

Executive Report

Ward(s) affected: Ash South and Tongham; Clandon and Horsley; Effingham; Friary and St. Nicolas; Holy Trinity; Merrow; Pilgrims; Shalford; Tillingbourne

Report of Director of Planning and Regeneration

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Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan (2020-2025)

Executive Summary

This report recommends the adoption of the reviewed Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan (2020 – 2025). The Management Plan contributes to setting out the policy framework for development within the Surrey Hills AONB.

The Management Plan for the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty ('AONB') has been reviewed as required under legislation. The Plan has been prepared jointly with other local authorities within the Surrey Hills AONB area. The review of the Management Plan comprised a deliberately 'light-touch' process, the main changes are summarised within the report. Each local authority is required to adopt the Management Plan separately.

Recommendation to Executive

- (1) That the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan (2020 – 2025) (Appendix 1) be approved for adoption and publication by the Council.
- (2) That the Director of Planning and Regeneration be authorised, in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Planning, Regeneration, and Housing Delivery to agree such minor alterations as proposed by the AONB Board as she may deem necessary.

Reason for Recommendation:

To meet our statutory obligations under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000).

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report requests that the Executive adopts the revised Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan (2020 – 2025). The adoption of the revised AONB Management Plan is required by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

2. Strategic Priorities

- 2.1 The Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan (2020 – 2025) will assist the Council in meeting its priorities as set out in the Corporate Plan (2018 – 2023). Many of the objectives outlined in the Council's 'place-making', 'community' and 'innovation' priorities will be supported through the application of guidance in the Management Plan.

- 2.2 Through the application of its guidance, the Management Plan will support;

Place-Making

- the delivery of the objectives in the Guildford borough Local Plan, including the provision of the range and mix of housing that people need, including affordable housing.
- making travel easier within the borough through the application of its transport and traffic policies.

Community

- the protection of our environment, ensuring that development within the AONB has regard to its character and significance as a designated natural asset.

Innovation

- the sustainable and proportionate economic growth of rural businesses within the AONB area to help provide the prosperity and employment that people need.

3. Background

- 3.1 Designated landscapes cover a significant proportion of the borough. Covering 36.41% of land in Guildford borough, the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty ('AONB') is a nationally-important landscape designation, wherein great weight is provided to the conservation of landscape and scenic beauty of the area by the National Planning Policy Framework ('NPPF'). Overlying the AONB, alongside areas on the fringes of the AONB, is the Area of Great Landscape Value ('AGLV'), which is a County-level designation that indicates important landscape in its own right, but also of significance as a protective buffer to the AONB.
- 3.2 Sections 89 and 90 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000) require local authorities and Conservation Boards to produce AONB Management Plans, which must be reviewed and published at intervals of no more than five years. A

new Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan will therefore need to be adopted by the relevant local authorities in 2019.

The Surrey Hills Board

- 3.3 The Surrey Hills AONB covers parts of neighbouring authorities, including Tandridge, Reigate and Banstead, Mole Valley, and Waverley. In order to secure that there is a co-ordinated approach to the conservation, enhancement and management of the AONB, a Joint Advisory Committee was set up, known as the 'Surrey Hills Board'.
- 3.4 The Board is made up of representatives of the constituent local authorities, including Surrey County Council, and partner organisations such as the Surrey Wildlife Trust and the National Trust. Guildford is currently represented by Councillor Susan Parker. The Board was previously chaired by one of the local authority core members, but has decided to move to an independent chair, who is currently being recruited.
- 3.5 The Board prepares the AONB Management Plan for the local authorities, with the assistance of officers from the Surrey Hills AONB unit and the local authorities. However, the responsibility for the Management Plan remains with the local authorities and each individual authority is required to adopt it separately. This report explains the Plan, the changes made to it within the review, and seeks approval to adopt it.

Policy Context

- 3.6 The policy context is provided by national policies contained in the National Planning Policy Framework and local policies provided in the Guildford Borough Corporate Plan (2018 – 2023) and Policy P1 of the Local Plan: strategy and sites (2015 – 2034). In summary, these documents emphasise the importance of conserving and enhancing the landscape character of the AONB, having regard also to the conservation of wildlife and cultural heritage, whilst recognising the benefits of development, in planning considerations. The AGLV continues to play a role in protecting the AONB from development in areas outside its periphery that may be harmful to it.
- 3.7 The purpose of the AONB Management Plan is to provide context for the various initiatives that support the conservation and enhancement of the protected landscape. The document seeks to reflect existing planning policy in relevant local authorities, whilst drawing together the range of other policy issues that are relevant to the consideration, enhancement and management of the landscape character, wildlife conservation and cultural heritage of the area. The Plan also seeks to promote the enjoyment of, and access to, the Surrey Hills AONB as consistent with the protection of the area's landscape character.

Management Plan Review

- 3.8 In March 2019, the Surrey Hills Board approved a draft of the Management Plan that is recommended for adoption by the constituent local authorities. The Plan represents the result of several months of work, during which officers have reviewed the previous Management Plan and carried out targeted consultations on proposed amendments.
- 3.9 The review of the AONB Management Plan takes place within the context of two significant broader pieces of work. The first comprises the review of the boundaries of the AONB, which is to be undertaken by Natural England. Natural England have advised that this is likely to take place either toward the end of this year or early 2020. The outcome of the review could result in areas that are currently designated as AGLV being included within the AONB.
- 3.10 The second project comprises the Government's review of protected landscapes, known as the Glover Review. The Glover Review reported recently and there may be significant implications for AONBs depending on the Government's response to the review, including issues relating to governance, financing and statutory purposes. For this reason, the Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan review has been deliberately 'light-touch' in approach, until such time that the implications of the Glover Review have been made clearer.

Summary of Main Amendments

- 3.11 The reviewed draft Management Plan is attached to this report at Appendix 1. The main revisions made to the existing Management Plan (2014 – 2019) are set out below, these amendments have been made in order to update the plan and ensure that the revised Plan responds to changing circumstances, the responses provided during the consultations, and the priorities of the constituent local authorities and other partners.

Section 1:

- 3.12 A number of minor amendments have been made in order to provide an updated context for the Plan.

Section 2:

- 3.13 The Statement of Significance and Vision have remained largely unchanged, reflecting the high degree of support for both during the consultation. The revised text now makes specific mention of the health and wellbeing benefits of the landscape, reflecting updated guidance.
- 3.14 The opportunity has been taken to redraft the policies regarding agriculture in order to make them simpler and more understandable, without altering their emphasis. In this, the policy on farm diversification has been amended in order to make it more responsive to creating opportunities to increase biodiversity.
- 3.15 The coverage of woodlands has been expanded in order to include hedgerows and veteran trees. The relevant policies have been amended slightly to improve readability and include reference to biosecurity in relation to disease control.

- 3.16 The biodiversity policy has been amended to include reference to water resources in order to reflect the importance of wetland habitats. In the supporting text, reference has been made to the catchment partnerships, including the work being undertaken to enhance the river catchments to meet the Water Framework Directive targets. An additional paragraph has been included in order to link to the section in the NPPF that covers biodiversity and references to biodiversity net gain. Amendments to Policy B4 have been made in order to seek biodiversity gains through the planning process, reflecting updated guidance.
- 3.17 The Historic and Cultural policy section has been revised with very minor amendments to improve readability.
- 3.18 In relation to policies for Recreation and Tourism, the term 'Wellbeing' has been included within the title, reflecting updated guidance. Other revisions to this area have been minor, with the exception of the removal of policies relating to sustainable tourism and development criteria for recreation enterprises, which are now covered within the planning policies area.
- 3.19 The main changes to the planning policies section are to supporting text, providing additional guidance on the landscaping of developments, developments resulting in the loss of agricultural use, and external lighting.
- 3.20 The transport policies remain largely unchanged, with the exception of the inclusion of additional supporting text relating to schemes designed to declutter rural roads and the value of sensitive verge management to biodiversity objectives.
- 3.21 The 'Development and Local Economy' policies have been retitled to 'Economy, Tourism and Community Development'. The amendments to this section have sought to make the policies clearer, with an increased emphasis on sustainable development, the promotion of local services and produce, affordable housing and community transport.

Section 3:

- 3.22 This section has been subject to minor redrafting. The amendments help to explain the role and function of the Surrey Hills 'family' of organisations, the Surrey Hills 'Brand', and the strategic targets underlying the Plan. Finally, there is a section on monitoring, which remains unchanged.

General summary:

- 3.23 The revision of the Management Plan does not result in major changes to any of the policies of supporting text. Amendments have been introduced to improve readability and to reflect an updated context in terms of policy and initiatives, in relation to biodiversity net gain, for example, and previous omissions such as consideration of hedgerows.

Environmental Considerations

- 3.24 The Management Plan has been the subject of both the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA) processes. An SEA environmental report has been produced which concluded that no significant environmental effects would result from the plan. The plan was screened against HRA “likely significant effects” in relation to EU protected habitats within or nearby the AONB. The HRA screening found that significant effects could result from some of the policies in the plan. An ‘appropriate assessment’ of those policies concluded that the plan would not lead to adverse effects on the integrity of EU sites.
- 3.25 Having carried out the SEA/HRA, it is considered that adopting the Management Plan will not lead to adverse environmental effects under the HRA or SEA regulations. The SEA and HRA documents will be made available alongside the final report for adoption.

4. Consultations

- 4.1 Consultation was undertaken prior to the review of the Management Plan. The consultation was launched at the Surrey Hills Symposium at the University of Surrey, which marked the 60th anniversary of the Surrey Hills AONB, covering various themes such as climate change and recreational pressures on the AONB. The discussions were documented and helped to provide background information for the review. Another platform for consultation comprised an online survey, which demonstrated a high degree of support for the existing Management Plan policies, the Vision, and the Statement of Significance.

5. Equality and Diversity Implications

- 5.1 The Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan is a high-level document, which contains broad policies for the design and management of development within the AONB area. The document relates to new development and its impacts on the designated landscape character, and to the development or improvement of local facilities that would benefit all groups equally. The guidance remains consistent irrespective of the owner, builder, occupant, or visitor. As such, the Plan provides land-use benefits which are unlikely to impact differentially based on any particular protected characteristic.
- 5.2 However, the document does recognise that there are currently significant barriers to disabled people accessing and experiencing the countryside. The purpose of the Plan is to promote a high-standard of development throughout the AONB, which includes consideration of appropriate access and transport throughout the area. The proposals will therefore not have an adverse impact for residents and visitors with disabilities, but are more likely to have a positive impact.
- 5.3 The Plan seeks to promote access to and appropriate use of the landscape and its character equally to all individuals. As such, the likely effect of the Plan will be to advance good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

- 5.4 An Equalities Impact Assessment Screening will be completed and provided with the final report for adoption.

6. Financial Implications

- 6.1 There are no additional financial resources or costs identified as a result of the adoption and implementation of the revised Management Plan. Since the Plan represents a 'light-touch' review, it is not expected that additional resources will be required beyond those available during the previous Management Plan period (2014 – 2019). The sources of funding for small-scale capital projects will remain grant schemes, revenue funding and agreed Neighbourhood CIL funds.
- 6.2 The Council is a core funding partner of the Surrey Hills Board, contributing in the region of £5,230 annually. The majority of the Surrey Hills Unit running costs are provided in the form of an annual DEFRA grant. The Council's position as a core funding partner is not affected by the decision to adopt the Management Plan.
- 6.3 As noted previously, the major review of designated landscapes will report to the Government later this year. The review will include recommendations on the funding of both AONBs and National Parks. It has been recognised that AONBs are not funded generously, particularly when considered in relation to National Parks, and there may be some positive recommendations in relation to AONB funding. However, the Glover review may potentially include the recommendation to make it a statutory requirement to implement the Management Plan, which might have financial implications in the future.

7. Legal Implications

- 7.1 The production of the Management Plan is a statutory requirement under section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.
- 7.2 The procedures to be followed upon review of the Management Plan are prescribed by section 90 of that Act. In addition, regulation 9 (1) of the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 requires authorities to determine whether or not a SEA is required for certain plans, policies or programmes. Regulation 63 of the Conservation of Habitats & Species Regulations 2017 requires authorities to determine whether or not a full HRA is required. As noted, in the report, both SEA and HRA processes have been completed.
- 7.3 Pursuant to section 9D of the Local Government Act 2000, the Executive of the Council has the power to adopt the Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan.

8. Human Resource Implications

- 8.1 There are no known implications for members of staff in relation to the adoption of the reviewed Management Plan.

9. Summary of Options

9.1 Option 1:

To adopt the reviewed Management Plan (2020 – 2025), with the delegation of any minor (non-material) amendments or corrections made during the proofing and publication of the document to the Director of Planning and Regeneration in consultation with the appropriate Lead Councillor.

This option comprises the recommended course of action. The option represents the least risk to the Council in adopting the Management Plan within the statutory time period. Minor changes in the proofing and publication of the document can be made without inciting further delays.

9.2 Option 2:

To agree to adopt the reviewed Management Plan (2020 – 2025), subject to changes to the document as proposed by councillors or without the delegation of minor changes as outlined above.

This option would require the document to be redrafted to incorporate significant changes, meaning that the Plan would be resubmitted to the other local authority partners for review and require approval by the AONB Board. Alternatively, the option to not include the delegation of minor changes would require the Plan to be resubmitted to the Executive for adoption following its final publication. These two courses of action are likely to significantly increase the risk that the Council does not adopt the Management Plan within the statutory period.

9.3 Option 3:

To reject the adoption of the Plan and require a substantial redraft.

This option would ensure that the Council would not be able to adopt the Management Plan within the statutory period. The revision of the Management Plan at this stage would likely require an extension to the statutory adoption period by DEFRA and would have serious implications of risk for the other local authorities in the AONB area. It is unknown how DEFRA and the other local authorities would respond. This option is likely to have negative financial implications.

10. Conclusion

- 10.1 This report requests that the Executive adopt the revised Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan (2020 – 2025). The adoption of the revised AONB Management Plan is required by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000). The Management Plan will help in delivering many of the Council's priorities as identified within the Corporate Plan (2018 – 2023). The recommended course of action from the available options is to adopt the reviewed Management Plan (2020 – 2025), with the delegation of any minor (non-material) amendments or corrections made during the proofing and publication of the document to the Director of Planning and Regeneration in consultation with the appropriate Lead Councillor.

11. Background Papers

Strategic Environmental Assessment Non-Technical Summary.

Strategic Environmental Assessment Full Report.

Habitats Regulations Assessment Report.

Equalities Impact Assessment.

Background papers are available at:

<https://www.guildford.gov.uk/article/23109/Surrey-Hills-AONB-Management-Plan-2020-2025->

12. Appendices

Appendix 1: Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan (2020 – 2015).