



Strategic Plan

2026-2030



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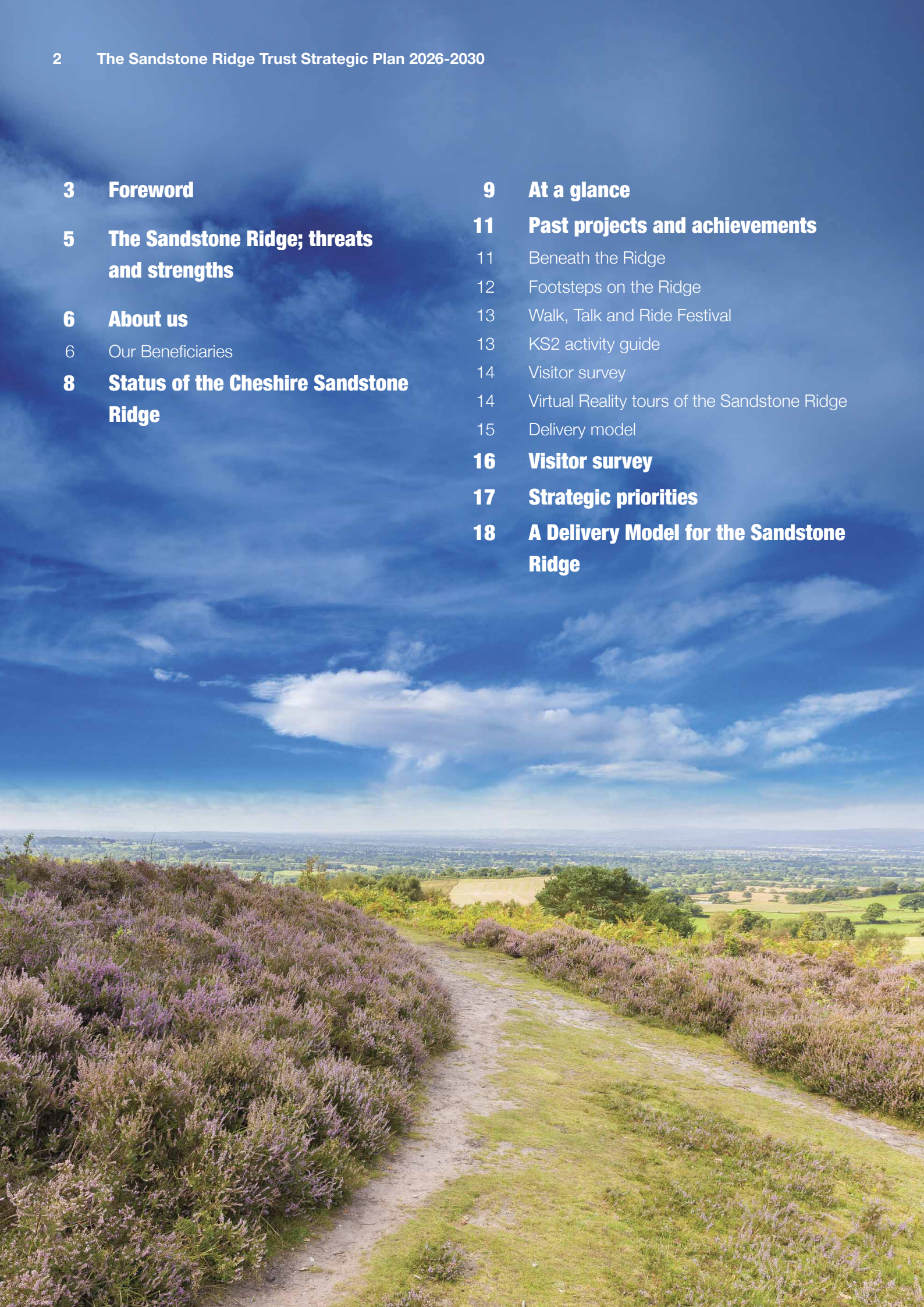
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Foreword

The Cheshire Sandstone Ridge is one of the region's most distinctive and cherished landscapes. A combination of geology, topography, natural resources, and six thousand years of human occupation have shaped a landscape that is rich in wildlife and heritage. In 2021, we were delighted when Natural England recognised the Ridge area as a nationally significant landscape, shortlisting it for designation as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

As we transition from our previous Strategic Plan, the Sandstone Ridge Trust (SRT) is at a pivotal, watershed moment where we move towards new objectives and priorities.

In most respects, our previous 5-year plan has been very successful, with a number of projects benefitting from UK Shared Property funding. The AONB process has been discontinued, but this has enabled us to develop a new strategic direction and vision. A vision that works towards securing the long-term future of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge for the benefit of present and future generations.

Along with our own strategic priorities the Trust is well placed to work with partners and stakeholders to help develop a number of initiatives, to **conserve** the natural beauty, special qualities and natural resources of the Sandstone Ridge; to **connect** people with nature and heritage and to **inspire** current and future generations to better understand and care for this unique area.

It is very encouraging to see just how many organisations and individuals share this common desire to collaborate towards securing this future.

Nicholas Holmes

Chair, The Sandstone Ridge Trust, August 2026



The Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, a diverse, distinctive, and celebrated landscape located in the heart of Cheshire. Covering 230 sq km, the Sandstone Ridge is less than one hour from Liverpool and Manchester, and is rich in heritage, archaeology, wildlife and culture.



The Sandstone Ridge; threats and strengths

The threats

There are many threats to the integrity of the Sandstone Ridge; habitat loss, extent and connectivity, climate change, visitor expectations, disconnection between people and the landscape and pressure from development. The attrition of smaller scale building higher on the Ridge, including the ridgeline itself, threatens to fragment the landscape and reduce wildlife connectivity. All of this of course can reduce visitor enjoyment.

... and strengths

To counter these threats, we need to understand the strengths, or more precisely, the intrinsic value of the Sandstone Ridge.

People clearly value the Ridge. Each year, well over a million people are drawn here — a figure recorded in 2017 which is likely to be far higher today. In fact, data suggests that there are over a million visitors annually to Delamere Forest alone and accessibility from nearby urban areas is enhanced by proximity to no less than 5 local railway stations. People come seeking space and perspective in a beautiful landscape and a deeper connection with the natural world. As a shared experience this becomes something far greater — a collective enrichment that cannot be easily captured in figures.

Around 90 national and local wildlife sites are located within our area. A single site itself has an environmental and ecological benefit, but the Ridge could provide a potentially continuous, connected corridor where habitats can link together and wildlife can flourish. Across its many reserves and sites, biodiversity is not just preserved — it is sustained



and strengthened, providing an invaluable contribution to restoring nature. Its contribution to education and cultural understanding is equally profound. Schools, students and visitors encounter layers of natural and human heritage embedded in the landscape. How do we measure the impact of inspiring a child's curiosity, deepening environmental awareness or fostering a lifelong respect for heritage?

There are also the personal, often unseen benefits. Access to open countryside offers physical restoration and improved mental health. Whether walking, running, cycling, birdwatching or simply breathing clean air, people leave with an improved sense of wellbeing.

The Ridge also performs vital natural functions. It filters and stores water, locks away carbon, improves air quality and connects fragmented habitats. Farmers and local enterprises linked to the visitor economy depend on the landscape's character and integrity — their livelihoods intertwined with its continued health.

Taken together, these visible and invisible contributions form something irreplaceable. And they extend beyond the present moment. Even if we attempt to calculate today's economic return, can we truly account for what future generations stand to gain — or lose? Protecting Cheshire's Sandstone Ridge is about more than preserving scenery. It is about safeguarding a living system, a cultural inheritance and a source of renewal for generations yet to come.

It is the purpose of the SRT to secure the long-term future of Cheshire's Sandstone Ridge — ensuring it continues to inspire, sustain and enrich both present and future generations.

Furthermore, in the absence of any statutory protection for the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge as a whole, a communal sense of 'ownership' and place, through a deeper attachment to its natural and cultural heritage, may be a method of landscape protection in itself.



About Us

The Sandstone Ridge Trust is a company limited by guarantee, incorporated on 17 June 2011 (Company number 7673603), and which was granted charitable status on 28 October 2011 (Charity number 1144470).

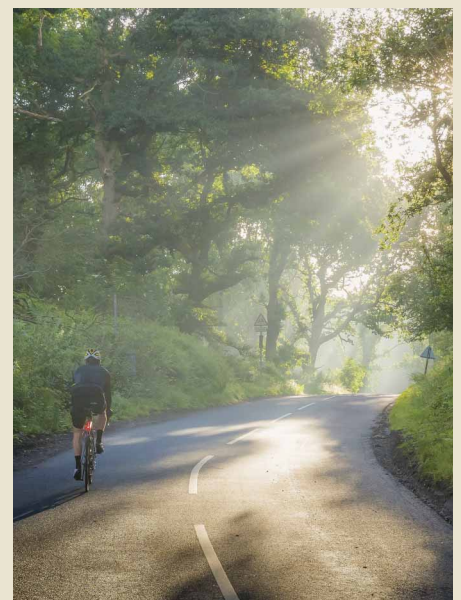
The Sandstone Ridge Trust is run by a Board of up to ten Trustees that is responsible for the overall management of the Trust, its strategic direction and finances. The Trustees are passionate about the future of the area and offer a diverse set of skills in areas such as governance, community development, communication, marketing, fund-raising, project and business management, ecology, landscape, geology and education.

The work of the Board of Trustees is supported by an unlimited membership of the Trust which includes those who are actively involved in the Trust's work, as well as those who voluntarily support the aims and objectives of the Trust in a generic sense.

Our Beneficiaries

Our principal beneficiaries are the individuals, landowners, and communities who live and work on the Sandstone Ridge and those who visit it from Cheshire, the wider sub-region and beyond.

Our other beneficiary is of course the landscape; the habitats that exist in this landscape and the fauna and flora associated with habitat diversity.





Status of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

The Cheshire Sandstone Ridge is a landscape that is highly cherished by residents, stakeholders and visitors alike, with an overwhelming agreement that it is an area of importance for its natural beauty, landscape, heritage and wildlife.

The Ridge provides a unifying presence to the views, not just from elevated heights, but also from the whole of its eastern and western flanks. In the fringes and low-lying areas adjacent to the Ridge, the rivers Gowy and Weaver, the nationally significant pond network and the distinctive network of hedgerows add to the cohesive nature and sense of place. The numerous sandstone quarries along the Ridge have provided a locally distinctive element to the built environment of this area.



This unique and dramatic landscape, standing high above the Cheshire Plain, is characterised by its topography and geology with visible exposures of bedrock and other geological features. The continuous geological 'spine' of sandstone which runs roughly north-south from Helsby to Duckington (a distance of some 32km) is the unifying feature around which everything else coalesces. The visual and topographic variation within this dynamic landscape supports a well-connected ecological corridor and time-deep culture of human habitation.



At a glance





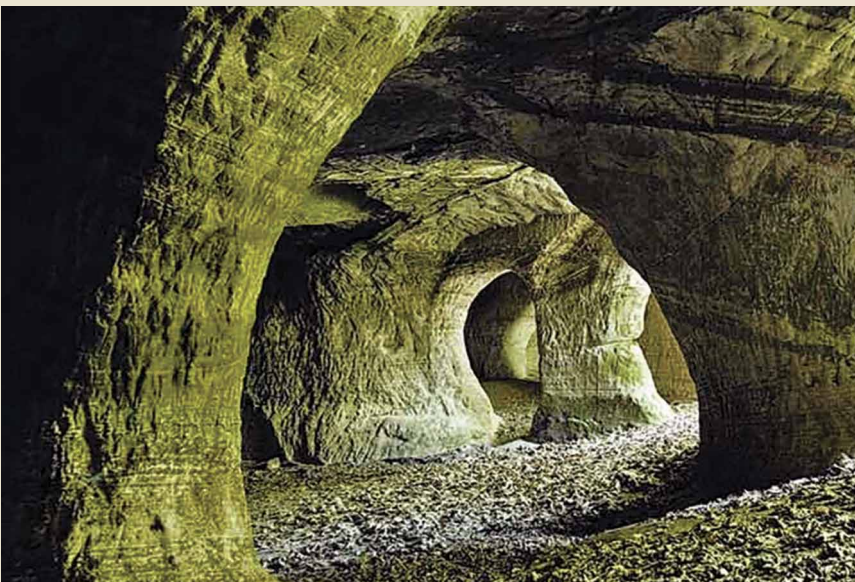
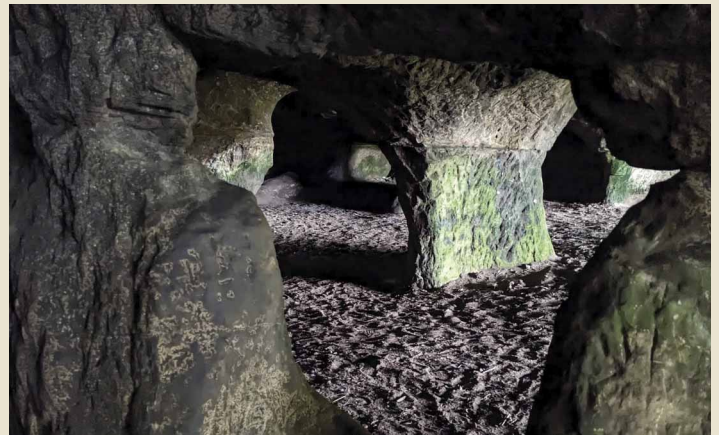


Past achievements and projects

The past five years have seen a number of successful projects completed. The focus of these projects has been to involve local communities in researching or investigating various aspects of heritage, as part of our mission to connect and inspire.

Beneath the Ridge:

This was initiated in 2020 to look at how the Ridge, specifically beneath the Ridge, has been used in the past for human benefit. Caves and overhangs along the Ridge have been exploited variously from the Mesolithic Period up to the 20th century. Over 30 volunteers surveyed the Ridge and worked on this project, discovering several new heritage assets. We are currently compiling the results as a book.



Footsteps on the Ridge:

The Cheshire Sandstone Ridge has a rich legacy of built heritage, cultural tradition and unique local character. Over time, these elements have inspired a diverse range of individuals whose contributions, memories and shared experiences continue to preserve the irreplaceable identity of the Ridge.

This project was undertaken to fully appreciate the contribution and impact of people from the past to the historic and cultural heritage of our landscape.



Sarah Hall

SR Webteam: 15/08/2022



Philip Egerton

SR Webteam: 17/05/2022



William Varley

SR Webteam: 02/05/2022



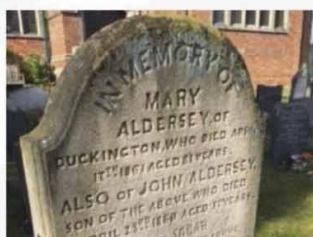
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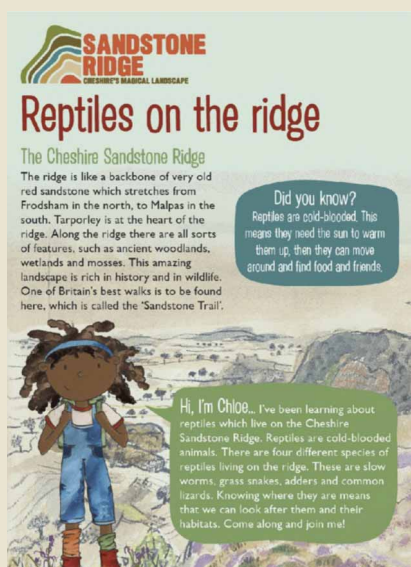
Ranulf de Blondeville



In 2024 the SRT was in receipt of a grant from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. This transformational money allowed us to pursue a number of very successful projects. These projects were:

Walk, Talk & Ride Festival:

In September 2024, 21 guided events led by stakeholders and trustees, covering the entire length of the Ridge, were attended by over 200 people. These events included a diverse range of subjects, such as natural history, geology, forest management, flood prevention and history.



KS2 activity guides:

Leaflets entitled 'Reptiles on the Ridge' and 'Habitats and Hillforts', aimed at children aged 7 to 11 years old, were produced and distributed to primary schools in Cheshire. This was done with the support of some of our partners, notably, the National Trust, English Heritage, Chester Zoo and Cheshire Wildlife Trust.

Visitor survey:

In conjunction with the University of Chester Business School, this visitor survey was designed to update and supplement our 2017 survey. Copies of this survey are available on our website, and its findings have shaped the new strategic priorities.



Virtual Reality tours of the Sandstone Ridge:

In partnership with Gizmo Media a series of virtual reality videos, viewed through headsets, have been used by groups unable to physically access the ridge, including older people, those living with dementia, primary school children and young people with special educational needs. Responses have been positive, and the project demonstrates the Trust's commitment to inclusivity and making the landscape accessible to all. Phase 2 of this project will form part of our new strategic priorities.



Delivery model – Area of Outstanding National Beauty:

In 2019, we concluded that for a landscape-scale delivery option that best met the requirements of the Sandstone Ridge was that of assignment as an AONB.

Following a positive recommendation in the Glover Report¹, in June 2021, we achieved a remarkable success within our delivery model, that of being identified by Natural England for consideration to be designated as a National Landscape. We were a key partner in ensuring the Sandstone Ridge met the various stages of designation by contributing to and supporting the important evidence gathering work through the Management Advisory Group. However, in 2025 budget constraints across the public sector meant this process had to be discontinued.

What is 'landscape'?



“.....an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.”



Figure adapted/reproduced from Natural England, 'Beyond the View' (2006), licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0

¹Glover, J. (2019) Landscapes review: National Parks and AONBs. London: Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra). Available at: GOV.UK Landscapes Review.

Visitor survey

From the Visitor Survey completed in 2024, the following points can be summarised:

The primary objectives of the survey were to:

- Continue to identify the profile and origin of visitors
- Capture demographic data of the visitors (not captured in 2017)
- Identify reasons and motivations for visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge
- Assess the levels of visitor satisfaction
- Examine the barriers to visiting the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Key Findings:

- The majority of visitors were residents and domestic tourists from Cheshire and across the North West, and this profile has not altered since 2017.
- Walking and dog walking were the most favoured activities.
- Over 95% of respondents reported high satisfaction with their visit, citing the Ridge’s scenic beauty and tranquillity as key highlights. However, many visitors expressed concerns ranging across parking availability, quality of roads and parking costs, as well as issues with dogs and dog waste, signage, and maintenance and accessibility of some trails.
- The volume of visitors to the Ridge plays a key role in supporting the local economy, particularly through spending on parking, food, and accommodation. Many visitors expressed a willingness to pay for improved services, such as parking, if it helped to support maintenance and access of the Ridge.
- Accessibility and inclusivity: While the Ridge is generally accessible, feedback indicated a need for better facilities to aid access to the Ridge (including for individuals with disabilities), enhanced public transport links, as well as clearer sign posting and maintenance of trails.

In addition, a survey of our partners conducted in 2026 concluded that the SRT adds value by:

- Raising awareness of the special qualities of the Ridge
- Engaging with communities and running local activities
- Promoting the Ridge as a landscape worthy of protection
- Finding new approaches to both interpret natural and cultural heritage and to extend this into educational content

While there is some overlap with other organisations, the Trust is the only organisation which promotes greater awareness of the Ridge as a whole. However, we need to ensure our activities dovetail with and compliment those of our partners.

A survey of our members (April 2026), provided many similar views to those of our partners, with the addition of a desire to see the SRT re-invigorate our volunteer research and survey-orientated projects.

Strategic Priorities

Evidence from the Visitor Survey, partners and members has been critical in shaping our strategic priorities and long-term delivery model suitable to meet the objectives of the Sandstone Ridge Trust.

This delivery model describes how we will deliver the Trust's mission, for the period 2026 - 2030.

Our membership will be reinvigorated, via a 'Friends of the Sandstone Ridge' group. Active membership will benefit from guided walks, talks and news.

The Trust has identified three strategic priorities to guide activity over the coming years. These actions are guided by our mission and shaped as a direct response to visitor and partner feedback. These aim to enhance access, protect the Ridge's unique natural and cultural heritage, and strengthen community and visitor engagement. Together, they form a framework for ensuring the Ridge remains a sustainable and cherished landscape for current and future generations.

Priority 1: **Conserve: Conserve and Enhance the Natural and Cultural Landscape**

The Ridge's scenery, wildlife, geology and heritage are its defining strengths. As visitor numbers grow, conserving and promoting these assets, while considering access, is essential to balance conservation with recreation.

A focus will be to make more widely available heritage data, often from original research by the Trust, to benefit a deeper understanding of the Ridge, visitor interest and education.

In addition, we will work with partners and stakeholders where possible to support nature, habitat conservation and connectivity, develop new heritage interpretation and educational content.

Priority 2: **Connect: Strengthen Community and Visitor Engagement**

In addition to the strengths mentioned above, the other resource that we have are the residents, farmers and businesses for whom the Ridge is a much loved and cherished landscape.

The visitor survey revealed a loyal but locally concentrated visitor base. Expanding awareness and broadening engagement through stronger local and member networks will strengthen long-term support for the protection of the Ridge. There is still a disconnect between communities at either end of the Ridge from their shared heritage. We must take this opportunity to bring the Ridge community together.

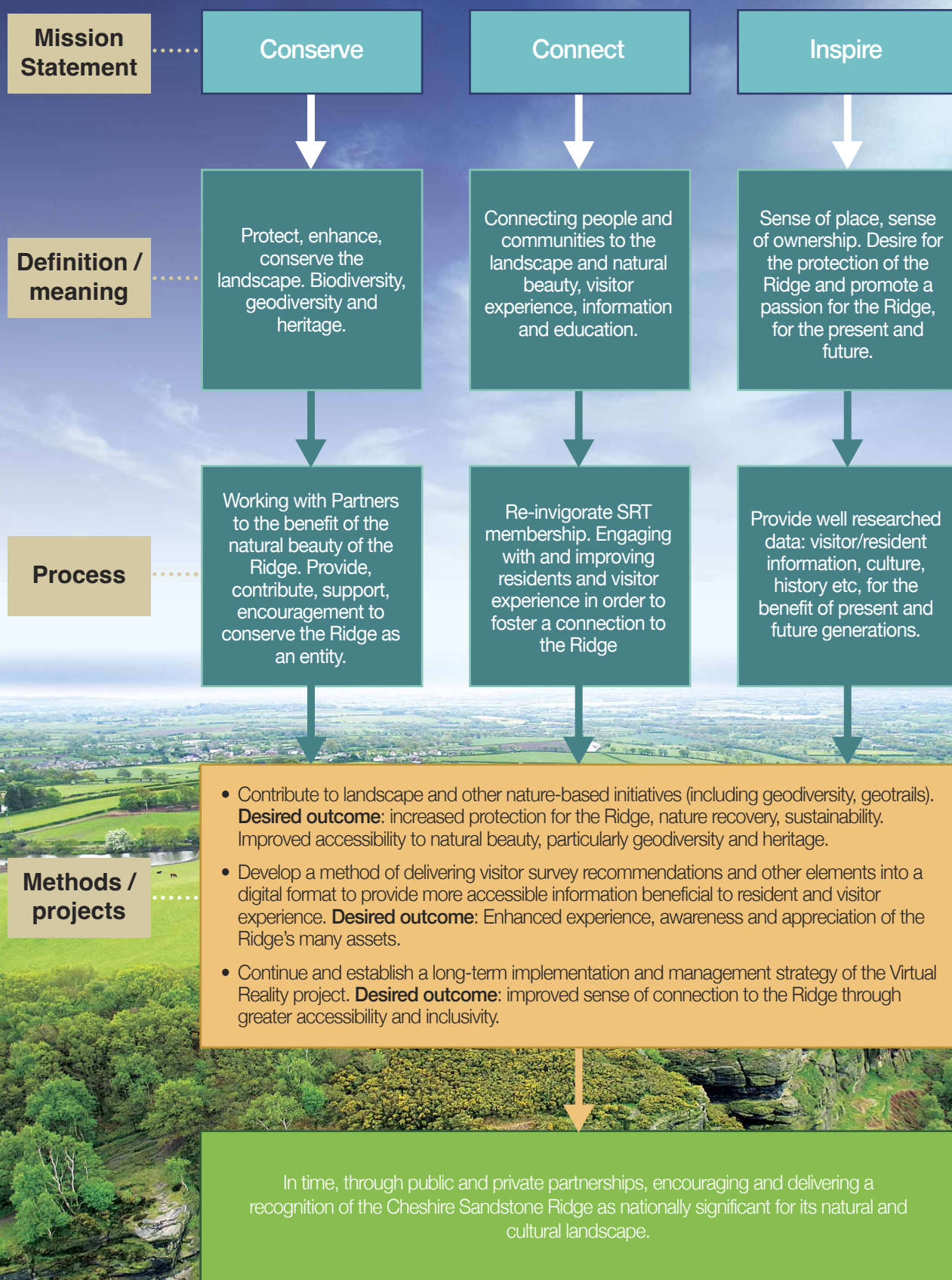
Central to this is the promotion of a broad inclusivity to include all those to whom access to the Ridge is compromised.

Priority 3: **Inspire: Support the improvement of Visitor Infrastructure and Accessibility**

The Ridge's beauty and tranquillity are highly valued but concerns exist regarding a range of structural and informational issues. Improved physical and digital infrastructure would enhance the visitor experience while encouraging sustainable and inclusive access.

Inspiring present and future generations will help develop a communal sense of 'ownership' of the Sandstone Ridge through a deeper attachment to its natural and cultural heritage, which may, in itself, provide a form of protection.

A Delivery Model for the Sandstone Ridge







The Sandstone Ridge Trust

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