk)

*** Distance From National Trails in England – Heat Map

**** Norfolk County Council (Environment Team)

**National Trails represented**

**Cleveland Way**  Spanning 109 miles, this trail starts at Helmsley, North Yorkshire and ends at Filey, North Yorkshire – taking an average of 9 days to complete.

**Cotswold Way**  Spanning 102 miles, this trail starts at Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire and ends at Bath, Somerset – taking an average of 7-10 days to complete.

**Hadrian’s Wall Path**  Spanning 84 miles, this trail starts at Wallsend, Tyne and Wear and ends at Bowness on Solway, Cumbria – taking an average of 6-7 days to complete.

**North Downs Way**  Spanning 153 miles, this trail starts at Farnham, Surrey and ends at Dover, Kent – taking an average of 12 days to complete.
Offa’s Dyke Path  Spanning 177 miles, this trail starts at Chepstow, Monmouthshire and ends at Prestatyn, Denbighshire – taking an average of 14 days to complete.

Pedders Way and Pedders Way and Spanning 90 miles, this trail starts at Knettishall, Suffolk and ends at Cromer,

Norfolk Coast Path  Norfolk – taking an average of 7 days to complete.

Pennine Bridleway  Spanning 205 miles, this trail starts at White Peak area, Derbyshire and ends at Howgill Fells, Cumbria – taking an average of 1-14+ days to complete by bike or variable times by horse.

Pennine Way  Spanning 268 miles, this trail starts at Edale, Derbyshire and ends at Kirk Yethholm, Scottish Border – taking an average of 16-19 days to complete.

South Downs Way  Spanning 100 miles, this trail starts at Winchester, Hampshire and ends at Eastbourne, East Sussex – taking an average of 8-9 days to complete walking and 2-3 days by bike.

South West Coast Path  Spanning 630 miles, this trail starts at Minehead, Somerset and ends at Poole, Dorset taking an average of 30 days to complete walking fast or 7-8 weeks at a leisurely pace.

Thames Path  Spanning 184 miles, this trail starts near Cricklade, Wiltshire and ends at the Thames Barrier, Greenwich, London – taking an average of 14 days to complete.

The Ridgeway  Spanning 87 miles, this trail starts at Avebury, Wiltshire and ends at lvinghoe Beacon, Buckinghamshire – taking an average of 6 days to complete.

Yorkshire Wolds Way  Spanning 79 miles, this trail starts at Hessel, East Riding of Yorkshire and ends at Filey Brigg, North Yorkshire – taking an average of 5-6 days to complete.

12 September 2017