

Correspondence from Rt Hon Dame Cheryl Gillan DBE MP

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

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Det N. Williams

I understand the Chilterns AONB forms part of your local authority and I am writing to seek your opinion and hopefully your support to explore the opportunity of the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty becoming a National Park.

As you may be aware, in 'A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment' the Government has committed to reviewing National Parks and AONBs fit for the 21st century, including whether more may be needed.

There are no National Parks between the Peak District and South Downs or the Brecon Beacons and the Broads. I believe the Chilterns AONB is an ideal candidate for National Park status, for its nationally-important concentrations of chalk grassland, over 11,000 hectares of ancient woodland, chalk streams, red kites and plenty of historical and archaeological value. Such a designation would create a new National Park Authority, which would be solely responsible for local planning within its area.

The Chilterns AONB is on the London Tube line, and facing unprecedented levels of infrastructure development to meet the housing crisis, High Speed Rail and from the East West and North now the proposed 'Arc' of development between Oxford and Cambridge. To the south it is being threatened by development spreading from Slough. It is the nearest designated protected landscapes to a very large urban conurbation, namely London and therefore very vulnerable and valuable.

Under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, it is Natural England's statutory duty to consider which areas in England meet the criteria for designation of a National Park. I have this week written to James Cross, Chief Executive at Natural England for his advice on what the process would be and what considerations he may have already undertaken for this designation proposal. I have also spoken to Sue Holden of the Chilterns Conservation Board, who is very supportive.

I strongly believe the Chilterns AONB should be considered as a candidate. I would be most grateful if you could lend me your support or let me know why you would oppose such a move to protect our local area.

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Papers to the 20 June Meeting of Chilterns Conservation Board

Item 8 Review of National Parks and AONBs

Author: Sue Holden, Chief Officer

Purpose of Report: To update the board with the recently published terms of reference of the Designated Landscapes (National Parks and AONBs) Review.

Introduction The Board will recall that the government's 25 Year Environment Plan committed to review National Parks and AONBs.¹ The government's press release said "an independent panel will look at how these iconic landscapes meet our needs in the 21st century – including whether there is scope for the current network of 34 AONBs and 10 National Parks to expand."² The review will report in 2019, the 70th Anniversary of the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act.

Terms of Reference The terms of reference of the review have now been published and confirms positively that the review "aims not to diminish the character or independence of our designated landscapes, or to impose new burdens on them and the people who live and work in the areas they cover. Instead, its purpose is to ask what might be done better, what changes could assist them, and whether definitions and systems - which in many cases date back to their original creation - are still sufficient."

The objectives of the Review have been given as the following: In the context of meeting both local and national priorities and wider environmental governance, the review will examine and make recommendations on:

- the existing statutory purposes for National Parks and AONBs and how effectively they are being met
- the alignment of these purposes with the goals set out in the 25-Year Plan for the Environment
- the case for extension or creation of new designated areas
- how to improve individual and collective governance of National Parks and AONBs, and how that governance interacts with other national assets
- the financing of National Parks and AONBs
- how to enhance the environment and biodiversity in existing designations
- how to build on the existing eight-point plan for National Parks and to connect more people with the natural environment from all sections of society and improve health and wellbeing
- how well National Parks and AONBs support communities

Review Process

The policy paper suggests that the review will draw on existing evidence and that submitted by interested groups and individuals during the Review. The review team will also visit people and places in a range of designated landscapes. There is no information yet as to how or when we can give evidence.

The review is being chaired by Julian Glover, a journalist and former Downing Street advisor, recommendations will be made to the Government and implementation will be led by the Defra Secretary of State.

Designations and Boundary Reviews

The policy paper outlining the terms of reference says the following

"Expanding on work already underway, the review will also take advice from Natural England on the process of designating National Parks and AONBs and extending boundary areas, with a view to improving and expediting the process."

Board members will want to bear this in mind when considering the questions raised in the following agenda item.

Recommendation

1. Board members are asked to note the terms of the Review

Item 9 National Park Status

Author: Sue Holden, Chief Officer

Summary: A call has been made for the Chilterns to become a National Park. A request for consideration of this can be made to Natural England and consultation on the question could happen as part of our Management Plan Review.

Purpose of Report: To seek agreement from the Board that a request to consider National Park status is made to Natural England. To seek agreement from the Board that the question of National Park status is consulted upon in our Management Plan review.

Introduction Following a meeting with Cheryl Gillan MP in December, at which concerns about development pressure and change were raised, Cheryl has been seeking support for the Chilterns to become a National Park. Cheryl has written to local authorities, local councillors, MPs and government departments promoting this idea. Natural England (NE) have responded to say that to move the idea forward the Chilterns Conservation Board needs to present NE with a compelling case. And that we should include the aspiration in our draft AONB Management Plan and consult upon it through the plan's consultation process. NE also proposed we discuss this with their Thames Region Area Manager and I am meeting him on 21 June.

The Case for Change The Chilterns AONB is facing unprecedented change, directly from housing and infrastructure but also indirectly from growth in London and South-East, increasing traffic, changes in land-use and lack of resources in local government and agencies for conserving landscape and the natural environment. Huge numbers of small incremental changes over the long term are detracting from our Special Qualities, which include views, tranquillity, dark skies, rare habitats and species, and the immense potential we have for access and

recreation. At the same time society needs green space for people's health and well-being, and the natural services provided by a landscape, more than ever.

At the same time society needs green space for people's health and well-being, and the natural services provided by a landscape, more than ever. Time outdoors, in greener, wilder, tranquil places, offers significant health benefits for everyone. Plus the opportunities for recreation, learning, volunteering, tourism and the rural economy of a cared-for, well-known and thriving landscape are significant.

Greater weight and attention needs to be given to the Chilterns and its setting to ensure the landscape and natural beauty is conserved and enhanced, for everyone to enjoy for ever. To achieve this, an enhanced planning role and powers are required. Increased influence could be achieved by becoming a statutory consultee or by having the ability to create a strategic development plan for the whole AONB. Or it could be achieved by becoming a National Park.

The Criteria for National Park Status

NE have advised that the following should be answered in making the request to become a National Park:

1. A proposal needs evidence to satisfy statutory criteria of outstanding natural beauty and recreational opportunity. The criterion 'opportunities for open air recreation' is particularly important.

The Chilterns is already designated for its outstanding natural beauty and we have a long list of special qualities e.g. chalk streams and ancient woodland, some of which are rare nationally and even internationally and many of which are unique in the region.

On recreational opportunity, there are few other designated landscapes which could claim to have as much recreational opportunity as the Chilterns, due to our extensive network of rights of way, to 1.6 million people living within 8km and to ten million people living within an hour. The Chilterns is probably the most accessible protected landscape in Europe, due to the extensive road, rail, underground and rights of way network of the area.

2. The additional benefits arising from NP designation would need to be shown.

National Park status would give a greater recognition to the value of the Chilterns and would create the potential for a more strategic view to be taken on the need for and impacts of development across the whole geography.

The Chilterns needs greater protection due to its location on the edge of Greater London, and of the new Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge arc and for the benefit of all. National Park status would contribute to this. The current protection for AONBs is, in theory, equal but it is not in practice, with the absence of statutory planning powers.

3. The case for designation must be made in an England wide context.

There are no national parks in central southern England. Proximity to London and a South-East location means the Chilterns faces more pressure than most designated landscapes (the Chilterns ranks 3rd in the table of housing applications per km²). The lack of other designated landscapes in the region and the enormous population nearby makes the Chilterns ideally placed to be a new National Park and would help it fulfil its potential, to benefit society.

The context for a request

The government's Review of AONBs and National Parks is covered in the preceding agenda item and the review will "take advice" from Natural England about the process for designating National Parks and AONBs. Board members are aware that there is a list of requests for National Park status, Conservation Board status and boundary reviews and that the process of reviewing each request can take a number of years.

Our request would also feed into plans to change local authorities in parts of the Chilterns. Local Authorities might be concerned that a National Park would take on some of their existing responsibilities, but this is for consideration. In the South Downs National Park, some of the councils have retained responsibilities for determining planning applications, working to policies in a single national park local plan. It is also possible that further variations of the National Park model emerge from the government's Review.

Recommendations

- 1. The Board are asked to give approval for a request for National Park status to be made to Natural England.**
- 2. The Board are asked to approve that the proposal goes into the draft management plan for consultation with partners and the public.**

