



## A new future for the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

### Q1. What does the Government's announcement mean for the Chilterns?

On 24 June 2021, Natural England announced its designation programme for 2021-22. This paper has been prepared by the Chilterns Conservation Board (CCB) to answer anticipated questions arising from those elements of the announcement that relate specifically to the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

This FAQ should be read in conjunction with:

- Written Ministerial Statement
- Government announcement
- Natural England FAQs
- Chilterns Conservation Board press release
- Chilterns Conservation Board FAQ

### Q2. What is the Chilterns Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty?

The Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is one of 34 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England. It was designated in 1965 and covers 833 square kilometres across Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire. The AONB covers only part of the wider Chiltern Hills landscape, which has many special features including its nine globally rare chalk streams, rolling chalk hills, magnificent beechwoods, native box woodland and wildflower-rich hills, which are enjoyed by local people and visitors alike. The Chilterns is an ancient landscape with traces still visible today of many eras and previous settlers, including Bronze Age barrows, over 20 Iron Age Hillforts and numerous medieval churches.

Few landscapes could claim to have as much recreational opportunity as the Chilterns. The extensive network of over 2000km of well-signposted footpaths, bridleways and cycleways make it easy to explore the area by foot, bicycle or on horseback. The area is fortunate to have plenty of countryside sites where people can relax, enjoy the scenery, have a picnic, or take a walk. The Chilterns may also be more familiar than people think, with locations often being used for TV and films such as *The Vicar of Dibley*, *Midsomer Murders*, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and *The Dirty Dozen*.

With 1.6 million people living within 8km of the AONB boundary, and ten million people living within an hour – and four London Underground stations taking visitors right to its heart – the Chilterns is one of the most accessible protected landscapes in Europe.

The [Chilterns Conservation Board](#) is an independent statutory body established by Parliamentary Order in July 2004, and has 27 members, all drawn from local communities. Eight members are nominated by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and the rest are members of our constituent local authorities and town and parish councils. The Board has responsibility for furthering the

purposes of the AONB designation by promoting its conservation and enhancement and increasing the understanding and enjoyment of its special qualities. We also work to foster the economic and social well-being of its local communities.

The Board has a statutory duty to publish a [Management Plan](#) for the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and to promote its implementation by a wide range of organisations, including local authorities, government agencies, community groups and landowners. In doing so, the Board is supported by a small body of staff, split between the core work with the Board and delivering specific externally-funded landscape management, conservation and community engagement projects.

### Q3. What does the announcement say about the Chilterns?

**The announcement includes proposals to:**

- a. Consider expansion of the designated area of the Chilterns AONB by designating additional areas adjacent to the existing protected landscape, and**
- b. work with the CCB, local stakeholders and communities to “consider the potential for strengthened management and governance arrangements”.**

Natural England is the Government’s advisor for the natural environment in England and, on 24 June 2021, published its ambitious new Landscape Designations Programme as part of broader Government plans aimed to deliver better outcomes for nature, landscapes and people.

One element of the Programme is to explore a ‘boundary extension’ to the AONB, with a view to contributing to the Government’s 30 by 30 target: to protect 30% of the UK’s land by 2030.

In addition to considering an extension of the Chilterns AONB, Natural England has announced plans to work with the Chilterns Conservation Board, local authorities and other stakeholders to jointly consider new management and governance arrangements to support the improved conservation, enhancement, understanding and enjoyment of the Chilterns landscape.

Further details of Natural England’s designation programme are set out in Natural England’s press release and FAQs.

Details on each of the proposals affecting the Chilterns are given below.

### Q4. What happened to the proposal to make the Chilterns a National Park?

**The proposal to redesignate the Chilterns AONB as a National Park continues to be an option, supported by the CCB, though no decision will be made until the Government has considered fully and responded to the recommendations in the Landscapes Review, as this may have implications for what it means to be a National Park, and how National Parks are designated.**

The current announcement is made in the context of a [Written Ministerial Statement](#), published on 24 June 2021, updating Parliament on its approach to the [Landscapes Review](#) and its thinking on the future role of England’s protected landscapes. The review, also known as the “Glover Review”, is an independent review commissioned by the Government and published in September 2019.

One of the key recommendations of the Landscapes Review was the designation of new AONBs and National Parks, with the Chilterns being identified as the “obvious choice” for redesignation as a National Park. We also proposed this option in our evidence submission to the Review.

While the Glover Review recommended that the Chilterns be designated a National Park, it also expressed the view that there may be alternative means to achieve similar or better outcomes for this protected landscape in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

So, while the Written Ministerial Statement provides an update on the Government's consideration of the Glover Review, it does not yet provide a complete response. This is expected at the end of the year. In the meantime, the CCB understands that implementing the full recommendations of the Review could require changes to existing legislation and that starting work on the costly and time-consuming process of designating a National Park in the Chilterns - ahead of the Government responding to the Review, or implementing its recommendations - could be counter-productive.

Our understanding is that the Government has therefore chosen to focus now on exploring improvements that can contribute to protecting landscapes such as the Chilterns, without pre-judging the outcome of deliberations on implementing the Glover Review's recommendations on National Parks.

We agree with this approach and are excited by the opportunity to explore new and innovative means by which we can tackle the impacts of climate change, reverse declines in nature, improve people's wellbeing and access to our special landscapes, and support our local businesses. This is even more important as we all work to recover from the impacts of Covid pandemic.

The Chilterns Conservation Board's stated policy is to "Explore the case for and against the Chilterns having enhanced status or being designated a National Park" (Policy GP1 of our [Management Plan](#) 2019-2024, p.24) and we support the conclusions of the Glover Review.

We also understand that, for now, Natural England has prioritised proposals that would lead to an increase in the amount of land protected for the benefit of nature, in line with Government's commitment to protect 30% of land by 2030. Re-designating the Chilterns AONB as a National Park on its own would not have contributed to this objective.

The Glover Review itself considered what measures could be pursued to enable the better protection and enhancement of the Chilterns should the area remain as an AONB, including increased resources, new powers and a single strategic development plan (pp.119-121). Natural England's proposal to consider the potential for strengthened management and governance arrangements aligns both with this aspect of the Glover Review and our own policy to explore "enhanced status".

There is no published timetable for the Government to complete its response to the Glover Review or to formally consider the case for the Chilterns to be re-designated as a National Park, though the government has confirmed that it will respond to the review's recommendations in full later this year.

In addition, in early June 2021, the Prime Minister [indicated](#) his personal support for the proposal. The CCB [responded](#) at the time and remains optimistic that it will be properly considered in due course.

#### **Q5. Why has it been suggested that the Chilterns AONB should be extended?**

**The area currently covered by the Chilterns AONB focuses on the dramatic landscape of the chalk scarp and downland and the woodlands and valleys of the plateau and upper dip slope. But these landscape areas are intimately connected, visually and in terms of natural and cultural heritage, with other parts of the wider Chiltern Hills landscape, which are also worthy of designation.**

A great deal has changed since the existing Chilterns AONB was designated in 1965. In our application to Natural England in 2013, the focus was on recognising the extent to which understanding had developed of the wider Chilterns landscape, and the interconnectedness of its features, habitats and cultural heritage, which are recognised in the description of the Chilterns National Character Area and in the relationship between that character area and its neighbours, particularly in the Thames Valley.

Research undertaken by the Chilterns Conservation Board and its partners has highlighted the importance of the area's globally rare chalk streams, its wildflower-rich grass downland and its diversity of prehistoric settlement, including a concentration of Bronze and Iron Age hillforts. Extending the boundaries of the

designated area could provide opportunities for a more strategic and coherent approach to positively managing these assets where they are outside the current designated AONB for future generations.

Increasing coverage of the AONB across the wider extent of the Chilterns National Character Area was the key driver behind the application made in 2013. That application also noted the presence of vibrant and growing communities distributed across the Chilterns, and recognised the potential for the extended designation to provide direct access to high quality natural and semi-natural environments to a large population, and to an even wider community through the region's unusually extensive public transport network.

Our understanding of the landscape, and its wildlife and cultural heritage, has continued to evolve and deepen since 2013. Alongside this, new approaches such as developing nature recovery networks, and an increased understanding of the importance of access to nature for people's physical and mental health and well-being all contribute to a need for a fresh look at which areas outside of the current protected landscape might meet the standards of natural beauty to be included in the designated AONB.

#### Q6. What is the process for deciding whether and how the Chilterns AONB should be extended?

**The formal process is set out in legislation (the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000), and Natural England provides advice on how that process should be carried out in practice and what criteria are used to assess the specific proposals. Subject to the basic requirements of the law and confirmation by the relevant Secretary of State, the decision as to whether land should be included in an AONB lies solely with Natural England.**

We understand that Natural England is keen to ensure that the processes followed for previous AONB designations are not overly complex and protracted, as this can cause uncertainty for local authorities, communities and businesses. We support this view. It is anticipated that new streamlined procedures could be followed, and we are working with Natural England to explore how these might be carried out in a more timely way, while increasing opportunities for community aspirations and evidence to be utilised, and maintaining the appropriate safeguards for accountability and due process.

#### Q7. What areas are proposed to be included?

**We are being careful not to suggest that any specific areas of land around the existing designated AONB are proposed for inclusion in an extended AONB. The Board's starting point is that more of the chalk landscapes that form the Chilterns National Character Area, plus contiguous areas of associated landscapes, habitats and features, can and should be considered for protection by the AONB designation.**

The proposal submitted by CCB to NE in 2013 included for illustrative purposes four sizeable areas of land to the south and east of the existing designated area. These areas were identified as a result of desktop analysis and site visits by CCB staff in 2012/13. Detailed assessments undertaken as part of the designation process would be needed to determine the location and extent of any new designated areas.

#### Q8. The CCB submitted a proposal to Natural England in 2013 – why doesn't anybody know about it?

**The proposal submitted by the CCB to Natural England in 2013 was intended to make the case for Natural England to initiate the formal process of assessing potential new areas for inclusion in the Chilterns AONB. This would be followed by a formal process in which stakeholders including local authorities, town and parish councils, local landowners and residents would be engaged.**

**It was not considered appropriate to raise expectations or concerns among stakeholders in advance of a decision being made by NE to proceed with that process.**

The CCB's proposal was informed by conversations with stakeholders at the time, some of whom had approached the CCB seeking AONB designation in their neighbourhood. The CCB has continued to make the case for extending the AONB, and we have continued to have conversations in principle with stakeholders, including receiving requests from communities to have their area included in the AONB.

**Q9. Have local authorities, town and parish councils and other stakeholders been involved so far? Will they be involved in developing the proposal?**

**Yes. Some stakeholders have been involved in discussions, but the composition and aspirations of stakeholders have changed since 2013. The formal processes for assessing the proposal leading to any new designations require engagement with stakeholders, including local authorities, town and parish councils, landowners and residents.**

While some stakeholders were engaged at the time of preparing our original proposal in 2013, individuals (both staff and elected representatives) involved with those stakeholders may have changed since then. Significant changes in stakeholders have also happened, including the merger of the Buckinghamshire local authorities into a single unitary council, as well as many political changes. Society has changed a great deal too, especially as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The CCB does not expect that any views expressed to us in 2013 will necessarily be the same in 2021, even if the individuals we are talking with today are the same. Furthermore, we will not have engaged with every relevant stakeholder in 2013, particularly in any areas outside the local authorities currently covered by the AONB. It is therefore critical that we work with Natural England to engage afresh with the communities that may be affected by the proposals.

**Q10. I live in/work in/own land in/run a business in/visit the Chilterns – will I have a say?**

**Yes. The views of anyone who has an interest in the Chilterns will be heard.**

However, the decision to designate new areas of AONB is made on the basis of whether the land meets the criteria for designation, which is assessed objectively by Natural England, and, ultimately, whether the relevant Secretary of State considers that the land should be designated as an AONB. No individual has a power of veto over the decision.

**Q11. Will the designation affect my ability to build on my land, or extend or alter my home?**

**Yes. Being designated as an AONB affects which planning policies (national and local) apply to the land in question, and can also affect 'permitted development rights' (the types of building and other work you can undertake without needing to apply for planning permission).**

We will provide clear guidance on this as part of our engagement on the designation process. Note that most of the land that was indicated for illustrative purposes in the 2013 proposal is already affected by restrictive planning policies, most notably those relating to the Green Belt. In many respects, Green Belt is a more rigid planning policy, which is intended to keep undeveloped land open except for certain carefully defined land uses, to manage the growth of towns and cities. Much of the Chilterns AONB already overlaps with Green Belt.

On its own, AONB designation is more permissive of development, where it is small-scale and aligns with the objectives of the designation, but requires greater attention to be paid to the design of both buildings and landscaping to conserve and enhance the character of the area. As a result, AONB policy can be positive about, for example, small-scale housing proposals (especially for housing that meets a specific

need and that local people can afford to live in) and proposals to expand or diversify businesses, especially where these relate to farming, forestry, tourism and recreation that align with or celebrate the natural beauty of the area.

#### Q12. Will the designation affect my ability to manage my farm/smallholding/forestry enterprise?

**Other than for planning and control over new development (see above) there are no restrictions on other land management practices.**

However, designation as an AONB could lead to new opportunities, including funding opportunities for environmentally beneficial land management projects, habitat restoration, etc. It will be a key function of the Chilterns Conservation Board to promote these opportunities to farmers and other land managers in the area.

#### Q13. Why is Natural England considering “the potential for strengthened management and governance arrangements” for the Chilterns AONB? What does this mean?

**The independent Landscapes Review (the “Glover Review”) recognised that many AONBs require more resources and new powers and responsibilities to successfully achieve the conservation and enhancement of the beauty of their landscapes.**

The Glover Review singled out the Chilterns in this regard because of the pressures of development in the region, coupled with the large number and variety of local authorities covered by the AONB, and recommended National Park status as a solution (see Q2 above). Recognising that re-designation of the Chilterns as a National Park might not be practicable in the short term, the Review recommended additional resources and powers for the Chilterns Conservation Board, and particularly proposed that a single statutory development plan should be produced for the AONB. This would be in addition to other proposals to strengthen the purpose and function of AONBs included elsewhere in the Review, and which have been referred to in the Written Ministerial Statement.

The exercise of bringing stakeholders together to consider the nature and extent of an extension to the area designated as AONB in the Chilterns also offers an ideal opportunity to consider how that area could be managed and governed in the future.

#### Q14. What kind of management or governance arrangements might be considered?

**Although there are recommendations in the Glover Review and suggestions in the Written Ministerial Statement, and we have some thoughts ourselves, the Chilterns Conservation Board is strongly of the view that new arrangements for the management and governance of the Chilterns landscape should be developed in partnership with relevant stakeholders, especially democratically elected local authorities, including town and parish councils.**

The Glover Review referred to “increased resources” and “further powers to address the specific challenges that it faces”, with specific reference to “a single statutory local plan”. We agree with all of those suggestions in principle, but are very much open to discussion about how they might be implemented. For example, the “single” local plan might be a comprehensive plan for the whole of the Chilterns, including parts of its setting or not, which replaces or supersedes existing local plans – or it might be a single development plan document, produced jointly by all the host authorities, covering the AONB area, and relating to specific policy areas, applying alongside the existing local plans, and possibly replacing some of their existing policies. This is all up for discussion.

We do, however, consider that it is highly desirable that the starting point for considering new management and governance arrangements for the Chilterns AONB, whether or not it is extended, begins

with convening a partnership between the Chilterns Conservation Board, Natural England and the local authorities in and adjoining both the designated area and the area(s) being assessed for inclusion in the AONB.

This partnership might also be opened up to town and parish councils and other public, private and voluntary sector stakeholders, but with a strong role for local authorities, the CCB and Natural England as a result of their accountability to local people and to national government. Such a partnership is seen as essential for developing new management and governance arrangements, and may itself evolve into the forum through which future governance of the AONB is provided.