



Northumberland

County Council

COMMITTEE: CABINET

DATE: 13 JULY 2021

TITLE OF REPORT: FUNDING FOR AREAS OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY

Report of Director of Planning

Cabinet Member: Colin Horncastle, Cabinet Member for Community Services

Purpose of report

Current funding arrangements for the Northumberland Coast AONB Partnership and the North Pennines AONB Partnership ended at the end of the last financial year. Ongoing funding is available from Defra, but this is conditional on at least 25% match funding being secured from local authorities. The purpose of this report is to seek approval for funding from NCC for the next three years.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Council's annual funding contribution towards the Northumberland Coast AONB and the North Pennines AONB is maintained over the next three years, to enable the funding contribution from Defra to continue to be obtained and to enable the important work of the AONB Staff Units to be continued. The Council's contributions to the two AONBs has not increased since 2007 and so it is recommended that it is increased by 10% this year, taking the contribution to the Northumberland Coast AONB from £33,700 to £37,070 per year, and the contribution to the North Pennines AONB from £22,660, to £24,926.

Link to Corporate Plan

The work of the AONB Partnerships will contribute to the achievement of a range of aims in the Corporate Plan:

Living

The AONB Partnerships engage with local communities, for example through the Coast Care volunteering programme which improves mental and physical health by reducing social isolation and providing physical exercise while undertaking environmentally valuable tasks.

Enjoying

The AONB Partnerships help to look after some of the most important and valued landscapes in the county, drawing in significant levels of external funding to do so.

Connecting

The AONB Partnerships work with public transport providers; for example, the Northumberland Coast AONB staff have worked with Arriva to increase the frequency of the X18 Coast and Castles service and the length of season over which it runs.

Thriving

The AONB Partnerships bring significant amounts of external funding into rural areas of the county, support farming and tourism businesses, and are working at scale to restore habitats that sequester carbon.

Key issues

1. Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is a statutory designation established by the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 and given further impetus by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. Together with National Parks, AONBs represent the nation's finest landscapes, and the primary purpose of the AONB designation is to conserve and enhance natural beauty. There are 34 AONBs in England, covering 14% of the country.
2. Defra funds up to 75% of the cost of AONB Staff Units in England, on condition that local authorities fund at least 25%. In 2018 Northumberland County Council's Policy Board agreed funding contributions for the North Pennines and Northumberland Coast AONBs for the three years 2018-19 to 2020-21. Therefore, it is necessary to agree the Council's funding contribution for the next financial year and beyond.
3. Northumberland County Council currently contributes £22,660 per annum to the North Pennines AONB, as part of the overall contribution from the five local authorities whose areas fall partly within the AONB area, with Durham County Council contributing £36,050, Eden District Council £7,025, Carlisle City Council £7,235 and Cumbria County Council £14,470. Defra currently contributes £330,050 per annum. The Council currently contributes £33,700 plus recharges to the Northumberland Coast AONB as match-funding for the Defra grant which is currently £142,845.
4. Given that the local authority funding to the two AONBs has not increased since 2007, it is recommended that this now be increased by 10%, a proposal that has been accepted by the other local authorities contributing to the North Pennines AONB. This would take the Council's contribution to the Northumberland Coast AONB to £37,070 per year, and the contribution to the North Pennines AONB to £24,926 per year.
5. To enable financial planning to be undertaken, it is recommended that this level of contribution from the Council to the two AONBs be continued for the next three years.

It is recognised that maintaining this level of contribution may be challenging in the current financial climate; however, it is important to recognise that there is a substantial return on this investment, firstly in terms of the 75% Defra funding contribution that is secured by the 25% Council contribution, and secondly in terms of the considerable project funding that is invested in the County through the work of AONB Staff Units.

6. In addition to the core and project funding being provided by Defra, the AONB Staff Units are successful in drawing funding into the area from a wide range of sources including the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Green Recovery Challenge Fund and INTERREG. The Northumberland Coast AONB is currently engaged in the NHLF-funded Coast Care volunteering project and Bamburgh Bones public engagement and education project, both of which have brought about half a million pounds of funding into the area. The North Pennines AONB has a peatland programme that has led the restoration of over 30,000ha of blanket bog over the past 15 years and is running several large scale NHLF Landscape Partnership Schemes, each bringing several million pounds of funding into the area.
7. Both AONB Partnerships have been involved in the test and trial projects that Defra has commissioned as part of the transition from Common Agricultural Policy support for farmers to a post-Brexit UK support scheme, and Defra is currently finalising the details of the Farming in protected Landscapes scheme that will enable National Park Authorities and AONB Partnerships play an active role in providing both advice and financial support to farmers as part of Defra's Agricultural Transition Plan. This will become a major area of work for the AONBs over the next few years.
8. Work to tackle climate change is also likely to accelerate in both AONBs through the restoration of carbon-sequestering habitats such as peat bog, woodland, freshwater wetlands and saltmarsh as new funding streams such as the Nature for Climate Fund become available, to support the Government's peat and tree strategies.
9. In addition to the considerable financial return on the Council's funding contribution, contributing to the funding of AONB staff teams also enables the Council to discharge its obligations in terms of review and delivery of the statutory AONB Management Plans and the legal duty to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of AONBs. To do this, the Staff Units work closely with colleagues within a range of services in the Council, especially Development Management, Strategic Planning, Tourism, Rights of Way, Highways and Public Transport. Having helped to lead the Coastal Summits that the Council organised to discuss the unprecedented visitor pressure experienced on the coast last summer, the Northumberland Coast AONB Staff Unit has been working closely with Neighbourhood Services to prepare for this year's tourism season.

Background

1. Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is a statutory designation established by the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 and given further impetus by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. Together with National Parks, AONBs represent the nation's finest landscapes, and the primary purpose of the AONB designation is to conserve and enhance natural beauty. There are 34 AONBs in England, covering 14% of the country.
2. The Northumberland Coast AONB was designated in 1958 and covers an area of 138 square km along 64km of coastline from just south of Berwick-upon-Tweed to the Coquet Estuary. The AONB is only 2.5km wide at its widest point, but contains a tremendous variety of features of natural, historical and cultural value. The North Pennines AONB was designated in 1988 and covers just under 2,000 square km of uplands across south-west Northumberland, west Durham and east Cumbria.
3. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 imposed new duties on Local Authorities in relation to AONBs, including the preparation and review of AONB Management Plans and a duty imposed on all public bodies to conserve and enhance AONBs. To assist local authorities in the implementation of these duties, Defra provided funding to enable AONB staff units to be established and Management Plans to be prepared and implemented. This funding is conditional on 25% of core costs being contributed by local authorities.
4. The Staff Units and Partnerships for the two AONBs were formed in 2003, with their first Management Plans being produced in 2004. Since then, they have developed diverse work streams to conserve and enhance the special qualities of the AONBs, especially the conservation of the natural and historic environment and the development of sustainable tourism.

Implications

Policy	AONB Staff Units lead and facilitate the implementation of the Council's statutory AONB Management Plans
Finance and value for money	Providing 25% of the AONB core funding requirement enables 75% to be obtained from Defra. AONB Staff Units also secure considerable project funding from external funders, which is invested in and around the AONBs.
Legal	The Council has legal obligations to have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of AONBs, and to prepare Management Plans setting out the Council's policies for the management of the AONBs.
Procurement	No implications

Human Resources	Continuation of funding is required to ensure that existing AONB staff remain in post.
Property	No implications
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A /	
Risk Assessment	The Council has a range of legal duties towards AONBs, and the work of AONB Staff Units ensures that these duties are fulfilled. Consequently, providing a funding contribution towards the Staff Units mitigates the risk of legal challenge.
Crime & Disorder	None
Customer Consideration	The work of the AONB Staff Units benefits a range of customers, including local businesses who benefit from their work on sustainable tourism and from investment in project work, and local people who benefit from recreational and educational activities organised or promoted by the staff units.
Carbon reduction	The work of the Staff Units will assist in carbon reduction in a number of ways. Project work will restore and create habitats such as peatlands and wetlands that remove and store carbon from atmospheric sources, and advocacy will promote reduction of emissions through increased use of public transport as an alternative to private car use.
Wards	<u>Northumberland Coast AONB</u> Berwick West with Ord, Norham and Islandshires, Bamburgh, Longhoughton, Alnwick, Amble and Amble West with Warkworth <u>North Pennines AONB</u> Haltwhistle, Haydon and Hadrian, South Tynedale

Background papers:

[Northumberland Coast AONB Management Plan](#)

[North Pennines AONB Management Plan](#)

Report sign off.

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

	Full name of officer
Monitoring Officer/Legal	
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	
Relevant Executive Director	
Chief Executive	
Portfolio Holder(s)	

Author and Contact Details

David Feige, Environment & Design Team Manager and County Ecologist
Tel 622653, david.feige@northumberland.gov.uk