

MALVERN HILLS AONB JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

A PROPOSAL TO EXTEND THE MALVERN HILLS AONB BOUNDARY

Recommendation

- 1. The Committee is recommended to:**
 - a) Discuss the proposal to extend the AONB; and**
 - b) Consider whether the AONB Partnership should support this work going forward as the applicant.**

Background

2. Suggestions that the Malvern Hills AONB could be extended to cover the attractive range of hills to the north of Knightwick (stretching past Martley, Great Witley and as far as the village of Abberley – the Abberley Hills) are not new. For example, Tenbury Town Council wrote to the AONB Partnership in 2005 asking about this matter. In 2015 representatives of the Abberley Hills Preservation Society (AHPS) presented a proposal for a possible boundary extension to the MHAONB JAC. At the end of the presentation the Committee asked that the AONB Unit be kept informed of any progress. In the same year the AHPS submitted the proposal for consideration by Natural England - the government agency responsible for protected landscapes.
3. Some progress has been made with the Abberley Hills boundary variation proposal since it was presented to the JAC in 2015. For example, work was commissioned by AHPS to explain how the proposed area meets the Protected Landscape Natural Beauty criteria set out by Natural England. This work was carried out by Francesca Iribar at Viento Environmental. BBC news also spent a day filming the area and interviewing a number of local interests and a piece was broadcast on the BBC Midlands news. Abberley Parish Council have been kept informed of developments and more recently a number of local authorities and key interest groups have been contacted about this subject.
4. In addition to the suggestion for a variation of the AONB boundary members will be aware that there have also been proposals/suggestions made in recent years for a National Park in the local area.

A question to the AONB Partnership

5. On 2 February 2021 Natural England wrote to the Malvern Hills AONB Unit asking for a view on whether the AONB Partnership supports this variation proposal remaining on the register of potential future designations. At that time, we replied that discussion on any possible change of status or area of the AONB was best had once the Government had responded to the National Landscapes review, which it has now done.

6. In recent correspondence with the AHPS Natural England has made it clear that any proposal for an extension of the AONB boundary would be significantly strengthened if it had the support of the AONB Partnership. With this in mind the AHPS has recently written to the AONB Unit asking if the JAC/Partnership would consider being applicants for the proposal. Whilst we have previously expressed the view that actively pushing for such a variation is not the job of the JAC, anecdotal evidence gleaned from AONB colleagues elsewhere in the country suggests that this would not be an unusual position to take. For example, AONB JACs in Suffolk have been the drivers behind proposals for two AONB boundary variations, one for the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB (this boundary change has now been implemented) and one for the Dedham Vale AONB.

Implications for the AONB Unit

7. A decision as to whether to support this proposal or to be the lead applicants for it lies with the JAC. However, the Steering Group recently considered this topic and the issue of possible resource implications for the AONB Unit. More information on this matter is being gathered.

8. In June 2021 Natural England - the agency responsible for considering and implementing boundary reviews - announced a new landscape designation programme including considering the creation of new AONBs in the Yorkshire Wolds and Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, and extensions to the Surrey Hills and Chilterns AONBs. It is likely that this current programme will occupy Natural England's work on new designations for a considerable period of time and it is believed that there is a long list of possible boundary reviews to NPs and AONBs for NE to consider thereafter. For these reasons, a proposal to extend the Malvern Hills AONB boundary should probably be considered a very slow burn. It is possible that its impacts on Unit staff resources may be spread more thinly over a long period of time.

The proposal

9. A summary of key points related to a boundary extension can be found as Appendix 1 to this paper. *Please note that the paper in this appendix has been produced by the Abberley Hills Preservation Society.*