

[Press release: Mark Field visits Sri Lanka to discuss reconciliation, demining and the illegal wildlife trade](#)

During his two day visit he will meet Minister of Foreign Affairs Tilak Marapana, Minister of Finance and Media Mangala Samaraweera, Leader of the Opposition R. Sampanthan, Speaker of Parliament Karu Jayasuriya and Chief Minister of Northern Province C. V. Vigneswaran.

In Colombo he will meet with families affected by enforced disappearances from both the north and south of the country, and hear of their concerns and their hopes for the Office of Missing Persons. He will also meet UK and Sri Lankan education institutions at the British Council to discuss education, and the UK's world-leading role in transnational learning.

In northern Sri Lanka, the Minister will visit a UK-funded demining operation and meet families living on land cleared of mines. He will speak with British demining charity the Halo Trust and hear how UK support for demining has enabled displaced families to return home. He will also visit the British Council teaching centre in Jaffna where he will talk with young people about their aspirations for the future and the importance of education.

Mr Field said:

The UK and Sri Lanka are long-standing friends, and we are committed to supporting Sri Lanka achieve its commitments on reconciliation and human rights. I welcome the Sri Lankan government's commitment to reconciliation and strengthening democracy. I am looking forward to talking with the government and affected communities about the additional steps that are needed to deliver long-term peace and stability for all Sri Lankans

Having hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 2013, Sri Lanka is an obvious partner in defining and driving a shared vision of the Commonwealth, to ensure it is fitted to deliver for all its member states into the future. The UK will host an ambitious and dynamic Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2018, with the purpose of ensuring that the Commonwealth remains on a path that is relevant for the 21st century.

I commend the authorities and all those in Sri Lanka working hard to combat the Illegal Wildlife Trade, and hope to encourage plans to conserve Sri Lanka's unique and beautiful environment.

Follow Foreign Office Minister Mark Field on Twitter @markfielduk

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[News story: Research into national curriculum testing at key stage 2](#)

Ofqual has today (5 October 2017) published [an evaluation of the Standards and Testing Agency's \(STA\) approach to developing key stage 2 reading and maths tests](#), alongside a review of evidence relating to the accessibility of the 2016 key stage 2 reading test. 2016 was the first year of a new suite of tests, which assessed the new primary national curriculum.

The main report evaluates STA's approach to ensuring effective coverage of the knowledge, skills and understanding set out in the new English reading and maths curriculum. It finds that STA's approach is robust and compares favourably to approaches taken in similar tests internationally, while acknowledging that there are aspects of maths and reading that cannot straightforwardly be tested.

The subsidiary review summarises a wide body of evidence and data relating to the accessibility of the 2016 reading test, acknowledging concerns raised by teachers at the time. While standards were set appropriately in 2016, the review suggests that the test seemed to be more challenging than the sample materials provided and a significant minority of pupils did not finish the test. The 2017 reading test did not raise similar accessibility concerns, nevertheless, the review suggests areas that could benefit from further consideration by STA.

Dr Michelle Meadows, Deputy Chief Regulator, said:

We are reassured that STA's approach to sampling from the national curriculum is robust. We have identified specific questions that we will continue to discuss with the STA, to help them to enhance the validity of the reading and maths tests, over time, for all pupils.

In regulating national assessments, Ofqual's objectives are to promote standards and confidence in statutory early years assessments and national curriculum assessments such as those at key stage 1 and key stage 2. We focus on the validity of assessment, in particular, on technical aspects such as test development, standard setting or marking. We also monitor wider activity, such as delivery and risk, at a high-level and we provide advice to inform future approaches to assessment. Whilst we do not approve decisions made by the Standards and Testing Agency, our regulatory review can provide independent post-hoc assurance about assessment quality.

We do not have a role in deciding whether or not there should be particular statutory assessments, or in curriculum policy, accountability policy or internal school assessment.

More information on Ofqual's specific powers and duties in relation to national assessments can be found in our [Regulatory framework for national assessments](#).

[Detailed guide: Areas of outstanding natural beauty \(AONBs\): designation and management](#)

Updated: Improved wording on what Natural England takes into consideration when prioritising designation proposals.

An area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB) is land protected by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW Act). It protects the land to conserve and enhance its natural beauty.

The CROW Act sets out the roles and responsibilities that different organisations must follow to manage AONBs. There are 34 AONBs in England. See the [map of AONBs](#) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This guidance is for England only. Visit the relevant websites for AONB management in [Wales](#) and [Northern Ireland](#).

Natural England's responsibilities

Under the CROW Act, Natural England can make orders to designate AONBs or vary the boundaries of existing ones. These powers apply to England only.

Natural England has the discretion to consider whether to assess and designate an area as an AONB. Natural England will prioritise proposals by considering if:

- evidence suggests the land might meet the natural beauty criterion
- there's local authority agreement that designation is appropriate
- it has the available resource to evaluate the proposal
- it's more important than other corporate priorities

For existing AONBs, Natural England must:

- give advice to local planning authorities on development proposals in an AONB
- consider the conservation and enhancement of AONBs in its work, for example when carrying out land management activities or giving permission for statutory bodies to carry out works in an AONB

Meet the natural beauty criterion

Before Natural England proposes an area becomes an AONB, it must meet the 'natural beauty criterion'. This could be a combination of factors, such as:

- landscape quality, where natural or man-made landscape is good quality
- scenic quality, such as striking coastal landforms
- relative wildness, such as distance from housing or having few roads
- relative tranquillity, where natural sounds, such as streams or birdsong are predominant
- natural heritage features, such as distinctive geology or species and habitat
- cultural heritage, which can include the built environment that makes the area unique, such as archaeological remains or historic parkland

Designation process

To designate an AONB, Natural England must issue an order under section 82 of the CROW Act for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of that area.

Before making an order to designate or vary an AONB, Natural England must:

- decide if a proposal meets the natural beauty criterion
- decide if it's desirable to designate for the purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty
- define a detailed boundary

Natural England must also:

- consult each local authority affected by the proposed order (or variation order)
- publish the proposals in [The Gazette](#) and local newspapers of each affected local authority
- consider all representations made against the proposals and make any necessary modifications
- submit the order to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, including any unresolved representations or objections

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs can confirm, refuse, modify or vary any order made by Natural England to designate or vary the boundary of an AONB.

Local authority responsibilities

Under the CROW Act, you, the relevant local authority, must make sure that all decisions have regard for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB. Your decisions and activities must consider the potential effect it will have within the AONB and land outside its boundary. Read more on [development proposals affecting AONBs](#).

Delegate authority

You can give authority to 'AONB partnerships' to:

- manage an AONB
- create a management plan

You can't give an AONB partnership the authority to make decisions on development proposals or strategic planning (see ['Development proposals affecting AONBs'](#)).

An AONB partnership could be:

- a joint advisory committee
- an AONB committee

You can also request that the Secretary of State establishes a conservation board with delegated powers to manage the AONB for you.

AONB management plans

Each AONB must have a management plan. It must be in place within 3 years of an AONB's designation. A review must take place within 5 years of the start of the plan.

All plans must be available to the public. See the management plans available on each AONB's website through the list of links on the [Landscapes for Life](#) website.

You're responsible for producing and reviewing the plan. Its purpose is to consider conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB with continuity and consistency over time.

The plan should include:

- an assessment of the special quality of the AONB, such as a landscape character assessment that includes its condition and vulnerability to change
- cross reference to existing plans, such as local transport plans or biodiversity action plans
- a strategy, such as a 5 year plan, of how you'll manage change
- other special sites that exist in the AONB, such as scheduled ancient monuments or sites of special scientific interest
- an action plan, for example who's doing what, why and by when
- a monitoring plan to show how you'll measure the AONB's condition and effectiveness of management

Development proposals affecting AONBs

Only local authorities or the Secretary of State can give permission for development in, or affecting, an AONB. As a local authority, you must make sure that any proposals have regard for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB, for example when:

- adding utility services, like gas pipes and telecommunications cables
- creating public access as part of rights of way improvement

You can [consult Natural England](#) where development might have a significant impact. Read guidance on [how to review planning applications in a protected area](#) before you make a planning decision.

You can use AONB management plans to help:

- shape [local](#) or [neighbourhood plans](#)
- make decisions on development proposals

Consult Natural England

Email planning proposals to: consultations@naturalengland.org.uk

Natural England Consultation Service

Hornbeam House

Electra Way

Crewe Business Park

Crewe

Cheshire

CW1 6GJ

[News story: UK takes world stage in fight against marine plastic](#)

Environment Minister Thérèse Coffey has set out how the UK is taking action to tackle marine litter and protect oceans from the effects of climate change at today's 'Our Ocean' conference in Malta.

Speaking in front of heads of state, ministers and NGOs from around the world, the Environment Minister pledged her support to help small island developing states with marine science, research and conservation projects – alongside setting out how the government is continuing the fight at home against the eight million tonnes of plastic that make their way into oceans each year.

The UK's ban on microbeads has been lauded as one of the toughest in the

world and nine billion fewer plastic bags have been distributed since the government introduced a 5p charge. This week the government also issued a [call for evidence](#) on the benefits of reward and return schemes for plastic bottles in a bid to clean up our oceans.

Speaking from Malta, Environment Minister Thérèse Coffey said:

Around the world our oceans are suffering from the blight of plastic pollution and the impacts of climate change.

The UK continues to be a global leader in protecting oceans and marine life – our 5p plastic bag charge has taken nine billion bags out of circulation, our microbeads ban is one of the toughest in the world, and we are now exploring what more we can do to reduce the impact of plastic bottles.

But there is always more we can do – which is why I am meeting with my counterparts in Malta today to pledge my continued support for marine conservation and discuss how we can work together to protect our precious oceans and marine life for future generations.

The [Our Ocean Conference](#), held in Malta from 5-6 October, brings together heads of state, governments, industry and NGOs to discuss marine conservation and agree actions to protect seas and oceans around the world.

Alongside further funding under the [Commonwealth Marine Economies Programme](#) – which began in 2015 to help small island states make the most of their maritime assets and encourage sustainable economic growth – the Environment Minister also announced support for global initiatives to tackle plastic pollution.

These include joining the Global Partnership on Marine Litter – one of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals – as well as signing up to the Global Ghost Gear Initiative, an alliance of the fishing industry, NGOs and government agencies working to solve the problem of lost and abandoned 'ghost' fishing gear that can trap sea life.

£5.2 million has also been granted to marine projects through the two most recent rounds of the Darwin Initiative and Darwin Plus grant schemes – helping to protect coral reefs, set up Marine Protected Areas, encourage sustainable fisheries and increase the resilience of coastal communities to climate change.

While in Malta, Minister Coffey also reiterated the government's commitment to creating a network of marine protected areas around the United Kingdom, alongside reaffirming £4.8 million to drive forward the creation of a 'blue belt' across the UK's Overseas Territories.

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