

Draft **MINUTES** of the Annual General Meeting of the **SURREY AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY BOARD (SURREY HILLS BOARD)** held at 2.00 pm on 1 September 2021 in the Council Chamber, Woodhatch Place, Reigate, and remotely via Microsoft Teams.

(These minutes are subject to confirmation by the AONB Board at its next meeting on 1 December 2021.)

PRESENT:

Chair:

Heather Kerswell Independent

Core Members:

Councillor Geoff Duck	Tandridge District Council
Councillor Susan Parker	Guildford Borough Council
*Councillor Claire Malcomson	Mole Valley District Council
Councillor Rosemary Absalom	Reigate and Banstead Borough Council
*Councillor Ruth Reed	Waverley Borough Council
Councillor Marisa Heath	Surrey County Council
Stephen Rudd	Natural England
Holly O'Neill	National Trust

Delivery Partners:

Gordon Jackson	Surrey Hills Society
*Simon Whalley	Surrey Hills Enterprises Community Interest Company

Advisory Members:

Hugh Broom	National Farmers Union
Mike Waite	Surrey Wildlife Trust
Kristina Kenworthy	Campaign to Protect Rural England
Liz Cutter	Surrey Association of Local Councils

Observer:

Alison Clarke Surrey Hills Arts

Apologies:

Andrew Smith	Natural England
Stephanie Fudge	National Trust
Sarah-Jane Chimbwandira	Surrey Wildlife Trust
Tim Bamford	Country Land and Business Association

In attendance:

Rob Fairbanks	AONB Director
Clive Smith	AONB Planning Adviser
Andre Ferreira	Regulatory Business Manager, SCC

*Attended remotely via Microsoft Teams.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

The following apologies for absence were noted:

Andrew Smith	Natural England
Stephanie Fudge	National Trust
Sarah-Jane Chimbwandira	Surrey Wildlife Trust
Tim Bamford	Country Land and Business Association

2. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair asked Board members to introduce themselves and to note which organisations they represented.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None declared.

4. SURREY HILLS AONB BOUNDARY EXTENSION PROJECT

Stephen Rudd provided an update on the project, specifically the appointment of consultants to help with undertaking the assessment and evidence gathering.

The contract was about to be offered to a consortium, which would combine landscape assessment and would take on engagement expertise. This was still at an early stage and the information remained confidential until all documents had been signed, but everything was proceeding according to plan and an inspection meeting would be held later in September, after which they would be commissioned to proceed. They would be gathering evidence over the course of the winter and present this by spring 2022.

Natural England was very much aware of the public and stakeholder interest in 'the area of search', in which consultants would look at areas of natural beauty. A date would be set for late September or early October for a briefing to Guildford Borough Council on the relationship of the boundary review with the Local Plan.

Because of the interest and questions around the review, a 'Frequently asked Questions' document was being produced, which would be shared with the Surrey Hills Advisory Group and then with the AONB Board.

Susan Parker commented that there was huge interest in this topic in all areas and asked how members of the public could engage with the process; become involved with the consideration of what constitutes an

area of natural beauty and what kind of evidence should be provided so that they know that their specific area was being considered.

Stephen Rudd said that the process of appointing landscape consultants had started and the seeking of evidence would be delegated to them. The process of how engagement with local stakeholders and landowners would take place would be very clear and transparent.

Susan Parker noted that evidence should be gathered from everybody who had an interest in an area of natural beauty, not just landowners. As an example, parish councils might want to appoint their own consultants. All the details should be a matter of public record, so that people are aware of how they can provide evidence to have specific areas assessed.

Stephen Rudd confirmed that the consultations would be very wide and the assessment criteria would be published; engagement would be as collaborative as possible.

Rosemary Absalom noted that certain existing maps had indicated where extensions could be. People were now realising that this was becoming a reality and are enquiring if there could be extensions to the extensions. She asked if any existing areas under consideration could be extended.

Stephen Rudd said that various assessments had been undertaken by a number of different consultancies in the past. The purpose of this project was to take all previous proposals into consideration and the AGLV boundaries would cease to exist. The areas to be considered were non-specific; no lines had yet been drawn and the area within which the assessment would be undertaken would be broadly defined. The assessment would be evidence-led and all previous assessments would be taken into consideration.

5. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The minutes of the AGM held on 2 September 2020 and the Board meeting held on 22 June 2021 were approved as a correct record of the meeting, subject to an amendment to the minutes of 22 June 2021 proposed by Ruth Reed.

6. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

Four questions from members of the public were received and these, as well as the replies, were taken as read and are attached as Annex 1.

Question 1: Wyndham Clarke.
No supplementary question

Question 2: John Oliver.

Supplementary question: The AONB Management Plan set out the vision and policy at a point in time. It did not address major issues, particularly environmental ones which may arise during the duration of the plan and which would affect the AONB. Whilst Board members might take away the outcome of Board considerations of such matters, given that there is regular disagreement within the Board about issues, how does the Chair satisfy herself personally that the overall Board advice on management matters which may arise, are properly conveyed to constituent local authority decision makers and why does she not, as the Board figurehead, send advice to them personally?

The Chair commented that one had to accept that different people worked in different ways. She thanked Mr Oliver for his interest and expressed the hope that the Board would have a more constructive partnership with him in the future.

Question 3: Sally Blake.

No supplementary question:

Question 4: Jenny Desoutter.

Supplementary question: Mrs Desoutter expressed her deepest sympathy with the bereaved family following an accident in Norbury Park. She welcomed the fact that these kinds of issues would be raised with the Police Commissioner and the initiatives for the use and responsible sharing of paths. However, it now seemed that there was a second serious collision between a cyclist and a pedestrian in Norbury Park just a few weeks after the first instance referred to, in which the pedestrian required hospital treatment. Neither of these accidents were reported in the press. Given these two accidents in one area and given the changing user profile as more vehicles, particularly faster vehicles, are attracted to these areas and use unregulated paths, is anybody able to say how many such incidents occurred over the Surrey Hills as a whole and if not, was it not time that somebody gathered this information and looked at the risks and safety?

Rob Fairbanks said that he would liaise with the Police, Ambulance Service and Surrey County Council. He was meeting Jenny Desoutter the following week and would report his findings to her.

7. GOVERNANCE AND FINANCE REPORT

Rob Fairbanks introduced the report and noted that this was an annual report which provided an overview of some of the key governance and funding issues. It was also the time of year that outturn reports were prepared on estimates for local authorities and Defra on funding within the context of the Board constitution.

It was key to note that the Glover report (with recommendations) had been published on 21 September 2019 and that the Government's

response was still being awaited. The response was now imminent and would be published within the next few months, but in the meantime Defra was pursuing some of the objectives, such as creating a national landscapes service; new powers and funding models for AONBs as well as relationships with stakeholders. AONBs would be coming together as a national landscape family, with help of Defra funding, to see how the nation's natural heritage and the wider society could be better served.

It was recognised that the Board constitution had not been reviewed for some time and whilst the Glover recommendations were awaited, a working group had been established to review the constitution.

The Chair noted that the working group had met and had discussed the constitution in context. Given the huge amount of change within the protected landscapes scene; the Glover recommendations; proposed changes to the Planning Act and Defra legislation, which should be available by next autumn, it could mean that major changes would have to be made to the constitution, but rather than sit back and wait for the changes, the Board could influence where possible and react appropriately. In the meantime some minor changes could be made and the Guildford BC legal team would assist the working group in doing a draft with track changes. This would take into consideration comments from Board members and include their professional judgment on what could be improved. Once received, the working group would reconvene to consider the draft.

Rob Fairbanks noted that the Risk Register was reviewed annually, which was considered by the Member Advisory Group. The register highlighted two areas of potentially high risk: Firstly reputational, specifically that the Surrey Hills AONB website was not fit for purpose and needed a major revamp.

The second high risk area was the allocation of £438k from the Farming in Protected Landscapes Fund. Ideally the funds had to be allocated by the end of January and spent by the end of March 2022, but it had not been possible until recently to set up a team and the processes to manage this. The Board should be aware there was a high risk that this would not be achieved. The mitigation was to work with local stakeholders, other AONBs and National Parks to make the case to Defra on how the money should be spent.

In relation to the Business Plan, Rob Fairbanks noted that the AONB team was situated within the Surrey County Council structure and the restructuring of the team would be aligned with the SCC restructuring. The Chair was in discussion with the relevant directorate on the restructuring.

Susan Parker raised the following:

- With referred to the funding from the Farming in Protected Landscapes Fund, she asked if information could be put on the AONB website with details of the application process to make potential applicants aware of the opportunity.
- The AONB Board was a separate entity and the AONB business plan should not necessarily align with that of Surrey County Council.
- Reports (with financial details) of entities within the Surrey Hills family, e.g. Surrey Hills Enterprises and the Surrey Hills Society, had previously been presented to the AONB Board and she asked if this could be done again in future. These entities were operating on the back of the Surrey Hills brand, and it was important that these details were transparent and reported to the public.

The Chair commented that the accounts of the Surrey Hills Society and Surrey Hills Enterprises were publicly available; whilst they operate in their own domains, they were cross-referenced on the AONB website. Details had also been made available to Board members in the past.

Gordon Jackson noted that the Surrey Hills Society was a registered charity and its accounts were on the society website. The internal accounts of the charity were not public and should not be; it was only the audited figures which were published, and these were transparent and provided all the necessary information. The Surrey Hills Trust Fund was administered by the Community Foundation and they did not publish their internal accounts, although the Surrey Hills Trust Fund Advisory Council did receive reports and these could be made available for the public. Even the trustees only got the information on a periodic basis and the information was therefore not available on a daily basis.

With reference to the AONB website, Claire Malcomson said that funds from the Welcome Back Fund could be used and encouraged other districts and boroughs to do this. Whilst certain councils benefitted more from the AONB than others, especially economically, all councils should be encouraged to contribute the same amount.

The Chair said that Guildford BC had also suggested that the Welcome Back Fund could be a source for this and Rob Fairbanks noted that Mole Valley District Council had volunteered to draft a service level agreement to ensure that all boroughs and districts contributed the same amount.

With reference to the Finance Report, Rob Fairbanks said that both the core budget and the project budget balanced; the estimates in the Outturn Report for 2022 – 2023 had to be agreed. This was submitted to the boroughs and districts on an annual basis and although it would be preferable to have a five-year agreement to provide stability, this was the situation at the moment.

The Board approved the recommendations in the report to:

1. Note the progress on taking forward the Glover recommendations and the adoption of the National Landscape name for promotional purposes.
2. Note the Risk Register and agree the actions needed to mitigate the areas of high risk as indicated in Annex 1 to the report.
3. Approve the outturn report for 2020/2021 as indicated in Annex 2 to the report.
4. Agree the core estimates for 2022/2023 as indicated in Annex 3 to the report.

8. AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN (2020 – 2025) MONITORING REPORT

The Chair noted that the report was very important as it detailed the work done by the AONB delivery and other partners. Compared to other AONBs, the Surrey AONB did not have big support resources, and the Board had to rely on its delivery and wider partners to assist with its work.

Planning

Clive Smith noted that there had been no let-up on planning applications during the Covid period.

The publication of two Local Plans, by Waverley and Mole Valley, were imminent and it would be interesting to see how they responded to the AONB planning advice which he had previously offered, although it had to be accepted that they had to take other planning applications into account. He was however confident that they took his advice seriously.

He raised concern about the number of proposals being submitted, not just for the conversion or replacement of farm buildings with dwellings, but also for the conversion of stabling. Given that there was so much stabling throughout the Surrey Hills AONB, if owners got wind of planning permission being granted for the conversion of stabling, there would be a strong economic incentive for further proposals.

Once the principle of a residential conversion had been established, it was often followed by an application for the replacement with a new dwelling and then further extensions, often referred to as 'development creep'.

One of his main concerns was the burden being placed on planning departments. They had always been fully stretched, but no more so than at the moment, probably because of financial constraints on councils. Staff were going on 'stress leave'; some of these were senior staff and he put out a plea to council representatives to support requests for additional funding for planning departments. Staff simply did not have the time to thoroughly consider applications as they used to and there seemed to be an inclination to permit developments because of concerns of having the time to deal with refusals. This might not always be apparent, but

because of his contact with the various planning departments, he was able to see this happening.

Geoff Duck commented that Clive's comments were nothing new, the whole planning system was struggling gravely with the mismatch of this supply and demand, i.e. the supply of attending to planning applications versus the demand of the number of proposed applications. The point about having time to negotiate improved design and provide feedback to the applicants was well made. It was perhaps time for all the planning authorities to get together and make joint representations on the state of the planning system.

Hugh Broom said that planning departments were under enormous pressure and seen from an applicant's view, the commercial knock-on effects of the delay in processing applications were becoming problematic; he urged council representatives to provide more resources to planning departments. The problem had been perpetuated by Covid, but as budgets were cut, planning officers had become more remote from the businesses and communities which they served, which by default made their job harder. Planning departments needed an injection of funds and resources to help them serve businesses and communities; they were woefully underfunded, which ultimately had an impact on the economic resilience and performance of the area.

Susan Parker said that there was increasing pressure, partly led by central government and partly led by officers, to move towards approval as the default option, which was exactly the problem as described, specifically in the case of the AONB. Whilst the AONB planning guidelines were incorporated in local plans, in reality these were not always taken on board in planning applications. There was also a huge burden on Clive; he worked incredibly hard and his department should perhaps be strengthened to spread the load. The AONB Board should ensure that councils do what they should be doing; it was not just about economic development, but also about protecting natural resources.

Geoff Duck noted that Tandridge District Council, mainly through its Planning Policy Committee, was taking this issue extremely seriously. A lobbying action across Surrey was necessary, as the planning rules put forward by government departments no longer allow council planning departments to work in a proper way.

The Chair commented that amendments to the Planning Act were being awaited and that development management and local plans would probably change after that.

Ruth Reed said that Waverley District Council had an excellent head of planning who had done his utmost to change various systems. There had been so many planning applications that an 'amnesty' had to be called in certain parts; pre-planning advice in certain instances had been suspended as thousands of applications had to be put on a new system,

which had added complications, although this has been extremely well managed. The system would be much more comprehensive and all stakeholders would be able to use it. The planning department understood the frustration of businesses and they were working as hard as they could. Clive Smith's hard work and analysis in this regard was greatly appreciated.

Rosemary Absalom commented that increased resourcing for Clive Smith should be supported, especially as boundary extensions were being considered, which meant that his workload would increase.

The Chair said that if the AONB area was extended, changes would have to be made and the financing model would have to be reconsidered.

Landscape Conservation and Enhancement

The Chair noted that the Nature Recovery Strategy had been launched earlier that day, which was led by landowners and land managers. She was particularly proud of the strategy as it was happening within the AONB and facilitated by Rob Fairbanks. It was not a top-down initiative, but was driven by people on the ground.

Hugh Broom said that a lot of credit had to go to Rob Fairbanks who was at the forefront when a future land management strategy was mapped out. Defra started a test and trial process and he led the successful Surrey AONB application, which was done through the Making Space for Nature group and which took into account a wide range of factors. The group started before the Covid pandemic and carried on throughout it via remote workshops and meetings for stakeholders. The Wildlife Trust, through Mike Waite and other agri-partners, helped with identification of key indicator species which were now referred to in the nature recovery strategy. Whilst all this work was now detailed in a beautiful document, the challenge was how to join everything and deliver the plan. For it to be delivered, all stakeholders had to do it together to create and optimise nature corridors; enhance the existing habitats and create new habitats. Many farmers were already doing this within the existing agri-habitat, but it had to be done collectively.

The Chair thanked everybody who had contributed to the project and commented that there were certainly opportunities for instant cooperation. For instance, the newly appointed volunteer co-ordinator should get volunteers involved and lead projects that would enhance key species.

Marisa Heath commented that people involvement was key to the success of the project and asked how this could be done; what the role of the local assessment panel would be; and how groups that are normally not involved, could be engaged.

Rob Fairbanks agreed that people involvement was vital and that the relevant tools and resources had to be made available for the work to be done. Large tracts of land were being managed and all stakeholders had to be involved. With reference to the local assessment panel, the Defra funding which had just become available could be used to implement the project. The panel had met earlier that day and agreed that this was one project which could be supported.

Hugh Broom noted that there was lots of enthusiasm and outside groups were becoming involved, such as the Wildlife Trust, but these groups and the landowners and managers had to be joined in a co-ordinated way.

Geoff Duck commented that this was an exciting project as it was bringing the natural environment into the mix of society and the economy more broadly. As regards the AONB, marketing, image and branding were important. As indicated in the document, there were certain key indicator species in different landscapes and habitats, but it was important that the right message and impression was conveyed to the public. The document would certainly contribute to the wider public message and should be seen as a strong asset to the Board.

Gordon Jackson stated that the Surrey Hills Society had managed to raise funding for a two-year post for a volunteer co-ordinator, and Christa Emmett has been recruited. She was very well qualified and her main brief was to bring the voluntary community together and to match them with landowners and other stakeholders in projects which they wanted to undertake. He expressed the hope that all stakeholders would work with her to deliver actual projects on the ground.

Rob Fairbanks noted that Sarah Thiele had been seconded to the AONB team to lead on the delivery of the Surrey Hills Farming in Protected Landscapes Fund. Any ideas from Board members on how this could be delivered would be welcome.

With reference to Land Manager Clusters, Rob Fairbanks noted that facilitators had organised a number of training programmes and one of the key elements was to see how communities could relate to and become involved in the projects. The public could act responsibly if they had the appropriate information and public engagement was vital to the delivery of successful programmes.

Access, Enjoyment and Understanding

With reference to the Rail to Ramble project, Gordon Jackson noted that this was one of the projects which could be started during lockdown. It was done in conjunction with the South East Communities Rail Partnership and four leaflets had been produced which promoted walking stations along the North Downs line. The leaflets were free and generally available and more would be produced to encourage people to visit the countryside by train rather than by car. Whilst these were not yet

available to download as applications, they could be accessed on the society webpage.

The Chair referred to the Surrey Strategic Greenway Strategy, specifically the Leith Hill Greenway project, and emphasised that the Greenway was not a dedicated cycleway. There was a misunderstanding that a network of cycleways was being launched, but these were in fact multi-user routes open to all users. It relied on people being considerate and used existing routes by linking them together with no additional tarmacking involved. It was hoped that this would be the first part of a strategic network which the Board considered and approved in June 2020, with the vision to create green corridors between villages.

Rob Fairbanks said that there had been issues with cyclists, as pointed out in an earlier question by the public, although the majority of users were responsible and the routes were very much about being tolerant and considerate behaviour. The main message was to demonstrate to the naysayers that the majority of people could use the routes respectfully. Invitations to the project launch would be sent out in the next week with the relevant details.

Gordon Jackson referred to the Surrey Hills Society autumn newsletter and noted that it detailed a number of events, many of which were part of the Guildford Walk Fest. He invited Board members to join in one of the walks, as it was often a good way of networking and finding information.

Alison Clarke noted that Surrey Hills Arts was a partnership between the AONB Board and Surrey Arts, which promoted specific art-related projects and mentioned the following:

- The Radius project was recently launched at Denbies Hillside
- A wheelchair friendly ramp had been installed and the North Downs Way had been connected to Denbies Hillside with two viewpoints.
- A series of walks had also been launched and downloads were available on the Surrey Arts website.
- James Tunnard did some workshops at the Patchwork Garden with a great response.
- A podcast by Whistlestop Arts, which involved several stakeholders, had also been made available.
- Footprints, a live storytelling project was held as part of the Surrey Archaeology Festival and can be accessed via QR codes as part of the self-guided walks.
- Arts Council funding had been obtained to bring choreographer Rosemary Lane to the Surrey Hills and she would be doing an event at the Orchard for children and older people.
- The Habitat project could be supported by giving it the thumbs up on the website.

- A symposium was also being planned on how the arts could help with climate change; a number of interesting speakers would be involved and workshops would be held.

Growing the Surrey Hills Economy

Simon Whalley expressed his thanks to everybody in the AONB family for working together in a collaborative way to grow the Surrey Hills economy and noted the following:

- Despite the Covid pandemic and the fact that a number of members had to step down, the Surrey Hills Enterprises membership was still growing with up to 155 members at present. Even more encouraging was the way they were working together, an example being the five vineyards that were working together to get more people into Surrey. The different WhatsApp groups had also started working together constructively which created many opportunities.
- A very successful Surrey Hills Artisan Festival was held at Denbies in July which saw members participating and some potential new members being identified. The festival attracted 2 500 visitors, which was very encouraging, especially given the Covid restrictions. Several other towns were also holding artisan markets where members could showcase their goods.
- The Surrey Wood Fair would be held soon at Cranleigh Showground, with a number of participants, although a few of the more distant participants would not be able to be there. It was fundamental that people engaged with these kinds of events and it was hoped that 5 000 – 6 000 people would visit the Wood Fair.
- The delayed Sustainable Business conference was scheduled for 22 October at Penny Hill Park; they have branded one of their restaurants with a Surrey Hills theme which has encouraged members to use the opportunity to promote their products.
- The new Guide to Surrey Hills, which was sponsored by Squires Garden Centres, was almost ready for publication.
- Squires Garden Centres were also sponsoring the Surrey Hills Champions programme and as they had exposure to thousands of visitors each year it would support Surrey Hills Enterprises in a constructive way. This set the standard the get more of the larger companies involved; there are more than 100 large businesses headquartered in Surrey and the new chair of the development group would use his experience to get more of the larger companies involved. This not only gave access to their funding, but also to their employees and bring them on board as volunteers.
- The Surrey Hills Champions initiative provided a link with society in general and provided a way of working together constructively.
- There were also a number of other projects in the pipeline which bode well for the future.

Advocacy, Partnership and Co-ordination

Rob Fairbanks referred to the annual partnership tour and said that it was important that the findings and feedback from the tour were incorporated into the work programmes going forward.

With reference to the Surrey Hills Community Forum, Liz Cutter noted that this was the third forum and over 100 people, representing various parish councils and community groups, participated. The discussions involved an update on the work done by the AONB Board and its management plan; introduced the Nature Page on the website which highlighted the links to the Greener Communities as well as the new Wiki page. The main item was the presentation by Natural England on the process for the AONB boundary extension, including timetables and clear advice on how consultations should be done. There was also a question-and-answer session and the forum was very well received.

Rob Fairbanks referred to the AONB unit staffing and thanked Caroline Price for her service of 17 years. She had taken up a new position in Surrey County Council and Emma Cole would start as the Communications Lead in October.

The Surrey Hills Wood Fair was a massive event put on by Surrey Hills Enterprises and would include a Making Space for Nature section which should continue the dialogue between landowners and managers on the one side and the AONB on the other.

The Surrey Hills Symposium would be held on 24 November and the theme was 'Our Climate and Biodiversity Emergency – how can we inspire action'. The keynote speaker was Partha Dasgupta on the economics of biodiversity and the BBC broadcaster Jim Al-Khalili would be chairing the panel debate.

The Board approved the recommendation in the report that members note the activities of the Surrey Hills Family and partners in delivering the AONB Management Plan (2020 – 2025).

9. MEETING DATES FOR 2021 AND 2022

Rob Fairbanks noted that the next Board meeting would be on 1 December 2021 and a possible venue could be the Hurtwood Inn in Peaslake, which was in the heart of the Surrey Hills and was a hotspot for mountain bikers and walkers.

The 2022 meeting dates were 2 March, 22 June, 7 September (AGM) and 7 December.

The Chair said that the meetings would take place at outside venues, except the AGM, which could be held at the Surrey County Council offices to enable webcasting.

Susan Parker commented that having three meetings at venues where webcasting could not take place was not in line with the principle of allowing public participation. It had previously been mentioned that at least one meeting would be a 'partnership meeting', which would require a bigger venue.

The Chair stated that there was no legal obligation to webcast meetings and it was not possible to do webcasting from all venues. The public could of course still attend meetings if they wished

Rob Fairbanks said that the idea was to have different speakers on a variety of topics at meetings.

Susan Parker said that transparency, democratic accountability and the ability for the public to contribute was important and should be enhanced to the greatest possible degree. Webcasting provided accountability, transparency and a public record of decision making.

The Chair stated that all AONB Board meetings would be open to the public and there would be a public question session. Going to different venues also gave different members of the public a chance to participate.

Hugh Broom commented that it was important as a Board to get out and about in the community it aspired to serve, and members of the public were welcome to attend all Board meetings.

Geoff Duck said that it was important to use a mixture of venues; by meeting at other venues it improved networking, specifically informal networking. It was also important to do this as the Board could learn more to discuss its remit.

The meeting ended at 15:57.

**Heather Kerswell
Independent Chair**