

EXTENDING PROTECTION FOR MAJOR OPEN SPACES

Boundary variation project for the Surrey Hills AONB

A Consultation Document outlining proposals to extend the Surrey Hills AONB was released on 7 March 23. It follows a sixteen month study by Natural England in which organizations and individuals have been encouraged to submit suggestions as to which adjacent areas could be similarly designated to give them greater recognition and protection. Nationally there are 46 AONB's – 34 of them in England. Three other AONB's besides The Surrey Hills are similarly under review – the Chilterns, the Cheshire Ridge, and the Yorkshire Wolds.

The Surrey Hills AONB was so designated in 1958, and its protection placed in the care of Surrey County Council, with a small team of staff responsible for producing and maintaining a management plan to sustain the special quality of the landscape. The Consultation Document just released now invites local authorities, national bodies, parish councils, community groups, and individuals, to respond to specific suggestions now being made by NE's panel of experts; with a deadline of 13 June 23.

The scale of change suggested

Substantial change is being considered - additional area coverage amounting to perhaps 100 sq. kms., means major expansion of the area known as 'the Surrey Hills'. Three factors help explain the scale of change proposed. Ten areas of countryside were already being considered for possible inclusion as 'of outstanding natural beauty' in the latest County Development Plan. A much larger proportion of countryside now being recommended for designation as AONB was already demarcated as of 'great landscape value' in longer standing Surrey County Development Plans. Doubtless weighing heavily too in the present review is pressure for development along the southern edge of Greater London – and even within the extant AONB by a number of substantial towns that are almost wholly enclosed within or immediately adjacent to the existing AONB – Godalming, Leatherhead, Reigate, Dorking, Caterham, Godstone, Limpsfield, and Sevenoaks. A major factor having to be weighed in extending the areas to be scheduled as 'of outstanding natural beauty' is how close the boundary lines can come to areas of dwellings and related infrastructure – schools, hospitals, business premises, without compromising the outstanding beauty concept. The challenge is perhaps greatest in Reigate/Banstead, Croydon and Caterham where urban intensification has been proceeding fastest over the last twenty years.

Three local areas considered for boundary variation are: Happy Valley, Chipstead, and Caterham

Some eighteen areas in all have been identified across the length of the North Downs for possible inclusion in an extended AONB. The three that edge closest to the southern boundary of the London conurbation perhaps posed the greatest challenge for the reviewers in resolving landscape quality, scenic quality, tranquility, wildness, heritage, and cultural factors, while steering clear of the pockets and stretches of urban development that has come to characterize the edge of today's metropolis.

Attached at the end of this text are the three sections of the Consultation Document that address the interests of the Residents Associations in southern Croydon and the Friends of Farthing Downs and Happy Valley:

[PROPOSED CHIPSTEAD EXTENSION](#)
[PROPOSED HAPPY VALLEY EXTENSION](#)
[PROPOSED CATERHAM WOODS EXTENSION](#)

together with two maps delimiting the precise areas now being proposed for inclusion within an expanded Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – [Figure 20 Chipstead](#); [Figure 21 Happy Valley and Caterham Woods](#).

The Chipstead area

A complex area in which incised chalk valleys, sinuous rural lanes, ancient woodland, and elevated open views compete with noise of traffic, masts and pylons –creating a tenuous link with the existing AONB – and with ‘pragmatic boundaries’ being the inevitable outcome. The text clearly illustrates the tension the reviewers felt between including segments into the AONB for the purpose of good management planning as against current realities of growing urban pressure on the remaining open landscapes.

Happy Valley

The area is seen as retaining a high degree of tranquility despite abutting areas of significant population, in which a suitable boundary line can be ‘convoluted’. The reviewers felt this even on Farthing Downs but where its very special classification as Ancient Monument, NNR and SSSI were felt to outweigh close proximity to urban development – the natural beauty of the landscape becoming ‘the primary consideration’.

Caterham Woods

The reviewers say inclusion here ‘will help widen the AONB landscape at one of the narrowest points’. Only minor boundary change is suggested – for fear of ‘not meeting the natural beauty criteria’. Access difficulty for the reviewers meant in places using aerial photographs and OS maps, but ‘was thought acceptable in sustaining some ancient woodland and chalk topography’.

NEXT STEPS

Summary observations like those above – set out at length in the text of the official Consultative Document attached to this paper – serve to remind all concerned with conserving and maintaining great landscape across southeast England of the challenge Natural England reviewers faced in altering the long established boundary to the Surrey Hills. Over the next two months, the Friends of Farthing Downs and Happy Valley will seek to explore and present area wide and local responses to the boundary variation project, to meet the deadline of 13 June 23 for submission of views. To help the debate along, [a composite map attached shows the whole length of the Surrey Hills AONB, the evaluation areas that comprised the whole review in 23 Figures, and the particular features of Evaluation Area 8 in southern Croydon including Kenley Common and Riddlesdown that the reviewers considered for inclusion](#). The Consultation Document indicates that if Happy Valley is included in an enlarged AONB, the borough council and GLA would need to become participant members of the governing Board (since land ownership is not a relevant factor, in deciding membership, no mention is made of the City of London). A tantalising final matter is whether a greatly enlarged Surrey Hills AONB is now too confining a term. Perhaps it should be the North Downs AONB

Graham Lomas
Chair, FoFD&HV