

PROCEDURAL MATTERS – PUBLIC QUESTIONS

1. Public Question submitted by Sally Blake

For many years, the Surrey Hills National Landscape (SHNL) has favoured “growing the Surrey Hills economy”, and the attraction of visitors, over nature, even though its purpose is “conserving and enhancing the natural beauty in an area of outstanding natural beauty”. The SHNL is now required by law to “seek to further the purpose” and to help the UK meet its commitment to protect 30% of land and water by 2030. However, Surrey Hills Enterprises (SHE) promotes its 250 businesses from the SHNL website which has barely a mention of conservation.

For many years, the SHNL executive team has also actively avoided or discouraged public awareness, attendance and participation, despite the SHNL being a publicly funded body, and responsible for decisions on projects, and for distribution of public funds expected to amount to £3.9 million between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2026. An application for a share of a National Heritage Lottery Fund of £150 million, to be invested in improving landscapes in 20 long-term projects in National Parks and National Landscapes in England and Wales, is also proposed.

The vast majority, if not all, of the other National Landscapes in England focus primarily on conservation, and welcome public participation.

Will the SHNL Board now correct that position by applying the following reasonable and appropriate standards and, if not, which standards will the Board decline to adhere to?

1. Have a majority of publicly elected or public representatives on the Executive Management Board (EMB).
2. Ensure SHE, Surrey Hills Society and Surrey Hills Arts do not have a vote on the EMB, being inappropriate and a conflict of interest.
3. Ensure the three “advocates” on the EMB are experienced in the three strands of the new DEFRA framework i.e. (a) nature (b) climate, (c) heritage buildings and access to countryside. Representatives from Surrey Wildlife Trust, University of Surrey climate research team and a Heritage body would be appropriate.
4. Ensure the SHNL has appropriate, challenging and measurable targets to meet its commitments to the three strands of the new DEFRA framework and review these at least annually.
5. Ensure the SHNL monitors the position by measuring progress against its targets at least annually. The SHNL did not monitor any of its performance indicators over the period of the last Management Plan 2020-2025, to show the results of public money being spent.
6. Ensure the SHNL reports publicly at least annually on progress to targets, and at the end of five years. It did not produce a State of the AONB report for the period 2020-2025 although it committed to.
7. Ensure the public has direct and remote access to, and at least one month’s prior knowledge of the date and venue, and space for at least 10 individuals, in addition to any invited organisations, to attend, all EMB meetings.
8. Ensure all current and proposed projects and their costs are clearly summarized, and approval sought, at all EMB meetings. The public were, illegally, excluded from Board meetings up to 2020.

9. Ensure every SHNL and EMB meeting is videoed, posted online within a week, and retained there for at least one year.
10. Ensure the draft minutes of every EMB meeting are posted online, a common practice with SCC Council and Committee meetings, normally within a week, two at most. Presently, they are not made public for 3 months.
11. Ensure Public Questions can be asked, as for Surrey County Council meetings, at every EMB. Public Questions were, illegally, not permitted at the SHNL Board meetings until 2020.
12. Ensure the Management Plan is reviewed at least annually, and updated to keep pace with nature, climate and conservation commitments and needs.
13. Ensure the governance of the SHNL Board is reviewed at least five yearly, to include the roles and functions of the EMB. It has not been reviewed for many years up to now.
14. Ensure the SHNL seeks required permissions from local authorities and the Planning Inspectorate, and makes those applications clearly available on its website. This has not always been done, or done correctly or openly, up to now.
15. Ensure the SHNL financials i.e. expected and actual income and expenditure, are made publicly available within six months after the end of the financial year.
16. Ensure money being spent is monitored and authorized by two appropriate persons and listed at all EMB meetings for discussion.
17. Ensure comments on planning applications are made without the input of SHE, Surrey Hills Society or Surrey Hills Arts, being inappropriate and a conflict of interest. SHE has recently supported a planning application without reference to the Board, an application which the SHNL has objected to and which is totally in conflict with the aims of the SHNL. It can no longer be trusted to work with the Board's interest at heart.

Thank you.

Reply:

Dear Sally,

Thank you for your question to the Surrey Hills National Landscape Board.

The primary purpose of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty designation is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Surrey Hills. This is the priority for the statutory Management Plan which is going through the adoption process by local authorities. It has been subject to an Environment Report and Habitat Regulations Assessment to ensure that it is fit for purpose.

Growing the Surrey Hills Economy is one of the pillars within the current Management Plan and activity is reported quarterly to the Surrey Hills National Landscape Board. Surrey Hills Enterprises Community Interest Company (CIC) is one partner whose activities contribute towards the delivery of the Management Plan. Surrey Hills Enterprises is funded by its membership and income from events like the Wood Fair with the Cranleigh Agricultural Society, the Spring Festival with the Rural Living Museum and the Country Fair with Merrist Wood College, and charity partners like Shooting Stars. There is no executive committee of the Surrey Hills National Landscape on which Surrey Hills Enterprises is represented.

Surrey County Council, as Host Authority, following on from the Resources for Change Governance paper will present an updated Governance proposal for discussion by the Board which will seek to address the questions you have raised as well as take account of the future impact of local government reorganisation. If any questions remain, Carolyn

McKenzie, the Director for Environment and Planning has agreed to meet with you, together with a Governance and Legal representative from Surrey County Council after the Board.

Yours sincerely,

Kathy Atkinson
Independent Chairman of the Joint Advisory Committee for the Surrey Hills National
Landscape
17 September 2025