

South East & East Protected Landscapes



1 Kent International Gateway road-rail freight interchange site, nr. Maidstone, Kent Downs AONB (photo: Richard Bate)



2 Housing site, Pangbourne: possible contributor to 2000 houses within the North Wessex Downs AONB in West Berkshire Council's Core Strategy (photo: Land Management Services)



3 Horkeley Park tourist attraction site, Dedham Vale AONB (photo: Stour Valley Action Group)

The Challenge to Protected Landscapes in the South East & East

In a nation famed for its countryside, England's National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) are our finest landscapes. They are established in law to recognise the importance which the nation attaches to their protection. Both designations exist for

'the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty'

of their areas. National Parks have the additional objective of promoting opportunities for their understanding and enjoyment.

Yet pressures for damaging change are never far away, whether from energy, water, transport or housing developments, or from polytunnels, erosion of landscape features, poor design or continual small-scale damage to local environmental quality. Nowhere is the threat to these special landscapes more intense than in the greater South East, where population growth is creating demand for more infrastructure and new development.

The outcomes to most of these risks and threats to National Parks and AONBs are decided through the land use planning system. Sound and effective planning controls are quite simply essential. Not only can they prevent bad developments, but they can also help good ones to proceed. National Parks have their own planning authorities, but in AONBs planning powers are exercised by local authorities within whose area each part of an AONB lies. The arrangements have worked reasonably well, but this has depended largely on a strong Government policy (see Box) to impress on locally elected councillors to importance of defending the national landscape interest.



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21. Nationally designated areas comprising National Parks, the Broads, the New Forest Heritage Area and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), have been confirmed by the Government as having the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty. The conservation of the natural beauty of the landscape and countryside should therefore be given great weight in planning policies and development control decisions in these areas. The conservation of wildlife and the cultural heritage are important considerations in all these areas....
 22. Major developments should not take place in these designated areas, except in exceptional circumstances. This policy includes major development proposals that raise issues of national significance. Because of the serious impact that major developments may have on these areas of natural beauty, and taking account of the recreational opportunities that they provide, applications for all such developments should be subject to the most rigorous examination. Major development proposals should be demonstrated to be in the public interest before being allowed to proceed. Consideration of such applications should therefore include an assessment of:
 - (i) the need for the development, including in terms of any national considerations, and the impact of permitting it, or refusing it, upon the local economy;
 - (ii) the cost of, and scope for, developing elsewhere outside the designated area, or meeting the need for it in some other way; and
 - (iii) any detrimental effect on the environment, the landscape and recreational opportunities, and the extent to which that could be moderated.
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Planning Policy Statement 7:
Sustainable Development in Rural Areas, DCLG, 2004.

The Risk

The real risk now is that major changes to the planning system through the National Planning Policy Framework could erode the special regime which has until now benefitted these protected landscapes.

Efforts to make the planning system more responsive to proposals for essential development could too easily apply as well within National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, or be interpreted by planning authorities to do so. Only planning powers stand between developers and the qualities which millions of people each year come to enjoy in these special places. The Government should of course be proudly retaining the existing planning policies for National Parks and AONBs, in line with its promises (*see below*).

Sound planning is integral to sustaining the landscape, which in turn underpins the rural economy of National Parks and AONBs. Independent research* in the Yorkshire and Humber region surveyed over 400 businesses in the National Parks there and towns around them, and found:

- 69% of businesses in the Parks believe high landscape quality has a positive impact on their business performance;
- 26% of businesses think a deterioration in landscape quality would seriously affect their businesses.

* SQW Ltd for the Campaign for National Parks, 2006

Commitments to National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

“We will maintain national Green Belt protection, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), National Parks, Sites of Special Scientific Interest and other environmental designations which protect the character of our country’s landscape.”

Conservative Manifesto 2010

“A new presumption in favour of sustainable development will be a powerful new principle underpinning the planning system that will help to ensure that the default answer to development and growth is “yes” rather than “no”, except where this would clearly compromise the key sustainable development principles in national planning policy, including protecting the Green Belt and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.”

Planning and the Budget, March 2011, Department for Communities and Local Government:

Recommendations

The National Policy Planning Framework should:

- retain the thrust of the well-established Government policy in paragraphs 21-23 of PPS7 (*see front page*).
- clarify that all local development plans and planning decisions within or affecting National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty must reflect the national priority given to conserving these landscapes, in line with the special protection given to them in law.
- specify that development plans and planning decisions should have regard to the effect of proposals on the settings of nationally protected landscapes.
- require public bodies to demonstrate how they have exercised their statutory ‘duty of regard’ in their decisions on developments affecting protected landscapes (as required by section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000).
- require local planning authorities when drafting development plans to have regard to statutory AONB and National Park Management Plans.

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Planning decisions still challenge protected areas

Wind turbines, Kessingland, 200m outside the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB, permitted in May 2008 following a public inquiry. The Planning Inspector nonetheless commented

“The two 125m high wind turbines will undoubtedly have a significant impact on both the immediate and more distant landscapes to the south and west, including within the AONB.”

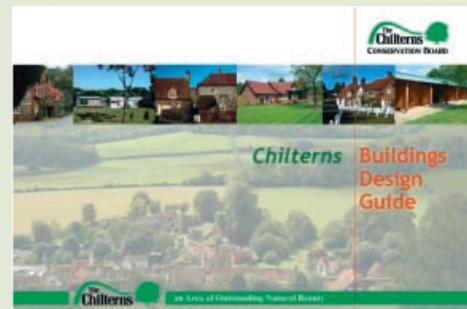
Natural England has commented

“The effect of visually prominent development occurring near to protected landscape boundaries has not consistently been taken into account during the determination of planning applications. This has led to noticeable “necklacing” effects affecting some AONBs and National Parks.”

(Position on Protected Landscapes, 2010)

Promoting high quality development in protected areas

Planning policy and practice in protected landscapes can help fulfil the National Planning Policy Framework objective for a positive approach to delivering high quality well-designed development, where appropriate in sensitive areas.



The Chilterns Building Design Guide exemplifies local policy to promote good design in new development.



Chinnor station, Oxfordshire: winner of the Chilterns Design Special Project Award 2004. Reproduction of previously demolished 1872 original station:

“A really great volunteer effort to replicate the original station, with good use of local materials, particularly flintwork and use of lime mortars.”

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a coalition of nationally protected areas.
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