

Introduction

“Nowhere in all England is there such a lack of stridency. The colours, the grey of the stone walls, which in much of this land do duty for hedges, and of the cottages and manor houses, the green and pale gold of the pasture and arable fields, seem softly blended... The landscape is a watercolour...”¹

The Cotswolds Conservation Board

The Cotswolds Conservation Board (‘the Board’) was established by Parliament in 2004, superseding the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Partnership.

The Board has two statutory purposes:²

a) to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONB; and

b) to increase the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the AONB.

In fulfilling these roles, the Board has a duty to seek to foster the economic and social wellbeing of people living in the AONB.

The Board is an independent statutory body. It has 40 members, of which 17 are appointed by the 17 local authorities in the AONB, 15 are appointed by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and eight are elected by the town and parish councils in the AONB.

The Board is supported by a small team of staff based at Northleach in Gloucestershire, and by the Cotswolds Voluntary Wardens. The wardens number approximately 340 volunteers who undertake a comprehensive programme of countryside management tasks and run an extensive guided walks programme.

The Cotswolds AONB Management Plan

This plan is statutorily required under Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (‘the CROW Act’). It will have significant weight in influencing the wide range of future decisions that will affect the AONB. It will operate alongside other statutory plans and programmes, especially community strategies, development plans and transport plans, and also a considerable range of other initiatives. It is intended to provide direction for a period of around 20 years, although the focus is on policies and actions for the period 2008-2013.

To prepare this plan, the Board has reviewed the Cotswolds AONB Management Plan that was prepared by the former Cotswolds AONB Partnership in 2004. That plan was adopted by the 17 constituent local authorities and the partnership in 2004. It was subsequently adopted by the Board in April 2005.

The Board has taken the opportunity presented by the requirements of the CROW Act to update and restructure the existing plan, taking account of changes in circumstances since 2004. As a result, this revised plan reflects the formulation of the Board’s policies for the management of the Cotswolds AONB and for carrying out its functions in relation to it.

The review process has involved consultation with many people and organisations involved in, or affected by, the management of the AONB. The consultation process has been independently assessed and this review of the process is available on the Board’s website.

¹ Robert Bryan, ‘The British Countryside in Colour’, (1950).

² Section 87, Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.



This Management Plan sets out a series of objectives for the AONB which the Board wishes to see achieved. These represent the Board's current view of what it considers are the most important management actions which should be pursued, and which also reflect the views and aspirations of a multiplicity of stakeholders with an interest in the AONB. Actions the Board intends to take to implement these policies throughout the five years of the plan are also included.

The Management Plan is therefore much more than a set of objectives for the Board alone. It is designed to be a guide for local authorities, statutory agencies, and other bodies working within the AONB, as well as for private owners of land, a wide variety of businesses, and the many communities who live in the area.

This concept is reinforced by statute. Section 85 of the CROW Act makes it a duty for all relevant authorities (government departments and agencies, local authorities, including parish councils, and all public bodies) to have regard to the purpose of designation of the Cotswolds as an AONB when making their decisions or carrying out activities in relation to or affecting land within the AONB. Relevant authorities are advised by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) that AONB management plans are a useful mechanism for securing their active involvement in the management of the AONB and demonstrating their compliance with the requirements of the CROW Act.³

³ Duties on relevant authorities to have regard to the purposes of National Parks, AONBs and the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads - Guidance Note, Defra (2005).



Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 requires that “Every public authority must, in exercising its functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity”. The AONB Management Plan is guidance to the constituent local authorities as to how this duty can be discharged, particularly through working on a landscape scale, rather than a site-based approach.

Implementation of the plan will be monitored and evaluated by the Board and an assessment provided as part of its annual reports.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs)

The primary purpose of AONB designation is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area.⁴ Within an AONB priority is given to the landscape, flora and fauna, geological or physiographical features and heritage, including archaeology and settlement character. The organisation that existed prior to the creation of Natural England, The Countryside Agency, suggested that, “Landscape encompasses everything - ‘natural’ and human - that makes an area distinctive: geology, climate, soil, plants, animals, communities, archaeology, buildings, the people who live in it, past and present, and the perceptions of those who visit it.”⁵

In pursuing the primary purpose of designation, account should be taken of the needs of agriculture, forestry and other rural industries. Attention should also be paid to the economic and social wellbeing of the area, as this plays a vital role in underpinning the area’s natural beauty. Particular regard should be paid to promoting sustainable forms of social and economic development which in themselves conserve the environment. Recreation is not an objective of designation, but the demand for recreation should be met so far as it is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and the needs of agriculture, forestry and other uses.⁶

In a written answer to Parliament in June 2000, the Government confirmed that AONBs and National Parks share the same highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty.

⁴ Section 82, Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

⁵ ‘Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A guide’, CA23, Para 1.1, Countryside Agency (2001).

⁶ Based on advice in ‘Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A policy statement’, CCP356, Countryside Commission (1991).

Largely because of the special place given to nature conservation within the statutory definition of natural beauty, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) considers AONBs to be of international importance as Category V Protected Landscapes.⁷ They are therefore listed on the World Database on Protected Areas compiled by the United Nations Environment Programme's World Conservation Monitoring Centre.⁸

On 21 November 2006, the Government announced that the UK had ratified the Council of Europe's European Landscape Convention. The convention aims to secure better landscape protection, landscape management, landscape planning and European co-operation, through a range of measures such as awareness raising, training and education, identification and assessment, setting landscape quality objectives and an effective policy framework. AONBs are well placed to use the convention to raise the importance of large-scale landscape management to deliver multiple benefits for society.

For the reasons outlined above, AONBs are thus not only national but also international assets.

What makes the Cotswolds special? (Statement of Significance)

The Cotswolds is the second largest protected landscape in England after the Lake District National Park, as well as the largest of the 40 AONBs in England and Wales, covering 790 sq miles (2,038 sq kms).

Limestone gives the area unity. This can be seen in the underlying geology and in the stone used for buildings and drystone walls throughout the Cotswolds. Within the area there is, however, considerable scenic diversity.

⁷ **Category V:** Protected Landscape/Seascape: protected area managed mainly for landscape/seascape conservation and recreation.

Definition: Area of land, with coast and sea as appropriate, where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant aesthetic, ecological and/or cultural value, and often with high biological diversity. Safeguarding the integrity of this traditional interaction is vital to the protection, maintenance and evolution of such an area (IUCN, 1994).

⁸ For more information, see <http://sea.unep-wcmc.org/wdbpa/>

Nineteen different landscape types have been identified.⁹ These include the dramatic escarpment all along the west of the area cloaked in beech woodlands and open commons; high wolds with expansive open views; deep incised valleys which dissect the area; and gentler rolling hills and vales to the east of the area.

Distinctive vernacular architecture, using the local building stone which varies markedly in colour across the AONB, contributes a wonderful sense of harmony between the landscape and its towns and villages. Streams trickling through such places set amongst the patchwork of farms and woodland, and dramatic views across the Severn Vale add to the attractions of this truly beautiful area.



⁹ 'Cotswolds AONB Landscape Character Assessment and Landscape Strategy and Guidelines', Landscape Design Associates (2003).



The principal elements that make the Cotswolds special are summarised below. More specific reference to these special characteristics is also contained in each section of this plan, so that it is easier to see how the issues identified in the plan affect them.

The Landscape Character Assessment for the Cotswolds AONB¹⁰ identified the principal elements that occur across the designated area. These elements encompass features of landscape, historic and biodiversity interest, as well as the built environment. The Board considers that either singly or in combination these elements contribute to the unique character and quality of the Cotswolds landscape.

¹⁰ 'Landscape Character Assessment of the Cotswolds AONB', Cotswolds AONB Partnership (2004).

These principal elements include:

- drystone walls
- ancient semi-natural woodlands and veteran trees
- permanent pasture, including unimproved calcareous grassland
- archaeological sites and their settings and remnant historic landscapes
- vernacular stone buildings and their settings
- settlement patterns and their relationship to landscape
- parkland and historic designated landscapes
- hedges

The Board also considers that the tranquillity of the AONB, provided by the absence of major development, few main roads, and the presence of dark skies, is a significant attribute given the Cotswolds' location in the southern half of England.

Key principles for the management of the AONB

The Cotswolds AONB can deliver multiple benefits for society. In addition to scenic beauty, ecosystem services¹¹ and cultural heritage it can provide:

- healthy lifestyle recreational opportunities for all - "an inspirational breathing space away from it all"
- opportunities for climate change mitigation measures
- water supplies for an extensive area of Southern England
- locally produced food and wood products
- opportunities for renewable energy generation

Management of the AONB is about realising this range of important benefits at a time of rapid change.

The following fundamental principles inform the Board's whole approach to managing the Cotswolds' AONB.

- The implications of climate change for all activities must be addressed - seeking to mitigate the causes of climate change by minimising the output of greenhouse gases; and at the same time taking action to adapt to the effects of climate change in ways that conserve and enhance the Cotswolds' special qualities.

¹¹ For definition of ecosystems services see 'Securing a healthy natural environment - An action plan for embedding an ecosystems approach', Defra, 2007 http://www.Defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/natres/pdf/eco_actionplan.pdf

- The landscape of the AONB must be managed in ways that conserve and enhance landscape character, local distinctiveness, geology and geomorphology, historic features, habitats and biological diversity.
- A sustainable approach must be taken to all issues within the AONB, particularly in the development and management of its rural economy.
- It is important to increase people's awareness, knowledge and understanding of the qualities of the AONB, and of the opportunities to enjoy and explore the area.

Structure of the plan

During the consultation process it became clear that there are three forces for change that are so fundamental that they influence the entire plan.

These are:

- climate change and our response to it
- the effects of globalisation on land use
- pressures from development, changing lifestyles and transportation

These overarching issues have been separated out in an introductory section called 'Forces for Change' (pg 12), along with associated objectives, policies, actions and tasks.



The rest of the plan is structured around two main sections (Conserving and enhancing, and Understanding and enjoying), reflecting the Board's two purposes. The duty to seek to foster the social and economic wellbeing of local communities is incorporated within these main sections of the plan. A commentary is provided to indicate how the policies and actions will impact on communities in the AONB.

Within each of the two main sections there is a set of objectives. Subsequent sub-sections include a series of Board policies with actions and associated tasks. These form the core of this Management Plan, setting out how the vision will be achieved.

The **objectives** are goals to be aimed at if the long-term vision for the AONB is to be met - "This is what we want to be achieved".

The **policies** are the means by which the objectives will be achieved - "This is how things will get done".

The **actions** are intended to deliver the policies - "These are things we want to do".¹²

The **tasks** are detailed activities which the Board, often in conjunction with partners, will undertake during the plan period.

The objectives and policies are designed to be taken up by the many organisations and individuals involved in managing the Cotswolds AONB. The actions and tasks set out how the Board will pursue these objectives, often in partnership with others.

¹² 'Guidance for the review of AONB Management Plans', Countryside Agency (2006).

¹³ Required under the Strategic Environmental Assessment Regulations (the SEA Regulations, Statutory Instrument 2004, No. 1633).

Strategic Environmental Assessment

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is a statutory process.¹³ A formal SEA is required for new plans and programmes that are likely to have significant effects on the environment. SEA aims to provide for a high level of protection of the environment and contribute to the integration of environmental considerations into the preparation and adoption of plans with a view to promoting sustainable development.

The Board employed consultants to undertake the SEA of the Management Plan. Preparation of the SEA has been undertaken in consultation with Natural England, the Environment Agency, English Heritage, the local authorities and partner organisations. An Environmental Report has been published along with the plan, assessing the environmental impact of the plan. An Environmental Statement has also been published which explains how the plan has been influenced by the SEA process.

Appropriate Assessment

The Board has undertaken an Appropriate Assessment of the potential impact of the objectives of the Management Plan on the conservation objectives of Sites of European Importance for nature conservation affected by the plan, as required by The Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc) (Amendment) (England and Wales) Regulations 2006.

An Appropriate Assessment was published by the Board for consultation with Natural England, the local authorities and partner organisations.

Natural England has confirmed that the assessment complies with the legislative requirements.



