

**Guildford Greenbelt Group (GGG)
Press announcement 3 December 2014
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**GUILDFORD GREENBELT GROUP (GGG) CALLS FOR SURREY
HILLS AONB TO BE NATIONAL PARK**

Guildford Greenbelt Group (GGG) calls for the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) to be redesignated as a National Park.

The constitution of the AONB has recently changed. It is now directly controlled by the same councils that have aggressively viewed the Green Belt as an area for development.

GGG considers that this area is too important and too precious to be left to local councillors. Our view is that some have already demonstrated in their local boroughs that they cannot be trusted. We need a board that runs this area in order to protect it.

The Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty runs across the North Downs from Oxted to Haslemere – where it becomes adjacent to England’s newest National Park – the South Downs National Park. It has countryside of national significance which includes areas like Box Hill, the Hog’s Back or the Devil’s Punchbowl, many other famous beauty spots like Leith Hill, Newlands Corner or Silent Pool; and many historic locations, sites of special scientific interest or wildlife importance. It is internationally famous because of the Olympic cycle routes which have triggered more frequent cycling events along the same or similar routes. It is also a playground for Londoners – cyclists, walkers, campers, riders come here for days out – and a breath of fresh air. Many teenagers have their first experience of serious walking by completing Duke of Edinburgh excursions along the Surrey Hills.

However, “AONB” is a designation that is not universally familiar; we have been told that some councillors were not aware of the designation before becoming councillors. But everyone understands what a National Park does.

Our AONB is perhaps the most threatened such area in the country. It skirts the M25, in an area with high housing values, between Heathrow and Gatwick and en route to the South Coast at Portsmouth and Southampton. It is an hour from London or less; and property values are high. It is besieged by developers. Our local councils have not been robust in defending our countryside.

Our landscapes – and the views in and out of the Surrey Hills – are of concern to everyone in this area. It is agreed that the views from the AONB, and of the AONB

from the surrounding countryside, should be protected landscapes too. It is perhaps a surprise to discover that there is no formal planning role within the AONB, and that the board is not run in the interests of the AONB itself, but by the local councils. (The reason for this is supposedly that those councils make a small contribution to funding the board –but the contribution from each is very small indeed, since we understand around 80% of the funding of the AONB is provided by Natural England.)

The Surrey Hills AONB is run by the Surrey Hills AONB board. This has representatives from local councils and from other notable entities such as the National Trust, Surrey Wildlife Trust, National Farmers' Union and CPRE. However, in the past few months the constitution of the Surrey Hills AONB has been changed.

DEFRA gives guidelines about the proper constitution of AONBs, to comprise:

- 40% or more local councillors
- 20% or more parish councillors
- up to 40% other specialist groups (e.g. National Trust)

In breach of these guidelines the Surrey Hills AONB board is made up of 75% local councillors who have voting rights and 25% non-council representatives. Councils do and should have concerns about economic management, economic growth, planning for homes, etc. GGG is concerned that councillors may regard their primary responsibility as being on behalf of their constituent councils, rather than acting in the interest of the AONB itself.

This is a change which has taken place very quietly over the last few months. Previously there was no differentiation between voting and non-voting members on the board, so that – theoretically – borough council board positions were in a minority. However, the structural change which has now been approved and which GGG understands has been ratified by all borough councils, means that the board is now controlled entirely by those councils. Should these councillors decide to approve substantial building projects, this could be voted through. GGG considers that this is unacceptable and in contravention of the purposes of the AONB.

GGG discussed this with the National Association of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (NAAONB) which then consulted with DEFRA on this matter. DEFRA has responded by noting that there are regional variations within AONBs and that constitutions are a local matter.

The only statutory requirement, for all AONBs is that they **conserve landscape**: *“AONBs have the following statutory purpose - To conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape. A Conservation Board has an additional purpose to increase the understanding and enjoyment by the public of the special qualities of the area”*. (Source: DEFRA on AONBs).

However, under the current board, the purpose of the Surrey Hills AONB has already been subverted: the Board website states: *“The Board was established in*

*2008 with the main purpose of; helping to conserve and enhance the landscape, promote public understanding and enjoyment **and to strengthen the rural economy of the Surrey Hills area.**"*. [GGG emphasis].

It is questionable whether this board's purpose is in fact *ultra vires* (a legal term meaning, roughly, that the board is proposing to take actions that it does not have the legal power to do). It is certainly morally questionable.

Surrey is an area of almost full employment, with high development pressures. The Surrey Hills is not an area of rural deprivation. In fact, at a Surrey Hills Society meeting attended by some Surrey Hills Board members, it was noted that the area was one where approximately 40% of households included a company director. The rural economy of the Surrey Hills area doesn't need much strengthening; and the landscape does need protecting. However, this is not the purpose of the Surrey Hills Board. The published purpose contradicts, in part, the actual statutory function of the AONB.

We think that it is vital that the AONB is run in order to protect and preserve the landscape. It is currently run by councillors who have divided loyalties and responsibilities. Without criticising the individuals concerned, the AONB should be self-standing. A National Park structure would be a clearer, cleaner and more straightforward organisational structure.

It is important that the Surrey Hills is protected. Is an AONB board made up of councillors, the right group of people to act to protect it? Is it right that the AONB should be managed by party politicians? Should it not be managed and controlled by those who are fundamentally concerned with protecting the area, its landscape and its wildlife and who have a track record in doing so? Why have the politicians gained control of the AONB – and who has authorised or approved this change?

GGG is supported by many individuals and a large number of campaigning groups, residents' associations and some parish councils across the whole borough of Guildford, in both the rural and the urban area.

Susan Parker, GGG leader, commented:

"The AONB is too important to be left to politicians. It should be run with the clear and unequivocal purpose of protecting the landscape, the wildlife and the countryside. National Park status is a straightforward structure that would allow proper protection and planning control over the area. A change to National Park status would take control of planning here away from the hands of the politicians."

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Notes for editors

1. Further information on GGG is available on the GGG website <http://guildfordgreenbeltgroup.co.uk>
Or on its facebook page:
<https://www.facebook.com/Guildfordgreenbelt>
2. GGG public meetings, open to all members of the public, will be held as follows:
 - 9 December 2014 -St Albans Hall Wood Street Village -7.30pm
 - 28 January 2015 -Fairlands Community Hall -7pm
3. A copy of the referendum petition supported by GGG is attached to this press release.
4. Details of the map of the Surrey Hills AONB:
<http://www.surreyhills.org/surrey-hills-explore/>
5. DEFRA guidance on the Conservation Boards which govern AONBs is set out here: <http://archive.defra.gov.uk/rural/protected/aonb.htm> which states:

“How are the members chosen?”

‘AONB Conservation Boards are made up from:

- Local Authorities appointees,
- Parish Council appointees, and
- Secretary of State ‘national’ appointees.

The basic rules determining the size of these groups within a Conservation Board are that:-

- At least 40% of members have to be appointed by Local Authorities,
- At least 20% by the parish councils, and
- No more than 20% by the Secretary of State.

The Chilterns Conservation Board currently has 29 members, and the Cotswolds Conservation Board has thirty six.

Information for Local Authorities/Conservation Boards

Defra has issued guidance notes on the establishment and operation of English AONB Conservation Boards:

- [AONB Conservation Boards - Guidance](#) (PDF 99KB) - October 2008
- [Flow chart of generic Conservation Board establishment process](#) (PDF 14KB) - October 2005”

6. Surrey Hills board is described on this website:
<http://www.surreyhills.org/surrey-hills-board/> which states:

“The Surrey Hills Board consists of Core (funding) and Advisory (non-funding) members consisting of representatives from local authorities, public bodies and agencies, landowners, land managers and farmers, and other special interest groups.

The Board was established in 2008 with the main purpose of; helping to conserve and enhance the landscape, promote public understanding and

enjoyment and to strengthen the rural economy of the Surrey Hills area. The Surrey Hills AONB unit undertakes work on behalf of the Board and prepares and implements the Management Plan, which formulates policy for the management of the area.”

Members of the board are as follows:

<http://www.surreyhills.org/surrey-hills-board/members/>

- Cllr David Wright (Chairman of Surrey Hills Board) – Guildford Borough Council
- Cllr Mike Band (Vice Chairman of Surrey Hills Board) – Waverley Borough Council
- Cllr David Mir – Mole Valley District Council
- Cllr John Stephenson – Reigate & Banstead Borough Council
- Cllr Lindsay Dunbar – Tandridge District Council
- Mike Goodman – Surrey County Council
- Adam Wallace – Natural England
- David Kennington – The National Trust

Advisory members are

- Nigel Davenport – Surrey Wildlife Trust
- Sandra Nichols – NFU (National Farmer’s Union)
- Liz Cutter – SCAPT (Surrey County Association of Parish and Town Councils)
- Tim Harrold – CPRE (Campaign to Protect Rural England)
- Chris Howard – Surrey Hills Society
- Simon Whalley – Surrey Hills Enterprises
- Neil Maltby – Surrey Hills Trust

There are therefore now 8 voting members and 7 non-voting advisory members of a total of 15 members. Of the voting members, 6 out of 8 represent local councils, and Natural England is a government quango. Only The National Trust is an independent – non-governmental - voice in relation to decisions made in relation to the Surrey Hills.