



Surrey Hills
National
Landscape

Surrey Hills National Landscape Board

25th July 2025

Governance Review

Purpose of the report:

To consider proposal for the new governance structure for the Surrey Hills National Landscape.

Recommendations:

1. Agree the proposed new governance structure for the Surrey Hills National Landscape, subject to legal advice.
2. Advise on the proposed Membership of the Executive Management Board
3. Consider the roles of the 3 thematic leads (advocates) for People and Place; Nature and Climate
4. Advise on the Membership of the Surrey Hills Partnership

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Surrey Hills National Landscape Board's current constitution as a Joint Advisory Committee was agreed in October 2013. Although various changes to the Constitution have been reported to AGMs over the years, there had been no formal review. The Board did set up a Working Group in 2021, but this was effectively put on hold pending Defra's response to the Glover recommendations on designated landscapes.
- 1.2 The Glover Review was generally very critical of the governance of AONBs and called for reformed governance to inspire and secure ambition in our national landscapes and to better reflect society, proposing an overhaul of how AONB Partnerships should be governed as new National Landscapes.
- 1.3 At the Board's AGM in September 2024, a brief was agreed (Annex 1) to undertake a review of the Surrey Hills governance and to make recommendations for effective new governance. The review was guided by a steering group comprising:
 1. Natural England (Chair)
 2. National Landscape Association
 3. Surrey Hills Board, Independent Chair
 4. Surrey County Council, as host authority

5. Representatives of the Surrey Hills Family and core partners (to be selected at the Board meeting)
6. The Steering Group may decide to engage individuals to advocate for areas like nature or climate

1.4 In November 2024, Resources for Change were commissioned to undertake the review. This involved a series of interview with national, regional and local stakeholders to review the effectiveness of the Surrey Hills governance and to seek best practice from other Landscapes and similar partnerships like Active Surrey¹.

1.5 The consultants undertook a workshop with the Board as part of its December meeting and presenting its findings and recommendations to the Board meeting in March. A copy of the final report has been circulated with these papers. The outcome of the Board meeting and the recommendations were summarised in Part 5 of the Management Plan Consultation draft. This included establishing an Executive Management Board and to retain a wider Partnership.

1.6 Once the recommendation has been made by the Board, legal advice will need to confirm the structure of the organisation, including whether it is a Joint Advisory Committee or requires a separate agreement between Defra, the host and local authority funding partners which have a duty to keep under review the statutory Management Plan. The revised Constitution or new agreement will need to be presented back to the Board's AGM and be adopted by the respective bodies along with the Management Plan. It is also recognised that the proposed extension of the Surrey Hills by 30% in area and potentially 3 new local authorities, and the proposals for local government devolution in Surrey will add a layer of complexity and uncertainty to any new arrangement.

2. Executive Management Board

2.1 The Surrey Hills National Landscape Executive Management Board (EMB) is proposed as the core decision-making body for the National Landscape. It focuses on the outcomes and strategy in the Management Plan and facilitates the joint delivery of the Plan, thus furthering the purposes of the National Landscape. The Surrey Hills Board will have oversight of:

- Strategic development of the Management Plan, including establishing and reviewing the membership of the Partnership and Task Groups.
- A Business Plan, delivering relevant parts of the Management Plan and setting the priorities for the Surrey Hills National Landscape Team.
- Financial management, reporting and decision-making of a devolved budget, with delegation of financial decisions to the Surrey Hills Director, based on the host authority Standing Orders.
- Promotion and communication, including consistent use of the Surrey Hills brand, in line with the trademark licence agreement.

¹ Active Surrey is constituted as a not-for-profit, unincorporated association. Through a formal partnership arrangement, Surrey County Council (SCC) is the accountable body for Active Surrey

2.2 The proposed Surrey Hills EMB membership is:

- Independent Chair, and Chair of Surrey Hills Trust Fund Panel
- Vice Chair –Local Authority Member.
- The Surrey Hills National Landscape Director
- Accountable Authority senior officer
- Chair of Planning Officers Working Group
- Natural England (on behalf of Defra)

Chairs of Surrey Hills Family organisations:

Surrey Hills Enterprises Community Interest Company

Surrey Hills Arts Partnership

Surrey Hills Society (Trust Fund)

2.3 The consultants also propose that the EMB will include three Board

`Advocates` who are responsible for the Outcomes and Targets:

- Nature - thriving plants and wildlife
- Climate - mitigating and adapting to climate change
- People and Place - enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment

2.4 The Advocates will encourage sector led collaboration and action planning with partners to help achieve relevant Management Plan priorities, bringing in knowledge and experience of the sector from a range of partners in Task Groups. The Advocates challenge relevant public bodies to fulfil their duty to further the purpose of the National Landscape, and report on progress towards delivery of the overall business plan.

3. The Surrey Hills Partnership

3.1 Surrey Hills Partnership enables a wide range of partners to contribute to the delivery of the Management Plan and its Task Groups. The Partnership both advises on and scrutinises the work of the Surrey Hills National Landscape Board. Its activities provide an opportunity to share progress and good practice. It has an annual Forum which manages progress against the Management Plan and an annual summer Tour which showcases the work of the Team and partners.

3.2 The Membership includes:

- Local authorities with a responsibility for preparing and keeping under review the Management Plan and funding the National Landscape Team,
- Defra non-Departmental public bodies (Forestry Commission, Environment Agency and Natural England),
- Surrey Hills Family (Surrey Hills Society CIO, Surrey Hills Enterprises CIC, Surrey Hills Arts Partnership and the Surrey Hills Trust Fund (Community Foundation for Surrey)
- Advisory Partners that are willing and able to contribute to the aims of the Surrey Hills National Landscape by virtue of their financial resources, influence, expertise and commitment of time to support Task Groups.

Annex 1. Surrey Hills National Landscape Partnership

Governance Guidance - Draft Consultants' Brief

7. Purpose

To recommend a new governance model and arrangements for the Surrey Hills National Landscape by appraising best practice and drafting a new constitution for the Surrey Hills National Landscape partnership.

8. Introduction

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) were rebranded as National Landscapes in November 2023. This followed one of the main recommendations from the government's Glover Review of Designated Landscapes which involved all the AONBs adopting the National Landscape name, branding and values. The Surrey Hills Partnership's constitution was agreed in October 2013 and despite the name change the governance of the Surrey Hills has not been reviewed. It is now imperative that the governance of the Surrey Hills National Landscapes is reviewed to ensure it is fit for purpose to deliver the Defra vision:

'A coherent national network of beautiful, nature-rich spaces that all parts of society can easily access and enjoy. National Landscapes will support thriving local communities and economies, improve our public health and wellbeing, drive forward nature recovery, and build our resilience to climate change.'

Proposal 26 of Glover is for reformed governance to inspire and secure ambition in our national landscapes and to better reflect society. It proposed an overhaul of how AONB Partnerships should be governed as National Landscapes including smaller 9-12 person boards, in line with best practice for charities and companies, with just one or two representatives drawn from local authorities who contribute funding to the AONB, determined either by the agreement of those local authorities, or if not, by ballot.

Proposal 24 is for AONBs to be strengthened with new purposes, powers and resources and renamed as National Landscapes. The renaming is so that their national importance is properly reflected by something much less unwieldy and which elevates them alongside National Parks.

9. Background to the Surrey Hills National Landscape

The Surrey Hills National Landscape was designated an AONB in 1958. In 1999 a Joint Advisory Committee was established for the AONB called the Surrey Hills Partnership. This was a broad organisation comprising Natural England (nee Countryside Agency), 4 Surrey County Councillors, 2 councillors from the constituent boroughs and districts and 8 advisory partners. It met twice per annum. An Officers Working Group of local planning authority officers provided advice and guidance to the AONB Officer and team.

In October 2013, the JAC agreed changes to the constitution. This retained the Surrey Hills Partnership meeting twice per annum with an annual tour and Partnership meeting, but also created a smaller JAC called the Surrey Hills Board. This reduced the number of councillors to one from each authority, Natural England, 6 Advisory Members and representatives from the delivery partners which had been established: Surrey Hills Society and Surrey Hills Enterprises. The Chairs of the Surrey Hills Trust Fund, a partnership with the Community Foundation for Surrey, and the Surrey Hills Arts Partnership were invited as observers. The Surrey Hills Board meets four times per annum in addition to the Partnership meeting.

The Constitution has been kept under review at the AGM. Some of the changes have included:

10. Since 2019, the Board has elected an Independent Chair, which also performs the role of the Partnership Chair
11. The annual Partnership Forum has ceased as partners were invited as Observers to the quarterly Board meetings.
12. Since 2018, the Surrey Hills Board also organises an annual Symposium with Surrey University as an opportunity to invite a wide range of partner organisations and the public to engage in the work of the Surrey Hills.
13. Since 2019, Surrey CC Democratic Services has provided the Secretariat for members of the Board. This has reduced the numbers of partners attending as observers and ensured it operates in line with Standing Orders and formal Public Questions
14. Surrey CC Democratic Services does not support the Partnership or the Members Advisory Group, whose membership and meetings have been inconsistent.
15. In 2022 and 2023, the Board's AGM has been followed by the Partnership Forum.
16. The Board has not identified any Patrons but the role of Surrey Hills Patrons has been developed by Surrey Hills Enterprises
17. In 2024, Natural England has published recommendations for extending the Surrey Hills designated area following public consultation. This is for an enlarged area to take in new authorities like the City of London and the London Borough of Croydon that will need to be engaged in the new governance proposals.
18. In 2024, Natural England is proposing a new Super National Nature Reserve for the heathland area in the western Surrey Hills National Landscapes. The governance structure will need to take account of this proposal.

19. What we would like from this review

Taking into account the Glover recommendations we should like our revised governance structure and constitution to include:

20. looking at best practice in creating diverse governance, by looking at principles of good governance eg. IUCN Principles of Good Governance, how other organisations have successfully created better representation in their Board, getting more representation and diversity into decision making with a streamlined smaller Board. For example, by greater integration and use of advisory panels, providing specialist expertise, formal avenues for feeding in local voices and experts through experience. Ensuring local voices are heard on decisions that impact local communities and importantly that communities are central to decision making processes. How can communities that aren't represented or involved be reached and engaged.
21. clearly differentiating between strategic decision making (by a governance board which includes local authority and other members) and delivery of the strategy, more likely by local authority and partner organisations' staff and volunteers
22. ensure that National Landscape Team has the ability to work independently in the interest of their National Landscape with appropriate control over staff and financial resources
23. ensure that governance facilitates a culture to learn, share knowledge and develop policies and programme regionally and nationally as National Landscapes
24. ensuring governance structures facilitate and enable all partners to recognise and act on their statutory duty of regard to the Designation, helping all involved to advocate more effectively for the National Landscape.
25. making more of the opportunity to form and disband working groups (task and finish groups) to suit changing opportunities and circumstances,

26. a small, proportionate, scrutiny function with the host authority including audit and risk, to ensure governance, finance and risks are managed.
27. ensure alignment with the proposals for the extension of the Surrey Hills National Landscape and the proposals for the Super National Nature Reserve.
28. fit for purpose governance processes that encourage greater public engagement both in formal meetings and in our work more broadly.
29. that it supports the local authority's statutory duty to prepare and keep under review the Management Plan, and the contributions are affordable and represents good value for money

30. The Brief

The outputs for this project is a new draft Constitution and proposals for governance of the Surrey Hills National Landscape

To do this the consultant(s) will be expected to:

31. review Glover recommendations and existing guidance for AONBs Partnerships and National Park Authorities
32. review existing governance documents
33. conduct qualitative interviews with a selection of partners and interested parties (a list of about 10 suggested interviewees will be provided).
34. and generic recommendations for improving governance structures and processes
35. Identifying and overcoming barriers to diverse governance, what would help. Eg training, buddying, networking, peer support to new members etc
36. The draft new constitutions for the Surrey Hills National Landscape based on best practice, setting clear performance standards, having agreed expectations eg. Chair fixed length of service, standard role profile, specialist roles within a Board for example to reach out to communities and increase diversity. How/where to advertise roles, ensuring roles are accessible through ensuring flexibility in when and where meetings are, catering to caring responsibilities etc.
37. a shared code of conduct, regular skills audits, and improved training, performance reviews, fixed-term appointments, and a streamlined process for underperforming members. Specialist advice would be useful. Following a review of Protected Landscapes in Wales advice from the Equalities & Human Rights Commission in Wales was sought on inclusion and diversity
38. Present findings and recommendations to the Surrey Hills Steering Group

39. Steering Group

The project will be guided by a steering group comprising

40. Natural England (Chair)
41. National Landscape Association
42. Surrey Hills Board, Independent Chair
43. Surrey County Council, as host authority
44. Representative of the Surrey Hills Family and core partners (to be selected at September Surrey Hills Board meeting)

The consultants will be supported by the Surrey Hills National Landscape Director and team.

45. Budget

A total budget of up to £10k is available for this task.