



High Weald AONB Unit Briefing Note

Consultation on the Government's response to the Landscapes (Glover) Review: National Parks and AONBs in England

Background

In 2018 the Government stated that England's designated landscapes (National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) have been a great success and that England is a more beautiful and more diverse place because previous generations had taken care to campaign for and set up designated landscapes.

Recognizing this success, the Secretary for State for the Environment announced the independent Review of Designated Landscapes of England's Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks. The Glover Review was asked to find out what might be done better, what changes could help, and whether definitions and systems - which in many cases date back to their original creation in the 1940s - are still sufficient.

In 2019 the findings of this Review were published following a wide consultation. As part of this process, we hosted a visit by the Review Panel, submitted our own detailed set of written recommendations, and contributed to a response by the South East and East of England Protected Landscapes group.

Government response to the Landscapes (Glover) Review

In January 2022 the Government published its response to the Glover Review providing an indication of their intentions and preferred options for the future of the English designated landscapes. It announced a 12-week consultation period and invited the public to comment on its response before the 9th of April.

High Weald AONB Unit – initial thoughts on the Government response to the Landscapes (Glover) Review

The High Weald AONB Unit broadly welcomes the Government's response. Much of it chimes with the evidence we and our colleagues elsewhere in England submitted to the Glover Review panel.

We welcome the opportunity to reinvigorate the status of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty with new purposes and powers, and the resources for the teams advising on and supporting the conservation and enhancement of these special places.

But we believe the Government's response and its proposals fall short of the ambitious and transformational change that Julian Glover and his independent panel envisaged. Central to Glover's recommendations was a clear recognition of the enormous potential and frustrated

ambition of the AONB network – 34 designated landscapes, covering 15% of England’s land area – to deliver so much more for nature, climate, farming and the rural economy, and people at this critical time.

The successful and proven track record of AONB teams across the country speaks for itself. AONB teams use a unique collaborative approach to advise on the conservation and enhancement of these valued landscapes and promote and support practices to address the challenges and threats these landscapes face.

Next steps

We are now working closely with our colleagues in the other English AONB teams and with the National Association for AONBs to develop and agree a collective response to the Government’s consultation in time for the 9th of April.

Our response aims to ensure the Government recognizes and adequately addresses the need for urgent action to secure the future of AONB landscapes and the viability of the local AONB teams advising on their conservation and enhancement.

Our emerging response is divided into a series of themes:

- **Purpose – the priorities and challenges AONB landscapes and AONB bodies are expected to address, an extension and revision of AONB purposes to reflect contemporary priorities for AONBs, natural beauty with a strengthened link to nature recovery on a landscape scale and the importance of cultural heritage. A second purpose to promote understanding and enjoyment of the area**
- **Powers – what teeth does an AONB designation fit for the 21st century need? Strengthening the ‘duty of regard’ linked to strengthening the status of AONB management plan, a formal role in planning and development management**
- **Governance – what is needed to drive this work and provide assurance? Robust minimum governance standards which provide sufficient independence to guarantee the integrity of the designation, a need to reconcile the national and local governance with appropriate oversight**
- **Resources – what does a resilient funding model look like? Address the ‘private finance’ angle. At least doubling of the core funding over the course of this parliament leading to a dynamic and progressive funding formula that reflects ambition and future needs**
- **Brand – Renaming AONBs as National Landscapes – what is this, what does it mean, and how will it contribute to the new expectations and demands placed on AONB landscapes and teams?**

We will test the ideas and thoughts being put forward and draft a final proposition before submitting a final response in April.

And although we’re still formulating the response, three priorities have begun to emerge:

1. Double the current core funding for AONB teams over the life of this parliament and establish a fair and forward-looking funding formula reflecting ambitions and future needs

The Glover Review recommended the funding for AONB bodies to be doubled. Funding, which has always been inadequate, has been cut by 36% over the last ten years and the average size of each AONB core team is now only 4 people (most AONB teams also have temporary project staff using funds raised elsewhere). The total annual Government funds provided to all 34 English AONB teams is roughly the same as the budget of one medium-sized secondary school or around half that given each year to our nearest National Park Authority, the South Downs.

An increase in Government funding and a new and fair funding formula is essential to secure the financial and operational viability of the High Weald AONB Unit and our work.

2. Strengthen the legal framework relating to AONB designation by giving the statutory duties greater weight to ensure all relevant authorities meet their duties when exercising their functions and contributing to AONB management plan implementation.

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 places a statutory duty on all relevant authorities to 'have regard' to the purposes of conservation and enhancement of the AONB while performing their functions. The Glover Review called for this duty to be strengthened to "further" these purposes and to implement protected landscapes' management plans.

Relevant authorities is the term used for all public bodies (unitary and county councils, borough, district, and parish councils, joint planning boards, and other statutory committees), statutory undertakers (such as energy and water utilities, nationalised companies), government ministers and civil servants.

3. Give AONB bodies a stronger voice in planning including statutory consultee status in planning applications and development plans

The High Weald AONB is facing an unprecedented level of development which threatens to fundamentally change its distinctive character. The responsibility for determining planning applications remains with the 15 local authorities of the High Weald. The AONB Unit is not a statutory consultee on planning matters, and it remains each local planning authority's decision whether they consult us on a particular planning application or development plan.

The Glover Review recognized that AONB bodies need to be given a stronger voice in planning and recommended statutory consultee status. The Government response suggests a strengthening of the role of AONB teams by making them statutory consultees in the planning process.

These changes represent a statutory designated landscape fit for the 21st century – delivering more for climate, nature, and people. These changes look to the future but are built on and informed by the legacy and the learning from the last 70 years of AONB designations across England.