



NORTH WESSEX DOWNS AONB POSITION STATEMENT

SETTING

(Development Affecting the Setting of the North Wessex Downs AONB)

2019

Position Statement Status

The purpose behind this Position Statement is to inform local planning authorities, landowners, applicants and other interested parties regarding development outside but within the setting of the North Wessex Downs AONB. This document is intended to guide policy makers, to assist in the preparation of planning applications and to assist in the decision making process. The Position Statement has been prepared in consultation with and approved by the Management Working Group and the Council of Partners that make up the North Wessex Downs AONB Partnership. This statement forms an extension of the principles laid out within the North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan (2019-2024).

The primary purpose of AONB designation is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area, as confirmed by Section 82 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW Act). Within Section 85 of the CRoW Act 2000 there is a duty on all relevant authorities to have regard to this purpose in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect land in AONBs.

Introduction

1. Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) are designated by the Government for the purpose of ensuring that the special qualities of our finest landscapes are conserved and enhanced. In planning policy terms, they have the same status as National Parks.
2. The primary purpose of the North Wessex Downs AONB is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONB. The AONB also has secondary purposes to increase awareness and understanding of the special qualities of the AONB, to take account of the needs of agriculture, forestry and other rural industries and to foster the social and economic wellbeing of local communities and those who live and work in the area.
3. The setting of the North Wessex Downs does not have a defined geographical boundary but it should be addressed as the area within which development and land management proposals, by virtue of their nature, size, scale, siting, materials or design can be considered to have an impact, either positive or negative, on the natural beauty and special qualities of the North Wessex Downs AONB.
4. The surroundings of the North Wessex Downs AONB and the protected landscape of the AONB add value to each other as the landscape and landforms link visually and functionally, joining the surroundings to the AONB. Proposals for change in the setting

should, therefore, have regard to the inter-relationship with the AONB and the landscape character and special qualities.

5. Examples of adverse impacts on the setting of the North Wessex Downs AONB could include:

- development which would have a significant visual impact on views in or out of the AONB;
- breaking the skyline, particularly when this is associated with developments that have a vertical emphasis and / movement (chimneys, plumes or blades for example);
- loss of tranquillity through the introduction or increase of lighting, noise, or traffic movement or other environmental impact like dust, vibration, spatial associations and historic relationships;
- introduction of abrupt change of landscape character;
- loss of biodiversity, particularly if of habitats or species of importance to the AONB;
- loss of features of historic and natural landscape interest, particularly if these are contiguous with the AONB;
- change of use of land such that to cause harm to landscape character; and
- development individually or cumulatively giving rise to significantly increased traffic flows to and from the AONB, resulting in loss of tranquillity and erosion of the character of rural roads and lanes;
- Increase in air and water pollution.

6. Adverse impacts might not be visual, as listed above tranquillity, a special quality of the North Wessex Downs AONB can be affected by a development which for example is noisy, even if not visible from the AONB.

7. The North Wessex Downs AONB Partnership will expect local authorities, where appropriate, to take into consideration the setting of the North Wessex Downs AONB when determining planning applications and, in accordance with their Section 85 duties, to ensure that only development that conserves and enhances the natural beauty of the AONB, in this case in relation to its setting, is supported.

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (2019)

8. The NPPF (2019) constitutes guidance for local planning authorities and decision-takers both in drawing up plans and as a material consideration in determining applications. Planning law requires that applications for planning permission must be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The NPPF does not change the statutory status of the development plan as the starting point for decision making. Proposed development that accords with an up-to-date Local Plan should be approved, and proposed development that conflicts should be refused unless other material considerations indicate otherwise. The NPPF confirms that it is highly desirable that local planning authorities have an up-to-date plan in place.

9. Within the second paragraph the NPPF states that “The National Planning Policy Framework must be taken into account in preparing the development plan, and is a material consideration in planning decisions. Planning policies and decisions must also reflect relevant international obligations and statutory requirements”. AONBs are of course protected under the existing statutory requirements of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, specifically under Section 85 it is a legal duty for all relevant authorities to have regard to the primary purpose of AONBs to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area.

10. The NPPF highlights and explains the three dimensions to sustainable development as being economic, social and environmental. These three dimensions then give rise to the need for the planning system to perform a similar number of roles – an economic role, a social role and an environmental role, for which an objective is to contribute to protecting and enhancing our natural, built and historic environment.

11. Although the NPPF promotes at paragraph 11 for the first time “a presumption in favour of sustainable development” it then goes on to highlight the position for plan makers and for decision takers in areas where this policy may be “restricted.” Specifically footnote 6 which highlights AONBs as such an area where restrictions may apply to the above presumption. It is also clear from the following paragraphs within the NPPF, as explained below, the emphasis is on great weight being given to conserving the landscape and scenic beauty of AONBs and that they have the highest status of landscape protection.

12. At paragraph 170 the NPPF states “Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by: a) protecting and enhancing valued landscape, sites of biodiversity or geological value and soils (in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan);” This reflects on the Local Authorities Duty of Regard which expands to land within the setting of the AONB.

13. The NPPF contains a number of references to various forms of pollution. Pollution can result from outside the AONB, but impact on and into the AONB including from noise, dust, and light. Paragraph 180 states “Planning policies and decision should also ensure that new development is appropriate for its location taking into account the likely effects (including cumulative effects) of pollution on health, living conditions and the natural environment, as well as the potential sensitivity of the site or the wider area to impacts that could arise from the development. In doing so they should:

- a) mitigate and reduce to minimum potential adverse impacts resulting from noise....
- b) identify and protect tranquil area which have remained relatively undisturbed by noise and are prized for their recreation and amenity value...
- c) limit the impact of light pollution from artificial light on local amenity, intrinsically dark landscape and nature conservation.

National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) (2019)

14. Para 039 of the Natural Environment Guidance of the NPPG (2019) confirms that the Local Authorities duty of regard is relevant in considering development proposals that are situated outside AONB boundaries which might have an impact on their setting or protection.

15. Para 042 the NPPG specially address how development within the setting of protected landscape should be dealt with. It states that “Land within the setting of these areas often makes an important contribution to maintaining their natural beauty, and where poorly located or designed development can do significant harm. This is especially the case where long views from or to the designated landscape are identified as important, or where the landscape character of land within and adjoining the designated area is complementary. Development within the settings of these area will therefore need sensitive handling that takes these potential impacts into account.”

Avoiding Harm to the Setting of the North Wessex Downs AONB

16. The North Wessex Downs AONB Partnership does not set out to judge the precise extent of the setting of the AONB. The scale, height, siting, use, materials or design of a proposed development will determine whether it affects the natural beauty and special qualities of the AONB. A very large or high development may have an impact even if some

considerable distance from the AONB boundary. Therefore, there is no defined boundary where the setting of the North Wessex Downs AONB ends. However, distance away from the AONB will obviously be a material factor in forming a decision on any proposals, in that the further away a development is from the AONB boundary the more the impact is likely to be reduced. Development likely to result in a negative impact on the setting of the AONB will not be supported, in accordance with meeting the key aims of the North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan and the primary purpose of designation. Accordingly, development resulting in the conservation of the existing setting of the AONB and its enhancement will be supported where all other environmental considerations are also acceptable.

17. The best way of minimising adverse visual impacts on the setting of the AONB is through avoidance in the first place so that schemes conserve and enhance the setting of the AONB. The North Wessex Downs AONB Partnership therefore, in relation to development within or affecting its setting, expects the following:

- measures to consider impact on the setting of the AONB, including where required through Landscape and Visual Impact Assessments;
- care over orientation, site layout, height and scale of structures and buildings;
- consideration not just of the site but also the landscape and land uses around and beyond it;
- careful use of colours, materials and non-reflective surfaces;
- restraint and care over the installation and use of street lighting, floodlighting and other external lighting to prevent harm to the dark night skies of the AONB;
- the grouping of new structures and buildings close to existing structures and buildings to avoid new expanses of development that are visible and out of context (though detrimental impact on historic buildings/groupings will need special consideration to avoid insensitive development); and
- detailed mitigation measures, for example including native landscaping (where possible contributing to BAP targets), and noise reduction (though again landscaping in certain contexts can be damaging to historic features/deposits/landscape/character so again will require careful consideration).

18. It is considered that many issues in relation to new development within the setting of the North Wessex Downs AONB can be resolved through careful design, appropriate materials, location and layout and mitigation measures from landscaping to use of minimal, well-directed and full cut-off street (and other external) lighting.

19. The North Wessex Downs AONB Partnership is willing to enter into any pre-application consultations to ensure full attention is given to these factors and to assist in the process at the earliest opportunity. Please see our website for further information [North Wessex Downs AONB](#).

20. The North Wessex Downs AONB Partnership will continue to make representations where new planning policy makes no reference to the setting of the AONB to ensure it is included.

21. The North Wessex Downs AONB Partnership will monitor, comment as appropriate, and report significant planning application decisions that relate to the impact of development on the setting of the AONB. The AONB Partnership will consider proposals on the balance of their positive change against negative impacts.