Our Climate Crisis Commitment: A Net Zero Carbon Landscape

1. **The Urgent Imperative**
   As the IPCC's sixth Assessment Report[1] makes it clear; change is unavoidable as land use, buildings and communities are affected by climate change. Many of CNL's[2] defining characteristics which we are charged with conserving and enhancing are threatened by climate change. We should acknowledge the likelihood of significant impacts on farming, soil health, biodiversity, tree cover and traditional buildings, and fulfil our duties in the light of a responsibility to minimise long term damage. Only re-stabilising the climate can avoid the worst effects, and this requires an urgent, deep and collective response. We must play our full part in that response. We should deploy our resources to shape the extent and nature of CNL's contribution to mitigation in ways which are most compatible with our objectives. Better to propose a landscape-led vision now, than react to multiple initiatives and site-by-site proposals. This aligns to our Vision's commitment *"to find outcomes which offer the most positive benefits and the least negative impact."*

2. **Past Activities and Current Policies**
   We started integrating climate change into our policies and activities in 2009, in particular developing our Climate Change Strategy in 2012 and revising the Landscape Strategy and Guidelines in 2016. Climate change has also featured in previous Management Plans and the current Management Plan, adopted in 2018, has specific policies on climate change (see *Annex i* for details), and others to specifically support it in detail, e.g. Natural and Cultural Capital and Ecosystem Services (CC4), Soils (CC5), and Biodiversity (CE7).

   All AONBs adopted The Colchester Declaration in 2019. This stated that *"Climate change is the biggest threat to humanity and one of the greatest threats to biodiversity. Designated landscapes offer some of the most powerful solutions to the challenges of climate change"*. In particular, through the Declaration, all AONBs pledged, *"To ensure all AONB management plans include meaningful measures around climate change mitigation and adaptation, including clear, measurable targets to support Net Zero."* This proposal will deliver on that commitment.

3. **Overview of Proposed Approach**
   The revised Climate Change Strategy (currently being drafted) details our position on a wide range of topics. It clearly sets out the challenges and our views on potential solutions. What is needed now is:
   a. An evidence-base to determine CNL's current emissions, and the potential mitigation impacts of currently and imminently practical land use changes and other solutions.
   b. Consider different combinations of those solutions to determine what we consider to be the optimum mix for reducing emissions and increasing carbon capture and storage while conserving and enhancing CNL's natural beauty and maintaining the social and economic vitality of its local communities.
   c. Encourage our partners to adopt those combinations as they develop their responses to the climate emergency.

[1] https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/#SPM
[2] Throughout this document, CNL refers to the Cotswolds landscape, not to the organisation

It is our commitment to identify a scenario which allows us to endorse a path to Net Zero emissions (or better) by 2050 (or sooner).

4. **Why Should We Go That Far?**
There will be unavoidable pressures to very significantly reduce CNL's UK carbon emissions.

    a. There is a legal obligation nationally to reach Net Zero by 2050[3], with 78% of that reduction by 2035[4]. In order to achieve this, the Climate Change Committee has estimated that approximately 21% of agricultural land in England will need to change function to forestry, energy crops, peatland or agroforestry[5]. COP26 is likely to accelerate the extent and pace of activities by public authorities, NGOs and communities.

    b. Many public bodies have declared a climate emergency. Indeed, our own Vision acknowledges that, *"We are in midst of a global climate emergency and an ecological crisis".* The local authorities within CNL have declared a climate emergency[6]. For example, Gloucestershire County Council has committed to the County's emissions being net zero by 2050, starting with a challenging 80% reduction by 2030, and land use changes is one of eight themes for achieving this. Cotswold District Council is reviewing its Local Plan to ensure it is "green to its core"[7], and notably, its area has the highest total and per capita emissions of any district council in Gloucestershire. Both Stroud[8] and Bath & North East Somerset[9] councils have pledged to achieve carbon neutrality in their districts by 2030. West Oxfordshire District Council's strategy highlights two ways of reducing emissions: converting to renewable energy and *"changing land use, selecting crops, restoring and creating new ecosystems as a way of increasing carbon storage in soils and plants and developing long-term carbon sequestration."*[10]

    c. We need to significantly increase CNL's carbon literacy, and our partners' and stakeholders'. This is essential for good decision making. Accordingly, we need to lead a discussion about:
        - The balance of changing land management (adjusting existing practices, for example, livestock/arable rotations; planting fruit or nut bearing trees in pasture; forage trees for livestock) and changing land use (the land's function, for example from food production to woodland or renewable energy).
        - The impacts of changing land use to carbon sequestration, carbon trading and renewable energy on food security and of offshoring the carbon emissions from producing and transporting our food. We should also ensure such debates recognise that farming created many of the Cotswolds' valued landscape characteristics, so land use changes need to consider how best to contribute to climate change mitigation and adaption, alongside the critical role of farming and food production.

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[3] Climate Change Act 2008 (2050 Target Amendment) Order 2019
[4] Sixth Carbon Budget
[5] Committee on Climate Change (2020) Land use: Policies for Net Zero UK
[6] https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/planning-and-environment/climate-change/gloucestershires-climate-change-strategy/
[7] https://news.cotswold.gov.uk/news/plan-to-improve-green-and-open-spaces-shared-with-cotswold-district-residents-for-their-feedback
[8] https://www.stroud.gov.uk/news-archive/this-is-how-well-lead-the-way-to-help-the-stroud-district-become-carbon-neutral-by-the-year-2030
[9] https://www.bathnes.gov.uk/climate-emergency
[10] Climate Change Strategy for West Oxfordshire 2021-2025

- The probable results of forces we cannot control, notably reforms to the subsidy systems and global food markets.

Given this, it is untenable for us to expect to be successful in arguing for no or little change to land use and buildings within CNL. Rather, we should get ahead of the game, and offer a positive landscape-scale vision of how CNL can contribute to these targets. And since many authorities are just beginning to determine what actions are required, this is the optimum time for us to inform and influence them and other stakeholders.

5. **Leadership**

This is also an opportunity to demonstrate leadership, both locally and nationally.

Nearly 30% of the UK has some form of protected status, and so a Net Zero UK is likely impossible without some land use and visual changes in those protected areas, beyond what climate adaption will force upon them anyway. We can lead nationally by acting as a pathfinder - developing a framework for how protected landscape organisations can devise an evidence-based climate change commitment which combines the imperatives to reduce GHG emissions while conserving and enhancing natural beauty. Furthermore, by finding an acceptable scenario for CNL becoming carbon neutral, we could be the first to commit to becoming a Net Zero (or 'Climate Positive') Landscape.

We would also provide leadership locally to shape the future by constructively engaging local authorities, land managers, communities, NGOs and other stakeholders to understand climate change's unavoidable consequences for CNL, and how we believe the landscape should evolve to mitigate the risk of even greater, irreversible negative impacts if climate change is not tackled.

6. **National Association of AONB Work Already Underway**

The Collaborative Climate Change Action Programme launched early this summer (2021). It was brought together by the Collaborative Advisory Group with the aim of generating tangible action on Climate Change mitigation and adaptation across the network of AONBs. Through consultation and research, the Group prioritise five key areas of work: agriculture, nature-based solution, building design and planning, renewable energy, and sustainable tourism and transport. The sub-groups are independent but are supported by members of the Collaboration Advisory Group.

This approach needs a framework for bringing contributions of these mitigation techniques together to propose a solution which maximising their effectiveness while remaining compatible with protecting our precious landscapes.

7. **Proposed Process**

a. Calculate current GHG emissions, carbon capture and storage within the CNL using tools which are affordable but still generate sufficient accuracy to make defendable and actionable conclusions. This model would likely include farming and forestry, energy use and transport (residents and visitors). We would tender for this work to be completed by qualified consultants.

b. Evaluate the potential emission reductions and increased carbon capture and storage from different changes to land use and management, buildings, low carbon energy generation, transport, etc. which are either already or imminently available. This would include identifying reversible options which can be adapted/removed if more landscape-benign solutions emerge. For example, solar arrays and wind turbines can be decommissioned.

c. Model different combinations of those options in order to assess the total extent to which emissions can be reduced (and how to reduce them) and how to increase carbon

capture and storage while respecting the objective to conserve and enhance CNL's natural beauty. Discuss these options with partners like local authorities, land managers, local nature partnerships and other NGOs, and community groups. Ideally, this would result in a collective ambition, but ultimately, the policy would remain ours, while dependent upon collaborating with others to deliver. These discussions should form part of the development of the next Management Plan (2023-28).

d. Set an achievable target with the associated, landscape-led changes to achieve it. These conclusions will be reflected in the next Management Plan by setting out how we will work with stakeholders to promote our preferred scenario, and avoid those we deemed incompatible with conserving and enhancing.

8. **Resources**
   We will seek funding to be a pathfinder for how protected landscapes undertake this process. This would be promoted as a 'Net-Zero (or Climate Positive) Landscape Officer'. We will also seek funding to commission specialist analysis. The work should also have a clear link to existing funding that prioritises climate action, e.g. Farming in Protected Landscapes.

9. **Timing**
   Ideally, we would announce this commitment in October 2021 to coincide with the COP26 meeting and alongside launching the public consultation on the draft Climate Change Strategy.

ENDS

Annex i: Climate Change Policies in 2018-2023 Management Plan

Outcome 3 (Climate Change): The impacts of climate change on the Cotswolds AONB will have been mitigated and the AONB will be more resilient to these impacts.

Policy CC7: Climate Change – Mitigation

1. Greenhouse gas emissions should be reduced through a range of measures, including:
   - improving energy efficiency, including building energy-efficient new buildings and retrofitting existing buildings;
   - improving energy conservation;
   - using small-scale forms of renewable energy that are compatible with the purpose of AONB designation;
   - reducing car use by: encouraging – and facilitating – the use of walking, cycling and public transport; encouraging home-based working (including the provision of high speed broadband); locating new development close to public transport hubs; ensuring the provision of affordable housing to reduce the need to commute into the Cotswolds for work;
   - providing a network of charging points across the AONB for electric cars;
   - purchasing locally produced food products and services.

2. Climate change mitigation should be a key consideration in all new development, infrastructure and transport provision.

3. Climate change mitigation should be a key component of land management practices and future agri-environment, land management and rural development support mechanisms in the AONB.

Policy CC8: Climate Change – Adaptation

1. The risks posed by the consequences of climate change should be reduced through a range of adaptation measures, including those identified in relevant policies of this Management Plan.

2. Climate change adaptation should be a key consideration in all new development, infrastructure and transport provision.

3. Climate change adaptation should be a key component of land management practices and future agri-environment, land management and rural development support mechanisms in the AONB.

4. Further research into the predicted impacts of climate change on the Cotswolds AONB should be undertaken. This research should be used to advise and inform sustained behavioural change to adapt to climate change and conserve and enhance the AONB.