

Division(s): Didcot East & Hagbourne,
Grove & Wantage, Hendreds & Harwell,
Shrivenham.

CABINET MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT – 9 OCTOBER 2014

NORTH WESSEX DOWNS AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN - ENDORSEMENT

**Report by Deputy Director for Director, Environment & Economy
(Strategy & Infrastructure Planning)**

Introduction

1. The North Wessex Downs AONB Council of Partners has finalised the statutory management plan for the AONB for the period 2014-2019. Oxfordshire County Council is requested to endorse the plan which is available to view on the County Council's website and public inspection at County Hall, Oxford.. The plan helps Oxfordshire County Council to demonstrate compliance with our statutory duties. It also helps meet Corporate Plan Priorities, particularly 'Enhance the Environment'. The plan sets out objectives and policies that direct the activities of the North Wessex Downs AONB and guide the activities of other bodies. The plan covers various topics including landscape, land management, biodiversity, historic environment, natural resources, development, communities and leisure and tourism.

Oxfordshire's AONBs – governance, finance and legislation

2. Oxfordshire has three Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: the Cotswolds, the Chilterns, and the North Wessex Downs (NWD), together covering around one third of the county. The AONB designation protects some of Britain's finest landscapes of distinctive character and natural beauty.
3. Members represent Oxfordshire County Council's interests (appointed via the list of Outside Bodies). AONBs are governed by one of two mechanisms:
 - (a) Conservation Boards – a managing body for large administratively complex AONBs, including the Cotswolds and Chilterns.
 - (b) Partnerships of local authorities, local people and other bodies, governed by a Council of Partners. The NWD AONB is a partnership.
4. Funding is 80% from DEFRA and 20% local authorities. Oxfordshire County Council contributed £7,054 to the North Wessex Downs in 2014-15. There is no legal requirement for financial contributions, but it enables the draw-down of substantive match-funding and in-kind support towards implementation of the management plan.
5. Legislation is contained in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. All public bodies including Oxfordshire County Council have a statutory duty of

regard for the purposes of AONBs when undertaking their work. Local authorities (or Conservation Boards) must produce a management plan in partnership, review it every 5 years, and send it to the secretary of state for approval. The plan helps to inform local authorities of the means by which they can comply with the statutory duty of 'regard'.

Purpose and planning status

6. The NWD AONB Management Plan has three main purposes:
 - (a) Sets out the NWD AONB Council of Partners' policies and actions for the management of the NWD AONB.
 - (b) Informs bodies such as Oxfordshire County Council how they can comply with the statutory duties of regard.
 - (c) Guides the engagement of partners in the management of the AONB.
7. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) gives '*great weight*' to conserving landscape and scenic beauty in AONBs and states that '*planning permission should be refused for major developments in [AONBs] except in exceptional circumstances...*'. This means that the management plan can have significant weight in planning and other decision-making that affects the AONB whether it is endorsed by the local authority or not.
8. The north-eastern part of the AONB area overlaps with the southern end of the "knowledge spine" that has been identified as a focus for economic and associated development in the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership's Strategic Economic Plan. The high quality landscape on the edge of the knowledge spine will be a factor which may encourage businesses and accompanying staff to want to move into that area. The same landscape quality issues are likely to be a constraint that influences the location, scale and nature of development that might not be experienced in areas outside the AONB.
9. The North Wessex Downs Council of Partners and relevant local authorities have approved the management plan for publication.

Why is endorsement required?

10. Local authorities are asked to formally 'endorse' the plan as a document with weight commensurate with the NPPF, and to ensure it is considered within plans, policies and decision-making.

Consultation Process

11. Following informal consultation in May 2013, an initial draft of the management plan was published for comment between August and October 2013. The North Wessex Downs Planning Officer met with officers from Oxfordshire County Council on 8 October 2013 to discuss aspects of the management plan relating to planning. The NWD AONB held public events in each local authority area. Specialists reviewed the comments that were received and brought their recommendations to a special meeting of the North Wessex Downs Management Working Group. Relevant members (our Board representative and Cabinet Member) are aware and are content with the approach.

Financial and Staff Implications

12. Endorsement of the management plan does not commit Oxfordshire County Council to financial expenditure. There are no implications for staff time 'over and above' our current activities (Member attendance on the Board and informal officer contact).

RECOMMENDATION

13. **The Cabinet Member for Environment is RECOMMENDED to endorse the North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan 2014-2019**

BEV HINDLE

Deputy Director for Environment & Economy (Strategy & Infrastructure Planning)

Background papers: AONB Management Plan

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