

POSITION STATEMENT ON THE AONB BOUNDARY

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Summary

This paper recommends that the Partnership abandons a previously held ambition formally to change the AONB boundary, and presents for approval a revised position statement on the AONB boundary, including guidelines for work in relation to the existing boundary.

Background

1. The AONB Partnership approved in October 2005 a position statement on the AONB boundary. This included the following points:

“The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership (formerly known as the Joint Advisory Committee) has long held the view that the boundary of the AONB should be reviewed to include additional areas. The Countryside Agency has recently consulted on criteria that will be used to judge proposed boundary reviews.

The process of undertaking a boundary review is likely to be time consuming and costly, and would have an impact on delivery of other work. However, as part of the long term future of the AONB, it is felt that this will prove worthwhile if a reasoned and realistic proposal is put forward.

The Partnership will gather evidence and undertake appropriate consultations on proposals before agreeing a formal position on a boundary review to submit to the Countryside Agency (or Natural England as its successor body).”

2. In 2006 a report was commissioned from Waterman CPM Consultants, reviewing the current Shropshire Hills AONB boundary in relation to up to date criteria for natural beauty and definition of areas. Key findings of the report were:
 - i. Significant areas of land in Wales adjoining the Shropshire Hills AONB are likely to justify designation as Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
 - ii. There are a number of small areas within England where extensions to the boundary may be justified, and a few smaller areas where land within the boundary does not appear to meet natural beauty criteria.
 - iii. Due to the boundary often following roads, 36 settlements are split by the boundary and lie partly within the AONB and partly outside.

- iv. Some stretches of the boundary do not follow clearly identifiable features on the ground.
3. In December 2006 a consultation letter was sent to the five local authorities within the AONB, to two neighbouring authorities affected (Powys and Herefordshire) and to the relevant national agencies of the Countryside Agency (now Natural England) and Countryside Council for Wales. The letter posed a number of consultation questions:
 - a. **If contiguous land in Wales were to be designated, should this be part of a single cross-border AONB, or as a separate but adjoining Welsh AONB, with the Shropshire Hills AONB maintaining its identity?** Our initial feeling is that the Shropshire Hills identity is important, and that the latter option would probably be preferable.
 - b. **Are the potential benefits of the relatively small proposed amendments within England likely to justify the costs?** (This includes a potential change on the southern border including part of Herefordshire). Despite the enthusiasm of some members to see particular areas included, and a desire that the boundary be seen to make sense and not cause problems, our initial feeling is that currently the case for pursuing a formal boundary review is not strong.
 - c. **If the boundary were to remain unchanged, are new formal planning policies required on 'split' settlements?**
Would it be desirable to treat any split settlement for planning purposes as if it were wholly within the AONB?
How would this work in practice e.g. if development proposals arose outside the current settlement boundary?
 - d. **Can some of the issues raised by the study best be addressed by adopting a pragmatic approach to working with the current boundary, rather than seeking to change it?** The AONB Partnership's current position statement on the boundary outlines a rationale for this which, with refinements, may provide an adequate basis for work in the foreseeable future.
4. Since December 2006, three substantive responses to this letter have been received, and these are summarised below:

Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Council: Remain separate from Wales, Shropshire Hills identity is important, but collaborate across the border. Would not object to amending boundary but case not strong given resource implications. Planning policy refers to 'adverse effect, directly or indirectly ...on the AONB' - therefore different policy for split settlements is not necessary or appropriate.

Countryside Council for Wales: Processes for future AONB designation in Wales are not established, though there is pressure to look at this. Cross-border AONB is laudable, and proven in the Wye Valley. Any designation in Wales likely to be by separate order, but does not preclude cross-border working.

South Shropshire District Council: Remain separate from Wales – Shropshire Hills identity is important. Benefits of boundary review do not justify/ outweigh costs. Policy of ‘taking into account impact on AONB’ means split settlement issue is not a significant problem, though this would not apply to permitted rights. Support pragmatic approach. Would like to see the Corvedale included, but this does not look likely.

5. The lack of response from other consultees clearly signals that there is no appetite for pursuing a formal boundary review. As previously reported to the Partnership, the Countryside Agency’s reopening of boundary review considerations in 2005 has been shelved due to legal issues arising from the New Forest National Park designation. It is therefore proposed to lay to rest this long-standing issue, by changing the AONB Partnership’s position to one of not aspiring to a formal boundary review, and by updating the clarifying guidelines about the Partnership’s work in relation to the existing boundary. This is shown in detail in the proposed revised position statement in Appendix 1. The substance of this position statement will also be incorporated into the draft new AONB Management Plan,

Recommendation

The Partnership is recommended to approve the revised position statement.

<p>List of Background Papers Earlier AONB Partnership Position Statement on the AONB boundary, available at http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/partnership/documents/PositionstatementonAONBboundary.pdf.</p>
<p>Human Rights Act Appraisal The information in this report is compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998.</p>
<p>Environmental Appraisal The recommendation in this paper will contribute to the conservation of protected landscapes.</p>
<p>Risk Management Appraisal Risk management has been appraised as part of the considerations of this report.</p>
<p>Community / Consultations Appraisal The content of this paper has been informed by previous discussions among members of the AONB Partnership and Team.</p>
<p>Appendices Appendix 1 Revised Position Statement on the AONB Boundary</p>

Appendix 1 Revised Position Statement on the AONB Boundary

Issues concerning boundaries of designated areas can sometimes be problematic. This statement is intended to clarify the AONB Partnership's approach to the boundary in carrying out its work.

Background

The Shropshire Hills AONB was designated in 1958, according to criteria for natural beauty set out in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, and its boundary has remained unchanged. The distinction between the AONB and surrounding countryside has been made through the policies of planning authorities, though some have sought also to apply high standards of protection to areas around the AONB. During the 1980s and 1990s the AONB was not the defining aspect of practical management initiatives, and the South Shropshire Countryside Project and later Shropshire Hills Countryside Unit worked to a larger area than the AONB, based on parish boundaries. This area was also used as the basis of the Shropshire Hills Advisory Plan in 1992. The AONB Joint Advisory Committee was formed in 1993, and supported both working in a wider area and the aspiration to formally review and enlarge the AONB boundary.

With the passing of the Countryside & Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 and subsequent guidance from the Countryside Agency, there was a national move to concentrate work on the designated area of AONBs. (One of the defined core functions of AONB teams is "*Promoting the AONB vision and management plan to help distinguish the AONB from adjacent countryside.*") This has been reflected in the Shropshire Hills by production of the AONB Management Plan in 2004. The Blue Remembered Hills project was developed before this change of focus was fully implemented, and ran until the end of 2007 within the wider area of the former Advisory Plan.

The AONB Partnership in 2006 commissioned a study by Waterman CPM consultants to provide recommendations for a boundary review of the Shropshire Hills AONB, and assess supporting evidence. The study largely endorsed the current boundary, but identified a number of small areas which could justify inclusion, and highlighted that significant adjoining areas in Wales were of AONB quality. A consultation with relevant authorities over 2007 revealed no support for a legal boundary review of the Shropshire Hills AONB. In February 2008, the AONB Partnership's previously stated aspiration towards a boundary review was formally dropped, and replaced by the position outlined below.

Position with regard to review of the AONB boundary

There are areas of considerable landscape value beyond the designated AONB itself. For some small areas, evidence may indeed be strong enough to support their inclusion against current criteria. **The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership does not however believe that the benefits of formally amending the boundary are justified against the considerable costs and resources this would entail.**

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership would support the designation of adjacent land in Wales as Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It is the Partnership's view that if this were to happen, the Shropshire Hills AONB should remain separate in

terms of identity and administration from a Welsh AONB, but that cross-border collaboration should be given a high priority.

Position with regard to work of the AONB Partnership in relation to the boundary

The Partnership exists to conserve and enhance the special qualities of the Shropshire Hills. **It will work to this end, and encourage its partners and others also to work, in ways which will strengthen the integrity and identity of the Shropshire Hills as an area of exceptional landscape value.** The AONB designation provides the core and legal backing for this approach, and though old, the boundary has been largely endorsed by modern assessment, and still encompasses the key features of importance.

The Partnership will focus its work strongly on the designated AONB area, but will work in a flexible and pragmatic way in relation to the AONB boundary, to secure the maximum benefit for the Shropshire Hills. In particular the Partnership will:

- have regard to, and make efforts to conserve, important features lying just outside the boundary and strongly linked to the Shropshire Hills, especially features crossing the boundary (for example rivers, geological features, Offa's Dyke).
- consider the context of the AONB in relation to:
 - economic and cultural links of nearby communities (including market towns lying just beyond the boundary) with the natural beauty of the AONB,
 - facilities and services for visitors and tourism which have an influence on patterns of visitor use within the AONB,
 - supply chains for products originating within the AONB, where these relate to management of the landscape (e.g. farm produce, wood products).
- consider planning applications for significant developments outside the AONB which may have an impact on its special qualities,
- collaborate, where results for the AONB will be achieved more effectively or more efficiently by working with others in relation to a larger or different area e.g. county-wide initiatives (though benefit to the AONB will remain the guiding rationale for the Partnership's involvement).
- avoid being drawn into issues and work outside the AONB boundary where there is no significant benefit to the AONB. This will include socio-economic issues in towns and settlements outside the boundary where there is little connection with the landscape.
- not support projects or initiatives which may undermine the integrity of the Shropshire Hills area, or the Partnership's work focused on the AONB.