



Guide to Community Planning

North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

September 2011

Introduction

All Community Led Plans need to have good information to guide decisions. The effectiveness of any plan will depend on the quality of the information on which it is founded. Many communities that lie within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty are not fully aware of the national significance of the landscape or the statutory powers and primary purpose of designation for “**conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area**” (Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000).

There is therefore often a missed opportunity to make reference to the AONB status, relevant planning policies and its Management Plan and the wide availability of research work, reports and position statements. All of this information will assist those who wish to prepare Community-Led Plans.

Guidance & Content

Specific guidance on Community Led Planning is provided by other organisations, for example Action with Rural Communities in England (www.ACRE.org.uk) provide a “*Community Led Planning Toolkit*” or English Heritage’s Historic Environment Local Management (www.HELM.org.uk) has recently published “*Knowing Your Place – Heritage and Community Led Planning In The Countryside.*”

For communities that fall within the North Wessex Downs AONB boundary, advice on how to prepare and fund Community Led Plans and examples of existing Community Plans can be found below:

Berkshire : The Community Council for Berkshire www.actionforall.org.uk

Oxfordshire : The Oxfordshire Rural Community Council www.oxonrcc.org.uk

Hampshire : Community Action Hampshire www.action.hants.org.uk

Wiltshire : Community Area Partnerships www.wiltshire.gov.uk

Community Led Plans should of course include community based issues that are identified through the plan formation process. These issues may include anything from public open space, rights of way, affordable housing to crime or anti-social problems.

The plans should however also identify physical features that are considered to be important and this may include the landscape, village layout, historic buildings, conservation areas, specific views and landmark buildings, village character and townscape for example. Community Plans should explain why features are of importance, what meaning those features have to the community and its history and whether there are any key issues or management requirements needed to conserve or enhance those features. The reason for this is to be able to gain an understanding of when those features come under threat, are proposed to be lost altogether or are subject to poor management.

Why is the North Wessex Downs AONB Relevant to Community Plans?

The North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is one of the nation's finest landscapes as recognised by its designation as an AONB. It is one of 46 AONBs in the UK and is of equal status in law to a National Park.

The North Wessex Downs was designated as an AONB in 1972, is of some 668 square miles or 1,730 sq. km (the third largest nationally), includes some of the finest landscape in England from chalk downland, to river valleys, ancient woodland, historic sites including the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Avebury, and has a population of 125,000 people.

This is therefore a landscape protected not just by the *National Parks and Access to Countryside Act 1949*, but also the *Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW) 2000*, and the European Landscape Convention ratified by the UK on March 1st 2007. The European Landscape Convention highlights (i) the recognition of landscape in law; (ii) the need to develop landscape policies dedicated to the protection, management and creation of landscapes; and (iii) the establishment of procedures for the participation of the general public and other stakeholders in the creation and implementation of landscape policies.

Under Section 85 of the CRoW Act 2000 Section 85 states that it is a legal duty for all relevant authorities to "have regard to" the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB in exercising or performing any functions affecting land in the area. These relevant authorities include all statutory bodies and all tiers of government, including parish councils and holders of public office.

Therefore, Community Led Plans can make a very positive contribution to the conservation and enhancement of the AONB through acknowledgement of its status and active support of AONB guidance. Equally the AONB can offer a level of landscape protection that requires a different approach to land use where the aim to conserve and enhance is the main priority. In pursuing the primary purpose of designation account also need to be taken of the needs of agriculture, forestry and other rural industries and of the economic and social needs of local communities.

Of note the North Wessex Downs AONB has two well established and successful grant programmes including the Sustainable Development Fund and LEADER. These have both grant funded a variety of community based projects among other schemes, funding that is unique based on the AONB status.

The North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan

Preparation of a Management Plan is a statutory requirement placed upon local authorities by the CRoW Act 2000, with a review required every five years. The

Management Plan (currently 2009 to 2014) is an agreed agenda for the North Wessex Downs AONB setting out policies and objectives that have been prepared with guidance from its local communities and Council of Partners. The consideration of the Management Plan and the AONB status is again a statutory requirement down to Parish Council level when exercising or performing any functions affecting land in the area, typically this may include when making decisions on planning policy and planning applications. Reference to it in any Community Led Plan is key in gaining an understanding of the AONB and its status.

The Management Plan covers a diverse series of topics from land management, to biodiversity and sustainability, historic environment, development, natural resources, communities and leisure and tourism. Therefore all Community Led Plans within the North Wessex Downs AONB should make reference to this document to be effective.

Further Guidance For Consideration

The North Wessex Downs AONB have also a wide and varied list of publications www.northwessexdowns.org.uk . After the Management Plan the *North Wessex Downs Integrated Landscape Character Assessment (2002)* will be of particular assistance to Community Led Plan formation. This document not only expands on the history, social and economic influences and perceptions of the AONB but then breaks down the North Wessex Downs AONB into broad Landscape Character Areas from “*Open Downland*” to “*Lowland Mosaic*” and then more detailed specific Landscape Character Areas like “*Character 1A : Marlborough Downs.*” Communities are able to find detailed information on the character area which their community lies within together with key issues and management requirements associated with that area.

Other publications produced by the North Wessex Downs AONB include Planning Position Statements; Chalk Grassland, Woodland and Arable Bio-diversity Strategies; The Urban Fringe Action Plan for Southern Swindon; and a Study of Landscape Sensitivities and Constraints to Wind Turbine Development.

Conclusions and Summary

Partnership, community involvement and understanding is key to achieving the primary aim of conserving and enhancing the AONB. Community Led Plans are one way of engaging with local communities to gain a greater understanding of the environment they live within.

In summary therefore, North Wessex Downs AONB support reference to the following within Community-Led Plans that lie wholly or partly within the AONB:

- The North Wessex Downs AONB and its legal landscape designation enshrined within planning policy.
- The North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan (2009-2014) and its objectives, policies and actions.
- The primary purpose of AONB designation: for “conserving and enhancing natural beauty”.
- The duty on all relevant authorities down to Parish Council level to consider the AONB status in any land use/environment decisions.
- The Integrated Character Assessment (2002) and specific Landscape Character Areas that are relevant.
- Other publications where relevant and the Planning Position Statements.

- The availability of grant funding specific to the AONB.

The North Wessex Downs AONB is regularly involved in the draft consultation process of Community-Led Plans and supports early discussions with the AONB to assist with the above.

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