

IUCN Protected Area Management Categories

Statement of Compliance for the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England and Wales

Introduction to Statements of Compliance

Statements of Compliance are an innovation of the IUCN National Committee for the United Kingdom's *Putting Nature on the Map* project. The project has developed guidance, within a UK context, on the use of the IUCN definition of a 'protected area' and the assignment of the associated management categories and governance types¹. The guidance suggests that short but authoritative Statements of Compliance are produced for a conservation site or group of sites.

For groups of sites designated for conservation under one overriding piece of legislation or public policy, the statements should concentrate on whether the sites meet the IUCN definition of a protected area. For statutory designations, the Statements of Compliance should review all relevant legislation, focussing on the priority given to nature conservation in the long-term. For sites not covered by legislation, the statements should review the significance for nature conservation of all relevant public policy positions that specifically affect the area or areas.

Statements should also provide a brief overview of current management objectives, in particular in relation to prioritising nature conservation, summarize examples of current management practice that demonstrate the priority given to nature conservation, and the ambition and vision for nature conservation in the future.

In addition to reviewing legislation or policy in relation to the IUCN definition of a protected area, Statements of Compliance can also assign sites to IUCN management categories and governance type. Where this is done, supporting evidence should be provided.

Note: Statements of Compliance should be prepared with full reference to the 2008 Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories as well as the Handbook (see footnote for details).

The Statement of Compliance below has been prepared for a group of sites in England and Wales that are defined in legislation as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). It does not address the AONBs in Northern Ireland, which are established under separate and different legislation.

¹ Dudley, N (Editor) (2008) Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN. X + 86pp. <http://data.iucn.org/dbtw-wpd/edocs/PAPS-016.pdf>

AND
IUCN NCUK (2012); Putting nature on the map - identifying protected areas in the UK: A handbook to help identify protected areas in the UK and assign the IUCN management categories and governance types to them, IUCN National Committee for the United Kingdom, UK <http://www.iucn-uk.org/Portals/0/PNOTM%20Final%20January.pdf>

A critical review of the legislation affecting Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England and Wales.

The founding legislation for AONBs is the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (Section 87 (1)). The Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 replaces the 1949 Act. AONB designation under Section 82 of the CRoW Act 2000 is made for the sole purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area. Section 92(2) of that Act states that “Any reference in this Part to the conservation of the natural beauty of an area includes a reference to the conservation of its flora, fauna and geological and physiographical features”.

Section 85 of the CRoW Act 2000 requires any Minister of the Crown, any public body, any statutory undertaker and any person holding public office to have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of an AONB when exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in that AONB.

Section 89 of the CRoW Act 2000 requires each local authority in whose area an AONB lies to prepare and publish a plan that secures the purposes of designation and formulates their policy for the management of the area; and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it. The local authorities must review that plan every five years. AONB management plans are statutory documents that require EU Habitats Regulation Assessments and Strategic Environmental Assessments.

The CRoW Act 2000 allows for the creation of independent conservation boards to manage an AONB (Section 86 of that Act)². Section 87 sets out the duties of such boards, which are wider than those imposed upon other public bodies. A board must have regard to:

- a) “the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty, and
- b) the purpose of increasing the understanding and enjoyment by the public of the special qualities of the area of outstanding natural beauty, but if it appears to the board that there is a conflict between those purposes, they are to attach greater weight to the purpose mentioned in paragraph (a)”.

This ensures the primacy of the conservation of natural beauty over a recreational or educational activity. In pursuing the statutory purposes, the conservation boards have a duty to seek to foster the social and economic well being of their local communities. This duty is subordinate to the purposes and so its fulfilment cannot undermine the priority given to nature conservation.

Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 places a duty on AONB partnerships³ (as on other public bodies) to have regard to the purpose of conserving biodiversity. This strengthens the nature elements within the definition of natural beauty.

How does this account of the legislation relate to the definition of a protected area as set out by IUCN? There are two central issues: the relationship between natural beauty and nature; and the priority given to conservation.

² To date, only the Chilterns AONB and the Cotswolds AONB have conservation boards.

³ The term ‘AONB partnerships’ includes Conservation Boards, Joint Committees and Joint Advisory Committees established to prepare and implement the statutory AONB management plans.

- i. As noted above, the statutory definition of 'natural beauty' includes a reference to the conservation of the area's flora, fauna and geological and physiographical features; so it *includes* elements of nature. But at the same time the concept of natural beauty is more than biodiversity and geodiversity as it also includes important cultural and historic elements, and has a subjective dimension. On the other hand 'nature', as defined by the 2008 IUCN Guidelines, refers not only to all levels of biodiversity but also to "geodiversity, landforms and broader natural values". Such a broad view of nature would seem to include all the natural aspects of natural beauty. A commonsense conclusion therefore is that, while nature conservation is not exactly the same as the protection of natural beauty, the protection of natural beauty will normally benefit nature conservation. The exception is where there is a very specific conflict with some other aspect of the protection of natural beauty (for example, the safeguarding of some heritage features in the landscape); in practice, such conflicts are unusual and usually localised.
- ii. AONBs are established with a clear conservation purpose that will normally take priority over development considerations. However AONBs are lived-in, working landscapes, and the law does not provide for every decision to be taken with conservation considerations trumping all others, although it does require that such considerations should always be taken into account and given much more weight than they would elsewhere. So AONBs are places where special measures are taken to safeguard natural beauty but not places where there is an absolute bar on any development that might conflict with nature. On the other hand, in many AONBs there are extensive areas where nature protection is assured through a range of landownership and land management measures, and where at least 75% is managed for the prime purpose of conservation as required by IUCN.

Clearly, AONBs stand near the "outer limit" of what IUCN considers a protected area. However, the examination of policy and practice that follows demonstrates that many AONBs, if not all, function as protected areas; and that their importance for nature conservation is increasing over time

Identification of the significance for nature conservation of any relevant public policy positions that affect the areas

Though there is a common legislative basis for AONBs in England and Wales, there are separate administrations and responsibilities in the two countries. This does lead to different, albeit only subtly different, approaches.

England

In 2010, an independent review⁴ commissioned by the Government recognised that AONBs provide an excellent base for delivering a more effective ecological network, not least because their legal standing, governance and management plans provide a basis for coordinated action to integrate effective ecological networks with landscape and other uses. In the 2011 Natural Environment White Paper⁵, the UK Government broadly endorsed the findings of this review and announced various initiatives to join up fragmented habitats;

⁴ Lawton, J.H., et al. *Making Space for Nature: a review of England's wildlife sites and ecological network*. Report to Defra. (2010)

⁵ Natural Environment White Paper – the natural choice: securing the value of nature (Defra, 2011)

including the establishment of 12 Nature Improvement Areas, two of which are associated with AONBs.

The Defra Biodiversity 2020 Delivery Plan also encourages large-scale initiatives in AONBs and has the milestone: *AONB partnerships to integrate Biodiversity 2020 and ecosystem targets into all AONB Management Plan Reviews by March 2014.*

The National Planning Policy Framework requires that when making planning decisions and policies, the conservation of wildlife is an important consideration in AONBs⁶.

Wales

It is the Welsh Government's objective⁷ to promote the conservation of biodiversity, in particular the conservation of native wildlife and habitats. Planning Policy Wales states that development plan policies and development control decisions affecting AONBs should favour conservation of natural beauty, although it will also be appropriate to have regard to the economic and social well-being of the areas. Development plan policies and development control decisions in AONBs should give great weight to conserving and enhancing wildlife.

The distinctive biodiversity of the Welsh AONBs is referred to in the Welsh Government's Environment Strategy for Wales⁸.

The Countryside Council for Wales report⁹ that Wales' protected landscapes (National Parks and AONB) include a wide variety of species, habitat and landscape types and many of the country's most sensitive sites. Analysis from their Special Sites Dataset indicates that protected landscapes include proportionally more European designated sites by area than the rest of Wales. Initial analysis of this dataset indicates that these sites are generally in slightly more favourable condition in protected landscapes, compared to the rest of Wales.

The Welsh Government National Parks Policy Statement is being revised during 2012 and is expected to include references to the AONBs.

An overview of current management objectives affecting the areas, including those in management plans and what they have to say about prioritising nature conservation

Local authorities and conservation boards are required to produce a management plan for their areas (CRoW Act 2000 S89). Guidance in England¹⁰ and Wales¹¹ provides advice on how to prepare and monitor progress on management plans, which should include policies and approaches for conserving and enhancing biodiversity.

There are 38 members of the family of English and Welsh AONBs and their management plans are available from their websites¹². An assessment of the 38 management plans

⁶ National Planning Policy Framework paragraph 115 (CLG, 2012)

⁷ Planning Policy Wales, Edition 5 paragraphs 4.5.3, 5.1.2, 5.3.5 and 5.3.6 (Welsh Government, November 2012)

⁸ Environment Strategy for Wales (Welsh Government, 2006)

⁹ CCW evidence to the WAG's Biodiversity Inquiry 2010

¹⁰ Guidance on the review of AONB management plan (Countryside Agency, 2006)

¹¹ Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: Guidance on the review of management plan (Countryside Council for Wales, 2008)

¹² Hyperlinks to each AONB website are at <http://www.landscapesforlife.org.uk/>

written between 2009 and 2011 shows that over 75% refers to the importance of nature conservation in the headline Vision for the AONB.

Typical AONB Vision Statements

By 2029, Cannock Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty will be an enhanced area of national and international importance in terms of landscape beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage, centred on its heaths and woods. Improved management of both habitat and public access will bring conservation and enhancement of biodiversity and geodiversity and contribute towards a better quality of life both for local communities and visitors.

In 20 years time there will be: Wide understanding and appreciation of the Mendip Hills as an area of outstanding natural beauty for its distinctive geology, biodiversity, historic, cultural and natural features, all of which are conserved and enhanced. The impact of climate changes in relation to these is understood.

In 20 years time there will be: A stop in the decline of certain habitats and species. Numbers for certain species including farmland birds will increase.

(There are 4 other paragraphs)

Indeed, 92% of the plans have a specific chapter on the conservation of nature. 100% of the plans have a cascade of aims, objectives, policies and actions setting out the requirements to conserve and enhance nature. Some are extensive, others are to the point. None of these objectives and policies is subservient to any other part of the plans.

Dedham Vale AONB

Landscape Farming and Biodiversity Aim In 2025 the Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley is a predominately rural, farmed landscape with a rich diversity of wildlife, habitats, geology and landforms. Its natural, cultural and heritage assets and historic features, particularly in the AONB, are retained and apparent.

OB1 Land use management decisions will demonstrate consideration of landscape, cultural associations, tranquillity, biodiversity and geodiversity to conserve and enhance the area.

OB2 Protected habitats and species will be conserved and enhanced.

OB3 The area retains its assemblage of landscape features which contribute to the character of the AONB and Stour Valley.

Around 50% of the plans make a specific policy reference to implementing Biodiversity Action Plans. The majority of plans present their role as creating and maintaining viable habitat areas and corridors. A number aim to support characteristic species and habitats.

All AONB management plans are now due for their quinquennial review. This gives an opportunity to refresh the vision statements, policy cascades and action plans in the light of national nature conservation imperatives. The IUCN can expect those AONB partnerships who are a party to this Statement of Compliance to adopt management plans that give a high priority to the conservation of nature¹³. This priority will be explicit in the aims and objectives of the new plans.

¹³ In this context, nature will refer to biodiversity, geodiversity, landform and broader natural values (See page 9: Dudley, N. (Editor) (2008). *Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories*. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN. x + 86pp. ISBN: 978-2-8317-1086-0).

A summary account of examples of current management practice that demonstrate the priority given to nature conservation

Introduction

Some 12% of the area covered by the AONB designation is also covered by other protected landscape designation (SSSI, SAC, SPA). The actions taken by those bodies responsible for the conservation of these other sites are not a part of this compliance statement. Nor are any actions arising out of legal obligations such as planning permissions or the wildlife statutes. The AONBs take care not to duplicate the actions of others or break the 'State Aids' rules relating to grant aid. This section outlines examples of how the AONBs give additional and discretionary benefit to the conservation of nature. Many of these initiatives draw in significant funds from the Heritage lottery Fund and similar funding bodies.

The AONBs are particularly skilled at project development and management. Traditionally they have deployed adaptive management techniques to experiment with solutions to nature conservation issues. Though area based, these projects were often subject specific. The trend now is to develop an ecosystem management approach, partly because data is more readily available across the designated areas.

Habitat restoration

A common approach throughout the AONB family is the large-scale restoration of habitats. This is often a priority in an AONB because the habitat is a special feature that supports its designation. There are many examples.

They include heathland and upland hay-meadow restoration projects in the North Pennines and Clwydian Range AONBs. The Forest of Bowland AONB takes action to re-vegetate areas of bare and eroded peat. The Wye Valley AONB supports small/amateur landowners with species rich grassland providing advice, networking and training (including surveying flora, meadow management & animal husbandry).

Woodland management projects occur throughout the areas, such as in the Blackdown Hills AONB where the management of the small woods is encouraged through local co-operatives. In the High Weald AONB, ancient woodland restoration is the priority.

In the chalk and limestone regions, grassland projects abound. The Chilterns AONB purchased 7.5 hectares of land to buffer a chalk-grassland SSSI. In the Cotswolds, the AONB has restored over 1,000ha of unimproved limestone grassland. The Kent Downs AONB is using INTERREG IVA to improve the biodiversity of 400ha of chalk grassland. The Dorset AONB developed the Pastures New (Chalk Grassland) fund (£60,000) to support capital works projects to restore nearly 300ha of grassland in the area.

In the South Devon AONB, estuary management is important. There are five estuaries within the AONB boundary, making up 5.5% of the area. The AONB employs an estuaries officer and prepares management plans specifically to support nature conservation.

And there are a variety of arable farmland schemes such as the Blackdown Hills AONB 'High Nature Value' farmland project run in partnership with the European forum 'Nature Conservation and Pastoralism'. In the Isle of Wight AONB, the Newchurch Field of Hope is used to demonstrate how an ex-arable field (under Woodland Grant Scheme) can provide an opportunity to combine managed public access for recreational and educational purposes with conservation benefit for nature conservation. The Quantock Hills AONB Service played

a pivotal role in the development and successful delivery of one of the largest lowland heath Countryside Stewardship Scheme in the country. During the first 5-years of the scheme the AONB Service invested considerable resource in assisting the Commoners Association, who held the scheme, with contract management, reporting, monitoring and delivery of activities such as bracken control, swaling, invasive species removal.

Habitat connections

A particular benefit that the AONBs bring to the conservation of nature is the creation and management of connections and corridors. AONBs are not usually site managers. They work at the landscape and natural character area scale. Their skill is the ability to bring parties together using their countryside management roots.

Connecting Cannock Chase is a project to open up heathland corridors between different landowners and includes habitat management to introduce species with grazing and public involvement to ensure sustainability of the actions. The Howardian Hills AONB has a project to plant in-field and boundary trees to provide the links between habitats. The Lincolnshire Wolds AONB has over ten years of success in supporting landowners and community groups with hedge planting, hedge plashing, grassland restoration, woodland enhancements, wetland and pond restoration. Well over 100 biodiversity and landscape projects successfully delivered across the AONB since 2000. All intended to maintain nature corridors.

Roadside verges are an important habitat, often providing linear links between wildlife rich areas that might otherwise become isolated. Following a botanical survey of 36 verges within the Malvern Hills AONB, there are now management plans for each of the verges surveyed. There is a similar story in most AONBs. The Isle of Anglesey AONB maintains a number (16) of special interest road verges each year, to enhance their nature value.

There is a range of river projects ranging from channel restoration to whole catchment management plans. In the Chilterns AONB, the Meades Water Gardens Regeneration Project on the River Chess was a £62,000 project to reinstate the chalk stream channel. There are similar projects in the Dorset AONB with over 5km of river enhancement works.

There are chalk river catchment projects throughout the Norfolk Coast AONB. The Shropshire Hills AONB rivers project works at a landscape scale on River Clun catchment, in support of River Clun SAC (sole qualifying feature is Freshwater Pearl Mussel). In the South Devon AONB, they are developing an approach to whole-catchment river management in association with West County Rivers Trust, Defra and the Catchment Restoration Fund and a range of other partners. The aim over the next year is to seek funding for a significant programme of land management interventions linking catchments with habitat connectivity.

Species

There are many species initiatives throughout the AONBs. Some focus on BAP priority species, others support wildlife important only to local groups. Sometimes particular species are important to the well-being of an AONB's special qualities.

Examples include bees in those AONBs where the pollination of fruit is the foundation of the local economy, as in the Isles of Scilly AONB Bee Health and Bio-security Project, and a similar project in the Malvern Hills AONB. Significant action is taken to support Black and Red Grouse in the Clwydian Range AONB and Raptors in the Forest of Bowland AONB. The

Dedham Vale and Howardian Hills AONBs work hard to secure the expansion of the native Black Poplar.

The High Brown Fritillary in Britain's rarest butterfly and Arnside and Silverdale AONB works hard to preserve its habitat. In Cannock Chase AONB, there is a landscape-scale project to develop habitats for butterflies, particularly the Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary. The Kent Downs AONB is reintroducing the Adonis Blue butterfly. Other insects are also of interest. For example, the Dedham Vale AONB is working hard to encourage its population of Stag Beetles.

Sea-life matters to the Chichester Harbour AONB, with particularly effective initiatives to support its seal populations. The AONB also took the lead in a project to restore an area of habitat for Desmoulin's Whorl Snail and commissioned a rare mollusc survey that identified a population of Lagoon Spire Snail, a species believed to be extinct in the UK. The site is within the management of AONB and amendments to the management plan accommodate the requirements of this species.

Most AONBs support bird projects, in particular farmland birds and owls. In the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB, there is a particular effort to maintain and improve a 5-acre skylark area.

In the Chilterns AONB, the Dormouse project involves local people in restoring hedgerows and dormouse survey and boxes. East Devon AONB is developing a countywide greater horseshoe bat initiative with radio tracking discovering roosts and foraging areas. Within the AONB, there is habitat enhancement within the roost sustenance zones and maternity roosts.

Dorset AONB uses the Purbeck Ponds project to support the Great Crested Newt. The Malvern Hills AONB protects its Adders.

Pests and diseases

Like many organisations, the AONBs work hard to control alien invasions, pests and diseases. The Chilterns AONB undertook one of the first UK river corridor surveys for Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Balsam. These are common throughout the AONBs with many comprehensive control programmes. This extends to Rhododendron and Western Hemlock control in areas like the Howardian Hills AONB. The AONB teams are working closely with the Forestry Commission to maintain the health of our woodland species. They are able to complete surveys and deploy volunteers. Cannock Chase AONB is even monitoring White Clawed Crayfish affected by fungal blight and managing their relocation.

Data collection

The AONBs give significant help with data collection and the mapping of priority habitats and species, often in association with the Wildlife Trusts, RSPB, Butterfly Conservation, etc. They regularly complete Phase 1 habitat surveys but they also undertake surveys that are more general.

Chichester Harbour AONB acts as the local repository for biological records, maintaining datasets on a wide variety of taxa and where appropriate sharing records with the relevant bodies. The unit also does bird ringing and surveys and a biannual juvenile fish survey. The AONB has a long involvement in the survey, monitoring and management of sites for rare arable flora including the endangered species; Shepherd's Needle, Grass Poly and Spreading Hedge Parsley.

In the High Weald AONB, they maintain the Ancient Woodland Inventory and now include woodlands less than 2ha in size. The team map, survey and document all ancient woodland in the High Weald AONB to provide robust evidence to inform woodland management advice and assign ancient woodland status. The Cannock Chase and Malvern Hills AONBs similarly have veteran trees surveys. The Dorset AONB use 'Wet Wood-link' to gather desktop data and partnership information regarding the location of wet woodland habitat and associated species. The Isle of Wight AONB keeps a record of healthy elms. In the Chilterns AONB there is a hedgerow condition survey and a 'Special Trees and Woods Project' (£268,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund) involving a team of committed volunteers who research and record the history of special trees and woods in the area.

There are many grassland condition surveys completed throughout the AONBs. In East Devon AONB, a botanical survey of the Umborne Valley recorded unimproved grassland habitats and encouraged owners to enter into a collective Higher Level Stewardship Agreement. The Dorset AONB 'Pastures New project' recorded the condition of 1200ha of Chalk grassland.

The Cannock Chase AONB monitors its streams, including habitat and water quality in the context of the Staffordshire headwaters. This has led to practical management work and informed white clawed crayfish management. The Malvern Hills AONB also monitors water quality.

The Blackdown Hills AONB runs a Hairstreaks audit. They survey suitable hedgerow and scrub habitats to establish current distribution of the Brown Hairstreak butterfly. The Dedham Vale AONB monitors their Stag Beetle population annually.

Each of the Devon AONBs conducts an annual swift survey. Nidderdale AONB surveys breeding curlew, redshank, lapwing and snipe over 150ha and the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB surveys its skylarks. The North Pennines 'WildWatch North Pennines' encourages wildlife recording amongst residents and visitors to the North Pennines AONB. The Forest of Bowland completes an annual Hen Harrier survey and most AONBs monitor their owl populations. Cannock Chase AONB conducts a five yearly bird survey.

Most AONBs complete annual bat surveys. The Dedham Vale has an annual Otter survey; the Chilterns completes a biannual Water Vole survey. In the Quantock Hills, the AONB completes an annual Deer count. The Wye Valleys AONB's 'What's that snake project' provides species and habitat surveys that lead to reptile habitat conservation work and awareness raising events.

Norfolk Coast developed integrated landscape character guidance to incorporate ecological character as well as landscape character. This reflects the approach developed by the Countryside Council for Wales and their LANDMAP data set.

Generating support for nature conservation

AONB's are well connected to the communities they serve. They are in a strong position to inform and excite people about nature; they are very successful at empowering volunteers and delivering environmental education programmes. At the most basic level, each AONB organises open door wildlife walks and watches.

Many AONBs have nature projects in school grounds, such as in the Isle of Wight AONB. The Chilterns AONB 'Trout in the Classroom' project teaches the life cycle of Brown Trout and the chalk stream environment. The Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB has a project

exploring above and below the sea linked to printmaking processes. A local business works with six schools and develops nature exhibitions in each school.

A number have programmes aimed at developing an interest in nature by young people. The Howardian Hills AONB runs a Junior Ranger Club that has nature based craft activities for 6-10 year olds. In the Blackdown Hills AONB, there is the 'Force for Nature', a volunteering hub, and a Young Environmentalists project. In the Wye Valley AONB, there are LEMUR (Learning Environments in Marine, Urban & Rural) bursaries. They are annual student bursary placements with the AONB to offer training in practical conservation management and survey skills.

Many AONB schemes train volunteers to complete nature conservation surveys and a number offer training days for education staff, such as in Arnside and Silverdale and Chichester Harbour. And there is specialist training related to the nature conservation needs of the AONB. Arnside and Silverdale AONB provides training workshops on grassland management to support the High Brown Fritillary butterfly. Cannock Chase AONB is training the local community in coppicing and sustainable woodland products. The Isles of Scilly AONB runs beekeeper training and gives general advice to retain the varroa-free status of the Scilly Isles's honeybees. The Malvern Hills AONB has training for local volunteers on reptile identification.

Most AONBs publish leaflets giving nature conservation advice. For example, in the Chilterns AONB, there is a landowner advice scheme and farmers training events aimed at increasing species diversity, complete with fact sheets and leaflets. The High Weald AONB has the Rother Woods Project giving advice and training (plus a significant volunteer input). The Norfolk Coast AONB is developing wildlife sensitivity messages with local tourism and related businesses. Its 'Share with Care' project is a study on managing recreational disturbance to coastal birds.

Further information

Each AONB partnership publishes an annual report on the achievement of the statutory Management Plan. Generally, these reports list the projects completed during the year. The reports are available on each AONB's website¹⁴.

A look forward with a summary of the ambition and vision for nature conservation in the areas

Summary of ambition

While the legislative and policy framework for AONBs allows for a high priority to be given to nature conservation, there are a number of external factors that could undermine conservation efforts, including climate change, development pressure and competing land uses. In order to address this, the AONBs have committed to four high-level objectives agreed across the AONB Family¹⁵, namely:

- Conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the UK's AONBs, ensuring they can meet the challenges of the future
- Support the economic and social well-being of local communities in ways which contribute to the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty

¹⁴ Hyperlinks to each AONB website are at <http://www.landscapesforlife.org.uk/>

¹⁵ The National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty Strategic Plan 2012 – 2015

- Promote public understanding and enjoyment of the nature and culture of AONBs and encourage people to take action for their conservation
- Value, sustain, and promote the benefits that the UK's AONBs provide for society, including clean air and water, food, carbon storage and other services vital to the nation's health and well-being

The AONBs have specifically committed to conserve and enhance the natural heritage, promote public understanding and enjoyment of nature, and value, sustain, and promote the benefits that the UK's AONBs provide for society in relation to their ecological functioning. AONBs are gaining recognition as places to focus nature conservation. Although AONBs were not established specifically to protect ecosystem services, in practice their size, long history and legal protection provides a robust context in which to adopt such approaches, based on partnership with others and adaptive management.

Each AONB partnership is reviewing its management plan. The intent is to embed ecosystem targets within those plans by 2014. This ecosystem approach provides a way to manage nature that combines three core themes. It considers the ecology of the natural environment, including its functions and processes; it considers the benefits that people get from the natural environment (ecosystem services); and it considers the value of nature to people.

Vision for Nature Conservation:

“England's National Parks and AONBs (the protected landscapes) are valued for their spectacular landscapes and the wildlife and cultural heritage that they contain. Our ambition is to establish National Parks and AONBs as core components of coherent and resilient ecological networks across England. These networks will increase the chances for wildlife to successfully adapt to climate change. At the same time, they will continue to provide people with vital 'ecosystem services' like clean water, climate regulation and beautiful places for recreation. This ambition expands the scale and scope of the many exciting partnership projects which are already achieving wins for wildlife in our most spectacular landscapes.”¹⁶

Conclusion

Although the legislation affecting AONBs in England and Wales is about protecting natural beauty rather than nature conservation, in effect it affords a strong statutory basis from which to deliver feature-based nature conservation goals. Nature conservation is usually given priority where it is in conflict with economic or social development, recreation and educational activity. While there is no legislative basis for affording priority to nature conservation as such, should there be a conflict with conserving natural beauty or cultural heritage, the integrated management planning advice of the AONB partnerships is considered sufficient to ensure that most conflicts are avoided through forward planning and stakeholder engagement.

Policy drivers from the UK and Welsh Assembly Governments send very clear signals about the important role that the AONBs in the UK must play in halting biodiversity decline.

AONB Management Plans identify the priority outcomes and pathways for nature conservation, and the partners to achieve them. In every AONB, there are examples of projects that give primacy to nature conservation. All AONB management plans are now due

¹⁶ Think big: ecological recovery in protected landscapes. A joint ambition from key stakeholders in England's National Parks and Areas of Natural Beauty (CNP, NT, RSPB, WTs, Woodland Trust, English National Park Authorities Association, NAAONB 2011)

for their statutory quinquennial review. The move to embed ecosystem targets into the plans will focus and strengthen actions for nature conservation. The IUCN can expect those AONB partnerships who are a party to this Statement of Compliance to adopt management plans that give a high priority to the conservation of nature.

Large areas of the AONBs (12% of area) envelop Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Special Areas of Conservation or Special Protection Areas. This reflects their nature conservation importance nationally and internationally. However, it is important to remember that the legislative and policy priority given to protecting natural beauty extends across the whole of the area of the AONB.

On the basis of the above, we believe that the case can be made to continue the recognition of AONBs as a family as protected areas. If there is any doubt about any individual areas, the assessment panel should invite the AONB manager concerned to draw up their own Statement of Compliance.

Statement of Compliance Validation

IUCN categorisation of UK protected areas – Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England and Wales

Background

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is a statutory designation used throughout England and Wales. AONBs are designated by the designating agencies under Section 82 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area. Section 92(2) of that Act states that “Any reference in this Part to the conservation of the natural beauty of an area includes a reference to the conservation of its flora, fauna and geological and physiographical features”.

The designating agencies are Natural England and the Countryside Council for Wales¹⁷ (referred to as the Agencies in this statement).

There are currently 38 AONBs as follow:

Country	AONB	Totals
England	33	15% of area 19,500 km ²
England/Wales	1	(shown in national totals)
Wales	4	4% of area 844 km ²
Totals	38	19%

Assessment of AONB against protected area criteria (Key A¹⁸)

1	Is the site a clearly defined geographical area?	Yes	<p>CRoW Act Section 82: Each AONB has a legally notified boundary made by formal Order. It is a duty of the Agencies to secure that copies of any order are available for inspection by the public at all reasonable times: at the office of the Agencies; at the offices of each local authority whose area includes any part of the area to which the order relates; and at such other place or places in or near that area as the Agencies may determine.</p> <p>Go to 2</p>
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¹⁷ To become Natural Resources Wales in April 2013

¹⁸ Keys A - E taken from IUCN NCUK (2012); Putting nature on the map – identifying protected areas in the UK: A handbook to help identify protected areas in the UK and assign the IUCN management categories and governance types to them, IUCN National Committee for the United Kingdom

2	Is it recognised, dedicated and managed to achieve the long-term conservation of nature? NB 'nature' includes all levels of biodiversity as well as geodiversity, landforms and broader natural values (see Appendix 4 for detailed definition)	Yes	Crow Act Section 89: Each relevant authority must prepare and publish a management plan and review that plan every five years. This is a landscape-scale plan taking a holistic view of nature. It ensures focused management over a long period. To date the plans assumed an adaptive management model but those now in draft are required to develop an ecosystems approach. Go to 3
3	Is the main management objective nature conservation? Other objectives of equal standing may be present but they do not cause conflict, i.e. nature conservation is the priority	Yes	CRoW Act Section 82: The priority objective of AONB designation and management is the conservation of natural beauty that (by Section 92) embraces nature conservation. The definition embraces more than nature conservation but there is no conflict because the 'Sandford Principle' gives primacy to the conservation objective ¹⁹ . Go to 4

¹⁹ The National Parks Policy Review Committee made a recommendation in 1974, which is now known as the 'Sandford Principle', that "Where irreconcilable conflicts exist between conservation and public enjoyment, then conservation interest should take priority". This principle applies to AONBs, (CRoW 2000 S87)

4	Does the designation of the site prevent, or eliminate where necessary, any exploitation or management practice that will be harmful to the objectives of designation?	Partially	<p>Crow Act Section 85: In exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in an AONB, a relevant authority shall have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB.</p> <p>AONB management plans are statutory documents that require EU Habitats Regulation Assessment, Strategic Environmental Assessment and Sustainability Appraisals</p> <p>The National Planning Policy Framework in England and Planning Policy Wales both require nature conservation to be taken into account when considering development in an AONB.</p> <p>However, on occasion harmful actions are allowed. AONBs are living landscapes and the socio-economic needs of the host population may require development that harms the immediate environment, for example, the building of low cost housing or the infrastructure for communication. Impacts are localised and do not affect the integrity of the site. Legislation does allow for a harmful action to be taken but only if there is an imperative reason of overriding public interest on the grounds of human health, public safety or primary beneficial consequences for the environment.</p> <p>Go to 5</p>
5	Does the designation of the site aim to maintain, or ideally, increase the degree of naturalness of the ecosystem being protected?	Yes	<p>CRoW Act Section 82: The purpose is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area. Improvement targets and indicators are set in the statutory management plan. Regular reporting by State of the AONB reports measures progress. The Agencies are now producing statements of environmental opportunities for the natural character areas (NCA) to embed the delivery of ecosystem services into management planning. The AONBs boundaries are a close match to the NCA and their plans must seek to achieve these objectives.</p> <p>Go to 6</p>

6	Is the long-term nature conservation ensured through legal or other effective means? E.g. national or international statutory law/ agreement/convention, traditional rules or NGO policy.	Yes	AONBs are designated under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 which defines the purpose of designation as conserving and enhancing natural beauty. The AONB management plans are required to detail biodiversity actions by the Government Departments as a part of the grant settlement. PASS Go to Key B
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Assessment of AONB against protected area criteria (Key B)

	Common Objectives	Yes/No
1	Does the site conserve the composition, structure, function and evolutionary potential of biodiversity?	No
2	Does the site contribute to regional strategies (as core reserves, buffer zones, corridors, stepping stones for migratory species etc)?	Yes
3	Does the site maintain diversity of landscape or habitat and of associated species and ecosystems?	Yes it <i>aims</i> to
4	Is the site of sufficient size to ensure the integrity and long-term maintenance of the specified conservation targets?	Yes
5	Is the site capable of being increased to achieve the integrity and long-term maintenance of the specified conservation targets?	Yes but many administrative barriers
6	Does the site maintain the values for which it was assigned in perpetuity?	Yes
7	Does the site operate under the guidance of a management plan, and a monitoring and evaluation programme that supports adaptive management?	Yes
8	Does the site possess a clear and equitable governance system?	Yes
Number of common objectives met (must be 5+)		7

Assessment of AONB against protected area criteria (Key C)

	Optional Additional Criteria	Yes/NO
9	Does the site conserve significant landscape features, geomorphology and geology?	Yes
10	Does the site provide regulatory ecosystem services, including buffering against the impacts of climate change?	Yes
11	Does the site conserve nature and scenic areas of national and international significance for cultural, spiritual and scientific purposes?	Yes
12	Does the site deliver benefits to residents and local communities consistent with the other objectives of management?	Yes
13	Does the site deliver recreational benefits consistent with the other objectives of management?	Yes
14	Does the site facilitate low-impact scientific research activities and ecological monitoring related to and consistent with the values of the site?	Yes [varies]
15	Does the site use adaptive management strategies to improve management	Yes

	effectiveness and governance quality over time?	[varies]
16	Does the site help to provide educational opportunities (inc. About management approaches)?	Yes
17	Does the site help to develop public support for protection?	Yes
Number of additional optional criteria met (OK as long as 6+)		9

Outcome - All AONBs fulfil the criteria to be defined by IUCN as 'protected areas'.

Assessment of AONB against categorisation criteria (Key D)

Category		Question	Y/N	Action
Ia	1	Is the site strictly protected and set aside to protect biodiversity and also possibly geological/ geomorphological features?	No	Various non-conservation purposes continue. Not Ia - go to 7
Ib	7	Is the site unmodified or slightly modified, and does it retain its natural character and influence?	No	All AONBs are modified to a greater or lesser degree by past/ ongoing human activity. Not Ib - go to 15
II	15	Is the site large, natural or near natural and set aside to protect large-scale ecological processes, along with the complement of species and ecosystems characteristic of the area?	No	Wide variety of sizes reflecting extent of special characteristics and features. Not set-aside. Not II - go to 19
III	19	Does the site protect a specific natural monument? E.g. a landform, sea mount, submarine cavern, geological feature such as a cave or even a living feature such as an ancient grove.	No	AONBs conserve and enhance a wider landscape. Not III - go to 21
IV	21	Does the site protect particular species or habitats?	No	Only by default, the aim is broader. Not IV - go to 24
V	24	Has the interaction of people and nature over time produced a site of distinct character with significant ecological, biological, cultural and scenic value?	Yes	AONBs are assessed through landscape characterization and evaluation using a range of ecological, biological, cultural and scenic layers. Go to 25
	25	Is safeguarding the integrity of the interaction in 24 vital to the protection and sustainability of the site and its associated nature conservation and other values?	Yes	A statutory requirement Go to 26
	26	Does the site protect and sustain important landscape/seascapes and the associated nature conservation values?	Yes	It is a statutory landscape designation to conserve and enhance natural beauty. Go to 27

Category		Question	Y/N	Action
	27	Are other values, created by interactions with humans through traditional management practices, also protected/sustained?	Yes	AONB Management Plans direct funds and advice for traditional management that sustains the area's special characteristics. Category V may be met. Go to 28 to check suitability of other categories
VI	28	Does the site conserve ecosystems and habitats, together with associated cultural values and traditional natural resource management systems?	No	Not VI
				Go to Key E to validate

Validating the category assignment (Key E)

Category	Other Objectives	Yes/No
Ia	Does the site preserve ecosystems, species and geodiversity features in a state as undisturbed by recent human activity as possible?	No
	Does the site secure examples of the natural environment for scientific studies, environmental monitoring and education, including baseline areas from which all avoidable access is excluded?	No
	Does the site minimize disturbance through careful planning and implementation of research and other approved activities?	No
	Does the site conserve cultural and spiritual values associated with nature?	Yes
Percentage of Other Objectives for Category Ia met		25%
Ib	Does the site provide for public access at levels and a type which will maintain the wilderness qualities of the area for present and future generations?	No
	Does the site protect relevant cultural and spiritual values and non-material benefits to human populations, such as solitude, respect for sacred sites, respect for ancestors etc?	No
	Does the site allow for low-impact minimally invasive educational and scientific research activities, when such activities cannot be conducted outside the wilderness area?	No
Percentage of Other Objectives for Category Ib met		0%
II	Is the site managed in order to perpetuate, in as natural state as possible, representative examples of physiographic regions, biotic communities, genetic resources and unimpaired natural processes?	No
	Does the site maintain viable and ecologically functional populations and assemblages of native species at densities sufficient to conserve ecosystem integrity and resilience in the long term?	No
	Does the site contribute in particular to conservation of wide-ranging species, regional ecological processes and migration	Yes

	routes?	
	Is visitor use managed for inspirational, educational, cultural and recreational purposes at a level which will not cause significant biological or ecological degradation to the natural resources?	No
	Does the site take into account the needs of local communities, including subsistence resource use, in so far as these will not adversely affect the primary management objective?	Yes
	Does the site contribute to local economies through tourism?	Yes
Percentage of Other Objectives for Category 2 met		50%
III	Does the site provide biodiversity protection in landscapes or seascapes that have otherwise undergone major changes?	No
	Does the site protect specific natural sites with spiritual and/or cultural values where these also have biodiversity values?	No
	Does the site conserve traditional spiritual and cultural values of the site?	Yes
Percentage of Other Objectives for Category III met		33%
IV	Does the site protect vegetation patterns or other biological features through traditional management approaches?	No
	Does the site protect fragments of habitats as components of landscape or seascape scale conservation strategies?	No
	Does the site develop public education and appreciation of the species and/or habitats concerned?	Yes
	Does the site provide a means by which the urban residents may obtain regular contact with nature?	Yes
Percentage of Other Objectives for Category IV met		50%
V	Does the site maintain a balanced interaction of nature and culture through the protection of landscape and/or seascape and associated traditional management approaches?	Yes
	Does the site contribute to broad-scale conservation by maintaining species associated with cultural landscapes and/or by providing conservation opportunities in heavily used landscapes?	Yes
	Does the site provide opportunities for enjoyment, well-being and socio-economic activity through recreation and tourism?	Yes
	Does the site provide natural products and environmental services?	Yes
	Does the site provide a framework to underpin active involvement by the community in the management of valued landscapes or seascapes and the natural and cultural heritage that they contain?	Yes
	Does the site encourage the conservation of agrobiodiversity and aquatic biodiversity?	Yes
	Does the site act as a model of sustainability so that lessons can be learnt for wider application?	Yes Through the Sustainable Development Fund
Percentage of Other Objectives for Category V met		100%
VI	Does the site promote sustainable use of natural resources, considering ecological, economic and social dimensions?	No

	Does the site promote social and economic benefits to local communities where relevant?	Yes
	Does the site facilitate inter-generational security for local communities' livelihoods – therefore ensuring that such livelihoods are sustainable?	No
	Does the site integrate other cultural approaches, belief systems and world-views within a range of social and economic approaches to nature conservation?	No
	Does the site contribute to developing and/or maintaining a more balanced relationship between humans and the rest of nature?	No
	Does the site contribute to sustainable development at national, regional and local level (in the last case mainly to local communities depending on the protected natural resources)?	Yes
	Does the site facilitate scientific research and environmental monitoring, mainly related to the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources?	No
	Does the site collaborate in the delivery of benefits to people, mostly local communities, living in or near to the designated Protected Area?	Yes
	Does the site facilitate recreation and appropriate small-scale tourism?	Yes
Percentage of Other Objectives for Category VI met		45%

Assigning a category

AONBs will be considered to be **Category V** protected areas.

Exceptions

The above categorisation is without prejudice to the case to assign individual AONBs to other IUCN protected area categories. Any such site will need to be separately justified by the relevant designating authority.

Governance Type

The AONBs are governance by **Government**.

Governance is by local authority or conservation board. A local authority is an organization that is officially responsible for all the public services and facilities in a particular area. The structure of local government in the UK has undergone a number of changes in recent times. Following the last major reorganization in the 1990s, the position in respect of each country is as follows. In England, there are a mixture of single tier (unitary) and two tier authorities. In areas covered by two tiers, the upper tier is the county or shire council and the lower tier is the district, borough or city council. Unitary authorities adopt any of these names. In Wales, there is a single tier system of unitary authorities.

Local authorities are required to secure the purposes of designation by developing a management plan for the designated area. This plan determines the conservation objectives (such as the ones that distinguish the IUCN categories).

In some cases, the local authority delegates the planning and daily management tasks to a conservation board. This is subject to agreement with the central government.

Under the legislation, there is a legal obligation to inform or consult stakeholders prior to setting up protected areas. The management plans are all the subject of a Strategic Environmental Assessment under European Union Directive. Local authorities and conservation boards seek advice from relevant experts and bodies before making decisions. They establish advisory groups to allow stakeholders to express a view on management proposals.

This statement was produced and agreed by the Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and submitted to the IUCN-UK committee on 25th March 2013