

## **RESPONSE OF THE SURREY HILLS AONB BOARD**

### **Government consultation on additional flexibilities to support housing delivery, the agricultural sector, businesses, High Streets and open prisons: and a call for evidence on nature-based solutions, farm efficiency projects and diversification.**

#### 1. Preamble.

1.1 This response relates to those aspects of the above consultation document that would have consequences for the Surrey Hills AONB.

1.2 The proposal to allow under permitted development (PDR) the conversion of rural buildings including agricultural buildings, stables, rural workshops, village shops, tourist accommodation to become unrestricted market housing and agricultural buildings also to change into commercial uses including general industry, represents one of the greatest threat since the designation of the AONB in 1958 to conserving and enhancing its natural landscape and scenic beauty and life within the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

1.3 Several million Surrey people and probably many Londoners close to the Surrey Hills look to get away to the nearby Surrey Hills and highly value this AONB seemingly appreciating its special unspoilt qualities. Any housing benefits arising from the proposed PDRs would be far outweighed by the environmental harm caused to the AONB and this form of unsustainable development. To relax the vigilant control of development in AONBs the Government, local Councils and seemingly the public wish to be continued and perhaps even enhanced, in this AONB, would send out the wrong message that the Government has changed its protection towards this nationally protected landscape. The results of elections in Surrey in recent years have often been influenced by planning issues and the priority the public places to the protection of their local environment including more than ever, the Surrey Hills AONB that is held in such high esteem.

#### 2. Contrary to National Protected Landscape Policy.

2.1 In 2013/14 the Government first consulted on proposed changes to national PDRs to allow the conversion of agricultural buildings into housing without the need for planning permission. Extensive concerns were expressed, including several Members of Parliament in AONBs and National Parks because of the resultant harm to these nationally protected landscapes. Whilst certain new PDRs were later introduced in 2014 to allow the conversion of buildings to form up to 3 dwellings under permitted development, the Government recognised that AONBs and National Parks should be excluded because of their special status warranting a different approach. It is now difficult to understand the justification for re-opening the debate. The great weight the Government requires to be given to conserving and enhancing the landscape and scenic beauty of these nationally protected landscapes that have the highest status of protection in the country remains the same. The environmental credentials of the present Government would be seriously undermined if planning controls in these protected landscapes were to be relaxed.

2.2 The Government commissioned National Landscapes Review published in 2019 recognised that the planning system has long played a critical role in protecting AONBs and National Parks, and that the ability to control and/or influence development that would have an adverse impact on our national landscapes is crucial.

2.3 On the matter of national permitted development rights the Review concluded “*The current Permitted Development Rights (PDR) system should also be reviewed and, if necessary, further PDRs should be added to the list of those currently withdrawn within national landscapes to ensure that the full application process applies before determining planning approval*”. The current consultation runs directly contrary to this recent conclusion of the Government commissioned review which called for fewer not more PDRs.

2.4 The Government response in 2022 to the National Landscape Review re-endorsed that a strong and effective planning system must sustainably balance protections with supporting local communities and economies. It stated “*This balancing exercise must be carried out differently in protected landscapes to ensure their statutory purposes and special qualities are meaningfully protected. This involves giving greater weight to their special qualities in planning policies, procedures and decisions .....we recognise the special role that protected landscapes hold within the planning system.*” The proposed PDRs would allow tourist accommodation, agricultural buildings and village shops to change into higher value unrestricted market housing in the Surrey Hills AONB would be completely contrary this Government statement.

2.5 While climate change and biodiversity loss are both great risks to protected landscapes especially in the longer term, planning in a protected landscape has a more immediate and visible impact. By not extending PDRs in protected landscapes, planning permissions for permanent change to a protected landscape would still be granted following applications having been capable of scrutiny and democratic accountability.

### 3. Nature of harm to the Surrey Hills AONB.

3.1 The harm to the Surrey Hills AONB can be summarised as follows:

- Adversely changing the character and appearance of agricultural or equestrian buildings that currently have a functional locational justification to maintain the protected landscape,
- Introducing upmarket housing with all their associated domestic paraphernalia and activity that has no functional justification for being within a nationally protected landscape,
- Farm shops, artisan producers, public houses, rural workshops, small offices and service providers valuable to the Surrey Hills economy would be vulnerable if their rented premises were converted into more valuable dwellings and their loss would harm local communities,
- Formation of formal domestic gardens with possibly associated structures and boundary features out of character with their more natural landscape setting.
- Introducing extensive fenestration into buildings that have no fenestration,
- Causing light pollution where little or none exists in areas benefitting from darker skies,
- Creating a greater permanence and different character of development often resulting from proposed cladding,
- Replacement dwellings being permitted on the grounds that a new build would be more attractive than a dwelling formed unsatisfactorily from a conversion, thereby circumventing control of new build market housing in the AONB and Green Belt.
- Following conversion replacement development for the previous lost use being required to service the land whether it be agricultural land or horse paddocks following the conversion of stables.
- Homes achieved through residential conversions scattered across rural areas would be an unsustainable form of housing development which should more properly be within or on the edge of built up areas.
- The collective impact of these various consequences of the proposed extension of PDRs in the Surrey Hills AONB fundamentally changing its character and value as a nationally protected landscape.

3.2 Many rural buildings, including the more modern often large utilitarian agricultural buildings have been accepted as part of the rural scene because they have a functional reason for being there to maintain the farming landscape that makes a positive contribution to the character of parts of the Surrey Hills AONB.

3.3 When some of these less attractive buildings which may no longer have a useful agricultural function, the extension of their existence should not be perpetuated through their conversion into up market houses with the associated domestic paraphernalia.

3.4 Planning Inspectors have dismissed appeals in the Surrey Hills AONB for the very reasons expressed that would result from the proposed change to PDRs. If the proposed PDRs existed those developments would have proceeded as planning permission would not have been required. The reasons the Inspectors gave for dismissing the appeals on AONB grounds endorse the concerns of the Surrey Hills Board.

3.5 The following extracts from an appeal decision in 2022 (APP/R3650/W/21/3271908 - Application WA/2020/0455) illustrate the AONB harm an Appeal Inspector identified from the conversion of a former agricultural and an equestrian building near the village of Elstead in the Surrey Hills AONB.

*“The existing collection of buildings are appropriate in appearance and character to their agricultural and equestrian setting.”* The Inspector went on to note that they have no fenestration and one building has partially open elevations. This is common throughout most agricultural buildings in the Surrey Hills. The Inspector continued to explain the harm as follows.

*“the resultant house would be a very large residential property. It would have a significantly different character and appearance to the existing buildings, primarily through the introduction of extensive fenestration and a greater permanence and character afforded by the proposed timber cladding. This would fundamentally alter the character and appearance of the appeal site, in particular when lit at night. It would change the area from being perceived as being ancillary farm or equestrian use, subservient to the farm house, to independent residential use.”*

*“.....the garden and forecourt areas proposed around the new house would also reinforce the proposed change in character away from ancillary farm or equestrian use to independent residential use.*

*Although relatively isolated and screened almost completely to the south and east by woodland, there are public rights of way close to the appeal site, to the south-west and north-east, which afford public views of the appeal site and the proposal. The harmful effects of the proposal would therefore be felt by the public as well as the occupants, or future occupants, of the farm house.”*

3.6 In another case (APP/R3650/W/18/3201229 - Application WA/2017/0588) for the residential conversion of a barn near Churt again in the Surrey Hills AONB

*“In particular, and notwithstanding its scale and utilitarian appearance the barn has a functional relationship with the adjacent land and is settled within its rural context. Consequently, the appeal site appears distinctly rural and positively contributes to the landscape and scenic beauty of the AONB and would be particularly sensitive to change.*

*The proposed development does not involve any extensions to the barn. Irrespective of this and notwithstanding their design, it would introduce alterations in the form of additional glazing along all elevations and the roof of the barn.*

*Most notably, the proposal involves the creation of a new domestic curtilage. Despite a small terrace/garden area to the south of the barn, the new dwelling would have a substantial overall garden area, as shown on ‘Proposed Site Plan – Drawing No 1198. P12’. The paraphernalia and domestication associated with this would be difficult and unreasonable to control and enforce by a condition, particularly in relation to garden furniture and other leisure equipment. The proposal would also utilise an existing hardstanding area for vehicle parking. Furthermore, the screen planting around the proposed terrace/garden and parking areas would in itself result in a degree of subdivision of the existing open field.*

*Consequently, during the night the lighting from the glazed elements of the dwelling would tend to be visible in the wider landscape, and by day its extensive domesticated curtilage with associated paraphernalia and parked cars would appear to conflict with the rural character and appearance of the site, which is an important part and characteristic of the AONB.*

*In particular, the AONB is protected on account of its natural character and appearance, and, the degree of domestication proposed would lead to the diminution of this natural character and appearance, despite the attention to materials and design.”*

3.7 Across the Surrey Hills AONB there are hundreds and possibly thousands of stables often of substantial timber construction that would be capable of conversion to dwellings under the change to the PDRs. The uplift in value would again be so great that it would take place widely. Replacement stabling may subsequently need to be permitted for the then unserviced paddocks. Some Surrey Hills planning authorities are already experiencing applications to convert timber stables to dwellings.

3.8 The proposed PDRs would also result in the loss of some village shops as their value as dwellings would be greater with relatively inexpensive conversion costs. This would constitute an unsustainable form of development that with poor public transport would require greater car journeys to alternative shopping facilities. The PDRs might also facilitate the loss of some rural public houses that can be important to local communities and the rural economy.

3.9 Some rural workshops and small offices often granted permission as more sustainable and suitable forms of conversion of rural buildings than residential, might then in turn be converted to residential at the cost to the rural economy as no permission would be necessary under the change to the PDRs..

#### 4. Substantial uplift in values likely to result in extensive residential conversions of rural buildings and possible need for replacement buildings undermining character of the Surrey Hills AONB.

4.1 A particular characteristic of the Surrey Hills AONB is the exceedingly high residential property values. This means there would be a substantial uplift in the base value of the building being converted into a dwelling. The financial incentive to convert without the need for permission buildings would be irresistible for many property owners resulting in a flood of such conversions both individually and cumulatively seriously harming the landscape character of the Surrey Hills.

4.2 The Nationwide Building Society 2022 study concluded that there is a 13% premium for dwellings located within an AONB compared to an identical property outside. For Surrey the premium can be expected to be higher as the same study identified The Surrey Hills as having by the highest average house price of £750,000 of any AONB in the country. For comparison, the Chilterns were the next highest with an average significantly lower house price of £613,000. The average house price in several other AONBs are under half that of Surrey.

4.3 This illustrates why there is such a strong financial incentive to convert a low or lower value rural building in the Surrey Hills AONB and that if PDRs are relaxed as in the draft proposals there would be a flurry of such conversions. But they will result in the wrong type of dwelling not needed in the Surrey Hills. Such conversions say, for a 3 bedroom dwelling would be well in excess of £750,000. 4 or more bedrooms can fetch well over £1million and even over £2million.

4.4 Some existing buildings to be converted may have exceeded their useful life and therefore may be almost worthless. Others may still have a beneficial use but the value of which is less than as converted into a dwelling taking into account the build costs. To illustrate the financial incentive, taking the case of the converted building into a 3 bedroom dwelling it may have a negligible base value if having exceeded its useful life and, if not, say, £100,000. The conversion costs might amount to about £350,000 giving an uplift in value of about £400,000 in the first case and about £300,000 in the second. The uplift in the larger converted dwellings the uplift in value is likely to be greater.

4.5 Ironically, it can be the conversion of large modern functional looking agricultural buildings that are accepted as working buildings associated with the maintenance of the landscape but when converted no longer do, that can fetch the highest sale price.

4.6 These buildings have sometimes been fragmented from the farm and so do not form part of farm diversification but merely profit the new landowner.

4.7 These types of dwellings do nothing to meet the more modest housing needs of the Surrey Hills. The Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan supports at Policy P4 the provision of small scale affordable housing and so scope already exists to provide the most needed form of housing in this AONB.

The Surrey Hills was one of the first landscapes to be designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1958. It is now one of 34 AONBs in England having equal landscape status to a National Park. The Surrey Hills AONB stretches across rural Surrey, covering about a quarter of the county.

The Surrey Hills Board was established in 2008 as a Joint Management Committee to develop policies and programmes that:

- Protect and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the Surrey Hills
- Enhance public understanding and enjoyment of the area
- Promote the social and economic well being of the Surrey Hills, particularly in regard to achieving the above objectives.

**The Core Members funding the Surrey Hills Board are:**

- Guildford Borough Council
- Mole Valley District Council
- National Trust
- Natural England
- Reigate and Banstead Borough Council
- Surrey County Council
- Tandridge District Council
- Waverley Borough Council

**The Advisory Members (non funding) are:**

- CPRE Surrey
- Country Land and Business Association
- National Farmers Union
- Surrey County Association of Parish and Town Councils
- Surrey Hills Society
- Surrey Wildlife Trust

