

CABINET MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT – 25 JULY 2013

COTSWOLDS AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN - ENDORSEMENT

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

Introduction

1. The Cotswolds Conservation Board has finalised the statutory Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty management plan 2013-2018 and Oxfordshire County Council is requested to endorse the plan. The plan helps Oxfordshire County Council to demonstrate compliance with our statutory duties and also helps meet Corporate Plan Priorities, particularly 'Enhance the Environment'. The plan sets out objectives and policies that direct the activities of the Cotswolds Conservation Board and guide the activities of other bodies. The plan covers various topics including Landscape, Historic Environment, Biodiversity, Development and Transport, Access, Health 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) AONBs, covering together 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 contributes £12k to the Cotswolds. 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 Cotswolds AONB Management Plan has three main purposes:
 - (a) Sets out the Cotswolds Conservation Board's policies and actions for the management of the Cotswolds 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 management plan was formally adopted by the Cotswolds Conservation Board in March 2013.

Why is endorsement required?

9. 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.
10. Oxfordshire's other two AONBs are in the process of reviewing their management plans, to a different timetable, with completion in 2014.

Consultation Process

11. The Cotswolds Board undertook two extensive consultations on the draft Management Plan during 2012, enabling the authority to make comments. Oxfordshire County Council's response to earlier consultations has been taken on board to our satisfaction. 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 the Environment is RECOMMENDED to endorse the Cotswolds AONB Management Plan 2013-2018**

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