

Date: 2 September 2020

Report: Surrey Hills AONB Boundary Review

Written by: Surrey Hills AONB Planning Adviser.

Purpose of Report

To agree to press Natural England (NE) to carry out the Surrey Hills AONB Boundary Review as soon as possible.

Background.

As the Board will recall NE has repeatedly given assurances since 2013 that the Surrey Hills AONB Boundary Review would to be carried out once the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Boundary Review had been completed. The Secretary of State confirmed the new Suffolk boundary at the beginning of this year. We had therefore expected the boundary review would be starting now and we have been seeking confirmation of this from NE.

However, in a letter of 17 August 2020 to Claire Coutinho MP for Tandridge, NE's Chief Executive has indicated she cannot quite yet give a definitive answer about our boundary review. She went on to state the following.

"NE is currently reviewing its approach to designating or extending National Parks and AONBs in the light of the recommendations of the recent Glover National Landscapes Review. Where we do take forward new designations and variations, we want to do this in a more streamlined way, which also better engages local communities and stakeholders. I am aware there is a great deal of interest locally in Surrey in working with us to do this.

You will be aware that Defra are also considering the Review's recommendations on new designations/extensions. We want to ensure that future designation work meets the needs of modern day society, enabling more and more representative parts of society to connect with nature, and provide resilient, natural settings within which economies and people can thrive.

Finally, we are making the case for additional funding to Government as part of this year's Spending Review to enable us to progress with this important work"

Consequently, NE appears poised to make a decision soon. In doing so it would be as well for NE to be fully aware of the Board's case, as follows:

- preparatory work has already been carried out through the 2013 Surrey Hills Landscape Character Assessment which recommended AONB candidate areas that specialist independent landscape consultants reporting to NE recommended meet its criteria of natural beauty for AONB designation.
- NE has repeatedly assured the Board since 2013 that the boundary review is next in line following completion of the Suffolk Coast and Heaths Boundary Review and the planning authorities, bodies

and local public are expecting it to happen imminently. If the review does not proceed soon we will be seen as having broken faith with the many people and groups in our communities, as well as bodies such as PINS and the local authorities, whom we have assured about the imminence of the review, based upon NE's Board decision in 2013 and letters from your Chairmen.

- Local Plan Inspectors have only accepted that the Areas of Great Landscape Value (AGLV) should remain pending the AONB boundary review that they accepted will be carried out shortly. They recognised that much of these local landscape designations have been recommended by independent landscape specialists for inclusion in the AONB.
- There is an increasing strategic planning role for especially this boundary review to protect those beautiful areas bordering the AONB and very close to London to provide effective extents of natural areas for the health and wellbeing of the capital's increasing, diverse and intensively housed population.
- Further local plan work in seeking to provide more much needed housing will have to balance the provision of those new homes with climate, environmental and health and wellbeing considerations in a better planned way to include a logical AONB boundary, the current one not being fit for purpose.
- A simpler designation process which the Board supports would be in line with the thrust of the Glover Report and emerging Government policy in its Planning for the Future White Paper.
- With our excellent local links we are well placed to engage local communities and stakeholders.

The attached timeline for the Surrey Hills AONB Boundary Review illustrates the events and commitments leading to the review.

Recommendation.

That Members note the urgent need to review the AONB Boundary and agrees to support Natural England on a new streamlined procedure for AONB designation in reviewing the Surrey Hills AONB boundary

Background papers:

Attached: Letters from Natural England between 2011 and August 2020.
Glover Review.

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ANNEXE. SURREY HILLS AONB BOUNDARY REVIEW TIMELINE

2006 – Surrey Planning Officers Association commission the Chris Burnett Associates study of the qualities of the Surrey Area of Great Landscape Value (AGLV).

2007 – Chris Burnett Report published identifying 3 categories of the AGLV: •Areas which have identical landscape characteristics to the AONB, •Areas which have some similar characteristics to the AONB and •Areas which have negligible characteristics to the AONB.

September 2007 – Government Office for the South East (GOSE) and Planning Inspectorate agreed to save AGLV policies in the short term until the Surrey Hills AONB boundary had been reviewed.

2008 – 2010 – The Surrey Hills AONB Board approached Natural England (NE) and Ministers stressing the urgency of progressing the boundary review especially as the Planning Inspectorate had only safeguarded the AGLV as a short-term measure. Constituent Surrey Hills planning authorities support early boundary review. Constituent Surrey Hills Parish Councils also informed.

9 August 2011 - Letter from Surrey Hills Board Chairman urging NE Chairman and Minister to carry out the boundary review. Copies sent to local MPs.

14 October 2011 - Letter from NE to Surrey Hills Board Chairman agreeing to undertake preliminary scoping and planning work of a boundary review to involve a desktop study to identify “evaluation areas” and to estimate resources required. Once completed NE to decide whether it will proceed with formal designation assessment work.

24 November 2011 - Surrey Hills Director writes to NE seeking timescale for undertaking desktop exercise for boundary review.

March 2012 – NE commission landscape consultant, Alison Farmer, to undertake desktop exercise to identify areas that could be assessed as part of a full boundary revision. Study concludes that the Chris Burnett Study could no longer be used as NE’s criteria of natural beauty for AONB designation had recently changed. Therefore, a new study would be required.

25 July 2012 - NE Board agrees Designation Strategy with Surrey Hills one of two AONB Boundary Reviews in the country.

August 2012 – NE allocates resources to progress the Surrey Hills AONB Boundary Review within their 2013 – 2018 work programme and approach several landscape consultants to bid for the Landscape Character Assessment.

19 October 2012 - Surrey Planning Officers Association (SPOA) agree for constituent Surrey Hills planning authorities to pay the balance of NE’s 50% contribution to the cost of the study.

2013 – Hankinson Duckett Associates appointed consultants and carry out study then published in October 2013.

6 November 2013 - Following consideration of the Hankinson Duckett Report recommending AONB candidate areas to be included in formal boundary review an Extraordinary Meeting of the Surrey Hills AONB Board agrees to make formal request to NE to modify the Surrey Hills AONB Boundary.

11 November 2013 - Letter from Board Chairman to Chairman of NE with evidence to support progressing a Modification Order to the AONB Boundary.

26 February 2014 - NE Board agree to begin work on the Boundary Review.

23 July 2014 - Board Chairman writes to new NE Chairman, Andrew Sells, to express concern at the apparent delay in commencing the Boundary Review. Asks for timetable as a matter of urgency.

9 December 2014 - NE Chairman apologises for uncertainty and delay that needs to wait for Secretary of State decision on Lakes and Dales boundary review and work on Suffolk Coast and Heaths boundary review.

12 November 2015 - Board Chairman writes again to NE Chairman following AONB Board's great concern at its meeting on 14 October 2015. Previous reasons for delay have been overcome as S of S had decided the Lakes and Dales boundary changes and Suffolk Coast and Heaths boundary review relatively straightforward. Delay causing local plan problems. Copies to Rory Stewart of Defra, local MPs and Council Leaders.

Early 2016 – undated letter from NE Chairman apologises for delay and supports the review to commence as soon as possible.

August 2016 – Following July Board meeting Chairman writes again to NE Chairman expressing serious concern at delay which is causing problems in local plan preparations and Suffolk Coast and Heaths nearing completion. Copies to Rory Stewart of Defra, local MPs and Council Leaders.

2 September 2016 - NE Chairman replies that fully engaged on Suffolk Coast and Heaths Boundary Review but is pushing for the review to commence.

12 April 2017 - Report to Surrey Hills AONB Board that NE's estimate is for boundary review to commence in 2018 when Suffolk Coast and Heaths completed.

September 2017 – NE officer indication that appetite for further boundary reviews is small.

2018 – expected commencement of boundary review.

September 2018 – Board Chairman writes to Glover as NE indicating they cannot progress boundary review because of work on the Glover Review.

19 October 2018 - Jeremy Hunt MP writes to Mike Goodman of SCC as constituent concerned at continuing delay in boundary review and whether anything SCC and AONB Board can do pursue the matter.

12 December 2018 - Board's response to Glover Review that boundary review process should be faster.

14 November 2019 - Email from Surrey Hills Director to Marian Spain asking for a meeting with new Board Chairman, Heather Kerswell.

November 2019 – Tandridge Local Plan Inspector queries status of AGLV and boundary review.

December 2019 – NE inform Surrey Hills Director that in New Year NE will advise of position regarding the Boundary Review.