

Surrey Hills AONB Meeting 3 March 2021

Public Question from Sally Blake

Dear Rob

Nature Protection and Restoration in the Surrey Hills AONB

In line with our mutual interest in nature restoration, I have started looking at some of the protected areas in the Surrey Hills AONB, namely the designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). I thought that any data we could provide to the Board in that regard would be very helpful.

Biodiversity Management Policy B1 in the Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan says “Existing designated sites (SSSIs, SPAs & SACs) within the AONB will be conserved, enhanced & managed by partners with the support of Natural England, to ensure that all such sites are brought into or maintained in ‘favourable’ condition. The importance of designated sites and the need for their protection and management will be promoted to the wider AONB community through information and awareness campaigns”.

Attached is a summary of the data from the Magic Map and Natural England websites, unchecked at this stage. The last line is probably the most helpful. I aim to get onto the other protected areas, when I have the time to do so, if the data is available.

In the meantime, I would like to ask a public question for the meeting on 3 March 2021 as follows please:

“From the Magic Map and Natural England website, there appear to be 22 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in the Surrey Hills AONB with a total area of about 5,121 hectares. Of these, 67% of the area when last assessed was deemed to be in ‘favourable’ condition and 33% in ‘unfavourable recovering’ condition. With that said, 40% of the area was last assessed 10-15 years ago, 32% 5-10 years ago, and only 28% in the last 5 years.

With our escalating crises of biodiversity loss and climate change, and nature restoration as a large part of the solution, would the Board please advise whether it can and will:

1. Exert its influence to obtain up-to-date and regular assessments of these habitats, ideally every year, or in any event within two years?
2. Determine the managers of the sites and ask to see their land management plans?
3. Monitor progress of the sites with a view to increased biodiversity?
4. Given its importance, report on policy B1 separately in the AONB Management Plan “Draft Monitoring Framework” which is submitted to the Board at each meeting?

5. Provide support to ensure visitor access to sites is sustainable and non-damaging?”

Thank you very much. Kind regards. Sally.

Draft AONB Board Response.

Dear Sally

Thank you for your research into nature protection and restoration in the Surrey Hills AONB. The table showing the condition of SSSIs in the Surrey Hills is very informative and helpful. I have now contacted Natural England to ask them to confirm when they intend to update the condition assessments of these designated habitats.

The onset of the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme and the emerging Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) should provide greater capacity to undertake these activities with the landowners and land managers of the respective sites. Under ELMS, payments will be based on a farm agreement (land management contract) that identifies specific measures to increase biodiversity, as well as delivering other environmental outcomes like soil health, water quality and the conservation of heritage features. As part of developing a Land Use Framework and Nature Recovery Strategy for Surrey, Surrey County Council has commissioned a natural capital assessment of the AONB. This will create a natural capital account for the Surrey Hills that will help to identify priorities and opportunities for conserving and connecting habitats. The timescale will be to report this summer.

You rightly identify the need to manage access to ensure that visitor activity is sustainable and that impacts on sensitive habitats are avoided or mitigated. Defra has confirmed £53million funding for the 44 English National Parks and AONBs over the next 3 years (2021 to 2024). At this moment we do not have any details of what the expected deliverables or Surrey Hills allocation will be, but access management, education and awareness activities may be an eligible activity.

We are also coordinating work on a new landscape wide access policy with partners like the Forestry Commission, Cycling UK, the Surrey Hills Society and the National Trust. This is principally trying to address the issues caused by wild mountain bike trails with the aim of identifying zones where action needs to be taken to avoid or mitigate damage to the most sensitive areas.

At future meetings the AONB Board will be able to consider these land management issues and how we promote and monitor condition through state of the Surrey Hills reporting. As always, your advice on measures would be gratefully received.

Yours sincerely

Heather Kerswell

Surrey Hills AONB Board Chair