

SURREY AGLV REVIEW

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The issue of the status of Local Landscape Designations (LLD's) has been highlighted by the recent advice issued by the government and embodied in PPS 7. This states that a landscape character assessment linked to criteria based policy approach should provide sufficient protection for these areas provided such designations are based on a formal and robust assessment of the qualities of the landscape concerned.

Against this background, Chris Burnett Associates (CBA) were commissioned to undertake a review of the Surrey AGLV by the Surrey Planning Officers Association. (SPOA)

The study commenced with a review of historic background. It established that the Surrey Hills AONB is closely linked with the designation of the AGLV. The first County Plan approved in 1958 showed the first AGLV area, which was a smaller area incorporating the North Downs escarpment and the area of Greensand Hills surrounding Leith Hill. The AONB designated in the same year incorporated the original AGLV area but was much larger including the Greensand Valleys, the whole of the Frensham / Devils Punch Bowl plateau and parts of the Wooded Weald. County Plan Reviews in 1971 and a second review of the AGLV in the early 1980s resulted in further areas being designated, effectively as extensions to the AONB boundary, which remain in place today.

A review of national background was also undertaken this revealed that Natural England had recently undertaken a nationwide review of the status and approach by Local Authorities towards LLD s in England. This revealed a number of key findings

- there was continued support for LLDs by many LA s due to uncertainty of alternative approaches
- LLD s are widely valued and understood
- LLD s are generally perceived to be successful in protecting areas of high landscape value.

They also found:

- LLDs do not facilitate appropriate development or enhancement
- They are not often justified by a robust evidence base
- They are not used as a primary reason for planning refusal
- A significant proportion of LAs (43%) were planning to use alternative approaches to LLDs in their LDF's.

The overall recommendation from this review was that Natural England should promote the use of landscape character assessment to underpin the formulation and application of criteria based policies (CBP s) in Local Development Frameworks. This should be the primary method for delivering the governments objective of providing for sustainable development in sensitive landscapes and at the same time protecting them from inappropriate development and enhancing local distinctiveness commensurately. Pilot studies were set up in three areas to take these recommendations forward. The linkage between landscape character assessment and criteria based policies is still therefore in embryonic form.

CBA also consulted all the planning authorities covered by the Surrey AGLV and found that views varied over the efficacy of the AGLV in landscape protection. Greenbelt was cited in most cases as being the overriding policy in terms of landscape protection. The parish councils were also consulted using a

questionnaire. The results overwhelmingly recognized the importance of the AGLV and its role in protecting the landscape quality of each parish.

A small pilot exercise was undertaken within the AGLV involving desk study and targeted field work. This yielded a series of anomalies and inconsistencies in that there appeared to be little variation between the AONB and AGLV and, in some cases, between the AGLV and surrounding undesignated land. Strong links between the AONB and adjacent AGLV in terms of landscape character were also noted.

The desk review found that the original AGLV designation relied on outmoded landscape evaluation techniques. In recent years this has been replaced by landscape character assessment methodology which makes no judgement on landscape quality but aims to map those distinct characteristics that create a sense of place. Following discussions over the findings of the desk review and the pilot field study a revised method for assessing the AGLV was agreed.

Our approach focussed on using the character of the Surrey Hills AONB, a nationally important designation, recently re-evaluated in 1998 using contemporary LCA based methodology, as a baseline for comparing the AGLV. A systematic approach was adopted which divided the AGLV up into compartments based on local authority boundaries. Following brief, preparatory desk based research into topics such as geology, topography and using the existing landscape character designations applied by Surrey County Council's landscape character assessment of Surrey, a fieldwork exercise was undertaken for each compartment. Record forms using the agreed baseline characteristics of the adjacent AONB and photographic records were used at a selected number of locations in each compartment with a view of mapping and grading the AGLV along the following lines:

Green = area of AGLV with identical characteristics to the AONB
Amber = area of AGLV with some shared characteristics to that of the AONB
Red = area with few or no characteristics in comparison to the AONB

In some cases it was also possible to identify areas outside of the AGLV designation which had comparable landscape character.

These grades were mapped on and recorded on the AGLV Landscape Character Evaluation map and represent the findings of this study. It should be noted, however, that this review is broad brush in scope and more detailed work will undoubtedly be required in specific areas.

As a result of the findings key recommendations were made to take the findings of the study forward. In summary these are:

1) It is recommended that an urgent review of the AONB boundary takes place. The AGLV, however, should be retained until this review has taken place. There should be no attempt to remove the AGLV designation from any areas until the case for the AONB has been considered and thereafter only once further assessment has been carried out.

2) When the AONB is reviewed it is recommended that the green areas are capable of being included without further assessment. Amber and red areas should be the subject of more detailed assessment.

3) Following the AONB review, any AGLV area that is left outside the newly defined AONB should then fall within the scope of a district wide LCA / CBP process. If funds are not available for this process then each former AGLV area should be the subject of a targeted LCA /CPB approach.

4) Until an AONB review is undertaken (and we recommend that this should be a priority given the inconsistencies that this study has revealed) we believe that this study has provided a sufficient evidence base for the retention of the AGLV designation for the green areas in their current form, but more assessment work is required for the amber and red areas, to establish whether they are sufficiently robust to be retained as AGLV. The remaining areas should then be subject to a targeted LCA /CBP approach.

5) Strategic views. The key viewpoints in the Surrey Hills AONB should be mapped and policies developed which protect the existing high quality visual character of these views from damage by inappropriate development.

6) The local authorities are recommended to take account of the results of this study in undertaking further assessment work and in targeting actions in particular areas

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