**Item 13**

##### AONB

**Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Board**

15 June 2022

**Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan Monitoring Report**

**Purpose of the report:**

To update Members on the activities related to the implementation of the Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan (2020 – 2025)

**Recommendations:**

It is recommended that:

1. Members note the activities of the Surrey Hills Family and partners in delivering the AONB Management Plan (2020 – 2025)

**Introduction:**

1. Although the fundamental purpose of the Management Plan will be to encourage co-ordinated action by all organisations, agencies and individuals, the Surrey Hills AONB Board has established a Surrey Hills group of organisations (the Surrey Hills Family) to help support the delivery of the AONB Management Plan’s Vision:

***The Surrey Hills is recognised as a national asset in which its natural and cultural assets are managed in an attractive landscape mosaic of farmland, woodland, heaths, downs, and commons. It provides opportunities for business enterprise and for all to enjoy and appreciate its natural beauty for their health and well-being.***

1. This report provides an overview on progress under the following Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan pillars:

* Planning
* Landscape Conservation and Enhancement
* Access, Enjoyment and Understanding
* Growing the Surrey Hills Economy
* Advocacy. Partnership and Coordination

1. The Surrey Hills Family framework (Appendix 1) is work in progress to monitor the delivery. This will be reported to the AONB Board and reviewed by Surrey Hills Chairs’ Group.

**Planning**

1. **Surrey Hills Expansion Project.** Natural England will be reporting progress under item 9 and an update will be given to the Surrey Hills Community Forum on 29th July.
2. **Wanborough Fields**. Concern continues to regarding the sale of land leading to fragmented parcels of land which was raised at a meeting with 6 Surrey MPs on 11th March along with an informal briefing on the AONB expansion.
3. **Rural Traffic Management.** Surrey County Council is taking a strategic approach to area wide speed management across the Surrey Hills with area speed limits of 20, 30 and 40 mph are being implemented in the area between Dorking, Guildford and Cranleigh. Implicit in the measures is to promote and reinforce the character of the rural area including the opportunity for repeater signs to be mounted on oak posts. This offers a potentially tremendous benefit to the Surrey Hills which could be expanded across the west of the area in future years.

**Landscape Conservation and Enhancement**

1. **Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) – Surrey Hills Fund**. In 2021/ 22, commitment of £33,774 had to be rolled forward due to supply chain issues. 21 projects were funded and completed including:

* 7.5km hedgerows planted across 11 landholdings
* Flail mower collector and ‘no-till’ drill
* Wildlife houses installed across 20 landholdings
* Surrey Choices Growth Team conservation work on Newlands Corner
* Forest Bathing – working with MIND Woking, Catalyst and Halow Guildford to positively affect the physical and mental health of participants identified as vulnerable or in great need.
* Puttenham Common survey
* Invasive species removal in woodland
* Mobile electric fencing for conservation grazing on chalk grassland

1. **FiPL priorities**. The budget for 2022/23 is £279,000. The Local Assessment Panel met in March 2022 to discuss and agree some broad priorities for the FiPL grant programme, to guide applicants and to aid decision-making, ensuring that the funding for the next two years is allocated to projects which meet key criteria and not on a ‘first come, first serve’ basis. Within the 4 core FiPL themes of Nature, Climate, People and Place, and whilst delivering the Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan priorities and the Nature Recovery Strategy aims, the highest scoring will be given to applications which meet the following:
2. Collaboration – projects which bring together a range of partners, or work across a wider landscape with multiple landowners/managers eg farm clusters
3. Innovation – projects which offer new ideas or solutions
4. Projects which kick start or provide ‘seed corn’ ideas ie which begin something which will continue to deliver beyond the life of FiPL
5. Projects which facilitate wider benefits and bring additionality
6. Proposals in the pipeline include looking at having a small-delegated fund for parish councils and community groups, and collaborative bids for ponds, access and water vole habitat improvements as well as more hedge planting schemes. There are 7 projects already agreed including:

* facilities for outdoor education centre for young people near Haslemere
* a farm trailer and facilities for farm visits/education near Dorking
* on-farm access improvements
* rainwater harvesting to enable conservation grazing in a remote site
* equipment to better manage chalk grassland for the SCC Partnerships
* a mentoring project to promote regenerative farming through the Pasture Fed Livestock Association

1. **Environmental Land Management Adviser.** In order to build staff capacity and to better integrate FiPL into the Surrey Hills AONB delivery, some of the FiPL allocation for its administration will be used to support a Environmental Land Management Adviser post on a fixed term contract. This will support the delivery of the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme and work in partnership with Natural England, the Local Nature Partnership, the County Council and other partners at a landscape scale to integrate delivery as part of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for Surrey.
2. **Cluster Groups.** The Surrey Hills contracted facilitators for 3 cluster schemes funded under the Defra Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Scheme which are the North Downs, Greenscapes, and West Surrey Greensands. The Defra funding will be ending over 2022 and a priority is to extend projects with FiPL funding as the facilitators are instrumental in promoting, advising and developing collaborative bids for the Surrey Hills Fund. Natural England is also supporting Big Chalk, which is a regional project led by the Protected Landscapes to restore downland landscapes and habitat, and NE is creating a wider landscape vision around the Thursley National Nature Reserve incorporating the Wealden Heath SPA.
3. **Space 4 Nature.** Surrey University and Surrey Wildlife Trust have been awarded £1.25m from the Dreamfund to connect Surrey’s nature by remote mapping and identifying the best areas of Surrey which can act as corridors to support a huge variety of species including bees, butterflies, birds and small mammals. Working with landowners, volunteers and community groups we aim to transform the plight of threatened species in Surrey. The project builds on our work with the University of Surrey and our land managers in using satellite data to develop the Surrey Hills Nature Recovery Strategy – Making Space for Nature. The use of large-scale, high quality habitat data which is easy to use would greatly assist our land managers to monitor and target activity to deliver nature recovery in the Surrey Hills linking to our wider Surrey countryside as part of the emerging Local Nature Recovery Strategy.
4. **Conservation Volunteers**. The Surrey Hills Society’s Volunteer and Projects Coordinator, Christa Emmett, has been helping to coordinate a wide variety of corporate, community group and developing volunteers under a Conservation Volunteer programme. At a Zero Carbon Guildford volunteer event on 24th March, 14 people expressed an interest in volunteering, with 8 specifically interested in access projects, including monitoring and repairing the promoted trails that will feature on the new website. The Society is also trying to support landowners in managing the unauthorised mountain bike trail network across the Surrey Hills.
5. **Unauthorised Mountain Bike Trails.** The recently published Surrey Story promotes `the Surrey Hills as famous for mountain biking’ and, although some of the pressures have eased since lockdown, there continues to be an increase in unauthorised trails. The AONB team has been working with Natural England, Forestry England, National Trust, colleagues and landowners on developing best practice policy and guidance on how to manage this issue with an emerging position developing as follows:

*`There will be no trail building without the consent of the landowner and land managers should seek to intervene where unauthorised trail building has resulted in conflict with nature conservation, visitor safety or land management interests”.*

The intervention needs to be proportionate to the resources available. For example, as we discussed at the last AONB Board meeting, the Friends of the Hurtwood has just one ranger covering over 4,000 acres of commons. Therefore, there is a pragmatic need to focus on managing higher risk areas (damage to sites, SSSIs, safety etc) and to get greater support from the responsible mountain bike community, Natural England and the police to mitigate damage and to seek prosecutions under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, as appropriate.

1. **Summer Lightning**. A priority is to work with landowners to ensure that the Summer Lightning trail is brought back into repair and safe condition. This was originally built with a £12k grant from Surrey CC about 9 years ago. It had proved very successful in managing mountain biking on Leith Hill to greatly reduce conflict by keeping the vast majority of cyclists on the one trail and allowing habitat to recover. Unfortunately, there has been no maintenance in recent years and unauthorised trails are now causing more damage to habitat, greater conflict and a general increase in risk of all users, which increases landowners’ liability. Specialized bikes, which has its new HQ just outside Dorking, is keen to support our Conservation Volunteers and corporate task days to help repair, monitor and maintain Summer Lightning to help reduce damage, risk and liability.

**Access, Enjoyment and Understanding**

1. **Summer Travel Campaign.** The Surrey Hills Communication Lead, Emma Cole, is coordinating the promotion of the Surrey Hills by rail and bus. This is working in a wide collaboration including the community rail partnerships, train and bus operators. As part of the promotion, the Mole Gap Trail, a walking linking Leatherhead to Dorking stations, is being refreshed with small signs installed on existing gates and posts to help waymark and to highlight important flora, fauna and points of interest along the way with links to our new website. This is being funded by Mole Valley DC’s Welcome Back Fund. Denbies will be hosting a launch event for project partners and civic guests on 12th July early evening.
2. **Countryside code.** The Countryside Code campaign is a collaboration with Surrey County Council’s Countryside Visitor Services team. It looks to make the code more accessible for the public to follow, sharing positive messaging to educate the public on the particular challenges we face in the Surrey countryside. This campaign includes six 30 second videos from various community groups; farmers, walkers, cyclists, horse riders, fire & rescue and access managers. They will share their stories and give a friendly face to the reasons why we must practice good behaviour in the countryside. The deliverables include the videos on Instagram Reels, sharing uploads onto websites and on-site posters that will be available to parish councils and land managers.
3. **BetterPoints. T**he BetterPoints app has teamed up with Surrey County Council in support of their Greener Futures programme. BetterPoints enables points to be earned for greener travel and exercise in the Surrey countryside that can be spent on local businesses and charities. We have collaborated with Surrey CC colleagues this summer to offer users points bonuses and giveaways as rewards for their sustainable travel efforts in the Surrey Hills.
4. **Surrey Hills Website.** Surrey Creative is developing the new Surrey Hills website. This will enable easier content management, a better visitor offering and community hub element, as well as supporting major projects like the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme. It is also a major opportunity to refresh the brand and to demonstrate greater diversity and inclusivity as a National Landscape. Volunteers were recruited for a photoshoot, representing greater diversity and inclusion, for a variety of locations in the Surrey Hills which will be used across the Surrey Hills website, social media and in printed materials.
5. **Making Space for Nature Exhibition.** Paintings of the 30 Surrey Hills indicator species have been created by an ‘Our Time’ artist at HMP Send, taking part in a programme delivered by Watts Gallery Trust and funded by the Michael Varah Memorial Fund and the Surrey Hills Trust Fund. They now feature as part of a wonderful exhibition with the National Trust at Leith Hill Place, aligning with the celebration of Vaughn Williams 150th anniversary. There will be an opportunity to have a fundraising event and to thank all the partners, land managers and conservation bodies involved in developing the project being planned for Thursday 25th August.
6. **Nature Connections in the Surrey Hills**. In a partnership withNatural England to help connect people with nature, Nature Connections is an integral physical and emotional experience to support a feeling of safety, belonging and purpose in the Surrey Hills. This is a key theme for 2022 and Emma has facilitated a fantastic variety of activities so far which includes 6 groups of displaced young people from The [Big Leaf Foundation](https://www.bigleaffoundation.org.uk/) for a series of nature-based activities at [Surrey Outdoor Learning](https://www.surreyoutdoorlearning.uk/) (SOLD). This involves cohorts from Big Leaf partaking in activities such as high and low ropes set within the woodland, to creative and artistic sessions. This gave the opportunity to reflect, understand and increase confidence in the natural environment.  The Big Leaf team had the following testimony:

*“Weeks like this are so important because it gives the young people an opportunity to be outside, to get to know each-other, to leave their accommodation, not to feel so isolated. It’s great for their mental health and general wellbeing. But it also makes them realise that there’s people that care, there’s people that want to help them and they are supported.”*

1. The project has also enabled groups of London based school children for a day at a farm in Norbury Park with Just Bring Yourself. They discovered what it is like to work on a farm, explore the natural landscape and some quiet artistic reflection. Forest Bathing sessions have also been held for Surrey Minority Ethnic Forum (SMEF) and Surrey Asian Women’s Network. The groups encountered feelings of safety, home and peacefulness during their session and enjoying the "lovely sunshine streaking through the dear old trees and their inhabitants”. SMEF have also partaken in a pyrography workshops at Birtley Estate with local artist Ruth Wheeler. This has proved to be inspirational with powerful feedback about the benefit to well-being, for example:

*It's wonderful to indulge your senses. Feel the gentle breeze on your skin. It has been tough especially during COVID so this really reunites me with a sense of wellbeing. I felt the weight off my shoulders.*

*Where did the time go? It was so peaceful. In Africa we call anything wild 'jungle'. And today I felt like I was back in the jungle at home, this is what we would do. Sit out in the open doing craft with bird song. Away from the hustle and bustle.*

1. **Equestrian Working Group – Horseman’s Sunday.** A group of equestrians are keen to continue the working group to promote equestrian interests in the Surrey Hills including public awareness and the development of a network of promoted trails. The Horseman’s Sunday event took place on 24th April at St Martha’s Church with the reverend David Oakden as a celebration of horse riding in the Surrey Hills.
2. **Cycle Surrey Hills network.** Following a comprehensive survey work, funding has been secured from the Surrey Hills Trust Fund to refresh the signage on the 50 mile of 5 loops in SW Surrey. This will replace the Cycle Surrey Hills branded way-markers with clearer colour coded way-markers that will promote the multi-user rights and messaging around share with care and the BHS and Cycling UK `Be Nice, Say Hi’ campaign. These routes will feature as ARCgis storyboards on the new website promoting links to bus stops, train stations and our local business members.
3. **Habitat.** Artists and ecologists have come together to develop a creative eco space on campus at the University of Surrey. This pilot project is funded by Arts Council England and involves the creation of sculptural habitats to support specific declining species. These will be launched in July. The artists have engaged 400 people directly teaching them about local species and creating sculptural habitats. 11-13 yr olds were a large proportion of those engaged in addition to the elderly and people with learning disabilities.
4. **Inspiring Views**: Artist duo Instar are creating the next ‘Inspiring Views’ seating on Titsey Estate in East Surrey. They are sourcing stone from the Titsey quarry and creating a circular area for walkers to rest on the North Downs Way. This is due to be launched in October.
5. **Heathland Artworks**: At the end of June, this annual art trail at RSPB Farnham Heath will be launched. Featuring temporary artworks by BA and MA students from the University for the Creative Arts who have been inspired by the history and geology of the heath. The trail will be in place until the end of October.
6. **Harvest**. We will be celebrating the Surrey Hills landscape through this community arts event at Box Hill on 17 September at dusk. The Harvest event, in partnership with the National Trust and Mole Valley District Council, will include singing, percussion, art installation and poetry. This year the theme is Nature Connections between people and nature. Artist Diana Burch is leading workshops with targeted groups which will all contribute to a striking installation on donkey green that will have been created by hundreds of local people.
7. **Social Media.** The Surrey Hills family continue to use their individual social media channels to share information about all aspects of their work. We encourage you to engage with us on social media.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Family Member** | **Facebook** | **Twitter** | **Instagram** |
| Surrey Hills AONB | 8,109 | 6,343 | 4,069 |
| Surrey Hills Enterprises | 1,306 | N/a | 3,447 |
| Surrey Hills Society | 483 | 679 | 1,570 |
| Surrey Hills Arts | N/a | N/a | 3,152 |

**Growing the Surrey Hills Economy**

1. **Surrey Hills Artisan Festival.** Surrey Hills Enterprises organised a very successful Artisan Festival on Saturday 21st and Sunday 22nd May at Denbies. It was wonderful to see such a brilliant turn out with over 5,000 people enjoying the lively music, artists in action, demonstrations, children’s games, delicious local food and drink and the wide array of artisan stalls to browse. Thank you to all the AONB Board Members and partners that supported the event. Regular Surrey Hills Artisan Markets are now being organised in Cranleigh, Dorking and Ripley.
2. **Promoting Corporate offerings.** As part of Surrey Hills Enterprise’s strategy to raise awareness of Surrey Hills Members, to promote the rural economy and sustainable tourism, we have collated a portfolio of activities that we will be sending to corporate event buyers. From April, Enterprises has been sending out a monthly email to event organisers, HR departments, hotels etc to highlight one corporate experience and one venue in the Surrey Hills. These will eventually feature on the new Surrey Hills website.
3. **Membership, Awards and Anniversary.** Surrey Hills Enterprise’s membership continues to receive steady growth, with a development group looking at the corporate, tourism and hospitality sector which will feature large in the new website. Services to members includes an active WhatsApp Group and seminars on various topics.At the Surrey CC sponsored CREST22 Sustainable Business Awards in May, the following Surrey Hills Enterprises Trademark members who were winners in their categories:

* [Nordic Wellness Drinks](https://www.surreyhills.org/local-businesses/nordic-wellness-drinks-ltd/) winning the ‘Going Circular’ award for their progress in environmental impact
* [Crumbs Brewing](https://www.surreyhills.org/local-businesses/crumbs-brewing-2/) winning the ‘Transforming Food’ award for their environmental efforts through produce
* [Clandon Wood Nature Reserve & Natural Burial Ground](https://www.surreyhills.org/local-businesses/national-constitution-center-1/) winning the ‘Sustainability Impact’ award for their focus on wellbeing and improving people’s lives on a day-to-day basis
* [Plant Passion](https://www.surreyhills.org/local-businesses/plantpassion/)winning the ‘Efficiency Champion’ award for their significant resource saving improvements an greater use of renewable resources

The historic Fetcham Park House will be hosting the 10th Anniversary of Surrey Hills Enterprises on Tuesday 21st June. This will be a celebration of all the wonderful businesses and corporate supporters and their commitment to collaboration, passion for the Surrey Hills and environmental sustainability.

1. **Surrey Hills Wood Fair.** Enterprises will be organising this year’s Wood Fair on Saturday 10th and Sunday 11th September. This is a major event in the Surrey Hills calendar planning to attract 6 – 8 thousand visitors to promote, educate and inform all that is good about wood. This year we are organising a larger Making Space for Nature zone with talks, demonstrations and activities including coppice crafts, tree planting, bug hotels and local provenance wild flower bombs.

**Advocacy. Partnership and Coordination**

1. **Landscape Review**. Following the workshop ahead of the last AONB Board, the response was submitted to the Defra consultation on the Government’s response to Julian Glover’s independent Landscapes Review. In the meantime, Defra has agreed a 3 year funding agreement for AONB partnerships with a 15% increase in 22/23 and flatlining for the next 2 years. This is disappointing as Glover had called for an immediate doubling on AONB funding, but Defra is targeting FiPL funding at National Parks and AONBs ad it is hoped that this will be consolidated within the new Environmental Land Management Schemes. In the meantime, Defra is setting up various working groups and is keen to pursue National Landscapes branding, securing private sector investment, advice on AONB Management Plans and governance.
2. **Surrey Hills Community Forum**. This year’s Forum will take place online on Friday 15July in partnership with the Surrey Association of Local Councils (SALC), led by Liz Cutter. This will provide an opportunity to update on Surrey Hills activities, Natural England progress report on the Boundary Review and Making Space for Nature, inviting parish councils to the Wood Fair for advice on FiPL grants, talks and demonstrations. All AONB Board members and partners are welcome to attend the Forum.
3. **Surrey Hills Symposium with Surrey University**. This year’s Symposium is being planned for 23rd November with the theme of Nature Connection – exploring diversity and inclusion in the countryside`. Based on the feedback from last year, the demand is to retain a hybrid event, to focus on the Surrey Hills and our projects and to have a longer session to allow networking and a marketplace.
4. **Surrey Hills AONB Staffing and Budget.** Following the SCC restructure in 21/22, the Working Group Coordinator/ Administrator (0.4 fte) and the Office Manager (1fte) left in December, with come of the function being replaced by SCC Business Support (0.3 fte). With a 15% increase in Defra funding over the next 3 years, this leaves the AONB core budget with headroom of circa £85,000 per annum. We also have a Defra Farming in Protected Landscapes budget of which up to £59,000 can be allocated to advice and promotion, and £34,000 to business support. It is proposed to use the £85k core budget and up to £85k of the FiPL Project Budget to:

- recruiting an Administrator into the vacant position

- extend the secondment of Sarah Thiele as Programme Manager using core and FiPL budget

- recruit an Environmental Land Management Adviser to be funded out of FiPL

- subject to the review, continue to contribute to the Surrey Hills Arts Programme Manager and the Surrey Hills Society Volunteer and Projects Co-ordinator out of the core AONB budget. This will be incorporated into the business plan and presented to the AGM in September to agree the budget.

**Conclusions:**

1. By working in collaboration, the Surrey Hills AONB family manages to deliver across a broad agenda in pursuit of the agreed vision for the Surrey Hills.

**Financial and value for money implications**

1. The Surrey Hills AONB team delivers the above programme of work with its core budget. Collaborating through the Surrey Hills family and partners demonstrates a high level of success in securing additional resources.

**Equalities and Diversity Implications**

1. The diversity of the Surrey Hills activity provides a wide range of opportunities to engage residents, businesses, and wider communities to understand, access and enjoy the Surrey Hills.

**Risk Management Implications**

1. The key risks are identified in the Risk Register that is reported annually to the AONB Board’s AGM based on reputational, performance, finance, and governance risks. This will inform the delivery of the programme to mitigate risks as appropriate.

**Next steps:**

Members’ advice will help to inform the delivery of the AONB Management Plan.

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**Sources/background papers:**

* The Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan (2020 – 2025) https://www.surreyhills.org/board/our-management-plan/