



National  
Trust

A Climate for Change:

Executive Summary



**The National Trust is committed to promoting and caring for places of nature, beauty and history to benefit everyone.**

Climate change is an existential threat. It offers significant challenge to the whole of society, and therefore the functioning of the Trust. How we respond and act in the present will define our future. In order to address these challenges, we are building climate adaptation into our operations and changing our processes, practices and structures. We are working to the best of our ability, not only to reduce the risk to the places that people care for, but also to try to find positive opportunities in this period of change.

Adapting to climate change is therefore essential if the Trust is to live up to its founding purpose, to ensure that the places we care for are available to enjoy for everyone, now and in the future. This report sets out the importance of undertaking climate change adaptation, how the National Trust is implementing it, and the further action we believe needs to be taken by governments.



**Why adaptation is important**

Climate change presents the single biggest threat to the places in our care and the single biggest challenge to achieving our mission.

Left: A pony grazing on Whiteford Burrows, Swansea

Climate change will have impacts across the UK. According to the Climate Change Committee:

By 2050 our **average winter** will be

 **+1° warmer**  **+5% wetter**

meaning more heavy rainfall events and more severe flooding.

Our **average summers** will be

 **+10% drier**  **+1.5° hotter**

which could bring longer droughts and water shortages.

Sea levels will have risen

 **+10–30cm**

since the year 2000, bringing with them serious impacts for our coasts.<sup>[3]</sup>

Even if efforts to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees are successful, the pace and scale of change will still impact the National Trust in a wide variety of ways. From changing conditions in our storerooms or showrooms, to more frequent flooding and wildfire of increasing intensity across our landscapes, the physical

outcomes will be stark. But the effects on our business may also be serious, as visitor patterns alter in response to changing weather and supply lines change. Like many others, we will have to think differently about how and where we invest charitable funds.

Adapting to these changes will not be easy. We operate across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the impacts of climate change will be felt differently in every location. Long-term solutions cost money, and draw already limited budgets away from current, everyday problems. We also need to consider how our actions at one place could have impacts elsewhere. And fundamentally, nobody can predict the future, so while we can model possible changes, a level of uncertainty is inevitable.

In fact, the only real certainty is that now is the time to rise to the challenge. We must not view the pursuit of adaptation as an admission of defeat in the battle against climate change. Rather, it is a recognition of an already changing reality, a way to make sensible, practical preparations and take positive action. It is also the responsible thing to do. By acting now, we may be able to avoid more drastic and costly interventions later.

**Right:** View of the storm-damaged cliffs and beach at Birling Gap, East Sussex



## What the National Trust is doing

The National Trust looks after over 250,000 hectares of land, more than 28,000 buildings and built structures, and 780 miles of coastline. As such we have an enormous range of responsibilities to our land, buildings, nature, and people.

The acceleration of human-induced climate change may be a more recent phenomenon, but caring for places through periods of change and upheaval has always been at the heart of the National Trust throughout its 128-year history. We have always understood that conservation is about managing inevitable change. It is about looking forwards as much as it is about looking back, and making decisions about what and how we care for things for current and future generations to enjoy.

In 2005 the National Trust released two major reports that set the stage for incorporating adaptation into our conservation approach. The first was *Forecast Changeable*, our initial attempt to come to terms with climate change at the places we care for. The second was *Shifting Shores*, which shared the National Trust's experience of dealing with coastal change and rising sea levels as the nation's largest coastal caretaker. Our coasts are arguably the first frontier for the impacts of climate change in the UK, and this report provided a call to action for the strengthening of the nations' response.

Since then, the Trust has been on a climate adaptation journey. We don't have all the answers, but we're constantly learning more about climate impacts and finding ways to meet the challenges head-on. We know we need to learn and share in equal measure, across our teams on the ground, with our sector, research and business partners and with governments across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, so that together we can create a better and more resilient future. This report looks at six core areas where the Trust is experiencing change and implementing adaptation:

**Coastal communities; Visitor operations; Historic buildings and collections; Nature restoration; Gardens and parklands; and Water in the landscape.**

Our working examples are many and varied. From employing traditional methods, such as slate hanging on the gables of Dyffryn Mymbyr in Eryri (Snowdonia), to working with farmers to adapt their land by restoring peatlands and planting trees, like at Darnbrook Farm in the Yorkshire Dales. We are also employing nature-based solutions, such as re-meandering Goldrill Beck in the Lake District, simultaneously absorbing peak flooding and restoring nature and carbon-rich habitats. To achieve all this, we're making changes ourselves and improving our ability to work in partnership with other landowners, tenants, public bodies and governments.

Our experience tells us that there's rarely a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to climate adaptation. As a consequence, we have developed a range of ways to put climate adaptation at the heart of our business. In 2021, working with partners, we launched our Climate Hazard Map. This helped us flag potential climate risks across our places, such as flooding and coastal erosion, crucially to a new and much greater level of accuracy and detail. This tool is now central to how we plan our adaptation responses.

We have further developed adaptation pathways for the places in our care, using the 'Adaptation Handrail'. The Handrail helps our places to use the Hazard Map data to assess likely impacts and their consequences. We identify potential difficult decision points and work backwards to formulate a series of appropriate actions for different scenarios. Trigger points are then established to determine the timing for discussion and intervention, which are monitored by our Property Observation Tool.



**Left:** Hazard Map layer showing future risk presented to heritage sites across the UK from slope failure

Our holistic approach is driven by seven principles:

- 1 **Every choice we make** will take account of the need to be resilient and adaptable to a changing climate.
- 2 We're **embedding our approach** into everyday operations because climate change is happening alongside other social and ecological changes.
- 3 There's no **'end goal'** to adapting to climate change – it's about developing a resilient way of thinking, and the ability to make confident decisions when we need to.
- 4 We are **driven by research and evidence**. We will test, try and share new approaches.
- 5 We **learn from the past** at every opportunity. Previous generations have much to teach us.
- 6 We **work with nature** – rather than against it – wherever possible.
- 7 We work in **partnership with others**.



Right: Malhamdale, Yorkshire



## What we want to see happen next

The Trust will play our part, but we know we cannot do this alone. And as much as partnership on the ground is important, so too is the support of governments across the UK. Our experience is that the current framework of laws and funding is not yet geared to support climate adaptation actions. More extensive and decisive action is urgently required. Recent years have seen policy and legislative progress on the environment across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Wales led the way with Prosperity for All: A Climate Conscious Wales in 2019. Since then, we have seen the UK Environment Act 2021, and Northern Ireland's Climate Change Act 2022. All are steps in the right direction.

However, adaptation has mostly remained a lesser explored and secondary consideration in environmental governance. In 2021 the Climate Change Committee found that “the gap between the level of risk we face and the level of adaptation underway has widened. Adaptation action has failed to keep pace with the worsening reality of climate risk”. In this year's 2023 Progress Report they said England remained “strikingly underprepared”.

We therefore need governments in all nations of the UK to take climate adaptation far more seriously and help us and others to adapt to changes by creating a sympathetic legislative and regulatory framework.

This report sets out four key areas where action is needed across the UK. We also offer some further detail and additional asks of individual national governments in Westminster, Cardiff and Belfast (the three nations that the National Trust operates within).

Firstly, it's vital that we have **effective legal frameworks, targets and duties for climate adaptation in every nation.**

In Westminster we think that means new legislation, with a **Climate Resilience Bill** to create national targets for adaptation and a statutory duty on public bodies to make adaptation a key factor in decision making. A Minister for climate adaptation either in the Cabinet Office or Treasury would be pivotal. We also need to consider how to involve and engage citizens across the UK in decision-making.

These actions would help put adaptation on an equal footing with mitigation, ensuring we have the right legislation, institutional oversight and duties on ministers and public bodies to galvanise effective action across the UK.

Left: The Drawing Room at Cragside, Northumberland

Secondly, we need **climate-responsive local planning frameworks and greater collaboration between public bodies**, in line with the Climate Change Committee's recommendations that planning systems prioritise future climate resilience.

Thirdly, the Trust is calling for governments to put in place the right **policy and funding to help key sectors adapt and deliver change**.

It's vital to support the sectors most likely to be impacted by climate change and to ensure that those best placed to make the greatest contribution to adaptation on the ground can do so.

For example, agricultural funding schemes must be designed to properly reward farmers and land managers for delivering public goods, and ensure that funding and support is available for appropriate nature-based solutions which deliver adaptation. The tourism sector needs more support to understand and prepare for risks and opportunities, and private businesses need help to ensure they can adapt. Investment in capacity building for climate adaptation will help deliver the green jobs of the future.

Finally, we urge greater **investment in better data and research**, which are essential to help us plan for the future.

We believe there is an opportunity here to pool knowledge, save resources, and facilitate the collaboration of research organisations. To promote this, we support the creation of adaptation observatories that monitor changes in the developing climate and provide data and information support across the sector.

Climate adaptation must be put at the heart of government policy and decision making in all nations of the UK. We hope that this report can be a launch pad for greater emphasis on adaptation, driving it up the political and public agenda, and a catalysing moment for the National Trust, for government, for partners, and for wider society, to properly investigate and implement the many opportunities for action on adaptation.

**Right:** Pennryhn: Visitors at Penrhyn Castle and Garden, Gwynedd, Wales



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