

BY EMAIL

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15th June 2012.

Dear Oliver,

Upper Thames Catchment Management Plan – Consultation draft.

Thank you for forwarding the consultation draft Catchment Management Plan for the Upper Thames. A large area of the catchment lies within the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), designated by Government in 1966 and extended in 1990, under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area. The Catchment Management Plan area also includes part of the North Wessex Downs AONB.

AONBs are also recognised and valued at the international level. The World Conservation Union (IUCN) considers AONBs to be of international importance as Category V Protected Landscapes and therefore listed on the World Database of Protected Landscapes compiled by the United Nations Environment Programme's World Conservation Monitoring Centre.

Background to comments.

The Cotswolds Conservation Board was established by Parliamentary Order under part iv of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. The purposes of the Board are:

- To conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Cotswolds AONB
- To increase the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the AONB, ensuring these are compatible with its conservation and enhancement.

In carrying out its twin purposes, the Board shall seek to foster the economic and social well-being of its local communities.

The Board is funded by Defra to carry out its purposes and is therefore part of the Defra family alongside the Environment Agency, Natural England, Forestry Commission and National park Authorities.

The CROW Act 2000 underlined the importance of AONBs and introduced specific requirements for local authorities and public bodies, including the Environment Agency

and Natural England, in looking after these special areas. Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, places a duty on public bodies to have regard to the purposes of AONB designation when carrying out their functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land. For further information on the duty and Defra's expectations: <http://archive.defra.gov.uk/rural/documents/protected/npaonb-duties-guide.pdf>

The Board is responsible for producing the statutory management plan for the Cotswolds AONB as required by section 89 of the CROW Act and in doing so, involves a wide range of agencies, authorities, organisations and individuals with an interest in the Cotswolds through participatory events, surveys and consultation. The 2008 – 13 plan was subject to widespread consultation, including the Environment Agency, is supported by a Strategic Environmental Assessment and Appropriate Assessment and has wide support, including endorsement from 14 local authorities. The Management Plan for the Cotswolds is currently under review and a revised plan is currently out for consultation until 13th July 2012. The Environment Agency has been consulted.

Overarching comments and concerns.

The Board welcomes these initiatives and already has several policies within the Cotswolds AONB Management Plan that will support the priorities and actions in the draft catchment management plan. However, the Board has two particular concerns; lack of recognition of the Cotswolds AONB / the AONB Management Plan and watercourse fencing.

Recognition of the AONB / Management Plan

The draft Catchment Management Plan for the Upper Thames states that part of the catchment falls within the Cotswolds AONB in the introduction. There is no mention elsewhere in the plan of the AONB or the AONB Management Plan and the implications they may have on the catchment management plan and the Field Actions.

A paragraph could be included in section 1.1.2. to explain the purpose of AONB Designation and what this means to the Catchment Plan. Suggested text:

The Cotswolds and North Wessex Downs Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are nationally protected landscapes designated by Government under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 underlined the importance of AONBs and Section 85 of the Act placed a duty on public bodies, including the Environment Agency to have regard to the purposes of AONB designation when carrying out their functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land within these special landscapes.

Both AONBs have statutory Management Plans that identify the strategic vision and policies to guide the management of the area.

Consequently, proposals within this catchment plan need to take account of their impact on the special qualities of the protected landscape and how they contribute to the AONB management plan and objectives of AONB designation.

A similar paragraph covering SSSIs would be useful. The inclusion of a map showing the catchment with AONBs and SSSIs would also be useful.

Watercourse Fencing

The Board has identified, through the Cotswolds AONB Landscape Character Assessment and subsequent Landscape Strategy and Guidelines, that permanent fencing of watercourses is an unacceptable force for change. Permanent fencing can be intrusive in the landscape and lead to the fenced off area becoming overgrown with rank vegetation due to the loss of grazing, both of which contradict the Catchment Management Plan aspiration for Creating Better Places for people to work, live and visit. A good example of the intrusive nature of permanent fencing is along the Churn near North Cerney. The impact is exacerbated by the fencing following the meanders across the meadows and the comparatively heavy specification.

The Board's policy in the Landscape Strategy and Guidelines* is to:

- Encourage low intensity grazing along floodplain and valley bottom meadows
- Promote the use of temporary or electric fencing if necessary.

The Board is therefore concerned to see water course fencing as a local field action along the Churn.

Permanent watercourse fencing may be appropriate in some circumstances but should not be the automatic response to solving an issue. A more considered approach should be taken to reduce the impact of watercourse fencing, where needed, and potentially save money. Alternatives include:

- Temporary fencing, particularly in sensitive landscapes and/or where the grazing period is short.
- A 'lighter' specification of fence to reduce impact (and reduce cost)
- A more sensitive layout of fencing E.g. not following meanders.

Consideration also needs to be given as to how the bank-side vegetation is to be managed to avoid, in particular, scrub encroachment.

Responses to consultation questions

Q1 What would your vision for the Upper Thames Catchment be? For example is there a more specific aspiration than 'Creating Better Places for people to work, live and visit?'

The aspiration does not reflect the thrust of the Water Framework Directive which the catchment management plans are to deliver.

Q2 This catchment plan is our first step to implementing a catchment based approach. The assessment of problems in the waterbodies has been agreed by the Environment Agency teams. Do you have any issues that need to be addressed to reach our objectives?

The principle issues are:

- How the catchment management plans address and contribute to the purposes of AONB designation.
- Watercourse fencing within open landscapes in an AONB

See comments above.

Q3 We have set out some actions required to meet the objectives. To what extent do you agree the right actions have been identified?

The vast majority of proposed field actions complement the AONB Management Plan and are supported. As raised above, the Board has concerns about proposals for watercourse fencing along the Churn.

Q4 Do you believe there are any missing actions?

No

Q5 How would you like to be involved within the process of delivering WFD actions?

The Cotswolds Conservation Board is keen to be involved in the delivery of the WFD where it impacts on the Cotswolds AONB. At a strategic level, the Board produces the statutory management plan for the Cotswolds AONB and a range of guidance and position statements. These are readily available and already used by a wide range of bodies such as local authorities and government agencies. The Board encourages the Environment Agency to use them and where relevant be involved in their production and review.

The Board is also keen to be involved in the practical implementation of actions where they impact on the AONB. At times, this may only need to involve commenting on detailed proposals but could involve the Board taking the lead on coordinating or implementing projects. The Board's voluntary arm, the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens are also keen to be involved in appropriate practical work.

Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs)

The Government White Paper; The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature published in June 2011 included the commitment to 'enable partnerships of local authorities, local communities and landowners, the private sector and conservation organisations to establish NIAs, based on local assessment of opportunities for restoring and connecting nature on a significant scale'.

The Cotswolds Ecological Network Partnership, formed in May 2010, has agreed to establish two NIAs; the Cotswold Scarp NIA and the Cotswold Rivers NIA. The Cotswold Rivers NIA includes the river valleys of the Coln and Churn covered by the Upper Thames Catchment Management Plan. The aim of the NIA, to create an area of highly connected habitat along the river valleys, complements the Catchment Management Plan

Q6 Have we missed any other partners who could/should be involved?

Natural England has established a Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF) Project in the north Cotswolds, coinciding with the Windrush, Evenlode and Upper Thames catchments. There is a lot of overlap and the Catchment Management Plan needs to include recognition of this. The CSF Project could also be an identified lead or partner for some of the actions.

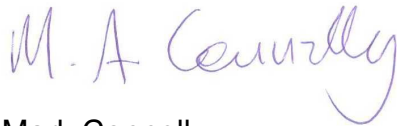
Q7 Do you have any other comments on this catchment approach?

Water resources, like landscape, biodiversity etc, do not recognise traditional administrative boundaries. The Board, therefore, supports the catchment approach as a common sense holistic approach to managing the water resource.

On a point of accuracy, in section 3.2 it is the Cotswolds Conservation Board that exists to conserve and enhance ... etc.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss any of the above responses, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely



Mark Connelly

Land Management Officer