



Committee and Date Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership 4 th December 2018

Item 3

GLOVER REVIEW OF NATIONAL PARKS AND AONBS – DRAFT SUBMISSION

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Summary

This agenda item is to provide discussion among Partnership members of the appended draft of the Partnership’s written evidence to the national Glover review of designated landscapes. If the Partnership wish to include in its evidence submission a Partnership position on the idea of a National Park for the Shropshire Hills, this position will need to be agreed.

Recommendation

The Partnership is recommended to comment on the draft evidence and recommend any changes.

List of Background Papers

Web page of resources related to Glover review <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/aonb-partnership/aonb-partnershipglover-review-of-designated-landscapes/> (includes previous Partnership papers, background reports and recent press coverage).
It is hoped to circulate the National Association for AONBs ‘prospectus’ before the meeting.

Human Rights Act Appraisal

The information in this report is compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998.

Environmental Appraisal

The recommendation in this paper will contribute to the conservation of protected landscapes.

Risk Management Appraisal

Risk management has been appraised as part of the considerations of this report.

Community / Consultations Appraisal

The topics raised in this paper have been the subject of earlier consultations with Partnership members.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Draft evidence from Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership to the Glover Review

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DRAFT at 14th November 2018 – as previously circulated to members by email

(Qs 1-5 are about the respondent. Q6 invites a recent picture which sums up what is special to you about our designated landscapes).

7. What do you think works overall about the present system of National Parks and AONBs in England? Add any points that apply specifically to only National Parks or AONBs.

The designations give recognition to these nationally important landscapes, as well as some protection. Designating and managing these areas brings huge value to society, including improving people's wellbeing, enhancing the economy, and supporting environmental services.

Designated landscape organisations take an integrated, sustainable development approach, work with local communities, and acknowledge the designated areas as living and working landscapes. Through both staff and volunteers, there is a huge wealth of knowledge in the organisations of the areas.

AONB Partnerships are effective conveners of a wide variety of people and interests, and by working in partnership their small teams achieve a lot with relatively few resources. We are sometimes described by others as 'honest brokers' and help bring other parties together to co-ordinate and reduce potential conflict. While AONB organisations have no real 'teeth' or powers, the strength of our partner engagement has been described as a powerful form of 'soft power'. There is potential to develop this further.

8. What do you think does not work overall about the system and might be changed? Add any points that apply specifically to National Parks or AONBs.

AONBs are the poor relation in this family. There is a large gap between the high aspirations of the AONB designation, and the actual influence carried by the designation and organisations in reality. AONB structures have many strengths and so we would hesitate to call them 'not fit for purpose', but the status and capacity of AONB organisations is not adequate to meet the large and necessary tasks set out for the designation. This applies across all areas of activity, but is especially seen in relation to planning decision-making.

AONB purposes. The single purpose of AONB designation is insufficient to do justice to the broad value of AONBs, and the term 'natural beauty' encourages a narrow view of just what the landscape looks like, and a tendency for other many benefits such as ecosystem services to be overlooked. AONB purposes should be amended to be the same as for National Parks. This would mean accompanying 'natural beauty' with 'wildlife and cultural heritage', as well as a new statutory purpose for enjoyment and understanding.

Governance and resourcing. The system of local authority hosting of AONB Partnership teams has been stretched almost to breaking point by increased pressure on councils' funding. A relatively 'hands-off' approach by Defra has allowed greater flexibility, but in combination this has created the potential for that flexibility to be exploited by hard-pressed local authorities to the detriment of the AONB. Loss of core Defra and council funding has led to an increasing amount of AONB core staff time going on earning income, and

uncertainty over hosting has led to time being spent on exploring alternative structures, both with inevitable opportunity costs. The increased need for AONB teams to justify their own existence and activity has also inhibited their engagement and promotion of the activities of other partner organisations in support of AONB purposes. In 2017 our Partnership and councils made a formal bid for a Conservation Board for the Shropshire Hills AONB, which was shelved by Defra due to the announcement of this national review. We still aspire to a stronger and more secure structure for our AONB, either through this mechanism or perhaps some alternative mechanism if one is found or created.

Status and planning. AONBs are not given adequate weight in planning – the policy words are strong, but the reality of decisions does not bear this out. AONB organisations should become statutory consultees in planning. If this requires stronger organisations to be put in place, this should happen, as it would also bring greater stability, stronger governance and higher profile, which are all needed. The Section 85 duty for public bodies to have regard to AONB purposes is weak and should be strengthened to ‘having due regard’ to the purposes of the designation. Strengthening the local authorities’ duty for the AONB Management Plan to include responsibilities for implementing as well as reviewing the Plan should also be looked at. It is not clear whether this is practical legally or how it would change the nature of AONB Management Plans which local authorities would be happy to approve.

Profile. The Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty title and its acronym are clumsy and too often used wrongly. A new simpler title is needed – we suggest ‘National Landscape’.

Most of these key points of our response are elaborated in answers to later questions.

9. What views do you have about the role National Parks and AONBs play in nature conservation and biodiversity?

This is an important role, and not always acknowledged by some who see the designation being about ‘beauty’. Evidence suggests that despite a lot of conservation activity, much biodiversity in AONBs and National Parks is in decline, and this is true in our area.

Small AONB teams cannot have the necessary expertise in all areas, but we do have the ability to choose what we work on and try to complement the activity of other organisations. In our AONB this is especially the case with regard to rivers and catchment work in the River Clun catchment, though we have also worked or are working on woodlands, meadows, wetlands and common land. The retention of specialist, experienced staff has enabled us to become a key biodiversity deliverer and adviser in certain areas.

The historic institutional split in the UK between landscape and nature conservation (and also heritage) has not been helpful and its legacy remains. As organisations which try to connect these activities, along with tourism, the economy and community etc. AONBs and National Parks are distinctive. Nature conservation is very important to the continued international recognition of AONBs as IUCN Category V protected areas, and the natural environment is obviously a large driver for Defra.

We have adapted the former Sustainable Development Fund, which used to operate in all AONBs and National Parks, into a Conservation Fund, which is now funded only by charitable donations. It is more closely linked to our primary purpose, and supports a range of good conservation projects mainly run by community groups.

a) Could they do more to enhance our wildlife and support the recovery of our natural habitats?

The need exists to do more for biodiversity, and more can and should be done if capacity can be increased. However, much potential project funding is competitive and is now reduced with the end of EU funding and certain Landfill tax sources. Heritage Lottery Fund money can be difficult to direct towards biodiversity work and is becoming increasingly competitive.

The concept of 'landscape scale' nature conservation fits well with the remit and way of working in AONBs, which have much to offer in this field. In particular, we are more used to working in collaboration with farmers and land managers than some conservation organisations who mostly manage their own sites. We have successfully assisted such organisations with communications and engagement where we have strengths. Partnership working on biodiversity with other organisations will remain very important – for us this includes statutory bodies such as Natural England and Environment Agency, as well as voluntary sector bodies including the National Trust, Wildlife Trusts and Butterfly Conservation.

10. What views do you have about the role National Parks and AONBs play in shaping landscape and beauty, or protecting cultural heritage?

Landscape and beauty would be seen as the heart of the AONB remit, though people's interpretation of these terms varies. The landscape of our AONB, as others, is being eroded by inappropriate developments, which the designation does not appear to have the influence in planning to prevent. Sometimes these undermine considerable amounts of positive project work, often funded by the public purse. The quality of the landscape is dependent on many decisions and choices by many people, especially land managers. Though the landscape is highly valued, to a large extent it is just a by-product of farming decisions. It is too important to be a by-product and needs to be factored more into financial incentives for land managers.

AONBs try to integrate conservation of cultural heritage with the natural environment in a way that few other organisations do. We, like others, have had Landscape Partnership Schemes funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. These have included considerable work on heritage (including both sites and skills, etc.), and we enjoy good working relationships with Historic England. The fact that our sponsor department is Defra while heritage comes under DCMS does mean that heritage does not come through as a driver from Defra, and greater integration on this would be preferable.

11. What views do you have about the role National Parks and AONBs play in working with farmers and land managers and how might this change as the current system of farm payments is reformed?

The Shropshire Hills is a farming area, and working with farmers is a longstanding high priority for us, though one on which we are continually working to do more. We have representation on the Partnership and its linked groups from farmers and farming organisations, but would welcome greater involvement. We have previously run a Farming Project funded by LEADER and we are currently involved with a national project on upland commons and a river catchment project offering grants and advice to farmers. We have undertaken a number of processes of farmer engagement including on a fee-earning basis for other organisations and partner projects, as this is recognised as a strength of our team.

We have organised and supported Farmers' Den advice clinics and events, and farmer-led groups including the Stewardship Facilitation Fund.

In the course of commenting on planning applications from the point of view of our statutory purpose to conserve and enhance natural beauty, we sometimes have to object to applications by farmers, such as large scale intensive livestock buildings and industrial scale renewable energy operations. Though the AONB Partnership's position is often not the determining factor in a planning decision, this consultation role can affect our relationships, and the perceptions of some farmers of the AONB designation appears to be that it limits their options. We would argue that if approached in the right way, the high quality of environment in the AONB provides an asset which can benefit the land management economy rather than being a constraint. Some farmers are positive about the support and services we can offer them, and the opportunities which arise from farming in an area of high landscape quality.

The proposed new environmental land management schemes offer potential for a greater role for the AONB Management Plan, Partnership and team. We are comfortable with taking a strong role in helping to define the priorities of such schemes for the area, and of facilitating and encouraging their uptake. The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership is however very wary of taking on contractual roles for schemes such as issuing agreements, making payments, monitoring and enforcement, as we feel there is great potential in these for harming our relatively good relations with farmers which arise from supporting and advisory roles.

12. What views do you have about the role National Parks and AONBs play in supporting and managing access and recreation?

In our AONB, the day-to-day responsibility for managing rights of way and access rests with the local authorities. Unlike some AONBs, we do not manage any public sites. The AONB Partnership's role in this field is more strategic, e.g. through leading a forum and strategy for sustainable tourism, and working in partnership to address issues such as pressure on honeypot sites and promotional activity to encourage dispersal. We take an active role with recreation and tourism as these are important to our area, and it would be preferable for this to be recognised in AONB purposes, as mentioned above.

13. What views do you have about the way National Park and AONB authorities affect people who live and work in their areas?

We encounter many people who are proud to live within an AONB and who support its aims. There are some who are negative about it, and a good number who are unaware of the designation and organisation, though they may well appreciate the landscape itself. We do offer support and services to people, community groups, etc. which may not be available outside the AONB.

a) Are they properly supporting them and what could be done differently?

We are mindful that the wording of this question is probably informed by the National Parks' duty to 'seek to foster the economic and social wellbeing', which is different to AONBs. We would endeavour to support people who live and work in the area, but we have the single statutory purpose to conserve and enhance natural beauty, and must relate all our activity to

that. Where we can support local people to help meet this purpose, we will do it. We employ a full time Community Officer and do a lot of work with community groups. With the Shropshire Hills AONB Trust, which we helped to set up, we distribute small grants to community groups.

We have given a high priority to working with businesses in our area, and used to run a Sustainable Business Network. We are keen to help businesses to work with the special qualities of the AONB rather than against them. Words such as 'supporting local businesses' occasionally however get thrown back at us to try to justify activities which may be harmful to the AONB. We cannot guarantee to support businesses whatever they want to do. We must be guided by our primary statutory purpose and we try to work with businesses to further this.

14. What views do you have on the role National Park and AONB authorities play on housing and transport in their areas?

The pressures for new housing are not as significant in our AONB as in some, though they are real. We would see our role as helping local authorities to deliver housing targets in a sustainable way. In some cases (a minority of housing applications) this may mean objecting, or perhaps seeking higher design standards or influencing the size and scale of developments. In our deeply rural area with an ageing population there are issues of demographic imbalance and rural villages losing services. We have been supportive of 'Rural Rebalance' options for housing distribution from our main local authority, recognising that some development must take place in villages in order to retain vibrant communities.

We have relatively little influence on transport. The trunk road through the middle of our AONB has been identified as the main single negative impact on tranquillity, which is a highly valued quality of the AONB. Smaller rural roads are suffering from larger and larger vehicles, causing physical damage and increase in soil loss to rivers. Public transport provision is very limited across much of the AONB, but we operate a Shropshire Hills Shuttles bus service on weekends through the summer, which is highly valued. We would wish to develop better guidance on design for both housing and roads, as have proved useful in other areas, but have so far been prevented by capacity reasons from doing this.

Other things such as large agricultural developments and renewable energy installations are probably more significant for us as planning issues. The overall concern is that the AONB designation is not being given adequate weight. Worryingly, every single known case of proposed 'major development' in our AONB since 2012 (11 cases) has been recommended by planning officers for approval. Not all of these developments have eventually gone ahead, but large poultry units, solar farms and large housing developments have all been contentious.

Some developments also drive wider land use changes beyond the planning system. The large number of relatively minor development applications in the AONB are cumulatively affecting its character. We urge the Review to consider fully the issues of planning in AONBs and how the influence of the designation can be improved.

15. What views do you have on the way they are governed individually at the moment? Is it effective or does it need to change, if so, how?

As described above, the Joint Advisory Committee model with a local authority hosted staff team is not really adequate now, given the pressures on local authorities, and the lack of

security is affecting delivery. The local authorities and Partnership for the Shropshire Hills AONB made in 2017-18 a formal request to Defra to create a Conservation Board. This proposal was shelved by Defra due to the announcement of the national review of designated landscapes. We still hold the aspiration for a stronger and more independent body for the Shropshire Hills AONB, in a model which may also be applicable to other AONBs. We recommend that the review looks at the current mechanism of Conservation Boards set out in the CRoW Act, to see if an adaptation of this, or a new model, can be put in place for AONBs. We would be happy to contribute some of our detailed thinking and exploration of options to this debate. Our Business Case for creation of a Conservation Board is available at <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/aonb-partnership/proposed-conservation-board/>.

16. What views do you have on whether they work collectively at the moment, for instance to share goals, encourage interest and involvement by the public and other organisations?

The National Association for AONBs is a strong and effective network supporting collaboration and collective working at a variety of levels. We are active members and value this highly. The Association, though stronger than it has been in the past and now with Defra funding, could develop further. We also belong to the Europarc Federation and its Atlantic Isles section, and find this network and learning valuable.

The National Association has undertaken successful collective action to raise the profile of AONBs including their very high-profile inclusion as shaded areas on Google maps, and Outstanding Hour on Twitter. Though we collaborate well with some individual National Parks on projects, we find the willingness of National Parks collectively to work with the AONB family to be rather limited.

17. What views do you have on their efforts to involve people from all parts of society, to encourage volunteering and improve health and wellbeing?

Work targeted specifically at including under-represented sections of society can be very effective, but labour intensive, e.g. through active outreach methods. Our AONB Partnership has not undertaken much of this kind of activity due largely to resource constraints, but there is great potential.

Volunteering – we have a good track record of involving volunteers in the Partnership itself, in working groups and more recently through our Friends scheme and AONB Trust charity. We do a certain amount of practical work with volunteers, but this is limited mainly by the fact that we do not own or manage any land directly.

Health and wellbeing are topics which we feel are relevant across a variety of the topics in questions above, and one of the benefits of designated areas which is most under-valued. An issue for the AONB Partnership is that the impact of our activities is often indirect – we help to conserve the landscape which has huge wellbeing benefits. Some of our projects generate activities which more directly involve people and improve their health and wellbeing, but our capacity for this through core funding is very limited, as it is in competition with other under-resourced activities such as involvement in planning.

18. What views do you have on the way they are funded and how this might change?

The core of funding from national government reflects the importance of the statutory designation. Secure core funding enables a small organisation to follow a consistent strategic direction, and absence of such secure funding may cause a small organisation to veer around following whatever funding it can find. We like other AONB Partnerships have been very successful in securing non-exchequer funding from a wide range of sources. Experience has shown that raising alternative funds for core running costs is very difficult for an organisation which is perceived as 'public sector'. We do not believe this is a good use of our time and resources, and we try to target fund-raising at direct and tangible delivery. We believe consistent and secure core funding from government is crucial for AONBs in the future.

The effects of the squeeze on local authority funding could be lessened if there was no requirement for this match for the central government money. However, unless central government funding increased, it is hard to see how such a change would do anything other than reduce our funding. It has also been pointed out that it would reduce the buy-in and interest from local authorities. While insecurity of funding from local authorities remains a critical issue for us as other AONBs, on balance we support a retention of the model including local authority funding.

19. What views do you have on the process of designation - which means the way boundaries are defined and changed?

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership's view is that our AONB boundary, though not perfect, is 'fit for purpose'. We have had a policy for some years of not seeking changes to our AONB boundary, partly on a pragmatic basis due to the difficulty of the process. If the process of changing boundaries were eased, there would be interest in the area in looking again at potential changes. This would result in more time and work on potential changes, which may or may not bring significant benefits. It is possible that changes to the boundary would still be contentious and time consuming.

In the mean time we work pragmatically and undertake work beyond the boundary where appropriate e.g. on work regarding rivers and catchments which extend beyond the boundary, working with towns nearby on tourism, etc. This approach works well and is supported by partners. We have also defined in the AONB Management Plan a 'Zone of Influence' around the AONB extending a few kilometres beyond the boundary, which is useful for some purposes. The location of the AONB boundary itself becomes more significant mainly in relation to planning issues.

20. What views do you have on whether areas should be given new designations? For instance, the creation of new National Parks or AONBs, or new types of designations for marine areas, urban landscapes or those near built-up areas

There is growing interest in and around the Shropshire Hills in the possibility of the area (or a wider area) becoming a National Park. The Review has prompted more discussion on this topic. Arguments in favour are achieving greater planning protection to the AONB, independent status with broader purposes and better resourcing, and greater recognition. There are some concerns about attracting significantly more visitors and potential change to the character and quality of the area, and about negative perceptions in some sections of the local community.

The AONB Partnership discussed the idea of National Park status on 4th December, and agreed the following resolution: ...

21. Are there lessons that might be learnt from the way designated landscapes work in other parts of the United Kingdom, or abroad?

The purposes of the Scottish National Parks are more modern than those of the English and Welsh ones, and may have elements to borrow:

- 1. To conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area.*
- 2. To promote sustainable use of the natural resources of the area.*
- 3. To promote understanding and enjoyment (including enjoyment in the form of recreation) of the special qualities of the area by the public.*
- 4. To promote sustainable economic and social development of the area's communities.*

Potential advantages here may be a move away from the somewhat archaic and problematic 'natural beauty', and the inclusion of sustainable use of the natural resources.

The recent review of designated landscapes in Wales also has applicable lessons. The aspiration to narrow the gap between AONBs and National Parks is one of these. The language of 'sustainable management of natural resources', though applicable in Wales both in and out of designated areas, is helpful and something similar could be used in updated purposes for AONBs (and possibly National Parks).

The experience of AONBs in Northern Ireland and of National Scenic Areas in Scotland show that with a weaker statutory basis and/or even less resourcing, the potential of these designations to deliver benefits to society is considerably reduced.

Many European countries have a tier of designations below National Parks and these (including AONBs) were studied in a recent project in which we participated. We commend this report to the Panel <https://www.european-parks.org/publications/book-living-landscapes>. These are mostly IUCN Category V protected areas, in which cultural landscapes are very important. Lessons include:

- The value of integrating conservation and sustainable development.
- The need for political and societal support, and secure structures, for these designated areas to fulfil their potential.
- Actions to support biodiversity, sustainable tourism and environmental education are highly valuable. Designated areas address some of the major challenges of our time such as climate change, sustainable food production, the water environment, and people's wellbeing.
- Strong community engagement brings a high level of acceptance among the local population. The designated areas contribute to local identity and culture.
- Working with farmers and land managers, designated areas can help to sustain both environmentally friendly farming and businesses, including locally distinctive produce.
- These areas bridge national and local government.
- Designations and the organisations supporting them help to promote values and actions which encourage conservation of the areas.
- The designated areas are highly valued for their contribution to the economy and people's wellbeing, as well as their environmental benefits.
- Designated areas can be models of sustainability and innovation, and lessons can be applied elsewhere.
- Rural development programmes can be successfully integrated with conservation.
- Networks of designated landscapes are extremely valuable for learning and sharing.

22. Do you think the terms currently used are the right ones? Would you suggest an alternative title for AONBs, for instance and if so what?

The 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' title is long and conveys an inaccurately narrow picture of the aims, while the 'AONB' acronym is said incorrectly almost without fail at every local and national AONB event. While we do not think re-branding alone is a high priority, in combination with a desirable update in the language of the purposes of designation, a new title could really help to boost public understanding and recognition of AONBs. One solution would be for all AONBs to become National Parks. Alternatively, a title could major on the word Landscape. Regional Parks would not be an appropriate name as the designation is national, and the term 'park' is not welcomed by many land managers. Possible alternative names are 'Outstanding National Landscape' or 'National Landscape'.

23. The review has been asked to consider how designated landscapes work with other designations such as National Trails, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), National Nature Reserves (NNRs) and Special Protected Areas (SPAs). Do you have any thoughts on how these relationships work and whether they could be improved?

We have many of these other designations within the AONB and work closely with those responsible for them. Often such designations are smaller than the AONB and sit within it. National Trails are an exception, which would usually extend more widely (in our case Offa's Dyke Path which runs through three AONBs and a National Park). We do not believe there is anything institutional required to make these relationships work, liaison between staff is the main requirement.