

Agenda Item 8

Committee: High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee

Date: 11 March 2011

Title of Report: Transfer of AONB Partnerships to Defra from Natural England

By: High Weald AONB Director

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Joint Advisory Committee is recommended to:

1. note the report and the operational changes; and
 2. welcome the Minister's decision to change the sponsorship for AONB Partnerships to Defra from Natural England.
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1.0 Change of central Government sponsorship

1.1 At the end of November 2010 Richard Benyon MP, Minister for the Natural Environment and Fisheries wrote to announce his decision that from 1 April 2011 the resources and responsibility for funding and strategic oversight of the English AONB Joint Advisory Committees, the two AONB Conservation Boards and the National Association for AONBs will transfer from Natural England to Defra. The Minister, among other things, wishes to see AONBs thrive and prosper with the appropriate support from central Government and minimal interference.

1.2 By making this decision the Minister has strongly endorsed the value of the work that AONB Partnerships are delivering at a local level and he has recognised that they have a fundamental role in meeting the coalition Government's environmental objectives. This is a clear recognition of the excellent work that each AONB Partnerships has carried out and is continuing to carry out despite the difficulties imposed by the current financial crisis.

1.3 The Minister's announcement is appended for information and it is worth noting some of his following comments:

- "The contribution that AONBs make to the conservation and enhancement of the natural environment is fully recognized by this Government. I believe AONBs are managed remarkably well by the AONB Partnerships and Conservation Boards and provide good value for money."
- "Despite these difficult times, AONB Partnerships and Conservation Boards have a fundamental role to play in meeting our environmental objectives and delivering Big Society for example, particularly with regards to the expression of local priorities. I see the AONB Management Plan as being an ideal framework by which delivery can be driven."

- “I can assure you that the best interests of the AONBs are at the centre of my thoughts. I am committed to ensuring that these valuable areas are protected and enhanced.”

1.4 The financial year 2011/2012 will see a managed transition of arrangements from Natural England to Defra to ensure any disruption to the AONB Partnerships will be kept to a minimum. Natural England will be given the resources to continue to provide advice and support at the local level and to deliver their own statutory role with respect to AONBs.

2. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 Members are asked to note the report and the appended copy of the Minister’s decision and to welcome the Minister’s decision to change the sponsorship for AONB Partnerships from Natural England to Defra.

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Your ref:

Our ref: NPS 415

30 November 2010

From Richard Benyon MP
Minister for Natural Environment and Fisheries

Dear Howard,

It was a pleasure to meet you, Peter Stevens and Richard Clarke at our meeting on 25 October, and I was interested to hear about the work of the Association and the issues it and the AONBs face.

The contribution that AONBs make to the conservation and enhancement of the natural environment is fully recognised by this Government. I believe AONBs are managed remarkably well by the AONB Partnerships and Conservation Boards and provide good value for money.

Despite these difficult times, AONB Partnerships and Conservation Boards have a fundamental role to play in meeting our environmental objectives and delivering Big Society for example, particularly with regards to the expression and delivery of local priorities. I see the AONB Management Plan as being an ideal framework by which delivery can be driven.

I am visiting as many AONBs as I can to learn more about the work they do, the issues they face, and to discuss how they might best cope with the challenges ahead. I am particularly interested in looking at how during these difficult economic times I can help AONBs deliver their objectives and whether the present system is the best way to fund and manage them now and in the future.

As you know, in late July this year, I asked my officials to conduct an informal review of the current Natural England AONB sponsorship arrangements with a view to determining possible options for giving government a ~~23~~ better line of sight on AONB management.

During July to September, they undertook an informal soundings exercise through bilateral discussions and correspondence with the following parties, in addition to the Association:

- the NAAONB's Funding Sub-group;
- Natural England;
- the Chilterns and Cotswolds Conservation Boards;
- the Protected Landscapes Regional Co-ordinators for the South West and the South East; and
- a small number of local authorities.

Further to our discussion on 25 October, I would like to confirm that following consideration of these soundings, I have agreed, in principle, that as from 1 April 2011 the resources and responsibility for funding and strategic oversight of the AONB Joint Advisory Committees, the two Conservation Boards and the NAAONB should transfer from Natural England to Defra, whilst also leaving Natural England with resources to continue to provide technical expert support and advice at the local level, and to deliver their statutory role with respect to AONBs. My intention is to achieve an effective tri-partite relationship which sees AONBs thrive and prosper with appropriate support from central Government and minimal interference.

I have asked my officials to work closely with Natural England and with you to achieve a smooth handover by means of a managed transition, which seeks to minimise disruption to AONB functioning. This would include retaining the multi-year funding settlement arrangements. I hope to be able to announce total funding for the AONBs before Christmas.

I am happy for you to share this letter with the AONBs and local authorities, and can assure you that the best interests of the AONBs are at the centre of my thoughts. I am committed to ensuring that these valuable areas are protected and enhanced.



RICHARD BENYON MP

Agreed by the Minister & signed in his absence