**AONB Board 2 March 2022**

**Item 5 : Public Questions**

1. **Jenny Desoutter to ask the Chair:**

We are all aware of the recent surge in numbers of visitors to the Surrey Hills. In fact, during the last two years many rural villages and beauty spots have been effectively overwhelmed, leading to unprecedented measures such as having to paint double yellow lines in our most rural locations including Frensham Ponds, some local roads e.g. in Westhumble being blocked by parked cars, the need to institute marshals in some villages such as Shere, and residents in villages like Abinger Hammer experiencing public health issues due to a lack of toilet facilities. Paths have been widened, crops trampled and habitats eroded. Given these unintended outcomes, at the December 2020 Board I questioned the wisdom of continuing to advertise in London for more visitors to come to the Surrey Hills. You replied that in fact the AONB had instituted a “Stay safe, Stay local” campaign encouraging visitors NOT to venture into the Surrey Hills, and that “Providers in the Surrey Hills have not been as well equipped as we would have wished to cope with the increased tourist numbers.” You also stated that the Board is very keen to learn about the impact of visitors on landscapes and habitats and how this can be monitored.

The popularity of the Surrey Hills continues to increase, and although pandemic restrictions are now easing, because of accessibility to London our lockdown legacy means visitor numbers are likely to remain high.

As the tourist season approaches, please can you give details of any current or planned advertising of the Surrey Hills, and can you say firstly what progress you have made in monitoring visitor impact on landscapes and habitats; secondly whether you believe that providers, and in particular those local communities whose lives are most impacted by large influxes of visitors, are now better prepared to cope with problems; and thirdly if the AONB and their partners are spending money on attracting more visitors, whether you are investing equivalent resources in equipping rural communities for increased visitor numbers, and in measures to protect sensitive habitats from damage caused by excessive footfall?

 **Reply:**

Dear Ms Desoutter

Thank you for your question highlighting the popularity of the Surrey Hills and the visitor pressures, particularly during the time when Covid restrictions were being eased.

Whilst monitoring the impact of visitors on landscapes and habitats is something that the Surrey Hills partners does take seriously, we do lack the resources to do this effectively. As you indicate, certain areas of the Surrey Hills are honey pots and there is a need to either spread the load or invest in better infrastructure to cope with the visitor numbers.

It is also the impact on wildlife rather than the numbers that we are particularly concerned about. For example, the NFU representative who responded to your previous public question highlighted that dogs off-lead can cause the most disturbance to wildlife and have a fatal impact on livestock. The Surrey Hills is looking at how our Farming in Protected Landscapes Fund can support farmers and land managers in helping to manage access and information to visitors in order to secure better outcomes for both people and nature.

The Surrey Hills AONB Board’s comments on the latest draft Surrey Local Transport Plan acknowledges that more investment is needed in countryside access infrastructure. In the meantime, our limited resources are being prioritized on promoting active travel, particularly working with our Community Rail Partnerships on encouraging visitors to use public transport.

We will also be launching our new Surrey Hills website in June. This will have much better information on sustainable travel, the new Countryside Code and create inspirational content so that people can appreciate and enjoy the Surrey Hills without the need to visit in person.

The Surrey Hills Team will always be happy to hear from you on your ideas.

**Heather Kerswell**

**Independent Chair**

1. **John Oliver to ask the Chair:**

At the September 2021 AONB Board meeting, the AONB Director stated that the main reason that there were continuing delays to a full review of the AONB Constitution was the possibility of significant changes to the status of AONBs following the Government’s response to the Glover report.  The Glover report suggested a new national landscape service and funding regime.

The Government has now responded.  It has rejected any idea of national parks and AONBs coming together as a national landscape service and has stated that it sees most new money coming from private sources.  Therefore, the status of the AONB Board will remain virtually unchanged.

Would you now, please, give a fresh update as to:

* what progress has been made in revising the AONB Constitution;
* what recommendations the working group has made to date and which of these has been accepted and which put into action;
* when the working group will next meet;
* when the working group will make its final recommendations to the AONB Board; and
* when the AONB Board will present the working group’s findings and a draft, revised AONB Constitution to the Board’s constituent authorities for their approval.

**Reply:**

Dear Mr Oliver

Thank you for your question. As you point out, the Surrey Hills AONB Board recognizes that the Constitution of October 2013 is in need of an overhaul and has been awaiting Defra’s response to the Landscapes Review which was not published until January 2022.

The Surrey Hills AONB Board will be holding a workshop on 2 March to consider Defra’s recommendations to improve consistency, performance, and transparency of AONB Partnerships. In advance of any further published guidance, it is our intention to work with Natural England to act on the governance principles, processes and structures set out in the Landscapes Review that would be appropriate for the Surrey Hills as a National Landscape designation.

**Heather Kerswell**

**Independent Chair**