

## Response ID ANON-MW92-FH1W-5

Submitted to **Landscapes Review: Call for Evidence**

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### About you

#### 1 Are you replying as a member of the public or on behalf of an organisation?

Organisation

#### 2 If you are replying as a member of the public

What is your name?:

If you enter your email address then you will automatically receive an acknowledgement email when you submit your response. We may also use this to contact you further.:

I live in a National Park or AONB, I visit a National Park or AONB

#### 3 If you are replying on behalf of an organisation or organisations

Which organisation(s)?:

Arts Taunton

What is your name and position?:

Donald Rice, board member

If you enter your email address then you will automatically receive an acknowledgement email when you submit your response. We may also use this to contact you further.:

#### 4 We would like to be able to use extracts from submissions in our final report. If you would not like them, potentially, to be made public, please tell us here.

Yes, I am content for you to use extracts of my response in the final report

#### 5 We have obligations under freedom of information laws and there is more information below. For the purposes of these laws, would you like your response to be confidential?

No

If you have answered yes, please give your reason:

### Before anything else

#### 6 We would love to know what makes National Parks and AONBs special to you

Upload :

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Not Answered

### Part 1 - Opening thoughts

#### 7 What do you think works overall about the present system of National Parks and AONBs in England? Add any points that apply specifically to only National Parks or AONBs

Please write your answer here:

1. Exmoor National Park and the Quantock Hills AONB are the two designated landscapes closest to Taunton. A little further to the south-west are the Blackdowns AONB and East Devon AONB, while to the north lie the Somerset Levels and Moors, all of which potentially make Taunton a focal point for some of the best-loved landscapes in Southern England. Arts Taunton has spoken to many stakeholders including AONB/National Park managers and rangers, local farmers, landowners and conservation bodies in order to respond to this report. From these conversations, we believe that much of the present system works well, but there is substantial room for it to be improved and its remit expanded. The principle positive points we believe to be:

- The protection of the landscape is generally robust within National Parks and AONBs
- The expertise of those employed managing these areas is huge, and one of the chief national assets of the UK conservation scene
- They perform their role often with limited funds and represent very good value for money
- The designated areas are generally held to be important and worthwhile by the local population, and highly prized by visitors

## **8 What do you think does not work overall about the system and might be changed? Add any points that apply specifically to National Parks or AONBs**

### **Please write your answer here:**

2. There are considerable opportunities to make the management of NPs and AONBs have far broader benefits. These positive impacts have the potential to reach well beyond the boundaries of the designated areas and into urban zones. Arts Taunton's research suggests the following points are where the system could be improved or where it is currently under-performing:

- We believe that the creation of new NPs and AONBs is an urgent priority. In Somerset, landscape areas of huge importance and beauty are currently outside of the designated areas. We believe there is a strong case to bring the Quantocks, Brendons and Exmoor into a single, expanded National Park
- The Somerset Levels and Moors, while recognised as a RAMSAR site, should also carry far greater protection as a national landscape area, and be managed, protected and promoted as one
- Nationally, there is a serious failure to designate and protect areas that are not 'hills', or a single coherent 'zone'. It is absurd that no part of Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Rutland or Leicestershire is considered to be officially of "outstanding natural beauty", while only tiny parts of Warwickshire, Essex and Hertfordshire are so designated. Excluding its coast, only modest areas of Norfolk and Suffolk have been protected. In other words, lowland (mainly Southern) England – which is under the most persistent pressure of development – is vastly under-protected (and therefore under-promoted to the public as worthwhile)
- This failure can be seen clearly in Somerset, where zones outside of the hilly areas are highly vulnerable to inappropriate development and exploitation (for example, the corridor between Taunton and Wellington, or the north-eastern edge of the Quantocks between Bridgwater and the coast). Local people have expressed concerns that, outside of the AONBs, it is extremely difficult to cite the landscape as something worth protecting in its own right; without the 'branding' of an AONB, it is hard to campaign to protect a landscape's beauty or for its appropriate management. This is highly relevant in terms of Taunton and its Garden Town status, and represents a huge public relations challenge: how can the public be reassured that official bodies care for the landscape, if those bodies do not officially recognise swathes of it as beautiful?
- The boundaries of existing NPs and AONBs are very hard to adjust; we strongly believe that boundaries fixed many decades ago need to be allowed to change, provided it is a bottom-up, locally-led process
- The Quantock Hills AONB service has proposed that AONB partnerships should be given statutory consultee status, and we strongly agree; formal objections from an AONB to a planning application do not at present carry nearly enough weight
- There should be improved guidance in terms of planning and, crucially, in design; there is a huge hidden resource in our rural areas in terms of vernacular design and building traditions, and this should be strongly promoted at local and national levels
- The highest quality design guides should be a priority for all designated landscapes, which would in turn improve flexibility, speed and cost of the planning application process, and reduce conflict
- We agree with the Quantocks AONB that the advisory role to Local Authorities is not sufficient, nor properly resourced; we share their concern that the weight attached to AONB status in relation to planning can be low
- The ecosystem services provided by NPs and AONBs are of critical importance to urban England, but this is not widely known or appreciated

## **Part 2 - Views**

### **9 What views do you have about the role National Parks and AONBs play in nature conservation and biodiversity?**

#### **Please write your answer here:**

NPs and AONBs play a crucial role in nature conservation and biodiversity but it is clear that nationally the trend in some areas (farmland and migratory birds for example) is steep decline, especially in Southern England. The supreme challenges are (1) how to mitigate population increases and (2) the impacts of industrial agriculture. In Somerset, rapid expansion of Taunton and towns and villages nearby is creating huge challenges and provokes strong emotions. The danger, as we see it, is that NPs/AONBs become islands of biodiversity and conservation practise in an otherwise denuded landscape.

#### **Could they do more to enhance our wildlife and support the recovery of our natural habitats?:**

It is beyond the remit of Arts Taunton to discuss detailed environmental and agricultural policy, but the 2010 Lawton Report's mantra of "bigger, better, more joined-up" is precisely the approach to the landscape/biodiversity that will bring maximum benefits to all – most particularly to wildlife. Arts Taunton strongly believes that more joined-up landscape management within expanded NPs/AONBs will produce vastly greater conservation and biodiversity benefits than is at present possible.

### **10 What views do you have about the role National Parks and AONBs play in shaping landscape and beauty, or protecting cultural heritage?**

#### **Please write your answer here:**

English NPs/AONBs are some of the most beautiful man-made landscapes in Europe. As per our response above, we do not believe that the long traditions and cultures of landscape management and vernacular design should be preserved exclusively within these designated landscapes. Design guides coupled with stronger legislative powers should not only promote this heritage but help it reach far beyond their 'official' boundaries. Taunton's Garden Town status offers an almost unique opportunity to bring this ancient expertise into the modern urban landscape, helping to providing a sense of place and purpose.

### **11 What views do you have about the role National Parks and AONBs play in working with farmers and land managers and how might this change as the current system of farm payments is reformed?**

#### **Please write your answer here:**

This is where the expertise of NP/AONB managers and rangers is so crucial. Agriculture is the major land use of much of England, yet the number of people directly employed in it continues to shrink. By comparison, the number of stakeholders in the landscape – be they visitors, residents or those who require a functioning ecosystem to provide such basics as clear water and fresh air – continues to rise exponentially. The ancient traditions of land use are rightly venerated but too much poor, modern agricultural practise is tolerated. NPs/AONBs can lead the way in changing attitudes and promoting dialogue between parties. In Somerset, inappropriate land use in upland areas contributed to the floods of 2013-14, and all areas of the country – especially urban areas - stand to

benefit from NPs/AONBs taking the lead.

## **12 What views do you have about the role National Parks and AONBs play in supporting and managing access and recreation?**

### **Please write your answer here:**

We agree with the Quantocks AONB submission that NPs/AONBs play the key role in supporting and managing both access and recreation in their areas. The information and advice they provide is excellent. The strength of the volunteer network in supporting this work is also crucial. There could perhaps be better education of the public as to how this work is funded and carried out, and a greater emphasis on the responsibilities of those who visit these areas to help protect them.

## **13 What views do you have about the way National Park and AONB authorities affect people who live and work in their areas?**

### **Please write your answer here:**

In Arts Taunton's experience, there is strong support for the NPs and AONBs locally. Feelings towards them are more mixed when speaking to farmers, but the more progressive element of the agriculture sector see opportunities from being within designated landscapes, either through tourism, diversification of their business or through better grants.

### **Are they properly supporting them and what could be done differently?:**

The Quantocks AONB reports that their volunteer numbers vary between 80-100, which, given the large populations within easy reach, is not high. A hugely increased volunteer sector – perhaps nationally – would be a massive PR tool for ecology and landscape heritage generally and improve dialogue between the NP/AONB managers and local populations.

## **14 What views do you have on the role National Park and AONB authorities play on housing and transport in their areas?**

### **Please write your answer here:**

In this area, housing is often contentious owing to the huge amount of building that has taken place in the last twenty years, and the even greater amount being planned. While there is a wide acceptance that there is a national housing shortage and that more houses need to be built, there is also a strong feeling that certain towns and areas get 'dumped on' and that local opinion is rarely deeply considered. Arts Taunton is campaigning for the principles of Garden Town status (recently awarded to Taunton) to be rigorously upheld in all aspects of future development of the town. Dialogue and engagement with NPs/AONBs could play a vital role in this. The town has much to learn from its hinterland, for example in terms of ecosystem management, traditional design/use of building materials, cultural heritage and exchange. This will be much harder, however, if the present boundaries of local NPs/AONBs remain the same. There was a concerted effort to leave out towns and villages from the Quantocks AONB when it was designated over 60 years ago, and the AONB service reports that this makes engagement with local people on matters like housing and transport much harder. If there were stronger guidance in terms of design and materials, stronger powers for AONBs, and appropriate infrastructure to go with development, new housing should not be impossible in NPs/AONBs. Indeed, it could flourish.

## **Part 3 - Current ways of working**

## **15 What views do you have on the way they are governed individually at the moment? Is it effective or does it need to change, if so, how?**

### **Please write your answer here:**

The organisational structure of NPs/AONBs is not an area we feel qualified to comment on. We wish to emphasise, however, that partnerships with groups across differing sectors often produce the most free-thinking and exciting ideas and outcomes. This is one of the reasons why Arts Taunton has engaged strongly with the Garden Town planning and design process – the arts will not flourish in a town with poor housing or infrastructure, or with low levels of health and wellbeing.

## **16 What views do you have on whether they work collectively at the moment, for instance to share goals, encourage interest and involvement by the public and other organisations?**

### **Please write your answer here:**

There is a clear benefit in aiming for "bigger, better, more joined up" in terms of outcomes and making best use of funding. We are not able to comment on how much of this currently takes place, though we understand that the relationship between Exmoor National Park and the Quantocks AONB team is close and productive.

## **17 What views do you have on their efforts to involve people from all parts of society, to encourage volunteering and improve health and well-being?**

### **Please write your answer here:**

Our knowledge of NP/AONB work in this area is limited, but we feel the volunteer sector deserves greater support both locally and centrally. As mentioned, the superb work done by the Quantocks AONB with just 80-100 regular volunteers suggests that extraordinary things could be achieved with more support and encouragement, if wider sections of society were engaged.

## **18 What views do you have on the way they are funded and how this might change?**

### **Please write your answer here:**

Again, this is outside our area of knowledge, but we are aware that ambitious thinking is sometimes curtailed by concerns over funding. The Quantocks AONB service has submitted that no new NPs or AONBs should be considered if "the overall pot cannot be sufficiently expanded". While we agree whole-heartedly that a poorly funded NP/AONB is undesirable, we nevertheless strongly feel that big ideas must be proposed and discussed, even if funding is seemingly a stumbling block. Momentum can build behind exciting ideas and solutions present themselves if the proposal is ambitious and bold.

## **19 What views do you have on the process of designation - which means the way boundaries are defined and changed?**

**Please write your answer here:**

We agree with the Quantocks AONB service submission that the present system for amending boundaries is urgently in need of reform. The boundary of the Quantocks AONB was strongly influenced in the Fifties by recalcitrant landowners and farmers, and most villages left out. This is a tremendous shame and represents a huge stumbling block to greater public participation in the landscape as a whole. All or part of the following historic estates that lie within three miles of the Quantock escarpment were left out of the AONB: Hestercombe House, Enmore Castle, Barford Park, Halswell House, Sandhill Park, Walford House, Quantock Lodge, Fairfield House, St. Audries House, and The Court House (Quantoxhead). It is surely not a coincidence (and somewhat ironic) that most of these estates have suffered huge erosion, degradation or destruction, a sad and avoidable fate that represents a loss to the whole country, not just to the local historic fabric. There is still time to protect many of these historic parks by bringing them entirely within the AONB. The boundaries must be allowed to move and adapt.

**20 What views do you have on whether areas should be given new designations? For instance, the creation of new National Parks or AONBs, or new types of designations for marine areas, urban landscapes or those near built-up areas.**

**Please write your answer here:**

As outlined in previous answers, we strongly approve of further NPs or AONBs being considered, and the boundaries of existing ones being consolidated, expanded or allowed to take in parishes that are bisected. Entirely new designations for marine areas should also be discussed, but Arts Taunton is especially excited by the suggestion of new designations for urban landscapes and built-up areas. We welcome anything that could encourage high quality design, green infrastructure and sustainable development with a sense of place and local character. In addition, we do not believe that enough legal protection or weight in the planning system is given to Conservation Areas within towns and villages. In canvassing opinion on this, Arts Taunton spoke to many stakeholders and key organisations, including Sarah Bryan, Chief Executive of Exmoor National Park, and representatives of the Quantocks AONB. We were especially keen to discuss what appetite there would be for an expanded Exmoor National Park that could include the Quantocks. While concerns were raised about administration, funding and local government, all parties were open to further discussion and keen to engage with any proposals that might be put forward. It was made clear that many issues surrounding expanding designated areas will be reduced or eliminated by hard assurances that adequate funding will be in place for them.

**21 Are there lessons that might be learnt from the way designated landscapes work in other parts of the United Kingdom, or abroad?**

**Please write your answer here:**

Arts Taunton has not yet engaged with the managers of designated landscapes outside of the South-West. However, we recently hosted a well-received seminar with London-based campaign CREATE STREETS. Their proposals for medium density, high quality urban planning using traditional materials and with appropriate scale and historic context is an obvious fit for Taunton. We believe that NPs/AONBs have much to learn from such campaigning organisations. Another example of a pioneering approach to landscape management from outside of 'official' groups/structures is the Knepp Rewilding project in Sussex, where a spectacular recovery of wildlife has taken place in a privately owned, densely populated, lowland farming landscape.

**Part 4 - Closing thoughts**

**22 Do you think the terms currently used are the right ones? Would you suggest an alternative title for AONBs, for instance and if so what?**

**Please write your answer here:**

There is a huge 'branding' gulf between AONBs and NPs, the latter having a degree of recognition internationally, the former often being misunderstood, even by local residents. Fundamentally, the term 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' results in discrimination against areas that aren't clearly defined by geology or geophysics, and favours those that are perceived to be natural; almost all non-coastal NPs/AONBs are defined by hills. Often, AONBs are no more natural than the farmland that surrounds them. Areas with a gentler, more modest beauty are far less able to resist inappropriate development. As argued earlier, it is perverse that we don't officially recognise any part of, for example, the Northamptonshire Uplands, the Essex Marshes, the Vale of White Horse, Romney Marsh, the Cambridgeshire Fens or the Somerset Levels and Moors to be "outstandingly beautiful". In the case of the last of these, it is recognised as a site of international importance for wildlife – yet has no national designation beyond some isolated SSSIs. A new term of 'National Landscape' might allow for a broader church of areas to be given more protection, as well as take more into account the human activity that has shaped and beautified the land.

**23 The review has been asked to consider how designated landscapes work with other designations such as National Trails, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), National Nature Reserves (NNRs) and Special Protected Areas (SPAs). Do you have any thoughts on how these relationships work and whether they could be improved?**

**Please write your answer here:**

Once again, we refer to the general idea that "bigger, better, more joined up" is a very good overall aim. Most of the designations listed here do not have resonance with the public, so NPs and AONBs could play a role in promoting and informing the public about them.

**24 Do you have any other points you would like to make that are not covered above?**

**Please write your answer here:**

When planning changes to the laws and governance of NPs and AONBs, Arts Taunton would argue for early and deep engagement with local people as a priority. Without their support, mistrust can flourish which can set back or prevent reform and modernisation.