

Proposed Happy Valley extension

Context

This area comprises the deeply incised Happy Valley, a chalk valley system which extends into the fringes of south London, to the east of the A23. It is contiguous with the existing AONB and is defined by the main break in slope between the valley sides and wider built-up areas.



View across the downland slopes and wooded ridgelines of Happy Valley

Extent to which the natural beauty criterion is met

The area considered suitable for inclusion within the proposed extension includes:

- The dramatic chalk valley system of Happy Valley and surrounding farmland.
- Network of ancient woodland and wooded shaws that create a patchwork across areas of downland and arable farmland.
- Extensive areas of nationally significant calcareous grassland habitat.
- Narrow rural lanes and tracts of land only accessible on foot.

Significance

Chalk grassland landscapes are an important component of the Surrey Hills AONB. The AONB as currently designated includes significant areas of chalk grassland on the steep scarp slopes but little land within the incised valleys of the North Downs.

This area, along with Marden Park and Stoney Hill to the east, encapsulates some of the best chalk grasslands north of the existing AONB. Special qualities are derived from the scale and drama of the valley and its areas of chalk grassland and ancient woodland which create scenic compositions and unfolding views. This landscape has smooth, rounded convex slopes emphasised by linear woodland shaws and expresses a range of colours and textures throughout the seasons. The water tower of Netherne-on-the-Hill and Chaldon church punctuate the skyline and add interest reflecting the history of the area. This landscape abuts areas of significant population, but retains a high degree of tranquillity, especially in the heart of area which can only be accessed on foot.

Key Issues affecting the area's special qualities

The following issues are currently experienced in this area and are relevant to considering the difference AONB designation may make:

- High public usage of this area resulting in compaction of chalk grassland and conflict between livestock grazing and dogs.
- Loss of field boundaries due to hedge removal, lack of management or over-trimming and limited take up of environmental stewardship in some areas.

- Introduction of incongruous elements such as large-scale agricultural buildings or masts which can disrupt patterns and create eyesores.
- Suburbanisation of lanes due to high traffic volumes and verge erosion.
- Expansion of urban fringe land uses including golf courses and playing fields.

Including this area within the AONB would ensure more consistent forward planning and decision making through the focus provided by the statutory duties and powers which would apply. The dedicated purpose of the Surrey Hills AONB Management Plan and the assistance that the AONB team can provide in supporting land managers and others will help to resolve issues affecting the area as noted above.

Other relevant factors

During the natural beauty assessment, concerns were raised regarding the transitional nature of the landscape to the south, where it abuts the AONB. Between Lord's Wood, Court Farm and Rook Lane, a less undulating and intensive arable landscape, with evidence of boundary loss and caravan development within Furze Field Wood, was considered to be of lower landscape quality. However, in the context of the wider extension area, these lower quality areas fall between qualifying land within the AONB to the south and the Happy Valley to the north and were considered to be localised. On balance these areas were regarded as sufficiently small in extent to be considered as part of a wider tract of qualifying land.

The extent of urban fringe land uses such as playing fields, visual influence of urban areas on the qualities of the landscape, and the extent to which incongruous features such as masts fragment the area, were also key considerations. The strong topography and high levels of vegetation on the fringes of Happy Valley and along urban edges has enabled the boundary to be defined close to the built edge and as a result it often follows fence lines along the perimeter of properties and is subsequently convoluted in some places. At Farthing Down consideration was given to the drawing back of the boundary to exclude transitional landscape influenced by the surrounding urban development. This would have resulted in almost all of the



Upper reaches of the Happy Valley east of Furze Field Wood



Chaldon Church

down being excluded due to a lack of clear features to follow on the ground. Given the ridge of downland is valued for its scenic views into Happy Valley, natural heritage (part of the Site of Special Scientific Interest and National Nature Reserve) and cultural heritage (Scheduled Monument), a pragmatic decision was taken to extend the boundary to the urban edge. This enabled the feature to be included in its entirety.

The proposed boundary

The county boundary across the southern section of Happy Valley has been used as the proposed boundary, in the absence of a clear feature to follow and the need to exclude land to the south which is increasingly influenced by urban context and includes the Surrey National Golf Course. The proposed boundary does not include the whole of the Farthing Downs and Happy Valley SSSI nor the South London Downs NNR - this is not unusual where natural heritage designations cover significant areas. The natural beauty of the landscape for inclusion in the AONB designation is the primary consideration.