



<u>Committee and Date</u> Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership  6 <sup>th</sup> March 2018	<u>Item</u>  <b>3</b>
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## **DEFRA FEEDBACK ON CONSERVATION BOARD REQUEST AND NEXT STEPS**

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### **Summary**

This paper updates Partnership members on feedback just received on our Conservation Board request, and makes recommendations for a process of reappraisal of options involving relevant stakeholders.

### **Recommendation**

The Partnership is recommended to comment on the issues raised and support a process of reappraisal.

### **Background**

Following our original request to Defra in November 2016 to create a Conservation Board, and the Minister's letter of April 2017 setting out new criteria, an updated formal submission was sent to Defra in August 2017. Since then we have been waiting for a decision. In early February 2018, following Defra's publication of the 25 Year Environment Plan, we have, through Philip Dunne MP, been invited to a meeting in London with Defra Minister Lord Gardiner on 21<sup>st</sup> March. The following was received on 23<sup>rd</sup> February from our Defra civil service contact in response to a request for further information ahead of the meeting with the Minister:

*"You will have seen that the 25 Year Plan announced a review of designated landscapes in England, which looks set to encompass the financing and governance of designated landscapes. In this context, the Minister has indicated that he is very unlikely to prejudge the outcome of this process by pressing ahead now and creating a conservation board before a review with recommendations for the best way forward are made.*

*I think the meeting is still an opportunity to make your case, based on the criteria the Minister outlined in his letter last year. As time is likely to be short, I think it would also be useful to focus on what practical solutions we can look at to try and make sure you are able to continue meeting the needs of the AONB within the existing structure of the local authority. I would envisage that the presence of Philip Dunne MP may help in that respect, given his link into local issues.*

*We can certainly agree an agenda beforehand. I appreciate that this is not necessarily what you will have wanted to hear, and I know this has been a long road for you which now looks*

*like it may get longer. I wanted to give you some idea of what to expect prior to the meeting so that we can make best use of the time."*

### Wording in the 25 Year Environment Plan about the review of AONBs and National Parks:

For members' clarity, the following is what the 25 Year Plan sets out regarding this review:

#### *2. Conserving and enhancing natural beauty*

*Some of England's most beautiful landscapes and geodiversity are protected via a range of designations including National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). Some landscapes are also internationally recognised through UNESCO World Heritage Site and Global Geoparks status (for example the Lake District, the Cornwall and West Devon mining landscape and the North Pennines). Collectively, they comprise some of our unique, most cherished and valuable natural assets.*

*Over the next 25 years we want to make sure they are not only conserved but enhanced. Many of the policies set out in the rest of the Plan will contribute to making all areas more beautiful. In this section, we focus mainly on the designated areas.*

#### *i. Reviewing National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty*

*The UK's first National Parks were created by an Act of Parliament in 1949 following the government's 1947 Hobhouse Report, which remains the basis for most protected landscape designation in England today.*

*Now, 70 years on, the Government will commission a review for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This will consider coverage of designations, how designated areas deliver their responsibilities, how designated areas are financed, and whether there is scope for expansion. It will also consider opportunities to enhance the environment in existing designations, and expand on the existing eight-point plan for National Parks to connect more people with the natural environment.*

*Actions we will take include:*

- Commissioning a 21st Century 'Hobhouse' Review of National Parks and AONBs.*
- Working with National Park Authorities to continue to deliver the 8-Point Plan for National Parks 2016-2020. National Park Authorities have already met the target to engage directly with over 60,000 young people a year in schools' visits, and will double this figure.*
- Working with National Park Authorities and AONB Partnerships and Conservation Boards to deliver environmental enhancement, including through demonstrator projects, and engaging with communities through their statutory management plans.*
- Identifying opportunities for environmental enhancement in all of England's 159 National Character Areas and monitoring indicators of our landscape's character and quality to improve landscapes for people, places and nature.*

It is understood that early steps are now being taken to scope the review, but the start date is unknown. Previous reviews of a similar nature have taken 18 months to two years to complete.

### Proposed process for reappraisal of options

A good deal of work was done by the Partnership on possible options for structure and governance for the AONB leading up to, and as part of, the submissions to Defra. Much of this is still relevant, and a 'blank sheet' reappraisal is not necessary at this stage. However, the possible options do need to be looked at again in the light of the current situation and changes which have occurred. Stakeholders who need to be included in this process include:

- The Partnership, as the current formal AONB governance body (including the Transition Board which reports to the Partnership)
- The staff team
- Trustees of the Shropshire Hills AONB Trust

The National Association for AONBs also have an interest as a broader stakeholder in relation to any issues of national relevance which may arise.

It is proposed to hold one or more independently facilitated sessions involving these stakeholders over the coming weeks. Comments at this stage from Partnership members are welcomed.

<b>List of Background Papers</b> Council & AONB Partnership submissions to Defra to create a Conservation Board Nov 2016 and Aug 2017, supported by Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council Cabinet decisions of October 2016.
<b>Human Rights Act Appraisal</b> The information in this report is compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998.
<b>Environmental Appraisal</b> The recommendation in this paper will contribute to the conservation of protected landscapes.
<b>Risk Management Appraisal</b> Risk management has been appraised as part of the considerations of this report.
<b>Community / Consultations Appraisal</b> The topics raised in this paper have been the subject of earlier consultations with Partnership members.
<b>Appendices</b> None