

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) Overview – Quantock Hills

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Cabinet Member:

Division and Local Member: n/a

1. Summary

- 1.1.** The county of Somerset has a vast range of special landscapes including a number of Protected Landscapes. These include two thirds of Exmoor National Park, the Quantock Hills AONB and parts of the Mendip Hills and Blackdown Hills AONB. There are also small areas of Dorset and Cranborne Chase & West Wiltshire Downs AONBs to the east of the county. The Protected Landscapes deliver or enable delivery across diverse workstreams including climate change adaptation / mitigation, nature recovery, engagement and economic development all influenced by the character of the landscape. The Quantock Hills and Mendip Hills Services are hosted by Somerset County Council.
- 1.2.** The purpose of the report and presentation is to:
 - Introduce / update the Committee on the purposes and duties of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty
 - Update the Committee on outcomes of the Landscape Review (2019) and implications for AONB Partnerships, Services and local authority partners
 - Showcase delivery by the Quantock Hills AONB

2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations

- 2.1.** Members are asked to consider and note the update.

3. Background

- 3.1.** Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty – AONBs – are a landscape designation created by the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. They are areas of countryside in England, Wales and Northern Ireland that has been designated for conservation due to their significant landscape value. AONBs have the same level of protection to inappropriate development as national parks but unlike national parks do not have their own planning powers, with the duty being discharged through the constituent local planning authorities.
- 3.2.** The Purpose of AONBs is to conserve and enhance the landscape, with landscape including the scenic landscape, flora & fauna, geology, historic and cultural importance. Currently there are two secondary aims, to meet the need for quiet enjoyment of the countryside and to have regard for the interests of the local communities living and working within AONBs.

- 3.3.** In 2000 the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW) increased regulation and protection of AONBs. Under the Act there is now a requirement for all local authorities with an AONB within their area to produce a management plan and to review the plan at a period not exceeding five years. The Act also placed a requirement that local authorities and other statutory undertakers make sure that all decisions have regard for the purpose of AONBs, including potential effects within and outside of AONB boundaries.
- 3.4.** The Gower and Quantock Hills were the first AONBs designated on 9th May 1956, with Gower confirmed by Secretary of State 2 weeks before the Quantock Hills. There are now 46 AONBs in Britain, 33 in England, 4 in Wales, 8 in Northern Ireland and 1 which straddles the English / Welsh border. AONBs vary greatly in size, type and landuse. The smallest is the Isles of Scilly at 16km² (6.2 sq mi) and the largest is the Cotswolds at 2,038km² (787 sq mi). Together AONBs cover around 15% of England's land area.
- 3.5.** In 2019 the Landscape Review was published [Landscapes review: National Parks and AONBs](#) . Commissioned by Government in 2018 the review aimed to assess the value and role of National Parks and AONBs in the 70th anniversary year of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. The report concluded that while protected landscapes are delivering much which is good, it falls short of what can be achieved and what society requires. The review recognised that the network of AONBs has different purposes from National Parks, vastly less money but in many cases greater pressures and yet cover areas that are more visited, more biodiverse and are just as beautiful. The review contained 27 proposals ranging from greater funding for AONBs, revised governance, strengthening purposes and powers, increasing the accessibility to all parts of society and connections with nature and wellbeing.
- 3.6.** In January 2022 the Government responded to the Landscapes Review. The response highlighted the will of Government to unlock the potential of AONBs by
- Renaming AONBs as National Landscapes
 - Creation of a National Landscapes Partnership – to ensure existing partners (National Parks England, National Association for AONBs, National Trails and National Parks Partnership) work together more effectively.
 - Reviewed or new purposes, specifically in relation to nature recovery and supporting access with specific reference to health & wellbeing.
 - Provision of sustainable funding
 - Robust governance
 - Strengthen the role of AONBs in planning
- It is likely that renaming of AONBs and launch of the National Landscapes Partnership will happen during 2023 though it is at a very early stage with uncertainty over the timescale for the other proposals.
- 3.7.** The Quantock Hills AONB was the first AONB designated in England. At 99km² (38 sq mi) it is one of the smaller AONBs. However the narrow upland plateau, based on sandstone rocks, towers imposingly over the surrounding lowland

plains and within its boundary it contains;

- 2,686Ha (27%) of land is designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for its habitat and species importance. This includes lowland and upland heath and sessile oak woods – which are also designated as Special Areas of Conservation).
- 3,276Ha (33%) of land within the AONB are classed as priority habitat and taken with the non-priority habitat land use the AONB's total carbon stores is estimated at 1,850,899 tonnes. 2,922Ha (29.5%) of the AONB is woodland with 72% of this being mixed deciduous woodland.
- The Quantock Hills is important for a number of priority and threatened species – with significant breeding populations of nightjar, Barbastelle bats, dormice and Dartford Warbler.
- Over 3,000Ha of Open Access land with 250km (150miles) of Public Rights of Way, 80% of which are bridleways. Over 6km of the English Coast Path National Trail winds its way along the northern AONB.
- The AONB contains 51 Scheduled Monuments, 205 listed buildings, 3 Scheduled Parks and Gardens. The Quantocks comprise one of the few remaining moorland landscapes in southern Britain of national importance for the legible survival of monuments dating from the Neolithic and especially the Bronze Age. These include numerous cairns resulting from land clearance and bowl barrows dating from around 2400 – 1500 BC, extensive crop mark evidence for settlement and land use and large-scale dramatic examples of Iron Age hill forts and smaller defended enclosures such as Dowsborough Hillfort and Ruborough Camp
- Significant geological interest from the hard frits of the hilltops to the internationally recognised fossil-rich Jurassic exposure of the coast with its limestone / shale banding producing nationally important fossils.
- Cultural and artistic contributions include inspiring Coleridge and Wordsworth when they lived on the Quantocks at the end of the 18th century and launched the romantic style of poetry which sets the tone of our current approach to natural landscapes.

4. Consultations undertaken

- 4.1.** AONBs are managed through partnerships or committees. The report and presentation provide information on AONBs and an update on the Landscape Review.

5. Background papers

- 5.1.** N/a

Note For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author