

Minutes of the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (National Landscape) Board (Surrey Hills Board) held at 1:30pm on 25 June 2025 at The National Trust's Surrey Hills Estate Office, Warren Farm Barns, Mickleham.

Members Present =*

Independent Chair Kathy Atkinson*	
<u>Core Members</u> Councillor Catherine Young (online)* Guildford Borough Council Councillor Roger Adams (substitute)* Mole Valley District Council Councillor Nadean Moses Reigate and Banstead Borough Council Councillor Catherine Sayer* Tandridge District Council Councillor Ruth Reed Waverley Borough Council Councillor Marisa Heath Surrey County Council Stephen Rudd* Natural England Stephanie Fudge* The National Trust	<u>Delivery Partners</u> Michael Coughlin Surrey Hills Enterprises Community Interest Company Gordon Jackson* Surrey Hills Society and Surrey Hills Trust Fund <u>Advisory Members</u> Mike Waite (online)* Surrey Wildlife Trust Harriet Henrick National Farmers Union John Goodridge (online)* Campaign to Protect Rural England Tim Bamford Country Land and Business Association Deborah Sherry Surrey Association of Local Councils <u>Observer</u> Alison Clarke (online)* Surrey Hills Arts

1. Chair's Welcome and Announcements

1. The Chair welcomed the Board and observer to the meeting.
2. The Chair announced that:
 1. The report on the proposed Natural England Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) boundary extension had been published the previous week. A full update would be provided at the agenda item.
 2. Putting nature first was the golden thread through the Management Plan and major development pressures should be resisted in the National Landscape.
 3. The Blackwell Farm solar farm planning application was under judicial review. The Chair noted that such cases were increasing in number and challenging local planning authorities' interpretation and application of the new LURA duty.
 4. The Wealden Heath National Nature Reserve was due to be launched within the week and would ensure greater protections for the rare habitats within.
 5. The Local Nature Recovery Strategy was due to be launched at the start of July and would complement the nature theme in the Management Plan.
 6. The grant letter from DEFRA had been received along with a letter from Under-Secretary of State Mary Creagh recognising the importance of protecting National Landscapes. The Chair noted that the Chancellor's spending review had not provided significant support to DEFRA and in-year funding only proved to be a challenge for the small team.
 7. The National Landscapes Conference would be co-hosted by the Surrey Hills National Landscape Team in Winchester with two trips: to the Devil's Punch and Thursley, and to Newlands Corner, Silent Pool and Albury.
 8. The Chair asked the Panel whether they would prefer to be individually named in minutes going forward, or for contributions to be recorded anonymously. The Panel agreed to be recorded individually, as appropriate

2. Apologies for Absence

1. Apologies for absence were received from:

Members

Cllr Marisa Heath (SCC), Cllr Claire Malcomson (MVDC) (substitute Cllr Roger Adams), Cllr Nadean Moses, Cllr Ruth Reed.

Advisory Members and Delivery Partners

Lucy Charman, Michael Coughlin, Harriet Henrick, Stuart MacLachlan

3. Declarations of Interest

1. None were declared.

4. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

1. The minutes were approved as an accurate record.

5. Public Questions

1. One public question had been submitted and a written response provided.

6. Natural England Boundary Extension Update and Presentation

1. The Natural England representative noted that the boundary review was one of only two being completed due to a funding shortfall.
2. The Natural England representative presented the most recent proposals and outcome of the latest consultation.
3. Three areas of concern had been raised by statutory partners; Natural England had met with each to resolve issues.
4. The general thrust of additions and deletions was aimed at remaining at a high-level of natural beauty and was not about fighting planning permission.
7. The remaining steps were outlined with target dates:
 1. 30-day notice period for final representations, in November 2025

2. Thorough and robust responses given to the representations
 3. Publication of final report by March 2026
 4. Submission to Secretary of State
2. It was possible that a public inquiry would be requested by the Secretary of State.
 3. It was confirmed that the project had been tabled for the Natural England Board meeting in September 2025.
 4. Cllr Sayer requested that the presentation be shared with Board members. **[action]**
 5. In response to a query from Cllr Sayer, the Natural England representative considered that the National Landscape Boundary Extension proposal would carry great weight for any future planning proposals within its new bounds. The Planning Advisor agreed.
 6. Boundaries continue to be updated ahead of final submission as representations were resolved and to reflect the most up-to-date situation.
 7. Cllr Young asked whether all Local Planning Authority officers were kept informed of the changing status to ensure sufficient weight was given to new material reasons for planning considerations. The Chair confirmed that regular meetings with all Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) were held, but there was no guarantee that all staff within each organisation was aware. This would be raised at the next relevant meeting with LPAs. **[action]**
 8. The Planning Advisor undertook to write to all LPAs to reinforce this point and would copy in respective councillors. **[action]**
 9. The Natural England Representative confirmed there existed a technical advisory group for the boundary review including relevant LPAs which was kept updated with the proposals.
 10. In response to a query from Cllr Adams, the National Trust representative agreed to discuss Bookham Common exclusion separately. **[action]**

8. The Surrey Hills Management Plan

1. The Chair introduced the item and noted there was still a degree of flexibility to the plan's governance structure to accommodate the proposed boundary changes; additional authorities would potentially need to be included in the future.
2. The Surrey Hills National Landscape Director summarised the process of developing the Plan, based around three themes of Nature, People and Place, and Climate. This included a public survey, outreach, and the Symposium. A poem for the Year 2100 had been composed based on the responses to the Postcards from the Future, by Poet in Residence at Leith Hill Rosie May Jones.
3. A consultation on the draft Management Plan ran between March and June 2025.
4. There was strong feedback about ancient trees and woodlands being the most valued feature in the Surrey Hills.
5. It was noted that the Surrey Hills now had 47% canopy cover and that secondary woodland had spread into open areas, and there were concerns about visitor numbers. People wanted to care for nature and support setting aside space for wildlife.
6. Although dog walking was both popular and recognised for its wellbeing benefits, it needed to be balanced with protecting wildlife.
7. There were opportunities to bring woodlands back into management, providing biomass and wood fuel, but without compromising air quality and opportunities to lock up carbon.
8. The importance of cultural heritage and the arts was a common theme and there was an opportunity for public education, including the variable quality of woodland and its spread in the past 100 years.
9. The Surrey Hills National Landscape Director noted that Part 2 would be summarised for the public following feedback on its length.

Commented [ST1]: Might be confused with Governance review? Would 'status' be better or similar?

10. It was made clear that the Management Plan is for all Responsible Bodies to act on and is separate from the business plan for the Surrey Hills National Landscape team.
11. The National Trust (NT) representative confirmed that no response had yet been given to the plan, as the NT was developing its own strategy which she was confident would align.
12. The National Trust had calculated that the Surrey Hills National Landscape is the busiest in the country, measuring by car park usage, despite covering a relatively small area.
13. The Chair confirmed that much consideration had been given in the 75-year plan to the impact of climate change.
14. The Chair confirmed that a meeting with the LPA Planning Officer Group would be held following the end of the consultation. This would focus on approving the specific wording of policies.
15. It was recognised that the policies had to be balanced with local plan policies.
16. The Board discussed the targets covering the next 75 years, which were provided by DEFRA. Some targets were specific to each National Landscape, whilst others were to be achieved collectively, by all combined. There was flexibility within the targets to allow focus for specific, rare, or niche habitats to be prioritised, such as promoting recovery of chalklands.
17. The targets had been frontloaded in recognition that not all gains would be as easily achieved.
18. On hedgerows, it was noted that the target needed to be revisited. **[action]** The CPRE representative encouraged that the various bodies assembled should coordinate on hedgerow planting to collectively achieve the target. **[action]**
19. It was agreed to discuss the meaning of 50% favourable condition for SSSIs outside of the meeting. **[action]**
20. The Climate Change Action Plan would be developed by 2028 to respond to the strategic ambitions of mitigating and adapting to climate change in the plan. The

Chair noted that Surrey County Council was due to renew their climate change strategy in 2026, and it was a priority for the National Landscape to develop theirs in tandem with, but for the benefit of, the Surrey Hills and achieve it much before 2028.

21. The National Trust representative noted that the National Trust was considering more radical steps to provide resilience in the face of climate change, particularly in preventing tree die-off from heat stress.
22. The Surrey Hills National Landscape Director explained that making trails easier for access was not equivalent to urbanisation but focused on improving surfacing and removing barriers. Surfaces would generally be permeable, as opposed to sealing with asphalt, for example. Where there were high-traffic areas with persistent problems, discussions would be held with landowners on creating sustainable tracks.
23. The sections of the Management Plan would be revised following the consultation and feedback and then published online for review. A summary of parts one and two would be written. The Management Plan policy framework would be published with links to their justification. This approach was being taken in recognition that the intended audience was the local authorities which have a duty to regard the policy.
24. Additionally, a method for public involvement was being considered as a 'thank you' for the engagement on the development of the 75-year plan.
25. It was aimed for the Plan to be considered by the Surrey Hills Planning Officers Working Group in July, and one final document will then be taken to the respective local authorities for adoption. An update would be provided at the September meeting. **[action]**
26. It was not anticipated that the serial nature of adoption between authorities would cause planning decision issues.
27. Due consideration to responding to invasive species was within the plan. In addition, the Local Nature Recovery Strategy to be adopted by the Council, gives significant consideration to this issue.

9. Surrey Hills Governance Review

1. The Chair summarised the governance changes and explained that approval of them was sought at the Board.
2. The changes were subject to legal advice from Surrey County Council.
3. Any changes would need to accommodate impending devolution and local government reorganisation (D&LGR), as well as the potential for more local authorities to be represented following the potential AONB boundary extension.
4. The previous Constitution update was undertaken in 2013 and, although the timing with D&LGR was not ideal, it was recognised that there was potential for change.
5. There was a void of detailed guidance from central government, so the Board had commissioned the Governance Review.
6. The result of the Review evidenced the need for governance change. A greater level of scrutiny of priorities and budgets was required and an emphasis placed on the Board providing oversight of the Management Plan and ensuring delivery by partners.
7. An Executive Management Board is proposed, which would provide the scrutiny required. This would answer to the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC).
8. EDI representation is significantly lacking in the existing structure, including for consideration of accessibility of the Surrey Hills, where expertise was lacking.
9. The National Trust representative emphasised the need to have clear, comprehensive Terms of Reference, including the stakeholders for these bodies. The Chair agreed that these should be drafted for Board review. **[action]**
10. The National Trust representative made clear the need to ensure that clear pathways for communication and inclusion with the wider stakeholder community were identified.
11. The Chair accepted there was risk that a smaller group, as proposed for the Executive Management Board, could become disconnected from wider partners

and that mitigation of such risk was important by clear reporting and accountability to the Partnership Board.

12. Cllr Sayer suggested that a representative from each unitary authority be included on the EMB, as opposed to one only, as suggested, once LGR had been accomplished.
13. The Chair noted that there were not yet arrangements for a host authority following D&LGR. Surrey would cease to exist in 2027 and a host from the newly established unitary authorities would take over. This could be permanent or temporary, depending on the result of devolution and the creation of a Mayoral Strategic Authority in 2028, which could take on responsibility.
14. Three new Advocate posts were proposed, each representing a priority area identified by DEFRA, acting both to challenge and enable. These were suggested to be openly recruited.
15. Concern was raised with the ability to recruit such Advocates and there was an open question as to whether compensation would be available to attract individuals.
16. The Joint Advisory Committee would have its membership broadened, including with EDI expertise and advocacy, as well as the three Advocates.
17. The JAC would meet twice a year.
18. The legal review underway by SCC would include what areas could or should be delegated from the JAC to the EMB, and which representatives would be able to vote on decisions.
19. It was therefore necessary to define the roles of the two bodies ahead of the proposed final meeting, in its current form, of the JAC in September.
20. The Chair of the Surrey Hills Society and Surrey Hills Trust Fund recommended that there be no representation from the Surrey Hills Trust Fund (hosted by the Community Foundation for Surrey) on the future bodies. This was agreed by the Chair. **[action]**

21. The citizen observer (SB) shared personal concern with the changes, particularly around reduction in number of elected representatives, councillors, and the inclusion of Surrey Hills Enterprises, Surrey Hills Arts, Surrey Hills Society, and Surrey Hills Trust Fund being on the Board, as well as the increase in membership of the JAC.
22. The Chair provided explanation and reassurance to the concerns. The JAC would remain, as required, as the statutory body. The increased scrutiny provided by the EMB would provide greater reassurance around decisions. The EMB had a smaller membership and was aimed to have delegated decisions-making power.
23. The Surrey Hills National Landscape Director noted that the legal review would consider who was eligible to vote on decisions as a JAC
24. In response to concern in increase in membership, and reduction of elected representatives, the Director noted that the Glover Review referred specifically to reducing the membership of elected representatives. The Review encouraged more members with specific expertise to make informed decisions.
25. The Chair emphasised that the changes in governance would only be viewed as successful if all proposed parts worked.

Recommendation

26. The Board agreed to the recommendations:
 1. Agreed the proposed new governance structure for the Surrey Hills National Landscape, subject to legal advice.
 2. Advised on the proposed Membership of the Executive Management Board
 3. Considered the roles of the 3 thematic leads (advocates) for People and Place; Nature and Climate
 4. Advised on the Membership of the Surrey Hills Partnership

10. Management Plan Monitoring Report and Forward Plan

1. On LURA duty and Gatwick airport, a compensation payment for impact on the Surrey Hills dark skies and tranquillity was being considered; more funding for

Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) had been awarded, and more Access for All funding would be awarded.

2. An immersive game trail at Box Hill was due to be launched on 19 July 2025. Cllr Adams, offered to attend the event, in capacity as Chairman of Mole Valley, and asked that contact be made with Mole Valley District Council's Civic Office.

[action]

3. Discussions were ongoing with the National Heritage Lottery Fund for support for a consultation to write an expression of interest for the landscape connection programme. All four outcomes of the NHLF would need to be incorporated: saving heritage; protecting the environment; inclusion, access and participation; and organisational sustainability.
4. The Surrey Hills National Landscape Director responded to question on the EOI that had been raised by citizen observer (SB), noting that it was not yet known what it would comprise of.
5. It was anticipated that workshops would be held in September and October to develop more ideas around the project. These would then be developed further and reported at the November symposium and finally submitted to the NHLF.

11. Date of the Next Meeting

The next meeting was scheduled for Wednesday, 17 September 2025.