

ACHIEVING BETTER FOR OUR NSAs
Non-statutory guidance and NSA Management Strategies

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Introduction

1. We have discussed this morning the new legislative provisions and the possible content of Ministerial guidance. This afternoon's workshop will focus on what other guidance would be useful to support the NSA designation.
2. **You might ask why we need other guidance?** – Essentially the scope of the statutory guidance is constrained by what the legislation requires, which is for legal minds to consider and advise on. But clearly there are other matters that fall outwith the legislation, such as the preparation of management strategies, and more detailed technical guidance that would not be appropriate for Ministerial guidance. I want to explore what the scope of this guidance might be, focusing on management strategies, boundary issues, and the need to raise understanding of NSAs.

Management Strategies

3. **Background** - Its worth reflecting that the original proposals for NSAs back in 1978 included the preparation of 'planning strategies', alongside addressing land management, so there is nothing new in the idea of Management Strategies. Unfortunately limited effort was put into these positive and pro-active actions for NSAs – but now there is the opportunity to address this. SNH's proposal to prepare Management Strategies during the original review received wide spread support, and the Scottish Executive recognised their value in last years discussion paper. But what guidance will be useful?
4. **Context setting** – We have always been conscious that this is another strategy being added to an already crowded shelf, so it will be important to set out the rationale for its preparation, and the principles underpinning its preparation. The role of NSAs in contributing to social and economic objectives could usefully be articulated, as well as the strong contribution to wider environmental objectives. The relationship between the Management Strategy and existing plans and

strategies needs to be explained, as does any role for SEA. What status should the strategy be given – we have heard that the D&G strategy has been adopted as supplementary planning guidance – should this be more widely encouraged?.

5. **Product – what does a management strategy need to cover?** Whilst there is more than one way to present a Strategy, our view is that there are a number of key elements that any strategy would need to contain. These are:
 - identification of the **special qualities** that have merited the area being designated
 - set out a **Vision** for its future management and how the landscape will continue to evolve over the next 20-25 years
 - define the **Objectives** by which this will be achieved
 - present the **Actions** required to deliver the safeguard and enhancement desired
 - and establish how progress will be **Monitored and Reviewed**
6. We do not consider that the guidance should be prescriptive in how these building blocks are presented, but options such as presenting issues thematically (as in the pilots) or spatially (perhaps using landscape character areas) could be presented.
7. **Process – how do we prepare a strategy?** Again, there is more than one way to prepare a strategy, but there are some common guiding principles. To achieve wider ownership a partnership approach is required. Communities within NSAs have a key contribution to make to the strategies, as do national representative bodies. Time is required to enable meaningful engagement. And the process needs to fit the circumstances of the particular NSA, taking account of the issues and communities present.
8. The lead lies with the local authority, and recruiting a NSA officer to drive the process forward has been identified as crucial from the pilots. The guidance could cover:
 - the role of the local authority and NSA Officer
 - the role of other stakeholders and their contribution to the process, perhaps identifying who the stakeholders are that should be involved in preparing the plan

- possible structures such as advisory or steering groups to guide the work, and mechanisms that can be used (workshops, field visits, questionnaires, etc) for engaging effectively with the full range of interests, and the potential to ‘piggyback’ on other processes
 - the broad timescale required to produce a strategy
 - how to seek endorsement or commitment to the finished strategy from the range of bodies involved
9. So to some extent we envisage the non-statutory guidance will be a bit of a ‘how to manual’, building on the experience of the two pilots but also similar processes that we should learn from.
 10. **Practicalities?** The Scottish Government has just written to Directors of Planning and SNH will be meeting in the near future with local authorities to discuss how we can take forward the preparation of Management Strategies. We recognise that resourcing this will not be easy for local authorities – the sums are significant but not excessive. We estimate total costs of around £2.2 million to prepare strategies for the whole suite.
 11. SNH’s grant scheme identifies the preparation of Management strategies and putting them into practice as eligible for grant support. Our ‘special places’ scheme offers up to 75% funding towards the cost of preparing strategies, employing NSA officers and carrying out projects identified in the strategy.
 12. We still consider that preparing all strategies can be completed within a 5 year timescale if there is a will, but those local authorities with significant numbers of NSAs will find this more burdensome than others.

Boundaries

13. One issue that never fails to attract criticism when discussing NSAs are their boundaries – or rather the nature of some of the boundaries. Getting the boundaries right is important for the credibility of any designation. The boundaries of a landscape designation are inherently difficult to define, as the qualities being identified rarely have precise limits but vary over a zone of transition.

14. **CCS approach**

- follow ridge lines to reflect visual tracts
- use identifiable features such as watercourses
- where no useful physical feature, straight lines were drawn
- in some cases OS grid lines used (eg Assynt Coigach NSA)
- in some cases used existing NNR or National Park Direction Area boundary
- boundaries were not drawn to exclude detractors where there was prospect for improvement
- coastal boundaries caused some difficulties, leading to a classification of different types of coastal tracts (islands, enclosed tracts, open tracts, coastal fringe)

15. **Process** - NSAs are nearly 30 years old, and even if we did not have controversy around straight line boundaries there is some merit in confirming that boundaries today are still relevant. But we are wary of the potentially large resource and time commitment that a full scale review would require, when the focus of effort needs to be on better management of these areas.

16. But some refinement of boundaries would certainly be beneficial, and we propose undertaking this in parallel with the Management Strategy process. Building on the special qualities work discussed earlier, and the increased understanding of stakeholders that it is hoped will be developed through the management strategy process, confirmation of the existing boundary or recommendations on amending the boundary can be made. At this time we do not envisage wholesale revision of the suite will be required, but rather refinement to provide a more robust boundary.

17. **Approach** - The approach we take to defining boundaries will continue to be based on seeking to encompass the special qualities that merit national designation, but with a degree of pragmatism to identify practical boundaries that will enable their special care. Some of the issues that still need to be discussed include:

- our approach to separate but contiguous NSAs, that were identified because of their distinct character

- how best to define the seaward limit of coastal NSAs
- what physical features should be used to define the boundary

Building awareness of the NSA designation

18. Finally, I want touch to on the need to build wider understanding and awareness of the NSA designation. This is considered critical to establishing the support for the designation that is required to underpin effort for its safeguard. SNH is conscious that there is a degree of scepticism about the value of the designation, given that it has not been as effective as we might have hoped, and it has not established itself a high profile in the past 30 years. But SNH's original review indicated strong support for addressing these issues, and the work in Dumfries and Galloway suggests how awareness of the designation, and support for it, can be built up in a relatively short period.

19. SNH is in the process of developing a strategy to raise awareness and understanding of NSAs. This identifies the need for more effort by SNH to promote the suite as a whole, to complement work that we hope will be identified for individual NSAs through the management strategy process. We have something to learn from the work in Dumfries and Galloway where use of a simple design style promotes a readily identified product. How we can best promote NSAs as a family with some coherence, whilst ensuring each NSA can establish and promote its own identity, needs some further thought.

20. In thinking about awareness raising and promotion we need to be mindful of the audiences we are trying to reach, and the messages we want to get across. One audience is the professional one – the planners, consultants and other stakeholders who come across NSAs in their professional life. That's all of us here – and you may have some thoughts on this for discussion in the workshop.