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By email only:

Supplementary information: National Landscapes Boundary Review Project Frequently Asked Questions

Dear Stakeholder

We are writing as a follow up to our email of 9th May in which we explained that Natural England has had to take the hard decision to stop work on the Chilterns National Landscape boundary extension project. In our previous email we said that we would provide more information about that decision as soon as it became available.

We have put together the following set of Frequently Asked Questions which we hope will address any questions that you may have about this decision. Please do contact us if you or members of your team have any questions or would like to discuss this further. For queries, please use this mailbox: landscapedesignations@naturalengland.org.uk.

Yours Sincerely,

The Chilterns Boundary Review Project Team

Natural England's Landscape Designation Programme, Update June 2025

Supplementary Information: Frequently Asked Questions

Q1. What is a National Landscape / Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)?

An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is land protected by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW Act). It protects the land to conserve and enhance its natural beauty.

AONBs have recently been rebranded as National Landscapes and are now commonly known as such, however, the legislation has not been amended so when referring to the legislation, they are still referred to as AONB. This document will refer to these areas as National Landscapes except where the question is in relation to the legislation.

Q2. What is Natural England's role regarding the designation of National Landscapes /AONBs?

Natural England is Government's Statutory Advisor on landscapes in England, with wide ranging landscape duties and powers, including in relation to landscape designations. Natural England has the power, under S.82 of the *Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000*, to consider whether to assess and designate AONB or vary the boundary of existing ones. Natural England will prioritise proposals by considering if:

- evidence suggests the land might meet the natural beauty criterion
- there's local authority agreement that designation is appropriate
- it has the available resource to evaluate the proposal
- it's more important than other corporate priorities

Whilst there may be certain parts of the designation process with which partners and stakeholders can assist, the statutory designation process, in England, cannot be completed by any organisation other than Natural England.

Q3. What decision has Natural England made regarding its Landscape Designation Programme?

Given the pressures on public finances, Defra has had to make difficult decisions about funding. It was not affordable to continue Defra funding to Natural England to continue

the new National Landscapes designations programme in 25/26. Consequently, the funding for this work is limited, and Natural England have had to make the decision to stop work on some of the planned programme.

Natural England had previously announced, in June 2021, a programme of four landscape designation projects, including two new potential National Landscapes (known at the time as AONB) in the Yorkshire Wolds and Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, and two extensions to existing National Landscapes, in the Surrey Hills and Chilterns.

Natural England will be continuing with the potential new Yorkshire Wolds National Landscape project and potential extension to the Surrey Hills National Landscape. The Surrey Hills and Yorkshire Wolds work is further advanced, and in both cases an extensive statutory (and public) consultation has taken place, meaning the proposed areas for designation are well established in the public domain. It was therefore considered, in order to make best use of the public funds available, to progress the two most advanced projects to completion.

This has unfortunately meant stopping work on the Chilterns National Landscape boundary extension project, and the potential new National Landscape in Cheshire. These projects had not yet reached the stage of sharing proposed areas for statutory (and public) consultation.

Q4. How will this decision impact Natural England's work on protected landscapes going forward?

We will consider any future landscape designations work in line with our new Strategy in due course. We fully recognise the continuing importance and required focus of National Landscapes in enhancing access to landscapes and supporting domestic and global targets, such as the Environment Act and 30by30 biodiversity commitments. We are continuing support for the

Protected Landscapes Partnership, the National Landscapes Association and the individual National Landscapes in this regard.

Q5. For the stopped projects, will the evidence which has been collated as part of the work to date be shared so others can use it?

Natural England recognises the value of the work which has been completed to date for both of these projects. Each has reached a stage where much of the technical assessment has been completed. Some of this evidence base may be relevant to LPA's in developing local plans and determining applications. Natural England hopes to publish the relevant information on NE's 'Access to Evidence' page in due course, so the evidence base which has been gathered can be shared.

Q6. Does NE not have to proceed to designate these areas given the stage they have reached?

Whilst Natural England is disappointed not to continue the projects, we are under no obligation to designate these landscapes. When considering proposals Natural England must also consider available resource to evaluate the proposal and other corporate priorities. Although the technical reports have been concluded, there are still a number of stages to go in the designation process for both of these projects, including a statutory (and public) consultation. In order to make best use of limited public funds the difficult decision has been made to stop work on these projects.

Q7. Do Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) have to consult on development proposals in the Chilterns and Cheshire Sandstone Ridge proposal areas?

No, LPAs do not have to consult Natural England on development proposals in these areas. Furthermore, LPAs are not legally required to consult Natural England on development proposals within or affecting existing AONBs under the Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) Order. In both instances it is for LPAs to determine whether to consult with Natural England.

However, in consideration of the evidence gathered to date for the purpose of assessing these areas, Natural England noted, and would continue to note that, Natural England considers the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge and the Chilterns to be a valued landscape under paragraph 187 of the National Planning Policy Framework. An assessment of the landscape and visual impacts of the proposal on this area should therefore be undertaken, with opportunities taken to avoid or minimise impacts on the landscape and secure enhancement opportunities. Any development should reflect or enhance the intrinsic character and natural beauty of the area and be in line with relevant development plan policies.

Q8. How should the areas identified for consideration as National Landscape, but not now being taken forward, be taken into account in the Planning process?

Natural England is stopping work on the formal designation of these areas, but the landscape designation technical assessments have been completed. As noted above, during the assessment of the candidate areas Natural England made reference to these areas in its advice on Local Plan consultations and planning application consultations. Natural England acknowledged that we consider these areas to be valuable landscapes for planning purposes and that LPAs may give weight to this as a material consideration in determining applications and making planning policies that relate to the candidate areas. This position remains unaltered by the decision on re-prioritisation of the designation programme due to resource.

However, the areas are not National Landscapes, have no legal designated status and policies specifically applicable to statutory designated landscapes will not be applicable. Ultimately, it is for LPAs to determine the material consideration and weight to be given to them in each case.

As noted above, NE hopes to publish the landscape designation technical assessments on its 'Access to Evidence' Page which will enable LPAs to use that information in accordance with the terms of the Open Government Licence.

The existing boundary for the Chilterns National Landscape is unaffected and remains in place.