



Planning for the Future Consultation  
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government  
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29 October 2020

Dear Sir / Madam,

## PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE CONSULTATION

The Cotswolds Conservation Board ('the Board') welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Government's 'Planning for the Future' white paper ('PWP') consultation.

The Board's response focuses, primarily, on the implications of the proposed planning reforms for the Cotswolds National Landscape<sup>1</sup> and for the family of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) as a whole – landscapes whose distinctive character and natural beauty are so outstanding that it is in the nation's interest to safeguard them.<sup>2</sup>

The Board recognises that AONBs should not be preserved in aspic and that they should be living, working landscapes with thriving local communities. However, the development that is required to achieve these aspirations should be delivered in a way that is compatible with – and positively contributes to – the statutory purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of AONBs.

It is important to note that 'relevant authorities', including Ministers of the Crown and government departments, have a statutory duty to have regard to this purpose '*in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in an area of outstanding natural beauty*'.<sup>3</sup> As such, the potential impact of the Government's proposed planning reforms on AONBs should be an essential consideration for the Government.

The Board is concerned that the scope of the specific consultation questions is quite rigid. As such, we consider that they do not adequately address the over-arching implications of the proposed planning reforms, particularly with regards to potential impacts of the proposed reforms on AONBs and on the Cotswolds National Landscape in particular.

We are aware that the National Association of AONBs and many individual AONBs are submitting responses to the PWP consultation. We hope that these responses will be considered collectively and

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<sup>1</sup> Cotswolds National Landscape is the new name for the Cotswolds Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The new name takes forward one of the proposals of the Government-commissioned 'Landscapes Review' to rename AONBs as 'National Landscapes'. This change reflects the national importance of AONBs and the fact that they are safeguarded, in the national interest, for nature, people, business and culture.

<sup>2</sup> Defra (2019). *Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: technical support scheme (England) 2017 – 2019*. ([Link](#)).

<sup>3</sup> Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. ([Link](#)).

### Cotswolds Conservation Board

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The Cotswolds National Landscape is a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), managed and looked after by the Cotswolds Conservation Board.

[cotswoldsaonb.org.uk](http://cotswoldsaonb.org.uk)

Chairman:  
**Brendan McCarthy**  
Vice Chair:  
**Rebecca Charley**

that the issues and recommendations that are raised in these responses will be fully addressed by Government as it progresses its proposed planning reforms.

In order to address these over-arching implications, the Board's response is grouped around four key issues:

For each of these key issues, we make a number of recommendations for how Government should address the issue. Where appropriate, the relevant PWP proposal and / or question is identified for each key issue.

The key issues and recommendations can be summarised as follows:

**KEY ISSUE 1: Level of protection afforded to AONBs**

Maintaining the current level of protection afforded to AONB in national planning policy will not be sufficient to achieve the purpose of designation. Additional measures need to be put in place to address this issue, including implementing the planning-related proposals of the Government-commissioned Landscapes Review Final Report.

**KEY ISSUE 2: Development in the setting of AONBs and other issues relating to the proposed growth / renewal / protected areas.**

The proposed 'growth', 'renewal' and 'protected' areas do not adequately address development in the setting of AONBs. The proposed zoning of land into these three areas is too simplistic – a more nuanced approach is required.

**KEY ISSUE 3: Housing Provision and Affordable Housing**

The assumption that there is a direct link between building more houses and affordability is fundamentally flawed. Housing provision in AONBs should be based on robust evidence of local need arising within the AONB, with priority being given to genuinely affordable housing, including social rented housing.

**KEY ISSUE 4: Climate change and nature recovery**

Measures to address climate change and nature recovery should underpin the Government's planning reforms.

Additional, supporting information relating to each of these key issues and the associated recommendations is provided in Annex 1 below.

Yours faithfully,



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## ANNEX 1. SUPPORTING INFORMATION REGARDING THE COTSWOLDS CONSERVATION BOARD'S FOUR KEY ISSUES AND ASSOCIATED RECOMMENDATIONS

### KEY ISSUE 1: Level of protection afforded to AONBs

#### Most relevant section of the PWP:

- Proposal 1 / paragraph 2.8-2.12 / Question 5: Three types of land – growth, renewal and protected.
- Proposal 4 / paragraphs 2.23 – 2.29 / Question 8: Standard method for establishing housing requirement figures.

#### Issue

The Board is pleased to see that the PWP proposes to treat AONBs as ‘protected’ areas *‘that justify more stringent development controls to ensure sustainability’*.

Paragraph 2.10 of the PWP states that, for protected areas, what is considered to be permissible would be explained by cross-reference to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). This indicates that the development controls that would be applied to protected areas, including AONBs, would remain unchanged. This implies that the Government considers that the current planning regime provides an appropriate level of protection of AONBs

However, this implication does not align with the experience of the Conservation Boards and many AONB partnerships. This is particularly the case in the south / south-east of England, where AONBs have seen a dilution of protection in the last decade due to development pressure, especially for housing, being given priority over the conservation and enhancement of AONBs.

Between 2012 and 2017, AONBs in England experienced a step-change in the number of housing units approved per year. In the Cotswolds National Landscape, for example, there was a three-fold increase in the average number of housing units built per year, during that time period.<sup>4</sup>

Since then, the standard method for calculating housing need, which was introduced in 2017, has increased the pressure for housing developments in AONBs even further. The proposed changes to the standard method add further pressure still. For example, in Cotswold District, where approximately 78% of the District lies within the Cotswolds National Landscape, the new standard method would potentially lead to a further three-fold increase in annual housing delivery in the District.

This increase in development pressure is already slowly eroding the natural beauty and special qualities of our AONBs, both through major development and through multiple smaller scale redevelopments. This, in turn, is undermining the purpose of AONB designation. The new standard method would further increase this erosion of natural beauty in our finest landscapes.

For these reasons, the Board considers that maintaining the status quo, in terms of the level of protection afforded to AONBs in national planning policy, will not be sufficient to prevent the purpose of AONB designation being undermined.

Further information on the challenges posed by the new standard method are provided in the Board’s response to the Government’s changes to the current planning system consultation.

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<sup>4</sup> Dixon, D., Sinden, N. and Crabtree, T. (2017) *An Independent Review of Housing in England’s Areas of Outstanding Beauty 2012-2017*. Commissioned by the NAAONB and CPRE. ([Link](#)).

Furthermore, with large AONBs such as the Cotswolds National Landscape cutting across multiple local authority boundaries, there is no regular, ongoing overview of the scale of development that is being proposed and permitted in the AONBs and their settings (apart from one off studies, such as the 2017 report referred to above). This is a particularly significant problem in the 2,000 square kilometres of the Cotswolds National Landscape, which cuts across 15 different local authority areas.

Without this overview, it is virtually impossible to provide a coherent and coordinated strategy for housing delivery (and other types of development) – or to identify an appropriate level of development - across the whole AONB.

AONBs are supposed to have the same (highest) level of protection, with regards to landscape and scenic beauty, as National Parks. However, the way in which housing requirements are assessed for the two designations is very different. Circular 2010 recognises that National Parks *'are not suitable locations for unrestricted housing and does not therefore provide general housing requirements for them'*. AONBs, on the other hand, are subject to the housing needs and requirements identified for multiple local authority areas. As a result the level of housing provision within AONBs is significantly higher than in National Parks even though they supposedly have the same level of protection in planning policy.

This issue is mirrored in the PWP, which states, in paragraph 2.25 that *'the whole purpose of National parks would be undermined by multiple large scale housing developments so a standard method should factor this in'* but which does not explicitly apply this principle to AONBs.

The PWP asserts that constraints will be factored into the proposed standard method for establishing housing requirements. However, the over-riding pressure is for local authorities to deliver their share of the national housing target of 300,000 homes per year, either individually or through cooperating with neighbouring authorities. There is no consideration of the fact that relevant constraints may mean that the housing target is not realistically achievable across multiple local authorities.

The term 'constraint' (as applied to AONBs) is, itself, unhelpful as it implies that relevant AONBs are barriers that need to be overcome. However, AONBs are an asset for the nation and should be valued as such in planning policies and in planning decisions.

### **Recommendations to Address Key Issue 1**

The Government's planning reforms provide a real opportunity to redress the excessive development pressures on AONBs and the way in which these pressures undermine the purpose of designation. The reforms also provide an opportunity to value these landscapes as an asset for the nation, rather than being seen as a constraint that must be overcome.

In order to achieve these aspirations, the Board recommends that the Government's planning reforms should:

- Facilitate the implementation of the planning-related proposals of the Landscapes Review<sup>5</sup> Final Report (e.g. stronger statutory purposes for protected landscapes), including:
  - Furthering the purpose of AONB designation; and
  - Providing statutory consultee status for AONBs.

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<sup>5</sup> The Landscapes Review is more commonly referred to as the Glover Review.

For the Cotswolds National Landscape (and potentially some of the other large, bureaucratically complex AONBs with heavy development pressures), the planning reforms should also facilitate consideration of the following proposals of the Landscapes Review:

- A single Local Plan for the whole of the National Landscape; and
  - National Park status for the National Landscape.
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- Address AONB constraints when calculating housing need (e.g. by removing the affordable housing weighting in local authority areas that overlap with AONBs), rather than leaving this consideration until the subsequent stage of determining housing requirements.
  - Base housing requirements for local planning authority areas that overlap with AONBs on evidence of landscape character, sensitivity and capacity rather than on the application of a standard formula, especially where a large proportion of the local authority area overlaps with the AONB.
  - Ensure that development within AONBs delivers net-gains, not just for biodiversity but for all of the factors that contribute to the natural beauty of the AONB.

**KEY ISSUE 2: Development in the setting of AONBs and other issues relating to the proposed growth / renewal / protected areas.**

**Most relevant section of the PWP:**

- Proposal 1 / paragraph 2.8-2.12 / Question 5: Three types of land – growth, renewal and protected.

**Issue**

#### 2a. Development in the setting of AONBs

The PWP's proposed zoning into growth, renewal and protected areas does not address development in the setting of AONBs.

As stated in the Government's planning practice guidance, land within the setting of AONBs often makes an important contribution to maintaining their natural beauty and, where poorly located or designed, can do significant harm.<sup>6</sup>

With regards to the Cotswolds National Landscape, the views from the Cotswold escarpment (within the National Landscape) towards the Vales of Evesham and Gloucester (in the setting of the National Landscape), and vice-versa, are one of the special qualities of the National Landscape. This makes development in the setting of this section of the National Landscape an even more significant issue.

However, this setting coincides with a number of urban areas adjacent to the National Landscape boundary, including Gloucester, Cheltenham and Tewkesbury, which are forecast to have significant levels of growth over the next few years. If such areas were to be automatically classed as 'growth' or 'renewal' areas, with a fast track to planning permission, the resulting development could potentially have a significant adverse effect on the National Landscape and undermine the purpose of designation.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/natural-environment#landscape>. Paragraph 042.

## **Recommendations to address Key Issue 2a**

The Government's planning reforms should take account of the potential adverse impacts of establishing 'growth' or 'renewal' areas in the setting of AONBs. Where appropriate, consideration should be given to applying a more restrictive approach to development in the setting of AONBs than in other areas outside the AONB boundary.

### 2b. Other issues relating to the proposed growth / renewal / protected areas

The issue of development in the setting of AONBs highlights one of the potential problems of allocating land into one of the three proposed areas – growth, renewal or protected. The Board considers that such an approach is too simplistic.

The creation of high quality places needs a more nuanced approach that recognises that new communities need green areas for leisure and health and space for nature and that protected landscapes need to accommodate some growth.

With regards to 'protected' areas the PWP is very inconsistent in the way that it specifies the designations that would merit protected area status. For example, it refers to various designations (and non-designated assets that merit protection), in various combinations, throughout the paper. It is also not clear as to the types of protected areas that would be decided / allocated at a national level or at a local level.

## **Recommendations to address Key Issue 2b**

The Board recommends that the Government should:

- Reconsider its proposal to allocate land into one of three zones - growth, renewal or protected – and, instead, consider options for a more nuanced approach.
- Clarify: (i) the types of designations (and non-designated assets) that would be given protected area status; and (ii) the types of protected areas that would be decided at a national level and at a local level.

## **KEY ISSUE 3: Housing Provision and Affordable Housing**

### **Most relevant section of the PWP:**

- Proposal 4 / paragraphs 2.23 – 2.29 / Question 8: Standard method for establishing housing requirement figures.

### **Issue**

Proposal 4 is based on the premise that there is a direct correlation between building more houses and the affordability of housing (i.e. increasing the supply of homes decreases demand / need, thereby decreasing house prices to enable housing to become more affordable). However, this is a significant oversimplification of the affordability issue. It is neither entirely correct nor supported by evidence.

There are multiple, more nuanced factors that affect the entire country that need to be addressed in order to improve affordability. For example:

- land banking (i.e. land being used as a financial asset to increase share prices rather than to deliver housing) and developers purposefully 'drip-feeding' new homes into the market to inflate house prices;
- wages have not kept pace with house prices;
- not enough social housing has been built;
- both low interest rates and the increased ability of people being able to get a mortgage have fuelled an increase in house prices; and
- second home ownership and buy to let have removed housing from the market that could otherwise be made available to first home owners, and the resulting increased demand within a reduced pool of housing stock inflates house prices and worsens affordability.

The use of affordability is a crude and unsubstantiated method of calculating housing need. It is unlikely, in reality, to produce a reliable figure for the number of homes that are needed. As such it is an entirely unsound basis upon which to plan for housing growth.

AONBs have a number of additional factors that contribute to affordability issues. For example, the natural beauty of AONBs makes them highly desirable places to live. This increased desirability bring with it a higher price tag. In addition, such beautiful landscapes are also highly desirable places to go on holiday so multiple properties are used as holiday lets rather than as homes.

By factoring affordability into the standard method for calculating housing need, the Government is actually encouraging more housing to be built in AONBs.

The higher prices associated with housing in AONBs means that many people who work in AONBs or grew up in AONBs (and have family there) are not able to afford to live there. Many of these people work in relatively low paid jobs in sectors that either help to create and enhance the outstanding natural beauty of these landscapes (for example, farming and forestry) or in sectors that rely on this natural beauty to attract customers (e.g. tourism).

In order for such low income workers / households to be able to live in AONBs, it will be essential to provide housing that is genuinely affordable. In most cases, discount market housing will be out of their price range and options such as social rented housing will be more appropriate.

This issue is recognised by Government with regards to National Parks. For example, Circular 2010<sup>7</sup> recognises that new housing in National Parks should be focused on meeting affordable housing requirements. However, there is no equivalent national policy statement in relation to AONBs, even though AONBs have the same status of protection as National Parks.

The Cotswolds AONB Management Plan 2018-2023 (Policy CE12) seeks to address this issue by specifying that development in the Cotswolds should be based on robust evidence of local need arising from within the AONB, with priority being given to affordable housing. This 'robust' evidence includes data such as that provided by rural housing need surveys for individual parishes.

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/221086/pb13387-vision-circular2010.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/221086/pb13387-vision-circular2010.pdf)

### **Recommendations to address Key Issue 3**

The Board recommends that the Government should:

- Reconsider the presumption that there is a direct correlation between building more houses and increasing affordability.
- Base housing requirements and housing delivery in AONBs (or the section of local authority areas that overlap with AONBs) on affordable housing needs arising within the AONB, or at least factor this into housing need calculations. This should include the provision of more housing that is genuinely affordable, such as social-rented housing.
- Exclude affordability ratios when determining housing needs and / or housing requirements for AONBs (or the section of local authority areas that overlap with AONBs).

### **KEY ISSUE 4: Climate change and nature recovery**

#### **Most relevant section of the PWP:**

- This issue cuts across all aspects of the PWP and the Government's proposed planning reforms.

#### **Issue**

Two of the most pressing and inter-related issues of modern times - at a global, national and local level – are climate change (and the associated aspirations to address the 'climate emergency') and the catastrophic loss of biodiversity (and the associated aspirations to deliver 'nature recovery').

The Board acknowledges that the PWP does refer to these issues in a number of places and takes some (relatively modest) steps to address them, for example, through Proposal 18, which relates to improvements in energy efficiency standards.

However, the PWP and the Government's proposed planning reforms also potentially undermine efforts to address these issues. For example, in order to mitigate the impacts of climate change, development should be based on a settlement hierarchy, in which development is focussed in locations that are close to sustainable transport hubs, services, centres of employment, etc. However, it does not appear that the PWP is promoting this approach. Indeed, the PWP proposals relating to permission in principle potentially encourage development on greenfield sites away from such services.

Climate change and nature recovery are such significant issues that they should be central strands of the PWP, underpinning the Government's planning reforms.

### **Recommendations to address Key Issue 4**

The Board recommends that the Government should:

- Ensure that climate change and nature recovery underpin – and become central strands in – the Government's planning reforms. The delivery of new housing (and retrofitting existing housing) should be required to play a key role in addressing these issues.



- Ensure closer integration between the Government’s planning reforms and other relevant initiatives such as the Government’s 25 Year Environment Plan, the Environment Bill and the Agriculture Bill.