

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

CABINET MEMBER

NORTH WESSEX DOWNS AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN 2019-2024: ADOPTION

Report by Director for Planning and Place

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet Member for Environment is **RECOMMENDED** to **ADOPT** the North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan 2019-2024.

Summary

2. The North Wessex Downs AONB Council of Partners has finalised and approved the core text of the statutory management plan for the NWD AONB for the period 2019-2024. The Council of Partners has requested that local authority partners adopt the plan which it is expected will be formally launched in October 2019. The plan helps OCC demonstrate compliance with our statutory duties of regard to the purposes of the AONB under the *Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000*. It also helps meet OCC Corporate Plan priorities, in particular by helping to create thriving communities - identifying opportunities for people to play an active part in their communities, enhancing communities' quality of life and protecting the local environment. The plan sets out objectives and policies that direct the activities of the NWD AONB management team and guide the activities of other individuals and organisations. The Plan covers various topics including landscape, land management, biodiversity, historic environment, natural resources, development, communities, tourism, leisure and access, and stakeholder responsibilities.

Introduction

Oxfordshire's AONBs – governance, finance and legislation

3. Oxfordshire has three Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: the Cotswolds, the Chilterns, and the North Wessex Downs (NWD), together covering around 26% of the county. The AONB designation protects some of Britain's finest landscapes of distinctive character and natural beauty.

4. AONBs are governed by one of two mechanisms:
 - (a) Conservation Boards – a managing body for the large administratively complex Cotswolds and Chilterns AONBs.
 - (b) Partnerships of local authorities, local people and other bodies, governed by a Council of Partners. The NWD AONB is such a partnership.
5. Elected members represent Oxfordshire County Council's interests (appointed via the list of Outside Bodies). The current representative on the Council of Partners is the Member for Eynsham Division.
6. Funding for the NWD AONB is 75% from DEFRA and 25% local authorities. Oxfordshire County Council contributed £7,298 to the NWD AONB in 2019. This contribution has changed little since the last plan was published in 2014. 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.
7. AONB legislation is contained in the *Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000*. All public bodies including Oxfordshire County Council have a statutory duty under section 85 of that Act to have regard to 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 how they can comply with the statutory 'duty of regard'. In the case of the NWD AONB the Management Plan is prepared by the AONB team on behalf of the local authority partners.
8. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), 2018 states that "Great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues." The NPPF further states that "The scale and extent of development within these designated areas should be limited. Planning permission should be refused for major development other than in exceptional circumstances, and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest."

Purpose and planning status

9. The NWD AONB Management Plan has three main purposes:
 - (a) Sets out the NWD AONB Council of Partners' strategic objectives, 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 duty of regard.

(c) Guides the engagement of partners in the management of the AONB.

10. 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 environmental quality of Oxfordshire AONBs is noted in the Introduction to the Oxfordshire Plan 2050. The high-quality landscape of the NWD AONB will be a factor which may encourage businesses and accompanying staff to want to move into the 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. This has already been the case in some situations, for example at Harwell. In this case it is important to note that the special qualities of the AONB extend beyond the formal AONB boundary to include the setting of the AONB.

Glover Review

11. In July 2018 Julian Glover was tasked by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to review the purpose, achievements and future of designated landscapes including national parks and AONBs. The report of the review has yet to be concluded. Amongst the interim findings was the following statement specific to AONBs:

“We think that AONBs should be strengthened, with increased funding, new purposes and a greater voice on development. We have been impressed by what they often achieve now through partnership working“.

Why is adoption of the Management Plan required?

12. As a formal partnership, rather than a Conservation Board as found in the Cotswolds and Chilterns AONBs, the Management Plan is ‘owned’ by and prepared on behalf of the partner local authorities. Adoption of the Management Plan ensures that it will be considered within the council’s plans, policies and decision-making commensurate with the weight given to AONBs in the NPPF.

Consultation Process

13. Rather than undertake a comprehensive review of the previous plan the NWD AONB Council of Partners decided for reasons of timescale and funding to undertake a limited update of the existing plan, to reflect revisions in legislation and respond to various key issues that have emerged in the preceding five years.
14. The North Wessex Downs AONB team ran a wide-ranging consultation process seeking input from residents within the AONB and other interested parties. Formal comments were requested and sought from Natural England, the Environment Agency and Forestry Commission. Consultation workshops

were held with members of the Council of Partners attended by an OCC officer and Member. Formal comments on a draft Management Plan were sought from partner authorities. Comments within OCC were co-ordinated by the Environment Strategy Manager from various teams across the council principally within Planning and Place, Infrastructure Operations, and Public Health. These have largely been incorporated into the proposed adoption version.

15. The draft management plan was presented to the Council of Partners on 5th March 2019 and approved subject to minor amendments. The Management Plan adoption version was first circulated on 5th May with subsequent minor changes. There are sections that remain to be completed including an introduction, a summary of achievements (which was one of the items requested by OCC) and finalisation of images and copy. The draft proposed for adoption is available as a pdf file from the Committee Secretary or the council's Environment Strategy Manager.

Financial and Staff Implications

16. Adoption of the management plan does not commit Oxfordshire County Council to financial expenditure. It is however noted that the financial support from local authority partners is key to releasing the 75% match-funding provided by DEFRA. There are no implications for staff time 'over and above' our current activities (Member attendance on the Board, and officer contact).

Equalities Implications

17. There are no equalities implications for the county council of adopting the Management Plan

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Director for Planning and Place

Background papers: NWDAONB Management Plan 2019-24 adoption draft for LAs 19052109

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