

Portfolio Holder Briefing Note:

High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty: Management Plan Review Consultation

Summary

1. The Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000 places a statutory duty on constituent local authorities of the AONB to prepare and publish a Management Plan that 'formulates their policy for the management of the area and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it'.
2. The High Weald AONB Management Plan was approved by the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) of the AONB Unit and adopted by the constituent Local Authorities of the AONB including SDC, in 2004 as a 20-year strategy. The CROW Act dictates that this plan must be reviewed at five-yearly intervals.
3. The current edition of the High Weald Management Plan runs from 2009-2014. The Plan is therefore currently undergoing a 'light touch' review, and it is expected that the revised Plan will be approved and adopted by the JAC of the AONB unit in early 2014 in order to be submitted to the Secretary of State by March 31st 2014.
4. The public consultation period runs to the 26th July. Officer opinion is supportive of the draft review, which is supported also by Cllr Jill Davison who represents Sevenoaks District Council on the JAC, and therefore this note is seeking approval of the Portfolio Holder.

Recommendation: Portfolio Holder supports the draft Management Plan review.

Background

5. AONBs are national designations carried out by Natural England. The main purpose of an AONB designation is to conserve and enhance natural beauty.
6. The CROW Act:
 - places a duty on all public bodies and statutory undertakers to 'have regard' to the purposes of AONBs; and
 - reaffirms the original purposes of designation and confirms the powers of local authorities to take appropriate action to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of AONBs.
7. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) places great weight on conserving landscape and scenic beauty in AONBs, giving them the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty.

8. The designation of The High Weald AONB was confirmed in 1983. It is the fourth largest covering areas of Surrey, Kent, East Sussex and West Sussex. Sevenoaks District Council is a member of the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee (JAC), a partnership of the 4 County and 11 District authorities that cover the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and who each according to their relative interest jointly fund the JAC. Cllr Jill Davison represents SDC on the JAC.

Summary of Review Process

9. The JAC agreed the scope of the review in winter 2011. Since that time a review of the issues and options has taken place and engagement with local authority partners, technical experts and key stakeholders to check that the objectives are still fit for purpose.
10. Public consultation is currently being carried out. After this consultation period, the AONB Unit will respond to these comments and present these to the Officer Steering Group for consideration. Any changes made to the draft will be taken to the JAC for approval, followed by a final adoption of the Plan by the Local Authorities involved including SDC in early 2014.

Changes to the 2009 – 2014 Plan

11. The draft Management Plan is based fundamentally on the 2009-2014 Plan. It was agreed by the JAC in Oct 2012 that this would be a 'light touch' review.
12. There are no major changes to the content of the Plan, but the review has enabled improvements to be made to the layout making it a more user-friendly document. Necessary amendments have been made to reflect changes in legislation, policy, and organisational roles.
13. The review has taken the opportunity to be clearer on policy wording and to strengthen the policies where required with some additions and alterations to the targets set for 2019, For example, Objectives R1 for Routeways and W2 for Woodlands place greater emphasis on partnership working with Parish Councils and Community Groups, which is in line with increased focus upon the principles of localism within the planning process.
14. The CROW Act requires the Management Plan to 'formulate the policies' for the local authorities for the management of the AONB and for carrying out their functions in relation to it. The policies in the plan are not, nor are they intended to be, planning policies and it is clearly recognised that it is for Local Planning Authorities to balance the impact of any development proposal on the AONB against all of the other material planning considerations.