

**WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT****DEPARTMENT FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS****Governance arrangements of the English National Park Authorities and the Broads Authority****13 September 2011**

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**Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Natural Environment and Fisheries (Richard Benyon)** The nine National Parks in England, along with the Broads, represent some of our finest landscapes which have been a source of inspiration, challenge, and reassurance to our citizens over many generations. Each now has an independent authority, constructed along local authority lines, to maximise the benefits which we all derive from these special areas. In the Coalition's Programme for Government we said that "We will review the governance arrangements of National Parks in order to increase local accountability"

That commitment was honoured by a public consultation which ran from 9 November 2010 until 1 February 2011. In the consultation document we made clear that the Government did not intend to remove or replace the Authorities but was rather looking for ways in which their governance arrangements could be improved. We also made clear that there could be variety between authorities - this would allow governance to better reflect their individual circumstances and histories and be consistent with the Coalition Government's commitment to decentralisation and localism.

I am today responding to the NPAs' proposals by placing on Defra's website and in the Library of the House a list of the proposals made by the NPAs and my response to them.

Central to this consultation was the question of accountability and the ultimate accountability is of course through the ballot box. Ever since the original legislation was being enacted in 1995, there have been calls for some members to be directly elected and that already happens in the Scottish NPAs. I have concluded that the time has now come for us to explore that option more thoroughly in England. I therefore propose to bring forward legislation which will allow for the possibility of elections in the National Park Authorities and the Broads Authority. Initially we propose to apply the new legislation in two NPAs on a pilot basis, namely the New Forest and the Peak District NPAs which provide different contexts on which to assess the impact of directly elected members.

Defra will be talking to the New Forest and Peak District NPAs in more detail about their pilots, covering in particular the number of members to be directly elected and the way they can be accommodated without increasing the overall size of those Authorities.

Other changes include: altering the composition of the Dartmoor, Lake District and Exmoor Authorities; some changes to the procedure for selecting 'national' members (within the requirements of the OCPA code); removing the Secretary of State's role in confirming parish appointments; in some NPAs (but not all) making non-councillors eligible for parish seats; applying a maximum limit to the period which all members may serve; requiring annual reports on how well the members of each Authority have collectively performed and endorsing a number of changes which NPAs can make under their existing powers, for example strengthening links between members and particular areas of the Park or improving meeting arrangements. I also propose further work in some areas.

A number of the actions I have outlined will require formal consultation and others require further development in cooperation with relevant bodies such as the NPAs and the Local Government Association. An implementation plan is being prepared which will present this information in tabular form and will be available on Defra's website - [www.defra.gov.uk](http://www.defra.gov.uk)