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for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

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Mr Richard Barlow
Chairman
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Dear Mr Barlow,

Thank you for your letter of 25 January to the Secretary of State about nature conservation in National Parks and AONBs. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area and I apologise for the delay in doing so. Defra is currently dealing with high volumes of correspondence due to COVID-19. Thank you for your understanding during this challenging time.

As you noted in your letter, the Landscapes Review highlighted that more could be done for nature within National Parks. We recognise that the proportion of SSSIs in favourable condition within National Parks tends to be lower than the national average. This is largely because they tend to be located in the uplands where habitats, notably blanket bog, are more likely to be in unfavourable condition. It is also worth noting, however, that the proportion of SSSIs in favourable condition in lowland National Parks is higher than the national average.

The 25 Year Environment Plan commits us to restoring 75% of our one million hectares of terrestrial and freshwater protected sites to favourable condition by 2042. Defra and Natural England are working with National Park Authorities, landowners, managers and others to improve the condition of our protected sites as a core component of a Nature Recovery Network. Alongside this, National Parks England has also recently published their vision to be “places where wildlife flourishes, and habitats are maintained, restored, and expanded” within their Delivery Plan for Wildlife.

We will also continue to provide funding for the positive management of SSSIs through our agri-environment schemes and are developing new schemes that reward farmers and land managers for producing public goods, including thriving plants and wildlife. In addition, we have recently announced a new package of support to farmers and land managers in protected landscapes in the Agricultural Transition Plan, which may also support the improvement of SSSI condition within National Parks.

The Landscapes Review set out a compelling vision for more beautiful, more biodiverse and more accessible National Parks, and the Government is committed to ensuring our protected landscapes flourish as havens for nature. We are taking time to consider the review's recommendations on improving National Parks for wildlife, and we are currently working with partner organisations to inform and develop our response to the review, which we will publish in due course.

Yours sincerely,
John Gardner
