

Lake District for the Nation Evidence Review

Introduction

The Lake District was designated a national park in 1951. A number of its Special Qualities are relevant to this evidence paper including: a source of artistic inspiration; a model for protecting cultural landscapes; a long tradition of tourism and outdoor activities, and opportunities for quiet enjoyment.

The English Lake District was designated as a World Heritage Site in 2017 with two of its three themes of Outstanding Universal Value - a source of inspiration and the birthplace of the conservation movement – being relevant to this evidence paper.

Relevant outcomes from the Partnership Plan 2020-25

1. We will increase our awareness of the needs and requirements of a diverse audience of people and seek to deliver their priorities over the next five years.
2. We will increase support to help underserved groups and people to access the outdoors and promote the health and wellbeing benefits of the outdoors.
3. We will improve representation of voices developing strategies and corporate processes.
4. We will improve visitors' understanding of how to care for the Lake District and its communities.

Facts, figures, trends

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The concept of creating National Parks can be traced back to William Wordsworth. In the 1835 edition of his 'Guide to the Lakes', he suggested that the Lake District should be regarded as a "sort of national property in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy." This evidence paper provides a review of access to the Lake District, visitor demographics, the value of National Parks to local communities and the nation, and diversity and inclusion.

2. Visitor Demographics and Tourism

- 2.1. The most recent visitor survey (2022)¹ shows a visitor profile that better reflects today's national population in comparison to the last Cumbria Visitor Survey (2018). This illustrates a visitor profile that better reflects that the Lake District is a place for everyone:
- Between 2018 and 2022 the proportion of visitors aged 16-34 has increased from 14% to 22% in the Lake District;
 - Between 2018 and 2022 visitors from minority ethnic communities increased from 2% to 22% in the Lake District;
 - 14% of visitor groups in Cumbria include someone in the party with health issues or a disability that limits their daily activities. This is down from 18% in 2018, but an overall upward trend from 7% in 2012.
- 2.2. The Visitor Survey tells us that the vast majority of visitors have high levels of satisfaction from their visit and that the Lake District continues to be an important source of inspiration:
- There are high levels of visitor satisfaction: 96% of visitors rate their visit as 'very good' or 'good';
 - The Lake District continues to be a source of artistic inspiration and is enjoyed and expressed through a variety of books, photographs, sculptures, paintings and digitally via social media. 31% of visitors partake in cultural activities.
- 2.3. In recent years the ways in which tourists are visiting the Lake District is changing. Length of stay fell from an average of almost 6 nights in 2012 and 2015 and 5 nights in 2018 to just below four nights (at 3.88 nights on average) in 2022.
- 2.4. The 'shoulder seasons' in the Lake District are becoming increasingly popular. Between 2012 and 2023 there was a 51.4% increase in the total number of visitors visiting in January and a 43.5% increase in the total number of visitors visiting in December. Whilst the summer months are still the most popular with tourists, the Cumbria Visitor Research survey shows that 24.5% of visitors would consider visiting again between October and December.
- 2.5. There is no available data to measure the depth of connection of our visitors with the Lake District's designations as both a National Park and World Heritage Site, nor the level of impact of Partner messaging about how to visit sustainability within our unique landscape.
- 2.6. Around a quarter of people surveyed described Cumbria and the Lake District as 'expensive'.²
- 2.7. The per person visitor spend inside the Lake District is higher than for the rest of Cumbria.³
- 2.8. The Destination Management Plan for Cumbria 2024 to 2030⁴ sets out a vision for tourism. This includes ambitions around responsible visiting to benefit the environment and support vibrant communities, achieving sustainable and low carbon tourism, and increasing the value and productivity

¹ Cumbria Tourism Visitor Survey, 2022

² Cumbria Tourism online survey with people who has not visited the area in the last five years, 2023

³ Cumbria Tourism Visitor Survey, 2022

⁴ Destination Management Plan for Cumbria 2024 to 2030 [Destination Management Plan \(DMP\)](#)

of local tourism. These themes are considered in the Communities and Economy evidence paper.

- 2.9. Across the wider area of Cumbria many visitors are local, reflecting the impacts of the pandemic. In 2022, almost a fifth were from within Cumbria, with another 18% from Lancashire, 12% from Yorkshire and the Humber and 10% from the Northeast.

3. Regional and National Health

- 3.1. We know people feel better as a result of their visit to the Lake District. Visitors to the Lake District were asked⁵ the extent (if any) that they felt better mentally and physically from their visit to the Lake District. 72% of visitors said they felt physically better for their visit and 90% said they benefited mentally.
- 3.2. There are a number of major urban populations within 90 minutes travel of the Lake District, including Lancaster, Manchester and Carlisle. These populations often report poorer health statistics compared to England's average.⁶
- 3.3. Level of deprivation is associated with the time children spend outdoors. Those living in the most deprived areas of the UK were less likely to spend time outside compared to those living in more affluent areas. Evidence suggests that there are positive associations between exposure to nature and children's mental and physical health including improved attention levels, mood and cognitive performance.⁷
- 3.4. An Office for National Statistics (ONS) study in 2022 'Health Benefits from Recreation, Natural Capital' found that the number of people who gained health benefits from outdoor exercise has increased 58% between 2009 and 2020.⁸ The effect of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic changed the way people interacted with nature and people within built-up areas visited more diverse areas of nature, as opposed to a green space within their local urban area. The study converts health benefits into an estimate of the avoided healthcare costs to provide a monetary value. In 2020, the annual value of benefits gained from outdoor exercise in the UK was estimated to be £8.4 billion.
- 3.5. Visiting heritage sites was estimated to save over £193.2m to the NHS from the reduction in GP visits and use of mental health services.⁹ Spending time in the historic and natural environment is widely reported to having a significant positive impact on human health.^{10 11}

⁵ Cumbria Tourism Visitor Survey, 2022

⁶ [Growing divide in regional health inequalities exposed, University of Manchester, April 2023](#)

⁷ [How the natural environment can support children and young people, Natural England Evidence Information Note EIN067, 2022](#)

⁸ [ONS: Health benefits from Recreation, Natural Capital 2022](#)

⁹ [Further analysis to value the health and educational benefits of sport and culture | Department for Culture, Media and Sport](#)

¹⁰ [Landscapes Review, Glover, 2019](#)

¹¹ [Green social prescribing improves your mental health, National Academy for Social Prescribing 2024](#)

4. Local People

- 4.1. In the Lake District, 96.7% of residents scored their health as fair, good, or very good and as a result are in typically better health than communities outside the park.¹²
- 4.2. Figure 1 shows the indices of multiple deprivation (IMD) by lower super output area based on the IMD decile. The deciles are produced by ranking the 32,844 Lower-layer Super Output Areas and dividing them into 10 equal-sized groups. Decile 1 represents the nation's most deprived 10 percent and decile 10 represents the least deprived 10 per cent.
- 4.3. Although the Lake District is an area with relatively low levels of deprivation, there is some evidence of deprivation, particularly in parts of the farming community (further information provided in the Farming Evidence paper).
- 4.4. Figure 1 shows that larger settlements outside the park experience high levels of deprivation, including along the coast. For example, Barrow-in-Furness experiences the highest level of deprivation in Cumbria; it falls within the 10% most deprived areas nationally for overall deprivation.
- 4.5. Across the Lake District on average 10.75% of pupils in primary schools are eligible for free school meals (below the national average of 24.6%). Three schools in the Lake District are above the national average for free school meals – Langdale C of E School, St Bega's C of E Primary School and Borrowdale CofE Primary School. However, it is worth noting that these primary schools have low pupil numbers - less than 35 - which skews the percentage data.
- 4.6. One of the greatest long-term health challenges faced in England is tackling obesity. In the Westmorland and Furness Council area 24.8% of adults are obese, and in the Cumberland Council area 26.2% of adults are obese.¹³

¹² [National Park residents, Census, 2021](#)

¹³ [Obesity Profile, Public Health, 2025](#)

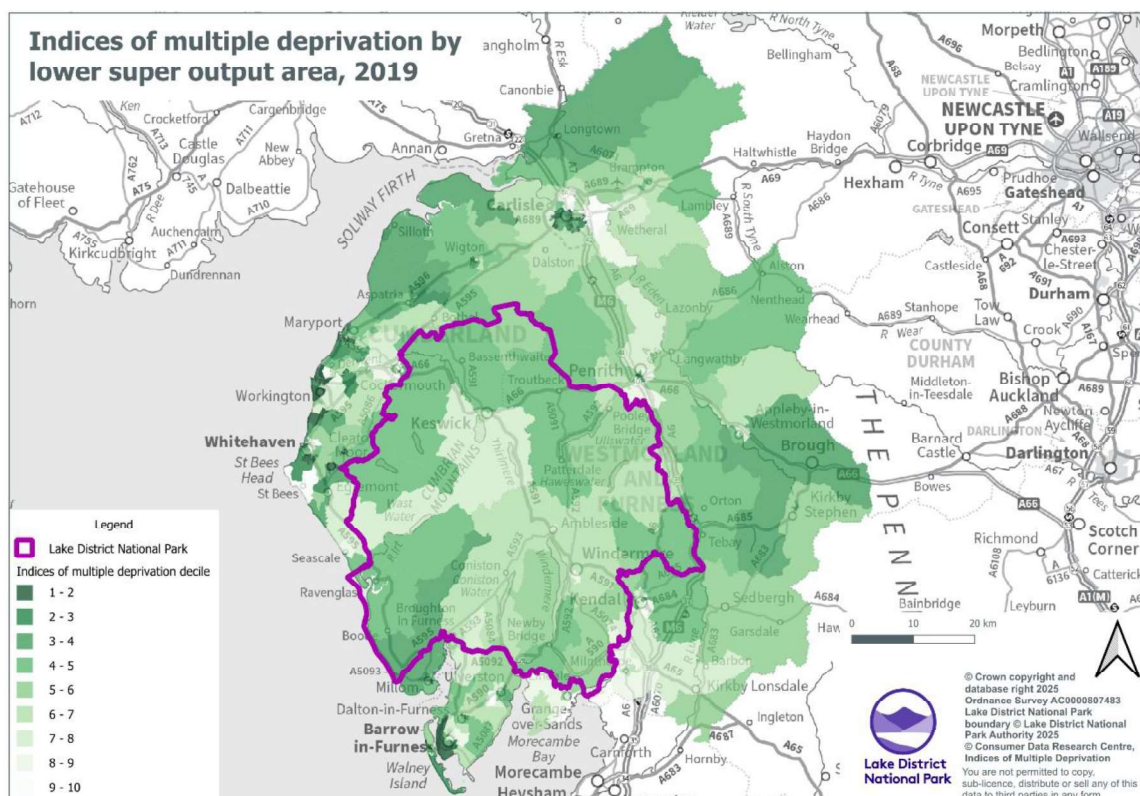


Figure 1 – Indices of multiple deprivation across Cumbria, 2019. A Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) is a geographic area in England and Wales, designed for the publication of small area statistics, typically containing between 1,000 and 3,000 residents and 400 to 1,200 households

5. Access to the Lake District National Park and World Heritage Site

- 5.1. The 2022 Cumbria Visitor Survey found that visitors to the Lake District choose to come to be outdoors (78%), for walking (48%) and for cycling (13%). The Public Rights of Way network is an incredibly important offer to visitors. As well as access for walking, the rights of way network supports a plethora of other activities which rely on rights of way, for example horse riding, mountain biking and others who use them to access a start point - such as for wild swimming and other water recreation. Therefore, the rights of way network is an essential part of the visitor and resident infrastructure and the local economy.
- 5.2. Whilst the Public Rights of Way network may not be the sole reason for our 18 million visitors per year, it is very popular with our visitors and forms the core fabric of the Lake District. The network's standard and quality is fundamental to the extent to which the public understands, benefits from, and sustainably moves around.
- 5.3. There are 3,209km of rights of way (footpaths, bridleways, byways open to all traffic, and restricted byways). Maintenance of the Public Rights of Way network costs over £1.7million per annum. By the end of 2025, the Lake District will include two National Trails: The Coast to Coast and the King Charles III England Coast paths. In addition, there are around 87km of unsurfaced, unclassified roads.

- 5.4. On average, 59% of rights of way are assessed as 'easy to use' (up from 56% in 2022 but down from 79% in 2018)¹⁴.
- 5.5. 52% of the land (124,726 ha) is designated as 'open access'.¹⁵
- 5.6. Erosion of the rights of way network on the high fells from people, coupled with severe weather events and climate change, is causing ugly scars and environmental damage in the Lake District's fragile mountains. The Fix the Fells programme (the core partners for which are part of the Lake District National Park Partnership) tackles this erosion problem by repairing and maintaining 344 upland paths, covering 410 miles (661 km). Delivery of the Fix the Fells programme requires approximately £750,000 of annual investment.
- 5.7. There is currently no established set of indicators to assess whether our visitor infrastructure is sufficient to support all visitor needs.
- 5.8. The Destination Management Plan (DMP)¹⁶ includes references to visitor's enjoyment of our environment being impacted by a lack of visitor infrastructure in some places, such as parking and toilets. The DMP includes an action to identify a baseline to measure the assessment of adequacy of accessibility offer/facilities. The intention is to establish and monitor the baseline through the Cumbria Visitor Survey.
- 5.9. There has been good progress on making parts of the visitor infrastructure accessible and inclusive for people with additional accessibility needs and for multi-generational groups. For example, the Lake District has 50 'Miles without Stiles' routes, around 130km of rights of way that are suitable for users of all ages and abilities. The Miles without Stiles homepage and route pages are some of the Lake District National Park Authority's most visited webpages: in 2023-24 750,000 page views by over 300,000 people.
- 5.10. Cumbria Tourism's '[Adventure For Everyone](#)' campaign was developed to help provide a warm welcome to people. The Destination Management Plan includes an action to support 'warm welcome' programmes to ensure all visitors feel welcome.
- 5.11. The Lake District National Park Authority prioritises investment in routes that are most accessible to all, for example the Keswick to Threlkeld Railway Trail, which has averaged approximately 26,000 users per month since opening in December 2020, and the Orrest Head Miles Without Stiles walk, which has averaged 16,000 users per month since its opening in September 2021.
- 5.12. Despite the popularity of the rights of way network and the opportunity it provides to support resident and visitor health and wellbeing, there is no current data to demonstrate the causality between the public rights of way network, physical activity, and public health.
- 5.13. There are three Changing Places¹⁷ within the Lake District National Park, which is a welcome increase from 2021 (2 Changing Places) when the Partnership prepared its last Management Plan. Two more Changing Places

¹⁴ Lake District [State of Park Report](#)

¹⁵ Lake District National Park [Interesting Facts](#)

¹⁶ Destination Management Plan for Cumbria 2024 to 2030 [Destination Management Plan \(DMP\)](#)

¹⁷ Changing Places are larger toilet facilities that have the right equipment, including a changing bench, peninsular toilet and a ceiling hoist, designed to support disabled people who need assistance. The locations within the Lake District can be viewed here:

<https://www.visitlakedistrict.com/explore/access-for-all/changing-places-toilets>

are being progressed on the peripheries of the Lake District in Millom and Cleator Moor.

6. Diversity and Inclusivity

- 6.1. Cumbria continues to be among the areas with the highest proportion of 'White British' people in the country, although Census data does show a gradual increase in Cumbria's ethnic diversity.
- 6.2. The environmental sector does not have a diverse workforce and is not always reflective of the communities it seeks to engage with and serve. Only 4.8% of 'environmental professionals' come from a non-White background (compared to the all-profession average of 12.6%).¹⁸ Pathways into environmental careers often depend on experience gained through unpaid work, which is not possible for many people on low incomes. The lack of diversity in the environmental sector nationally is reflected within the organisational representatives on the Partnership.
- 6.3. The Partnership's 2023 Lake District for Everyone survey of Partners indicates there is a lack of collection of data on visitors and employees (including volunteers), making it difficult to track progress on inclusivity.
- 6.4. While there is general agreement on the importance of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), practical implementation and monitoring differs among the Partners of the Partnership. Many Partners demonstrate a commitment to EDI through various strategies and initiatives including; recruitment strategies, EDI training, knowledge of the demographic makeup of the workforce and specific strategies and activities related to outward-facing engagement.¹⁹
- 6.5. Many initiatives which are targeted at this area of work are dependent on funding to progress and there are barriers to inclusivity such as geographic isolation, transport, and accommodation costs. A recent equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) project working across all English Protected Landscapes revealed that there is still a culture of 'projectisation' of EDI work rather than embedding EDI across all areas of work.
- 6.6. The 2021, 'Potential for Green Jobs' Cumbria Action for Sustainability report²⁰ emphasises the importance of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in the transition to a green economy in Cumbria. It does this by recognising the disproportionate impact of climate change and economic challenges on marginalised groups and advocating for a just transition that prioritises their needs.
- 6.7. Good strides have been made to improve access. For example:
 - Cumbria Tourism (a Partner) chairs the Accessible Cumbria Partnership, a network of businesses and organisations across the county who are all working together to improve access to the area. Cumbria Tourism's role

¹⁸ New to Nature Impact Report, 2024

¹⁹ Lake District for Everyone: Partner Response Report, February 2023

²⁰ The potential for green jobs in Cumbria, CAFS, Green House Think Tank, March 2021

is to join up products and itineraries county-wide, building on the demand for people to explore more widely and enabling visitors to make their own informed decisions about what is accessible and doable for them. A lack of information has been identified as one of the main travel barriers for people with an impairment so, sponsored by United Utilities (a Partner), Cumbria Tourism is also working to improve and integrate accessibility information on [visitlakedistrict.com](https://www.visitlakedistrict.com).

- The Lake District Foundation (a Partner) created 'Lake District for Everyone' grants as part of the Partnership's 'Journeys Project' concept. 17 under-represented groups applied for easy access grants that could be used for anything related to their Lake District trip. Their experiences over Autumn 2024 and Spring 2025 will allow an understanding of the barriers these groups face. Positive outcomes from the visit have already been reported. For example, the most common benefit was the 'inspirational' effect, i.e. that supporting groups to visit led to more engagement and more people likely to visit again on their own. Further benefits include: a greater sense of belonging and connection to the outdoors and positive impacts on the mental health of group members.

What does this mean?

7. Visitor Demographics and Tourism

- 7.1. There are high levels of visitor satisfaction and there has been a significant shift in our visitor profile which now better reflects today's national population; this is a hugely welcome change in ensuring the Lake District serves all of society. To support the changing visitor profile, it is important to understand how tourists experience the Lake District and how we can best support them through warm welcome initiatives.
- 7.2. Our visitor profile evidence does not measure the income or deprivation levels of our visitors and visiting the Lake District can be seen as being expensive. This could be a barrier to ensuring the Lake District is an inclusive destination.
- 7.3. The Lake District continues to be an important source of inspiration.
- 7.4. We do not know whether our visitors are aware of, or understand, the Lake District's Special Qualities or Outstanding Universal Value, or whether increasing understanding would result in inspiring more visitors to care for the natural and cultural heritage. There is a risk that, if we do not engage audiences and deepen their connection with the Lake District we will miss an opportunity to deliver a sense of belonging and shared responsibility; the landscape could lose its value to the nation, and cultural capital could be diminished.

8. Health (National, Regional and Local)

- 8.1. Evidence presented shows the positive association between exposure to nature and mental and physical health and data suggests that there are a growing number of people benefiting from outdoor exercise away from their local urban areas; both data sets demonstrate a positive impact on healthcare costs and savings to the NHS.
- 8.2. Urban populations within 90 minutes' drive and some settlements in close proximity to the Lake District experience high levels of deprivation and long-term health challenges such as obesity. This raises questions as to whether more can be done so that the Lake District makes a greater contribution to addressing the nation's health inequalities, particularly for nearby deprived communities.

9. Access to the National Park and World Heritage Site

- 9.1. As a result of a well-used large-scale Public Rights of Way network, generating funding investment at appropriate levels to maintain the rights of way in good 'ease of use' condition and tackling erosion in the high fells is challenging. This is also important to ensure that the network contributes to improving health and wellbeing.
- 9.2. Evidence shows that the vast majority of visitors feel better mentally and physically from their visit to the Lake District. However, identifying data to demonstrate the direct causality between the Public Rights of Way network, physical activity, and public health could help build a case for much needed funding in access infrastructure.
- 9.3. There is not an established set of indicators to identify whether our visitor infrastructure is sufficient to support all visitor needs, and there is evidence that shows visitor's enjoyment is impacted in some areas by lack of infrastructure.
- 9.4. However, good progress has been made in providing accessible visitor infrastructure, such as the area's 50 Miles without Stiles network and the tourism sector working together to improve information and access.

10. Diversity and Inclusivity

- 10.1. There is a lack of diversity in the environmental sector nationally, this is reflected within the representatives on the Partnership. Collection and coordination of data on our Partnership workforce (including volunteers) could be improved. If we do not have diversity in the Partnership workforce there is a risk that the needs for everyone who lives or visits the Lake District is under-represented in partner's service delivery and project and policy design.
- 10.2. Many initiatives which are targeted at this area are dependent on funding, and there are barriers to inclusivity such as geographic isolation, transport, and

accommodation costs. There is a risk of 'projectisation' of work that proactively focuses on diversity; more progress could be made by investing in embedding the focus into 'business as usual'.

- 10.3. There are examples of good practice within the Partnership around Diversity and Inclusion, including the Lake District Foundation's grants programme and the Accessible Cumbria Partnership.

References and policy context

Some of the key international, national, regional, and local strategies that provide important context for updating the Management Plan include:

- [Equality Act 2010](#) – requires public bodies to exercise their functions in a way that legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society.
- [Cumberland Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2023-2028](#) – the strategy outlines how health and wellbeing will be improved and how health inequalities will be reduced.
- [Westmorland and Furness Council Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2034](#) aims to improve the health and wellbeing of its population and address health inequalities.
- [Cumbria Visitor Survey](#) provides an in-depth review of visitors to Cumbria.
- [Cumbria People and Nature Network](#) the hub for people and nature activity in Cumbria.
- [Land + Nature Skills Service](#) connects people with learning and training opportunities in the land and nature-based sectors across Cumbria.
- ['Out There' LDNP Access and Recreation Strategy](#) covers informal, low impact, recreation and has a focus on the rights of way network.
- [The Destination Management Plan for Cumbria 2024 to 2030](#) seeks to ensure a balance between the economic benefits from a successful visitor economy and the need to support the environment and communities of Cumbria.
- [Landscapes Review](#) and the [Landscape Review: A Government Response](#) - The review's purpose was to ask what might be done better, what changes could assist these areas, and whether definitions and systems - which in many cases date back to their original creation - are still sufficient.
- [Accessible Cumbria Partnership](#) is a network of businesses and organisations across the county who are all working together to improve access to the area.