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Report: Government Review of Designated Landscapes

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Purpose of Report

To agree the Surrey Hills AONB Board's response to the Call for Evidence on the Government's Review of National Parks and AONBs

Summary

In announcing the review, the Environment Secretary Michael Gove said "The creation of National Parks almost 70 years ago changed the way we view our precious landscapes – helping us all access and enjoy our natural world. Amid a growing population, changes in technology, and a decline in certain habitats, the time is right for us to look afresh at these landscapes. We want to make sure they are not only conserved, but enhanced for the next generation."

The Review is being led by Julian Glover. His Panel has issued a Call for Evidence that needs to be submitted on-line by the 18th December. The AONB Director has drafted the response (at Appendix 1) on behalf of the Surrey Hills AONB Board. The first questions (1- 6) are about the organisation. The draft has been informed by the Surrey University Symposium, which was attended by Jim Dixon, a member of the Glover Panel, and discussions with colleagues and partner organisations, including meetings with the National Trust, Cycling UK and the Landscape Institute.

The AONB Director will also be contributing to a joint South East and East National Park and AONB submission that will be agreed on 7th December and a National Association for AONBs response. Partner organisations on the AONB Board are encouraged to submit their own evidence as individuals and organisations.

The Panel's recommendations will be made to the Government and will be implemented by the Defra Secretary of State. The Review will report in 2019, as part of the 70th Anniversary of the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act.

Recommendations

Members are asked:

To consider the draft Call for Evidence (Appendix 1) and to agree its submission

Annex - 1

Landscapes Review – CCB Response

Part 1 - Opening thoughts

We would like any opening thoughts on the role played by National Parks and AONBs - you may want to make a more detailed suggestion further on.

7. What do you think works overall about the present system of National Parks and AONBs in England? Add any points that apply specifically to only National Parks or AONBs.

The designated landscapes of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and National Parks are recognised as a national asset. They are an important part of the nation's identity and much loved and valued internationally, nationally, regionally, locally and by residents.

The protection afforded to these Designated Landscapes through the Town and Country Planning Act has largely been successful in safeguarding them from major development with favourable protection afforded in national policy and Local Plans.

The landscape designation gives an identity to the area based on its geological, natural and cultural heritage, but the designation itself provides the area with a significance which is much greater than the sum of the parts. It provides an opportunity for landscape management and conservation, access management and tourism promotion that cuts across local government and agency boundaries.

The value of beautiful landscapes in attracting investment and industrialists should have greater acknowledgment. The Surrey economy contributes more money to the Exchequer than the entire economy of Wales. Indeed, an astonishing 43% of dwellings in the Surrey Hills AONB have a Director registered in residence (Defra, Professor Jupp unpublished report) and along with its adjoining towns like Guildford, Dorking and Reigate, world leading creative industries, including the University of Surrey. The erosion of the beauty of the Surrey Hills as a place to live and recreate for business leaders should be considered of importance to the nation's economy.

8. What do you think does not work overall about the system and might be changed? Add any points that apply specifically to National Parks or AONBs.

The AONB designation is not fit for purpose as there is limited understanding of the term amongst decision makers and the general public. The focus on just natural beauty, underplays the cultural heritage of the way the land has been managed that has created these much loved beautiful landscapes.

The Surrey Hills AONB was designated to protect the beauty of the area but, as a beautiful landscape with some of the greatest countryside visitor pressure in the country, the designation is not fit for purpose in securing investment required to manage visitors to provide a high quality experience and reduce its impact on its landscape and communities.

AONBs in the South East, particularly the Surrey Hills in the London Metropolitan Green Belt, faces tremendous development pressure and high land values. Since its designation in 1958, the Surrey Hills AONB has been severely blighted by major infrastructure, particularly motorways and trunk roads, that fragment the landscape and its functions. AONBs need to be considered at the outset in national and regional infrastructure planning to ensure that harmful effects are avoided, mitigated or compensated for.

Incremental development also leads to an erosion of character over time; and once a land is lost to built development, it is lost in perpetuity. The AONB needs greater weight to ensure that development is always justified, appropriate and proves to be an asset to the landscape and its community.

Part 2 - Views

We'd like to hear views on particular issues.

9. What views do you have about the role National Parks and AONBs play in nature conservation and biodiversity?

AONBs can play a critical role in nature conservation and biodiversity but have few levers or the resources to have significant impact across the whole AONB.

There has however been a dramatic decline in biodiversity in AONBs that demonstrates the primary purpose of the designation to conserve and enhance natural beauty is not fit for purpose. There needs to be greater investment in the capacity to work with farmers and landowners in a coordinated way to monitor, record and deliver practical action to address this decline. The Protected Landscapes, particularly where they join boundaries should be a foundation of the Government's proposed Nature Recovery Network. The Surrey Hills aligns with the Kent Downs AONB and the South Downs National Park.

a) Could they do more to enhance our wildlife and support the recovery of our natural habitats?

There is a massive opportunity for Designated Landscapes partnerships and their Management Plans to have a central role in the restoration of nature and ecosystem services. This should be ensured through development and support for the role AONB teams will play in delivering on Outcome 1c of Biodiversity 2020, Net Gain, and their crucial role in supporting a Nature Recovery Network.

The statutory Management Plan should set the framework for the delivery of new Environmental Land Management Schemes. The Surrey Hills AONB Board has submitted a bid to Test and Trail such approaches with Surrey University and the Surrey Nature Partnership on which it would like to collaborate with other Designated Landscapes, Government agencies, NFU, CLA and conservation bodies.

The Designated Landscape team should be given the capacity to play a leading role in the local delivery of agri-environment schemes through supporting the Farm Cluster approach. The Surrey Hills currently contracts two coordinators with funding through the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund, which is proving a great way of bringing landowners and other partners together on a landscape scale. It forms the basis for an investment framework.

It is essential for Designated Landscapes to deliver for climate change adaptation and mitigation. This includes influencing new land uses, like viticulture in the Surrey Hills, to take opportunities to enhance natural capital and to critically examine whether the basis of notifying nature conservation designations, like SSSIs, are sustainable given the changing climate.

10. What views do you have about the role National Parks and AONBs play in shaping landscape and beauty, or protecting cultural heritage?

Designated Landscapes through the Management Plan should have the key role in articulating and shaping the landscape and beauty of the area. The AONB and natural beauty is poorly understood and therefore a major constraint to progressing this agenda.

The AONB is constrained in having few levers or the resources to have a significant impact. Some great projects are delivered by Designated Landscape partnership, often with Heritage Lottery Funds, but this work needs to be scaled up. For this to happen extra capacity and sharing of resources within the Designated Landscape movement will be required as individual AONB teams simply do not have the resources to do this effectively.

A framework for assessing landscape quality and for assessing environmental limits is needed. More data is required to measure change in Designated Landscapes and to assess whether the purposes of the designation are being fulfilled. A method for quantifying landscape capacity and for valuing natural capital is needed to ensure damage/loss is understood and net gain can be achieved. This should include a measure of the quality of visitor experience, to make sure our areas are offering access to exceptional wildlife and unspoilt recreation and that we can troubleshoot problems that impede this.

The landscape and what we assess as beautiful should be subject to change and articulated in the Management Plan through tools like 'statement of landscape beauty' and 'sense of place'. Future development should be of the highest quality design, siting and sustainability, in order to protect and potentially enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the landscape.

11. What views do you have about the role National Parks and AONBs play in working with farmers and land managers and how might this change as the current system of farm payments is reformed?

The Surrey Hills AONB Board believes that farmers and land managers are best placed to advise and deliver cost effective amenity or biodiversity outcomes. There is a need for the Designated Landscape team to be able to support and facilitate this through the Farm Cluster approach (as previously mentioned) and to engage the third sector and volunteers in citizen science activities to help assess, monitor and review. It is important that there is a robust and independent payments agency, but this does need to be much more efficient and timely in payments, and get greater use of satellite technology for remote sensing to verify claims for payments (see note on working with Surrey University on Test and Trail, which is a world leader in this field).

In summary, Designated Landscape should play the lead role at the heart of a new Environmental Land Management Scheme to deliver across all ecosystem services, using our management plans to direct and prioritise future support and working with farmers and land managers to deliver the best outcomes for the AONB. A clear menu of management options, geared to the objectives of the specific AONB, should be offered to those who could deliver the plan objectives (farmers, woodland owners, Parish Councils, NGOs etc.). Devolved administration of a tailored Environmental Land Management Scheme with land management contracts (as proposed by CLA) would reduce the bureaucratic burden to both participant and government.

12. What views do you have about the role National Parks and AONBs play in supporting and managing access and recreation?

Designated Landscapes are for the nation and resources should be invested to enable increased access for a far greater number of people. The Surrey Hills already has some of the highest numbers of walkers and cyclists in the country yet only a fraction of the 1.5 million people who live within 10km of the Surrey Hills regularly enjoy the AONB. There is approximately ten million people within an hour of the Surrey Hills and with 25% of the land available for open air recreation and an extensive Public Rights of Way Network, there is the potential to provide a 'natural health service' that cannot be overstated.

AONBs can and should play a critical role in supporting and managing access and recreation but have few levers or the capacity to have significant impact across the whole AONB. This includes future support for land management and farming needs to deliver enhanced access and recreation, at a time that the County Councils as access authorities are having to cut budgets for countryside access. This is not sustainable.

Where there is the potential to engage and benefit large nearby populations especially urban areas with varying access needs, there should be well-resourced programmes for access, recreation, volunteering

and health and well-being. This includes working with public transport providers and strategic green access corridors to link urban and rural areas free of motorised vehicles.

13. What views do you have about the way National Park and AONB authorities affect people who live and work in their areas?

AONBs can and should work closely with communities in and near the AONBs but have few levers or the capacity to have significant impact.

Green space is needed by the growing population of London and the south-east more than ever and the designated landscapes have the potential to provide high quality space and recreational opportunity at scale. Investment is needed to ensure that recreation contributes to the economic and social wellbeing of local communities, for example, by helping to keep village pubs, shops and amenities alive. There is significant potential to expand the visitor economy, but a stronger brand for AONBs is needed both locally and as a family.

It is important however that local people are the ambassadors for their landscape and buy into the vision as set out in the respective Management Plans. The Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan is facilitating a My Surrey Hills campaign to communicate what local people love about the Surrey Hills.

The demand for housing in an area like the Surrey Hills is insatiable and the Surrey Hills has some of the highest house prices in the country. The provision of affordable housing is supported to sustain our rural communities and business but it has to be provided in a way that will keep it affordable in perpetuity.

14. What views do you have on the role National Park and AONB authorities play on housing and transport in their areas?

Given the massive pressure on these landscapes that originates from outside the areas, the AONBs does not have the resources, influence or expertise to respond to housing and transport pressures effectively. As a consequence, the planning system is failing to conserve and enhance the Designated Landscapes.

Our local planning authorities are under tremendous pressure to provide more housing in an area whether the landscape is quite rightly protected for its national importance and where insufficient funds are made available for infrastructure. It is imperative that the planning of housing allocations and infrastructure starts at a national level, recognising the primary purpose of conserving and enhancing the Designated Landscapes with appropriate levels and quality of development.

The planning authorities only have a duty of 'due regard' to the policies set out in the AONB Management Plan. This is very weak. The creation of a Development Plan document for the Designated Landscape may help but our local planning authorities would need to be supportive and have the capacity to undertake this work. There is also a danger that such a document will not be able to influence the need for investment in infrastructure required to meet the increasing recreational demands and traffic movements across the area.

Regarding the highway network, there should be a clear strategy to keep HGVs and through traffic on the principle road network and to discourage the use of country lanes, which are beautiful features in themselves and that need to be shared with residents, walkers, horse riders and cyclists. There is an opportunity to collaborate on research and best practice to enhance highways for all users by promoting and reinforcing their rural quality. Quiet Lane initiatives like sign de-clutter and removal of white lines could significantly reduce the costs of maintenance and enhance the experience of our Designated Landscapes.

Part 3 - Current ways of working

15. What views do you have on the way they are governed individually at the moment? Is it effective or does it need to change, if so, how?

The current governance of individual AONB partnerships is through a Joint Committee or Joint Advisory Committee structure. This means that they have a high level of local accountability but there is a question about the balance in its ability to represent the national public interest in the landscapes.

In order to meet the purpose of the Designation, it would be useful if public bodies had their responsibilities for the AONB formalised and should have a duty to implement the AONB Management Plan. AONB Management Plans should have a clearer status in the planning system and should always be taken into account when making development decisions in the AONB.

16. What views do you have on whether they work collectively at the moment, for instance to share goals, encourage interest and involvement by the public and other organisations?

There is a massive opportunity for much greater collaboration across Designated Landscapes on issues like evidence base, research, advocacy, project development, fundraising, marketing and even corporate services, as host authorities are increasingly constrained.

At present there are two separate national bodies representing AONBs and National Parks with very limited capacity. There is an opportunity for greater capacity to operate internationally, nationally and regionally. This would help to reduce the pressure on individual Lead Officers, particularly in AONBs, who have very limited capacity to engage effectively. A well-resourced central landscape body could facilitate collaboration and delivery across landscape organisations, provide a single strong voice for designated landscapes and provide central services and expertise in a more effective way nationally and regionally, but with clear benefits to individual designated Landscapes which could benefit from joint initiatives, fundraising and learning.

In summary, such regional and national collaboration would greatly enhance the performance management of Designated Landscapes collectively across our wide mandate. It would create an agenda of how we share resources rather than focus on the toxic subject as to how funding is distributed but such an arrangement would require the appropriate leadership, governance and funding.

17. What views do you have on their efforts to involve people from all parts of society, to encourage volunteering and improve health and well-being?

For Designated Landscapes to be valued, to make their case for conservation and enhancement, they need to be relevant and provide benefits to wider society. This is particularly the case for the Surrey Hills which provides a massive opportunity for residents and visitors from London to access and enjoy wonderful countryside for their health and well-being. Our Google analytics show that over 85% of people seeking "Directions" to the Surrey Hills come from a London IP address. There are already around 14,000 young people who undertake the D of E Bronze Award in the Surrey Hills and the AONB Board would like to have the resource and capacity for more young and disadvantaged groups to benefit.

A significant number of people give time to care for the Surrey Hills AONB. This ranges from the Surrey Hills Society that plays a key role in promoting public understanding and enjoyment of the Surrey Hills through a walks, talks and events programme. There are also many organisations like the National Trust, Surrey Wildlife Trust and Countryside Partnerships who enable active volunteering to work on improving access and habitats. There is potential for much greater volunteer involvement but to realise this potential, volunteer co-ordination capacity is needed, but this capacity is currently threatened by public sector cuts.

Arts programmes can be an effective way to engage and inspire new audiences. They can create a wonderful legacy in the landscape and provide powerful health and wellbeing outcomes for society. The Surrey Hills Arts programme is something that the Surrey Hills AONB Board would like to share with the Review panel and with other Designated Landscapes.

18. What views do you have on the way they are funded and how this might change?

The underpinning of central Government funding to support the core activity of Designated Landscapes is imperative if they are to deliver greater public goods and be held to public account for their performance. The Review offers an opportunity to look at the way resources are allocated and shared between Designated Landscapes and the allocation locally, regionally and nationally. For the Surrey Hills the outcome needs to be greater capacity to deliver the purpose of designation given the massive pressure on the land management and recreation. The current structure of 3.5 FTEs in 1 office does not match partner or public expectations for administering one of the most popular and pressurised nationally Designated Landscapes.

One model going forward would be to establish an investment panel that would direct all public funding that is invested in the Designated Landscape. This would be similar to the Leader Local Action Group, in which the Surrey Hills AONB Director is actively engaged as the Vice-Chair, and could direct grants to third parties to deliver. This would create a structure for collaboration with delivery partners and lever in additional resources, rather than additional funding of projects leading to competition and duplication of scarce resources. The Danish National Park model is an example of where the administration of Government funding is capped at 20% with the rest going to support delivery through increasing the capacity of partner bodies.

The model of an investment panel could easily be applied to the allocation of grants for Environmental Land Management Schemes. Even with Brexit, this area is likely to remain the single largest area of public spending in the Designated Landscape. Allocating funds through the investment panel could secure, and be accountable for, the delivery of great (environmental and amenity) public goods through best practice and innovation. We would welcome the opportunity to Test and Trail such an approach with partners locally, regionally and nationally.

The Surrey Hills AONB Board however does acknowledge the tremendous pressure on public finances and is seeking to diversify its resource and funding base through our AONB Management Plan Delivery Partners, the Surrey Hills Society, Surrey Hills Enterprises CIC which is helping to build the brand and rural enterprise, and the Surrey Hills Trust Fund as a focus for fund raising which is a partnership with the Community Foundation for Surrey. The Trust Fund in particular provides a charitable vehicle that could hold permanent endowment funds for mitigating and compensating the impact of major development and for biodiversity off-setting in the Surrey Hills.

19. What views do you have on the process of designation - which means the way boundaries are defined and changed?

A faster process is needed for reviewing boundaries especially where landscape of equal value to that within the AONB boundary has been excluded. Boundaries should reflect landscape character, natural beauty and special qualities. Natural England is committed to undertaking a review of the Surrey Hills AONB boundary in its current corporate plan but this has not happened yet and there is still not a definite

date for it to be undertaken. This has major and legal implications for the status of the AONB in local plan policies which are currently being examined.

20. What views do you have on whether areas should be given new designations? For instance, the creation of new National Parks or AONBs, or new types of designations for marine areas, urban landscapes or those near built-up areas

The Designated Landscapes should be the nation's finest and most beautiful landscapes. There should be a strong brand which Government and the nation should cherish and protect.

21. Are there lessons that might be learnt from the way designated landscapes work in other parts of the United Kingdom, or abroad?

There is huge potential to share learning, but we need a culture and structure to enable this to happen effectively.

The HLF funded Future Landscapes programme being run by the National Association for AONBs, including Taking the Lead development programme for AONB staff, should be a great demonstration of the benefits and opportunities for greater collaboration that should be shared with National Parks.

The Danish National Park model (referred to earlier) of delivering the Park Management Plan through third parties is a potential model that could generate better outcomes through greater leverage, innovation and collaboration.

Part 4 - Closing thoughts

22. Do you think the terms currently used are the right ones? Would you suggest an alternative title for AONBs, for instance and if so what?

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is too long and the term AONB is not understood by the general public (who often refer to it as an ANOB) and does not reflect the national significance of AONBs.

The Surrey Hills AONB Board has discussed the name Surrey Hills National Park for branding purposes but there would be great resistance to, and no appetite for, the creation of a new planning authority

23. The review has been asked to consider how designated landscapes work with other designations such as National Trails, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), National Nature Reserves (NNRs) and Special Protected Areas (SPAs). Do you have any thoughts on how these relationships work and whether they could be improved?

There are no formal arrangements with the above but we work closely with Natural England, National Trails and others when opportunities arise. Core capacity is limited but the opportunity to work on a landscape scale with Farm Cluster coordinators could provide a massive benefit.

24. Do you have any other points you would like to make that are not covered above?

This is open for comment!