**AONB Board meeting: 15 June 2022**

**Item 7: Public Questions**

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

At its 2 September 2020 Board meeting, the AONB Board agreed the protocol for the attendance by the public at its Board meetings. Article 7 of the protocol states “The draft minutes of meetings will be posted promptly on the AONB Board website, within 1 week or at most 2 weeks”.  The protocol was originally published on the AONB website but I am now having difficulty locating it. More to the point, Article 7 is not being complied with, and has not been for quite some time.

The AONB Board has returned to its old ways of not publishing draft minutes of one meeting until the week before the next meeting. This is a time delay of three months for ‘normal’ meetings and 12 months between AGMs.

Given the difficulties people face attending meetings, and the fact that a number of venues for AONB Board meetings do not support live streaming, it is important that residents are kept in touch, at the earliest opportunity, with the AONB Board’s discussion of the papers put to it for consideration and its decisions.

Whilst I understand there may have been some difficulties complying with Article 7 during the height of the Covid pandemic, that has surely not been an issue for a long time.

Could the Board please explain why Article 7 is not being complied with, give an assurance that it will be complied with in future and, if cannot give that assurance, set out its reasons for this?”

**Reply:**

Dear Mr Oliver

Thank you for your public question concerning the timely publishing of minutes. At the time this was agreed in December 2020, the AONB Board had dedicated administrative support provided within the AONB staff team. This support no longer exists and Surrey County Council Legal and Democratic Services provide meeting support to the Board.

You are correct that it is the intention of the Surrey Hills AONB Board to hold its meetings in various locations in order to get a better understanding of the management issues across the landscape. Now that Covid restrictions have eased, the public is welcome to attend all AONB Board meetings.

To mitigate the fact that it is not always possible for people to attend or, because of venue constraints, to provide live webcasts at meetings, recordings of the AONB Board meetings are placed on the Surrey Hills AONB website after the meeting.

There is no statutory requirement to publish draft minutes within a specific timeframe, but the SCC support officer has assured me that they will aim to publish these on the Surrey Hills AONB website within two weeks of each meeting.

I do hope that our process provides anybody interested in the Board proceedings the opportunity to view the meetings in full and stay in touch with the activities of the Board.

Yours sincerely

Heather Kerswell

**Independent Chair**

1. **Sally Blake to ask the Chair:**

The Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan’s Biodiversity Management Policy B1 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”.

The Magic Map and Natural England websites show 22 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in the Surrey Hills AONB with a total area of 5,121 hectares. Of these, based on the last assessments, 68% of the area is in ‘favourable’ condition, 31% in ‘unfavourable recovering’ condition, and 1% in unfavourable no change’ or ‘unfavourable declining’ condition.

With that said, 32% of the area has not been assessed since 2006-2010, 24% since 2011-2015, 29% since 2016-2020, while 14% has recently been assessed since 2021.

I last provided data on the SSSIs to the Board 15 months ago. Since then, the pace of assessments has picked up, but there is a long way to go. Of considerable concern, the latest assessments show the condition of the protected sites has not improved. My summary of the SSSI sites is attached.

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 will exert its influence to

* obtain up-to-date assessments of all its designated habitats, including its Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), its Special Protection Areas (SPAs), its Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), and its locally designated Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCIs), within a defined timescale?
* ensure its SSSIs, SPAs, SACs and SNCIs are brought into or maintained in ‘favourable’ condition?
* ensure visitor access to its SSSIs, SPAs, SACs and SNCIs is sustainable and non-damaging?

and will the Board review the position with updated information at each quarterly Board meeting?

**Surrey Hills AONB - Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)**

**Summary 8 June 2022**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name** | **Area****(hectares)** | **Favourable****Condition** | **Unfavourable** **Condition****Recovering** | **Unfavourable****Condition****No Change****or Declining** | **Last Assessed****(% of area)** |
| Blackheath | 142 ha | 107 ha75% | 35 ha25% |  | 2006-2010 - 33%2011-2015 - 35%2016-2020 - 27%2021- Now - 5% |
| Charleshill | 10 ha | 10 ha100% |  |  | 2006-2010 - 100%2011-2015 - 0%2016-2020 - 0%2021- Now - 0% |
| Chiddingfold Forest | 542 ha | 41 ha8% | 501 ha92% |  | 2006-2010 - 100%2011-2015 - 0%2016-2020 - 0%2021- Now - 0% |
| Colyer’s Hanger | 27 ha | 18 ha67% | 9 ha33% |  | 2006-2010 - 0%2011-2015 - 16%2016-2020 - 0%2021- Now - 84% |
| Combe Bottom | 42 ha | 42 ha99% | 0 ha1% |  | 2006-2010 - 0%2011-2015 - 0%2016-2020 - 0%2021- Now - 100% |
| Devil’s Punch Bowl | 282 ha | 282 ha100% |  |  | 2006-2010 - 1%2011-2015 - 0%2016-2020 - 99%2021- Now - 0% |
| Gong Hill | 6 ha | 3 ha53% | 3 ha47% |  | 2006-2010 - 0%2011-2015 - 47%2016-2020 - 53%2021- Now - 0% |
| Hackhurst & White Downs | 185 ha | 142 ha77% | 43 ha23% |  | 2006-2010 - 0%2011-2015 - 100%2016-2020 - 0%2021- Now - 0% |
| Hankley Farm | 2 ha | 2 ha100% |  |  | 2006-2010 - 0%2011-2015 - 100%2016-2020 - 0%2021- Now - 0% |
| Leith Hill | 338 ha | 325 ha96% | 13 ha4% |  | 2006-2010 - 4%2011-2015 - 0%2016-2020 - 23%2021- Now - 73% |
| Mole Gap to Reigate Escarpment | 1,016 ha | 508 ha50% | 475 ha47% | 5 ha 1%No Change28 ha 3%Declining | 2006-2010 - 84%2011-2015 - 15%2016-2020 - 0%2021- Now - 1% |
| Netherside Stream Outcrops | 3 ha | 3 ha100% |  |  | 2006-2010 - 0%2011-2015 - 0%2016-2020 - 100%2021- Now - 0% |
| Puttenham & Crooksbury Commons | 114 ha | 107 ha94% | 4 ha4% | 3 ha2%No Change | 2006-2010 - 3%2011-2015 - 4%2016-2020 - 93%2021- Now - 0% |
| Quarry Hangers | 29 ha | 14 ha49% | 12 ha42% | 3 ha9%Declining | 2006-2010 - 0%2011-2015 - 45%2016-2020 - 55%2021- Now - 0% |
| Ranmore Common | 224 ha | 209 ha93% | 15 ha7% |  | 2006-2010 - 0%2011-2015 - 12%2016-2020 - 7%2021- Now - 81% |
| Seale Chalk Pit | 1 ha | 1 ha100% |  |  | 2006-2010 - 0%2011-2015 - 0%2016-2020 - 100%2021- Now - 0% |
| Sheepleas | 100 ha | 10 ha10 % | 90 ha90% |  | 2006-2010 - 100%2011-2015 - 0%2016-2020 - 0%2021-2022 - 0% |
| Stockstone Quarry | 4 ha |  |  | 4 ha100%Declining | 2006-2010 - 0%2011-2015 - 100%2016-2020 - 0%2021- Now - 0% |
| Thursley, Hankley & Frensham Commons | 1,878 ha | 1542 ha82% | 336 ha18% |  | 2006-2010 - 3%2011-2015 - 37%2016-2020 - 51%2021- Now - 9% |
| Titsey Woods | 45 ha | 5 ha11% | 36 ha80% | 4 ha8%No Change | 2006-2010 - 21%2011-2015 - 0%2016-2020 - 0%2021- Now - 79% |
| Upper Common Pits | 3 ha | 3 ha100% |  |  | 2006-2010 - 0%2011-2015 - 0%2016-2020 - 100%2021- Now - 0% |
| Woldingham & Oxted Downs | 128 ha | 65 ha51% | 63 ha49% |  | 2006-2010 - 8%2011-2015 - 88%2016-2020 - 4%2021-Now - 0% |
| **TOTAL for all SSSIs** **in Surrey Hills AONB** | **Area** **5121 ha** | **Favourable****Condition****3466 ha****68%** | **Unfavourable****Condition Recovering****1612 ha****31%** | **Unfavourable****Condition** **No Change****or Declining****43 ha****1%** | **Last Assessed****% by Area****2006-2010 - 32%****2011-2015 - 24%****2016-2020 - 29%****2021- Now - 14%** |

Sites from Magic Map, Areas & Percentages (Rounded) using Data from Natural England Website. Sites and figures unchecked at this time

Sally Blake

8 June 2022

**Reply:**

Dear Sally

Thank you for your question about the condition of designated sites in the Surrey Hills AONB.

It is within Natural England’s remit to monitor and report on the current condition of SSSIs to government via DEFRA. Natural England has an annual assessment programme which sets monitoring priorities based on a set of national criteria such as where it is known that there is a high risk of decline in condition, the habitat/feature is particularly vulnerable to change, there is a high value financial agreement in place or where there is a report of damage which may require enforcement action.

There is some local discretion to prioritise additional sites depending on the availability of resources. However, past resourcing challenges have meant that Natural England has been unable to assess sites as often as they would like but they are working to get back to a position where SSSIs are assessed more regularly. To assist in this Natural England have invited partner bodies with the necessary expertise to undertake assessments on their own land. Natural England has also commissioned specialist contractors to undertake assessments of certain types of site, for example geological SSSIs.

In relation to the SSSIs within the Surrey Hills AONB, the acknowledgement that the pace of assessments has recently increased is welcomed by Natural England. It is notable that, for 99% of SSSIs in the Surrey Hills AONB to be either favourable (68%) or unfavourable recovering (31%), is actually above the national average which is 89% (38% favourable + 51% recovering).

Whilst progress is welcomed, the Surrey Hills AONB Board and our partners recognise that more needs to be done.  We will continue to work with Natural England to use our Farming in Protected Landscapes fund and other land management initiatives that tackle landscape-scale problems such as lack of grazing of downland, gorse encroachment on heathland and conflicts between grazing stock and dogs.

Yours sincerely

Heather Kerswell

**Independent Chair**