

## Extract from DEFRA Website re Role and Status of AONBs and Management Plans

### Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs)



There are 40 AONBs in England and Wales. The statutory purpose of AONBs is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area. Where an AONB has a Conservation Board, the Board has an additional purpose to increase public understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the area.

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#### What are AONBs?

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) were brought into being by the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 strengthened the conservation and management of AONBs in partnership with local authorities.

They are fine landscapes, of great variety in character and extent. The criteria for designation is their outstanding natural beauty. Many AONBs also fulfil a recreational role but, unlike national parks, this is not a designation criteria.

The first designation of an AONB was Gower in Wales in 1956 and most recent addition was the Tamar Valley in 1995.

A map of AONBs in England and Wales (and also those in Northern Ireland) can be found on the National Association of AONBs website.

- [A map of AONBs in England and Wales](#) (on National Association for AONBs website)

#### Purpose of AONBs

AONBs have the following statutory purpose - To conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape.

A Conservation Board has an additional purpose to increase the understanding and enjoyment by the public of the special qualities of the area.

Additionally, while having regard to the two purposes, a Board must seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities within the AONB; for that purpose, a Board should co-operate with local authorities and public bodies whose functions include the promotion of economic or social development within the AONB.

### **Who manages them?**

Natural England and the Countryside Council for Wales are responsible for designating AONBs and advising Government on policies for their protection.



The administration of planning and development control in AONBs is the responsibility of those local authorities within whose boundaries they fall.

Larger and more complex AONBs can apply to the Secretary of State to establish independent Conservation Boards under section 86 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000.

### **How are they funded?**

The responsibility for funding AONBs rests with Natural England. AONBs administered by their constitutional local authorities receive 75% of their funding from Natural England, the remaining 25% coming from their constituent local authorities. Each AONB's funding depends on agreement between the constituent local authorities and Natural England. The agreement has to take into account the resources of the local authorities and Natural England and their overall priorities.

An AONB administered by a Conservation Board has slightly different funding arrangements. It receives 80% of its funding from Natural England as opposed to 75% for AONBs managed by their constituent local authorities. This is only to help offset the fact that a Board is unable to reclaim VAT costs in the way that other AONBs can. It is not intended that becoming a Conservation Board will provide financial advantage over the AONBs. The remaining 20% of costs are provided by the constituent local authorities.

In the late spring of 2005, Defra, through the Countryside Agency, introduced a Sustainable Development Fund for AONBs. The Fund is intended to support the purposes of AONBs and the

delivery of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 Management Plans, support Defra's objectives of sustainable development, partnership and social inclusion; and support Natural England in working towards a sustainably managed countryside, improved environment and integrated delivery of rural services. The Fund is administered by Natural England with a "light touch" approach.

## **Conservation Boards**

The CRoW Act's most significant change to the way AONBs could be managed was the ability to create Conservation Boards. The intention was to help simplify the administration of larger and more complex AONBs so that one body would have the delegated authority to manage an AONB as a whole.

Conservation Boards are made up of members appointed by Local Authorities, parishes and the Secretary of State.

An AONB Conservation Board is created by the Secretary of State signing (making) an Establishment Order, but before they will do this, they must be sure that the majority of Local Authorities within the AONB support the creation of a Board. The Order must have received an affirmative resolution from both Houses of Parliament.

Conservation Boards for the Cotswolds and Chiltern AONBs became operational using this process on 1 February 2005.

Section 14 of the establishment orders for the existing boards require a Code of Conduct to be produced. Defra is currently drawing up a completely new Code of Conduct.

## **How are the members chosen?**

'AONB Conservation Boards are made up from:

- Local Authorities appointees,
- Parish Council appointees, and
- Secretary of State 'national' appointees.

The basic rules determining the size of these groups within a Conservation Board are that:-

- At least 40% of members have to be appointed by Local Authorities,
- At least 20% by the parish councils, and
- No more than 20% by the Secretary of State.

The Chilterns Conservation Board currently has 29 members, and the Cotswolds Conservation Board has thirty six.

## **Information for Local Authorities/Conservation Boards**

Defra has issued guidance notes on the establishment and operation of English AONB Conservation Boards:

- [AONB Conservation Boards - Guidance](#) (PDF 99KB) - October 2008
- [Flow chart of generic Conservation Board establishment process](#) (PDF 14KB) - October 2005

## Management Plans

Section 89 of the CRoW Act 2000 required all AONBs to prepare and publish a management plan for their area by the end of March 2004. To support AONB staff, Natural England have produced the AONB Management Handbook which is available online through the [Finest Countryside Learning Network](#).



If a management plan (written by a Local Authority or a Joint Committee of two or more authorities) already exists then Local Authorities in the AONB can choose to formally adopt that as the "AONB Management Plan". The Act also requires that the plan be reviewed every five years, consideration given to whether any changes need to be made and amended if necessary.

In the case of areas where a Conservation Board has been established by the Secretary of State to manage an AONB: the Board must either adopt an existing plan or prepare their own within two years of being established.

Defra is aware that every AONB has put immense effort into producing their management plan. Their investment is now paying off as the plans are being adopted by local authorities, and copies submitted to the Department. We hope that the plans will now become tailored "living documents" guiding the development and conservation of each AONB.

## Duty to have regard to AONBs

There is a general statutory duty on all relevant authorities to have regard to the purposes of AONBs when making decisions affecting these areas. A [guidance note explaining the duties](#) (PDF 96KB) is available.

## Contacts

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