



Report to Cabinet

Date:	5 March 2024
Title:	Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty update
Cabinet Member(s):	Thomas Broom & Peter Strachan
Contact officer:	Darran Eggleton, Head of Planning Policy & Compliance
Ward(s) affected:	Ivinghoe, Aston Clinton & Bierton, Wendover, Halton Stoke Mandeville, Chiltern Ridges, Chesham, Chess Valley, Amersham & Chesham Bois, Little Chalfont & Amersham Common, Chalfont St Giles, Beaconsfield, Penn Wood & Old Amersham, Wooburns & Bourne End, Tyles Green & Loudwater, Flackwell Heath & Little Marlow & Marlow Southeast, Ryemead & Micklefield, Terries & Amersham Hills, Totteridge & Bowerdean, Marlow, Chiltern Villages, Ridgeway West
Recommendations:	Note the contents of the update report and seek comments from Members regarding Chiltern Conservation Boards decision to undertake a 'light-touch' review of their management plan and delay their full review until early 2025.
Reason for recommendation:	The paper sets out a number of points for information only. The paper also seeks members views on the Chiltern Conservation Board's intention to delay the full review of their management plan and undertake a light-touch review at this time.
1. Executive summary	
1.1	This report provides an update on a number of matters relating to the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), including a national name change to all AONB's, the Chiltern AONB Boundary review, Chiltern Conservation Board's decision regarding its Protected Area Management Plan, an increased duty on Local

Authorities in light of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, the government's re-commitment to designating a new National Park in the UK and the Chiltern Conservation Boards intention to engage with the Local Authority regarding their next steps and Management Plan review.

2. AONB Name change

- 2.1 In November 2023, the government announced that all designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England and Wales are becoming National Landscapes.
- 2.2 The new name reflects their national importance; the vital contribution they make to protect the nation from the threats of climate change, nature depletion and the wellbeing crisis, whilst also creating greater understanding and awareness of the work that they do.
- 2.3 Whilst the name 'Chilterns AONB' will continue to exist in law for the time being, we anticipate further legislation at some point in the future to change that to become the 'Chiltern National Landscape'.
- 2.4 It is understood that Defra's intention is to launch and publish the new national landscapes brand by March 2024.

3. Boundary review update

- 3.1 Natural England is leading the process of assessing land around the Chilterns with a view to potentially extending the designated AONB. The project is part of Natural England's wider Designations Programme which was announced by the Government in June 2021.
- 3.2 The boundary review process involves answering three broad technical questions:
 - 1) Does the landscape have sufficient natural beauty to be considered outstanding?
 - 2) Is it desirable to designate this landscape as AONB to conserve and enhance its natural beauty?
 - 3) Where should the boundary be drawn?
- 3.3 Natural England is already working with representatives from all the local authorities that may have land included in the extended AONB. This is being done through the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) which includes at least one technical officer representative from each local authority in the existing and potential extended area. A wider Management Advisory Group (MAG) with more senior officer organisation representatives provides further support to the collaborate process. Eric Owens, Director of Planning & Environment has replaced Steve Bambrick, Corporate Director Planning, Growth and Sustainability as the Buckinghamshire Council representative on the MAG.

- 3.4 It is understood that so far work on the boundary review has focused on addressing Question 1) and has involved gathering and appraising evidence, desk-based studies, and field assessments across numerous sites. The Chiltern Conservation Board report that work has seen significant progress, including a recent stakeholder engagement event with local specialists and has led to steps to identify the proposed boundary changes (Question 3) starting in February 2024.
- 3.5 In the meantime, Officers understand that the informal engagement helped strengthen proposals in advance of a statutory and public consultation on the draft candidate areas, currently scheduled for spring/summer 2024.
- 3.6 The statutory consultation, which we understand will take place in spring/summer 2024, will be open to everyone and give all stakeholders an opportunity to have their say on the proposed boundary changes.
- 3.7 Following the public consultation, a draft legal Order will be submitted by Natural England to the Secretary of State. The current project programme indicates that this is likely to be undertaken by the end of 2024. The Secretary of State may decide to hold a Public Inquiry. The Secretary of State may then decide to confirm the Order with or without modification or may choose not to confirm.

4. Chiltern Conservation Board Management Plan decision

- 4.1 In July 2022 the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) wrote to all the partners responsible for producing 'Protected Landscape Management Plans'.
- 4.2 In the case of the Chiltern AONB that is the Chiltern Conservation Board (CCB) and are required to prepare and publish a plan which formulates policy for the management of the Chilterns AONB and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it (a "management plan"). In addition, the CCB are required to review that plan at least every five years (ie. by the end of March 2024).
- 4.3 In the meantime, DEFRA set out in a letter in July 2022 that they recognise the current changing context around AONBs and their Management Plans as well as the size and scale of the implications resulting from the reforms coming as a result of the Landscapes Review. DEFRA has therefore decided to allow an option for Management Plans reviews to be delayed by up to 1 year from the initial review date.
- 4.4 On 19th December 2023 the Chief Executive Officer of the Chiltern Conservation Board wrote to all Local Authorities within the Chiltern AONB setting out that at its meeting in September 2023, the Chiltern Conservation Board resolved to publish, by the end of March 2024, a "light-touch review" comprising a short paper setting out the CCB's objectives for the following year including its intentions for completing the review of the Plan.

4.5 The CCB set out that:

“This will have the effect of enabling the vision, objectives and policies of the existing plan to be carried forward to the end of March 2025 while the details of the review are completed. We will share a draft of that paper with you in the next few weeks. It is the Board’s view that the current Management Plan was prepared on the basis both of robust evidence and of extensive and productive engagement with our stakeholders and communities in and around the AONB, including our local authority partners.”

“It is therefore proposed that the review of the Plan undertaken during 2024-25 will largely roll the content of the Plan forwards to cover the 2024-2029 period, with only limited factual updates where necessary.”

4.6 Subsequently, as soon as there is greater clarity on the future boundaries of the AONB, the CCB proposes to engage with existing and new partners on a completely new Management Plan, in the context of a new long-term vision for the AONB, to be co-created with the new partnership.

4.7 The CCB seeks any observations on their proposals and will seek comments on the “light-tough review” upon its publication. Such comments are sought to be submitted before the end of February ahead of the CCB Board meeting on 14th March. Officers therefore intend to submit ‘officer comments’ by the deadline, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning & Regeneration and the Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Environment which will be confirmed following the cabinet meeting on 5th March.

5. Increased duty

5.1 On 26th October 2023, the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill achieved royal assent and made extensive changes to the planning system and other matters affecting the functions and responsibilities of Local Authorities.

5.2 With specific reference to the Chilterns AONB and other National Landscapes, Section 245(6) of the Act has the effect of elevating the existing duty of regard that all public bodies must have to the purposes of AONB designation in exercising their functions (section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000) to a duty “to seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area”. This duty applies to all functions undertaken by all public bodies, including local authorities, relating to, or affecting land in an AONB, and came into effect on 26th December 2023.

5.3 The Planning Department intends to continue to ensure that the increased duty is being met through its development management processes and will continue to consult relevant organisations (ie. CCB, Natural England) on applications in the AONB

as part of the statutory consultations taking their views into account in the overall decision-making process.

6. Potential New National Park

- 6.1 At the end of November, the government announced a package of measures to further support protected landscapes' resilience for nature and for people. The measures included a £10m funding boost for National Landscapes and National Parks and a recommitment to designate a new National Park.
- 6.2 In September 2019, the Glover Review, a wide-ranging review covering functions, purpose, priorities, funding and ongoing support of all the United Kingdom's National Parks and AONB's, recommended to the government that 3 new National Parks should be created in the UK and that these should be in Cotswolds, Devon and the Chilterns.
- 6.3 Following the government announcement, it is anticipated that the Chilterns remain amongst the top 3 likely locations to be explored as a possible contender to become the new National Park.
- 6.4 Members will be aware the designation of a new National Park in the Chiltern AONB will have significant impacts and would likely create a new planning authority although other hybrid models do now exist where planning functions could remain with the local authority.
- 6.5 We await further details on this and will keep members up to date as that process progresses.

7. Chiltern Conservation Board

- 7.1 On 25th January, the Chiltern Conservation Board wrote to the Council setting out that their Chief Executive Officer, Elaine King, considers that now is good time to refresh its partnership with the Chief Executive and Managing Directors of the nine local authorities covered by the Chilterns AONB.
- 7.2 CCB propose to invite all the relevant CEO's or MD's to a meeting the next few weeks to provide an update on the protected landscapes as well as the changes happening regarding future conservation and enhancement of the AONB.
- 7.3 It is proposed that further meeting will occur with appropriate senior officer from each local authority to carry forward work that needs to be done in partnership between the CCB and the relevant authority, including the review of the Chiltern AONB.
- 7.4 Officers intend to engage in the consultation process as set out above and propose to engage with the CCB following their request to meet.

8. Legal and financial implications

- 8.1 As the content of this report is for information only, there are no immediate direct financial or legal implications.
- 8.1 With regards the proposed name change to the AONB to Natural Landscapes, we have not yet undertaken an audit of where this name is referenced across the Council's assets, where changes will need to be made, and at what cost. The only cost we can envisage relates to signage and rebranding, however Defra have set out some key targets for the rebrand work. These are:
1. The 'National Landscapes' brand is launched and publicised nationally by March 2024.
 2. The rebrand is implemented locally across the majority of the AONB network by March 2024, with recognition that this may be phased to allow for local circumstances.
 3. Implementation will include local PR, replacement of selected branded materials and rebranding of the AONB network's online presence.
 4. The intellectual property of each National Landscape is protected.
- 8.2 In addition, we understand that Defra has provided funding to the National Association for AONBs to cover the costs of the central rebranding work and is also making a small amount of funding available for each AONB team to help with the initial transition.
- 8.3 We consider that the rebranding work would be the responsibility of the Chiltern Conservation Board and therefore it is the CCB that are likely to receive any associated funding.
- 8.4 With regards the potential for a new National Park in the Chilterns Area, the financial implications of this have not yet been worked through, and we are working on the assumption that, if this does happen, the government will be required to fund the cost of change.
- 8.5 The Council's MTFP does not have any provision for the cost of change for the name change of AONBs, or the potential that the Chilterns becomes a new National Park. The Council is therefore budgeting for these to be cost neutral within existing budgets, and any costs funded by the Government.

8a Director of Legal & Democratic Services comment

- 8.6 The Director has read and noted the report.

8b Section 151 Officer comment

- 8.6 The S151 has read and noted the report.

9. Corporate implications

- 9.1 The AONB update contained in this paper feeds directly into the key priority set out in the Council's Corporate Plan 2020-25 specifically in relation to improving our environment. This key priority sets out that *"Buckinghamshire is a beautiful county, and our stunning natural and historic landscape is valued by all"* and makes specific reference to Buckinghamshire being one third covered by the AONB setting out that we want *"to address climate change, improve our environment and create economic opportunities for clean growth"*.

10. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

- 10.1 Consultation and views on this paper were sought from the Cabinet Member for Planning & Regeneration, Peter Strachan and the Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Environment, Thomas Broom. Both Cabinet members were given a verbal briefing, have seen the content of the draft report and are both supportive of its content.

11. Communication, engagement & further consultation

- 11.1 The Communications team have been briefed on the paper and are familiar with its content. At present there is no communication issues to address but officer will review that position as the items detailed in this report progress and transpire accordingly.

12. Next steps and review

- 12.1 Officers will prepare a written response to the Chilterns Conservation Board outlining the Council's support of their proposed actions, will agree the content of that response with the Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration and the Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Environment and send that response to the CCB by their deadline of end of February 2024.

13. Background papers

- 13.1 None.

14. Your questions and views (for key decisions)

- 14.1 If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report, please contact the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider, please inform the democratic services team by 5pm on 1 March 2024. This can be done by email to democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk.