**Item 8**

##### AONB

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

7 June 2023

**Surrey Hills AONB Position Statements**

**Purpose of the report:**

To share with Members draft position statements on Solar Panels, Ash Dieback and Mountain Biking

**Recommendations:**

It is recommended that:

1. Members advise on the draft position statements.

**Introduction:**

1. Board Members are asked to comment on draft position statements on key policy areas that affect the Surrey Hills AONB. These are:
* Solar panels (Appendix 1)
* Ash Dieback (Appendix 2)
* Mountain Biking (Appendix 3)
1. The statements are intended to inform the policies and programmes for public bodies who have a legal duty of regard to the purpose of the AONB designation when carrying out their functions in relation to the Surrey Hills. They will also be used to guide the work of the Surrey Hills Team and Family including advice and the award of grants, as appropriate. The statements will be published on the Surrey Hills website for information to the public, landowners, land managers and other interested parties.

**Solar Panels**

1. There is an increasing number of applications for renewables in the Surrey Hills and its environs including small to large scale solar installations. The position statement will inform the work of the Planning Adviser and, where appropriate, our support for investment proposals.

**Ash Dieback**

1. Ash dieback is having a dramatic impact on the landscape of certain parts of the Surrey Hills. This provides issues and opportunities for recreation and nature recovery. The position statement will help to inform residents and visitors about ash dieback, provide advice to landowners and farmers, and opportunities to target funding and resources, e.g. conservation volunteers and grants to support conservation.

**Mountain Biking**

1. The Surrey Hills is the most popular area for mountain biking in southern England. The AONB Board has established a working group, chaired by Tim Metson of Surrey CLA, to support landowners and land managers in the management of mountain biking to help reduce liability by engaging the mountain bike community to be trained to create safer trails that reduce conflict and the damage to habitats.

**Next steps:**

1. Members’ advice on the draft statement will be taken into account, along with other partners comments. The Independent Chair will sign off the Statements before being published on the website.

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**Sources/background papers:**

* The Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan (2020 – 2025) https://www.surreyhills.org/board/our-management-plan/

**Appendix 1.**

**Solar Panels Draft Position Statement**

The Surrey Hills AONB Board recognizes and supports the renewable energy benefits of solar panels and is therefore generally supportive of solar power. At the same time, solar panel arrays can harm the landscape and scenic beauty of this nationally protected landscape. Therefore, careful assessment needs to be given to ground mounted solar panel proposals. The priority should be given to opportunities provided through installing solar panels on roofs, especially on new buildings, which provide the greatest opportunity to minimize visual impact and maximize operational efficiency through good design. Innovative methods of providing solar panels, such as above large car parks, should also be explored.

Retro-fit on existing buildings will normally be acceptable, as long as it does not adversely affect a listed building or its setting, or have an adverse impact on the character of a Conservation Area or any other location where local character is significantly influenced by the quality of the built environment. However, even in these situations, innovative solutions, for example the use of individual solar tiles, may successfully overcome these issues.

Self-standing panel installations for domestic use can, in some situations, have less visual impact upon the landscape than on roofs of visually prominent buildings but will only be acceptable if no suitable roof-mounted alternative is available, and there is no adverse visual impact affecting public viewpoints. They should avoid any adverse impacts on trees or other habitats of ecological importance. Each case needs to be considered on its merits as in some situations less visual harm can occur from roof mountings.

The great weight that national and local planning policies in the Surrey Hills AONB give to conserving and enhancing an AONB means that in these areas, large-scale commercial solar farms (i.e., field-scale arrays of self-standing panels) within the AONB should clearly be avoided. Instead, the priority should be to use commercial roof space, including agricultural buildings, domestic roofs and surface car parks that could be harnessed with less or little impact on the landscape, tranquility and cultural heritage. But even then, if these buildings are within the AONB care needs to be taken to avoid harm to the protected landscape.

Outside of the Surrey Hills AONB, large-scale commercial solar farms may be acceptable provided the setting of the AONB would not be spoiled by harming public views into or from within the AONB. This approach accords with Government planning policy, Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan Policy P6 and possibly the relevant Local Plan. Much depends upon the scale of the proposal, proximity to the AONB, prominence in public views from the AONB, the intervening topography and existence of woodlands screening the development and likely to exist during the lifetime of the development.

**Appendix 2.**

**Ash Dieback Draft Position Statement**

Ash dieback is changing our Surrey Hills landscape and will have a dramatic localised impact on the North Downs where ash established as the dominant woodland following the Great Storms of 1987 and 1990.

**What are the key issues?**

Ash dieback is a chronic fungal infection that is affecting the ash population across Europe and the UK. An infected tree is noticeable for its loss of leaves, wilting, lesions in the bark and stems of trees, and discolouration of the bark.

It is estimated there are almost 1,000 species of wildlife that have an association with ash, with 45 of these being wholly dependent on the tree. This means the loss of ash poses a risk to the habitat of these species.

The invasive fungus makes some trees brittle, which could lead to them becoming unstable or shedding limbs. Infected ash trees along public rights of way or established trails could pose a threat to people enjoying these routes.

**What is our goal?**

In the Surrey Hills, we want to encourage woodland owners and land managers to allow for nature to be the solution as much as possible. This can happen by allowing safe areas to naturally decay, only dealing with trees where they are a danger to people. This could help transform our woodlands for the better, increasing species richness in the woodlands over time.

The aim is to remove trees where they pose a threat to people, such as by roads or busy footpaths and close or re-route people away from badly affected areas, where possible, onto open land. This will allow the greatest possible area to naturally decay over time which will be of great benefit to woodland wildlife, from fungi and insects which thrive on the deadwood, to the mammals and birds that live off them.

Clear felling areas of woodland is damaging and means that healthy and disease resistant trees are also destroyed, whereas the benefits of allowing infected trees, which are in safe locations, to naturally decay will:

* Provide a huge amount of deadwood habitat which will become home to a vast array of wildlife such as fungi and insects. These changed habitats will improve biodiversity.
* Increase light levels resulting from the ash trees dying. This will stimulate new growth and natural regeneration of other plants.
* Mean that resilient ash trees will survive, and their seeds will naturally regenerate new growth, meaning that ash can remain a part of our countryside in the future.

**What should landowners do?**

In affected ash woodlands with open access, visitors should be encouraged through sensitive signage to keep to the main inspected tracks and sensitively discouraged from access along desire lines by sensitive measures such as dead hedging, which volunteers can create and manage.

Trees should be individually assessed, including a habitat impact assessment. Tree owners have a duty of care for the preservation of trees and to ensure they remain in a safe condition. Felling a tree without the proper permissions and ensuring protection for wildlife may result in legal implications.

We would recommend getting in touch with a woodland or tree professional who can help formulate a measured plan of action for tackling ash dieback in a specific location. It is important that this plan incorporates best practice guidance and is undertaken in phases so that it minimises the negative impacts of removing a tree. It is also important to retain any ash tree that has a natural resistance to the disease.

In the Surrey Hills, there should be careful consideration of the impact on landscape, environment, and biodiversity immediately after felling, as well as considering the recovery phase. It may be beneficial to wildlife to leave any felled wood in the environment than remove it all.

For more information see:

[Managing ash trees affected by ash dieback: operations note 46a - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/managing-ash-trees-affected-by-ash-dieback-operations-note-46a/managing-ash-trees-affected-by-ash-dieback-operations-note-46a)

[A Farmer's Guide to Ash Dieback by linking-environment-and-farming - Issuu](https://issuu.com/linking-environment-and-farming/docs/ash_dieback_guide_issuu_version?fr=sZGIyZjU4MDIwMjg)

**Appendix 3**

**Mountain Biking Draft Position Statement**

Mountain biking has seen a huge increase in popularity over the years making the Surrey Hills one of the most popular areas for mountain biking in the country. ​

Many people will be surprised to know that there are no authorised mountain bike trails in the Surrey Hills and neither are there any landowner agreements in place for mountain bike trails.

Building trails without a landowner’s consent is illegal. People who build unauthorised trails may be liable for any harm to those using the trail or where the trail is hazardous to other users – we often see trails that are built with limited knowledge of how this might affect other forest users, the harm it can cause to our sensitive wildlife and the damage it can do to important archaeological sites. Please do not build unauthorised trails.

You have an established right to ride on Bridleways, Restricted Byways, Byways Open to All traffic and most other routes displayed as ‘ORPA’ (other routes with public access) on Ordnance Survey Maps. In addition to this, some landowners also allow wider levels of responsible access on a permissive basis.​

We share the Surrey Hills with other users and nature, so please:

Protect Nature

* Protect the environment: Think about the impact of your journey. Ride from home where possible, or consider public transport and car-sharing options
* Protect wildlife: Be aware of the potential impact of public access on sensitive ecosystems, plants and animals. Take extra care during the breeding season
* Leave no trace: Leave gates as you find them, take all litter home and guard against fires.

Respect the Trails

* Be prepared: Know your access rights. Know where you are and where you are heading. Ride within your limitations, wear a helmet, and carry appropriate equipment for the duration of your ride and likely weather conditions
* Ride appropriately for the trail and conditions: Avoid wet, boggy or soft ground and don’t churn up the surface. Avoid skidding or cutting corners. Some trails are vulnerable to damage, particularly in winter months, so please consider using alternative, more sustainable, routes.
* Put something back: Consider joining a local group to share trail information and improve access locally. Remember no new trail building.

Enjoy Responsibly

* Be Nice – Say Hi: Moderate your speed and give an audible greeting when approaching other users. Give way to walkers and horse riders and be prepared to stop if necessary. Always leave plenty of room when passing.
* Context is key: Appropriate riding styles for Public Rights of Way and other shared user trails are different to those at trail centres, modify your riding style to match your surroundings.
* Be considerate: Think about the people who live and work where you ride. Avoid busy areas at peak times, park considerately, act responsibly and support local businesses.