**Item 6**

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

8 March 2023

**SURREY HILLS AONB BOUNDARY REVIEW**

**Purpose of the report:**

To report on progress to the Surrey Hills AONB Board

**1. Introduction.**

This paper provides the AONB Board with a report on progress since the last AONB Board meeting that was held on December 7th, 2022. It outlines the next steps with Natural England’s project to review the boundary which includes the formal statutory and public consultation launching on 7th of March 2023 for a proposed extension to the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (SH AONB).

The launch of the consultation marks an important milestone for the Surrey Hills AONB boundary review project. This work is contributing to fulfil recommendations from the Glover Review that we should do more for our most important national landscapes. It’s one of four landscape designation projects we are now considering: the others being a proposed extension to the Chilterns AONB and two possible new AONBs (for the Yorkshire Wolds and the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge).

This is a change for Natural England as we have previously only worked on one designation or boundary variation at a time. We’re trialling new ways of working through these cases, including ways to better engage stakeholders and make use of local evidence. We expect these reforms to reduce the average designation period by 1 to 2 years. We anticipate submitting the first case (Surrey Hills) to Government in summer 2024.

**Progress since December 2022**

* Finalised and prepared all documents (including Natural Beauty, Desirability and Boundary reports, consultation pack, questionnaire, online consultation platform).
* Approval from Natural England director to go to statutory consultation.
* Undertook a series of briefing events including:
  + Briefing for TAG and SPOA reps on the 28th of February to present the proposed extension areas so that statutory local authorities can be prepared for any queries that they may receive from members of the public on day 1 of the consultation launch.
  + Four ‘Warm up’ webinars to inform attendees how they can engage in the consultation, including the planned consultation events and how they can access the consultation documents and respond to the consultation.
  + Held an online briefing for Lead Council members to help prepare the statutory authorities for the consultation, with details of how the authorities and constituents can respond, and details of engagement events throughout the consultation period.
* A series of events have also been organised for after the launch date, including briefing sessions for key stakeholders and drop-in sessions for the wider public. See further details below.
* Launched the Statutory and public consultation on the **7th of March 2023** regarding a proposed extension to the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The consultation will last for a 14-week period ending on 13th June.

**Natural England’s statutory responsibility with regard to the designation of AONBs**

Section 82(1) of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 defines an AONB as ‘an area which appears to Natural England to be of such outstanding natural beauty that it is desirable that the protective provisions of Part IV of the Act should apply to it for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the area‘s natural beauty’.

In deciding whether to designate an AONB, or to vary an existing AONB boundary, we must first consider whether the land has outstanding natural beauty and then whether designation is desirable for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the area’s natural beauty. This decision requires Natural England to address three sequential questions:

1. Does the landscape have sufficient natural beauty to be considered outstanding? If yes:

2. Is it desirable to designate this landscape as AONB? If yes:

3. Where should the boundary be drawn?

In order to assist us in considering these questions we have produced ‘Guidance for Assessing Landscapes for designation as National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England’, revised June 2021.

**Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Statutory and public consultation**

The CRoW Act also requires that Natural England undertakes a statutory local authority consultation prior to reaching a final decision. This is the current stage reached by the project and we have decided to also invite the public and other organisations to comment. Other stakeholders include; National bodies, MPs, Parish Councils in the existing AONB and in and adjacent to the proposed extension, AONB Partnership members, local businesses and landowning groups, community organisations, recreational interests and the wider public.  The consultation process is wide ranging, and we aim to reach as many stakeholders as possible.  We are therefore arranging a series of meetings/briefings before and after the launch date as well as four all day and 2 evening ‘drop-in’ events for the public (see below).

Pre-launch events

* 28th of February - Briefing for TAG and SPOA to present the proposals so that statutory local authorities can be prepared for any queries that they may receive from members of the public on day 1 of the consultation launch
* 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th of March - ‘Warm up’ webinars to inform attendees how they can engage in the consultation, including the consultation events and how they can access the consultation documents, and respond to the consultation.
* 6th of March - Online briefing with Lead Council members to prepare the statutory authorities for the consultation, with, details of how NE would like to hear views from their Authority, how their constituents can respond, and details of consultation engagement events.

Post launch meetings/briefings for targeted stakeholders

We are holding several targeted briefings for key stakeholder groups, these include:

* Local authority members (in the existing AONB, in the proposed extension areas and adjacent to the proposed extension areas).
* Parish and Town Councils x 2 (as above)
* Briefing for farming and landowner organisations
* Special Interest Groups & AONB Partnership/Board

Post launch sessions for the general public

We are holding a series of consultation events for the general public where people will be able to find out about the proposals, speak to NE, view documents and maps and pick up a consultation pack (if required).

The daytime drop-in sessions include:

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Date** | **Time** | **Location** |
| Thursday 23rd March | 10:00-15:00 | Leatherhead Institute, Leatherhead |
| Monday 27th March | 10:00-15:00 | Guildford Institute, Guildford |
| Tuesday 18th April | 10:00-15:00 | Merrow Hall - St John’s Centre, Guildford |
| Saturday 20th May | 10:00-15:00 | Soper Hall, Caterham |

The evening sessions include:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Date** | **Time** | **Location** |
| Wednesday 29th March | 18:00-20:30 | Soper Hall, Caterham |
| Thursday 27th April | 18:00-20:30 | Chichester Hall, Witley, Godalming |

All the meetings and events will be held in local, fully accessible locations. Responses to this statutory/public consultation can be submitted by completing an online response form at: <https://consult.defra.gov.uk/ne-landscape-heritage-and-geodiversity-team/surrey-hills-boundary-variation> or by requesting and completing a paper version of the response form (which can be done by contacting the project mailbox [SurreyHillsAONBBoundaryReview@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:SurreyHillsAONBBoundaryReview@naturalengland.org.uk), or calling 0208 0265 774).

We have provided a folder of supporting documents to the relevant officer on the Surrey Hills TAG. The folder contains the detailed technical assessments undertaken by Natural England. This folder is available for reference by the public at the main local authority offices. All these documents are also available on the government platform for online consultations and are also available for reference in the main libraries for each local authority area, at the Surrey Hills AONB office and at the Natural England offices at Reading Eastleigh and Worcester (NE Head Office), as well as at the consultation meetings we are organising (the list of locations is available at <https://consult.defra.gov.uk/ne-landscape-heritage-and-geodiversity-team/surrey-hills-boundary-variation> )

Note that the consultation will end on the **13th June 2023**. If you would like to respond to the consultation, please ensure that you do so by the closing date as responses received after that date will not be accepted.

**Surrey Hills AONB boundary review - next steps:**

* Assessment of responses to the statutory and public consultation - by end of December 2023.
* Drafting a paper, with supporting evidence, to seek Natural England Board approval of a draft Order with regard to extending the boundary of the Surrey Hills AONB and approval to proceed to a formal period of Notice - by end of January 2024.
* The draft legal Order would then be subject to a 28-day Notice period prior to submission to the Secretary of State (DEFRA) for confirmation. The Notice period allows anyone who wishes to do so to make representations to Natural England, objecting to, supportive of, or proposing amendments to the Order, and stating the grounds on which they are made.
* Following analysis of all representations made, Natural England Board will then be asked to give final approval for the submission of an Order for confirmation to the Secretary of State (Defra) varying the boundary of the Surrey hills AONB. Natural England then ‘makes’ (signs and seals) the legal Order prior to submission to the Secretary of State- by end of June / July 2024.

Please note that the timescales provided are only indicative and may change. A national landscape designation (AONB/ National Park) is a significant undertaking requiring robust evidence gathering, engagement and consultation with local and national communities and stakeholders and is therefore rightly not a quick process or one where timescales can be firmly determined. Overall, we expect a designation to take 2-3 years. Previous designations have taken three to five years from commencing technical assessments to the submission of a designation order for confirmation by the Defra Secretary of State. The time until the Minister confirms an order varies according to several factors including whether a public inquiry is deemed necessary.

It is not possible to say how long the Secretary of State’s decision will take following submission or whether a Public Inquiry will be called.

**Who makes the final decision?**

It is Natural England’s responsibility to decide whether to designate an area as an AONB. Any decision made by our Board, having considered all the evidence and the results of the consultation, will not take effect until it is confirmed by the Secretary of State (Defra), after the draft legal Orders have been placed on deposit. The Secretary of State has the power call a Public Inquiry to assist in their decision making in relation to whether the designation should be confirmed or not or amended. A Public Inquiry provides a further opportunity to explore any remaining unresolved objections to assist the Secretary of State in their decision making.

If you would like more information about the proposed extension please visit <https://consult.defra.gov.uk/ne-landscape-heritage-and-geodiversity-team/surrey-hills-boundary-variation> or contact one of the project officers named below. The online consultation platform contains all the background documents regarding Natural England’s role with regard to the designation of AONBs plus the detailed technical assessments that we have undertaken.

**Report contact:** Natural England’s Senior Responsible Officer for this project:

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