**Item 6**



**SURREY HILLS AONB BOUNDARY REVIEW**

**Report on Progress to the AONB Board June 2023**

**Purpose of the report**

This is to provide the AONB Board with a report on progress, since the last AONB Board meeting that was held on March 8th, 2023. It will outline the next steps with Natural England’s project to review the boundary of the Surrey Hills AONB. The report also provides details on the formal statutory and public consultation.

To remind the Board, Section 82(1) of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 states:

“Where it appears to Natural Englandthat an area which is in England but not in a National Park is of such outstanding natural beauty that it is desirable that the provisions of this Part relating to areas designated under this section should apply to it, Natural England may, for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area, by order designate the area for the purposes of this Part as an area of outstanding natural beauty”.

**Progress since March 2023**

* The CRoW Act 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. We 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 have aimed to reach as many stakeholders as possible.
* We have written to different audiences, both local and national, informing them of the consultation including statutory consultees, MPs, Parish Councils (with land in the proposed variation as well as those with land in neighbouring areas to the proposed variation as well as those in the existing AONB), AONB Partnership Organisations and NGOs including recreation and conservation groups as well as community groups and individuals.
* We have provided a series of briefing opportunities for stakeholders **(see below)** as well as four all day and 2 evening ‘drop-in’ events for the public so that they can find out about our proposals and speak to members of the Natural England project team. The formal statutory and public consultation began on March 7th and concludes on 13th June 2023. We extended the length of time for the consultation from the normal 12-week consultation period to 14 weeks to account for the Easter holidays.

. **Briefings for stakeholders:**

* Local authority members and officers – (9th March AM) Chichester Hall, Godalming
* Parish and Town Councils – (9th March PM) Chichester Hall, Godalming
* Parish and Town Councils – (13th March AM) Woodhatch Place Reigate Surrey**.**

Three briefing events for special interest groups:

* Recreation and conservation groups, and AONB Board/ Partnership (16th March AM) Denbies Wine Estate Dorking
* Business, landowner, and farming interests. (16th March PM) Denbies Wine Estate Dorking
* Surrey Development Forum on March 20th. (online)

We have produced a Formal Consultation pack that includes:

* A project summary document including an introduction to the work and process, key information on AONB designation, a précis of the assessment methods used, summary statement about the area(s) being considered for designation (including text on natural beauty and issues affecting special qualities and a summary statement of reasons why it is desirable to designate the area as a whole.
* Detailed proposed boundary maps on A3 sized paper and 1:25,000 scale, with an A4 key map.
* Consultation Questionnaire and Response Form, suitable for all audiences, posing questions and seeking evidence related to:
	+ Whether the area has sufficient natural beauty to warrant designation as an area of outstanding natural beauty
	+ Whether as a result of its natural beauty it is desirable that the area should be designated
	+ Whether the draft boundaries are sensible and robust.
* Consultation Letter introducing the project to stakeholders and how they can respond to the consultation.

Responses to this consultation have been submitted by completing an online response form at on the government platform for online consultations (<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. The online platform also provides access to all the supporting technical assessment documents undertaken by Natural England.

We have also provided a folder of supporting documents and a folder of all the relevant maps to the officers on the Surrey Hills TAG. The document folder contains the detailed technical assessments. These folders have also been made available for reference by the public at the main local authority offices, the main libraries for each local authority area as well as the Surrey Hills AONB office and at the Natural England offices at Reading and Eastleigh.

We have also provided a telephone /email enquiry service to answer queries regarding the consultation and to allow requests for consultation packs to be received and sent out.

Natural England has consulted upon 18 proposed extension areas along with several minor proposed boundary alterations (boundary anomalies)

The proposed extension areas are:

* Wey Valley, Farnham
* Hogs Back
* Wey Valley, Farley Hill
* Binscombe Hills
* Enton Hills
* Cranleigh Waters
* Hatchlands and East Clandon
* Headley Hills
* Chipstead
* Happy Valley
* Caterham Woods
* Woldingham Valleys
* Limpsfield
* Godstone Hills
* Bletchworth and Mole Valley
* Ockley Low Weald
* Dunsfold Low Weald
* Dockenfield Hills

As of May 19th, we have received 706 online responses.

**Publicity and Media relations**

We have promoted and publicised the various opportunities to engage with and comment on the designation proposals via the media, including newspapers, radio and TV as well as via NE twitter feed etc. We have worked with the assigned NE press officer to agree an approach and ensure that we are working within NE guidelines and best practice.

The aims of the publicity and media coverage have been to:

* Make people aware of the various opportunities to have an input into the designation process, supporting seamless promotion of the consultation processes
* Maximise public participation in the designation process
* Avoid misinformation and/or misunderstanding
* Ensure timely and appropriate responses to any challenge in the press

Since the designation will affect local people most directly and given resource constraints, the majority of effort has been directed at local media rather than national media.

Messages that we have put across:

* What designation means
* Why Natural England is undertaking this project (duties and powers etc)
* What it will mean for those living or working in, or visiting the area
* How to take part in the consultations
* What will happen after the consultation

**Next steps:**

* The formal statutory and public consultation closes on 13th June 2023.
* Assessment of responses to the statutory and public consultation -by end of November 2023

The purpose of this key stage of the project will be to collate, assess and evaluate issues and views on the designation options expressed during the formal consultation period and use them to inform and influence the development of the proposals for designation. Two types of data analysis will be required, simple quantitative analysis of closed questions from the questionnaire and qualitative analysis of the open evidential questions.

Quantitative analysis: A simple quantitative analysis of overarching numbers will be required to differentiate, a) overall numbers responding, b) those for and against, c) breakdowns of the diversity data, d) breakdowns of responses from statutory respondents and non-statutory Local Authorities e) types of public respondent, such as those resident in the area/s proposed for designation, those in the existing AONB, those in neighbouring areas and those from outside the area. This information will form part of the evidence base provided to support the project and will be used in public feedback on the consultation process.

Qualitative analysis will be required to assess the types of reasons and evidence provided in the open questions. For this exercise we will use a series of codes to allow easy segregation of which question they relate to, and the types of subjects raised. Each response will then be coded so that our database can be sorted by reason type and type of respondent.

Reporting Consultation Responses

The quantitative and qualitative analyses will be reported separately. The quantitative analysis will give the overall figures for each feature analysed. The qualitative analysis will correspond to the themes relating to natural beauty, desirability and boundaries. It will include a summary of the detailed comments made by both statutory and non-statutory respondents. Natural England’s response to that evidence will then also be provided.

**It should be noted at this stage that if our assessment and evaluation results in changes being made to the proposed boundaries, then a further 8 to 12 week consultation will be required for any areas where additional land is proposed to be designated as AONB.**

* Drafting a paper, with supporting evidence generated from the formal statutory and public consultation, 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. Legislation (CRoW Act 2000, Section 83) requires that before making a Variation Order, Natural England shall publish in the London Gazette and in one or more newspapers circulating in the area of every local authority whose area includes any part of the area to which the Order is to relate, notice that they intend to make the Order, indicating the effect of the Order and stating the time within which and the manner in which representations with respect to the Order may be made to Natural England, and shall consider any representations duly made.

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.

The indicative timescale for the launch of the formal Notice Period is early February 2024 to early April 2024. **(Note this timescale does not consider the time required for additional consultations if further land is proposed to be included following the statutory/public consultation assessment and evaluation).**

* Analysis of all representations made during the Notice Period. April 2024 to early July 2024.
* Following analysis of all representations made during the Notice Period, 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 August 2024.

 **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.**

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