

MALVERN HILLS AONB JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

REVIEW OF 2019-24 AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN

Recommendation

1. The Committee is recommended to:

- a) **Approve the principle of delaying a substantive Management Plan review for one year**
- b) **Approve the indicative revised schedule for AONB Management Plan production**
- c) **Having previously reacquainted themselves with the current AONB Management Plan**, to highlight and discuss any specific issues that it wishes to raise which could be included in one page of text setting out its intentions for the next Management Plan, in particular concerning:
 - **A vision**
 - **A Management Plan Structure**
 - **Partnership Objectives**

Background

2. The current Malvern Hills AONB Management Plan was adopted in March 2019. There is a legal requirement to review and have an updated plan published within five years, meaning that a revised plan would normally need to be in place by end of March 2024.

3. However, there has been widespread change since 2018/19 and the scale and scope of the rapidly evolving legislative, policy and management framework for AONBs has significant implications for protected landscape management planning at this time. A revised plan to meet the normal timetable risks being substantively adrift from the principal legislative and policy drivers anticipated over the next 12-18 month period. In the wording of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act it is therefore not considered expedient to review the AONB Management Plan at this time.

Option of delaying a substantive review

4. Defra have confirmed (see Letter from Lord Benyon, Appendix 1 to this item) that our Partnership has the option to delay publication of the AONB Management Plan by up to one year from the original planned review date

5. The purpose of this optional delay is to give Partnerships time to digest new outcome-based targets (due to be published in January 2023), new Management Plan guidance (due to be published in Spring 2023), and Landscapes Review developments, and to embed these more easily into their Plans. Delay of up to a year would also provide some additional time to account for possible slippage of these publication dates.

6. Defra considers that that any Partnerships wishing to utilise the option of delaying a substantive review will still need to undertake a very light touch review to ensure compliance with the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, but will not need to consult extensively. Partnerships could simply agree and publish Malvern Hills AONB Partnership Committee papers and text that sets out their intentions for the next Management Plan and that the current plan period will be extended.

7. A review of this nature would allow Partnerships to carry over their existing Management Plan by demonstrating they have considered the next Plan in compliance with the law. Support for this approach would be required from all five Local Authorities with responsibility for the Malvern Hills AONB, along with sign-off in accordance with decision-making procedures for each Council.

8. Around 20 other AONB Partnerships are broadly aligned with the same Management Plan cycle as the Malvern Hills AONB with many indicating that they also wish to delay their substantive reviews by a year.

Rationale

9. In the absence of a definitive and detailed government response to proposals made by the Landscapes Review, a one year delay will enable alignment of a substantive Management Plan review with the development and publication of key drivers including:

- Significant changes to the purposes of designation for England's protected landscapes
- New guidance on the structure and production of strengthened protected landscape Management Plans.
- New Strategy for England's protected landscapes.
- An outcomes framework for protected landscapes to include new targets and monitoring requirements.
- Establishment of a new National Landscapes, Parks and Trails Partnership and AONB branding changes • completion of a review of options for AONB governance.
- A refreshed 25 year Environment Plan.
- Planning reform.
- Development of Local Nature Recovery Strategies and exploration of links with the AONB Nature Recovery Plan.
- Further development and roll-out of new funding mechanisms for environmental management and nature recovery including: Environmental Land Management, Biodiversity Net Gain, Carbon credits and other forms of natural capital financing.
- AONB management role in delivering Environment Act 2021 and Net Zero Strategy requirements.

10. In particular, the publication or substantive iteration of the first four bulleted items are seen as an in-combination trigger point. When reached, this would enable meaningful progression of a Management Plan review.

Proposed timetable

11. The route to adoption of this very light touch review, effectively delaying a substantive review by one year, will differ by local authority. This could be a delegated decision that falls under the schemes of delegation for each Council. However, this requires confirmation from each Council.

12. The subsequent substantive review to produce a 2025-2030 AONB Management Plan would likely revert to requiring a more rigorous local authority approval process.

Table 1 - Indicative revised schedule for Management Plan review

Activities	Schedule
Confirm LA support for 1 year delay and sign-off process and notify Natural England	Autumn 2022
Appraisal of current plan and preparation of review statement	Autumn 2022
LA sign-off of extending duration of current Management Plan by 1 year	Winter 22/23 to Spring 23
Triggers met for a substantive review	Anticipated during 2023
Local authorities to confirm AONB Partnership to undertake review	Autumn 2023
Inform Natural England	Autumn 2023
Initial appraisal	Autumn 2023
Policy review and current version consultation	Autumn 2023
Consult Partnership on scope of review	November 2023
Context and topic papers prepared	Winter 2023/24
Stakeholder workshops	Spring 2024
Development of consultation draft	Spring 2024
Partnership approval of consultation draft	June 2024
Public consultation (8 weeks)	July/August 2024

Prepare final draft	Autumn 2024
Consult Natural England	Autumn 2024
Final text-only plan prepared for adoption	Autumn 2024
AONB Partnership adoption	November 2024
Local Authority adoption	Winter 2024/25
Design and publication	Winter 2024/25
New substantively reviewed Management Plan in place	31st March 2025

13. State of AONB analysis and reporting is expected to run 2022/23 – 2023/24 and will be used to inform the substantive review

14. Environmental Assessments / Environmental Outcomes report as required at the time will be iterated alongside substantive review stages.