

Cabinet

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| Report Title: | Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and Stour Valley Management Plan 2016-2021 |
| Meeting Date: | 14 June 2016 |
| Lead Councillor(s): | Councillor Matthew Hicks, Cabinet Member for Environment and Public Protection Councillors James Finch and Richard Kemp, Suffolk County Council representatives on the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Stour Valley Joint Advisory Committee |
| Local Councillor(s): | Councillors Gordon Jones, Peter Beer, John Sayers, Mary Evans, Julian Flood and Tony Brown |
| Director: | Geoff Dobson, Director of Resource Management |
| Assistant Director or Head of Service: | Sue Roper, Assistant Director Strategic Development |
| Author: | Simon Amstutz, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Manager. Tel: 01394 445225 |

Brief summary of report

1. Cabinet is asked to endorse a plan to co-ordinate partnership activity for the nationally designated Dedham Vale of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and Stour Valley Project area that seeks to:
 - a) Conserve and enhance its natural beauty and special qualities;
 - b) Enable communities to become actively engaged in their environment;
 - c) Support the economy by supporting new and established businesses; and
 - d) Develop high profile facilities for everyone to enjoy.

What is Cabinet being asked to decide?

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. The Cabinet is asked to approve and endorse the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and Stour Valley Management Plan 2016-2021 (Appendix 1). |
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Reason for recommendation

3. Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires the relevant Local Authorities to “prepare and publish a plan which formulates their policy for the management of their AONB and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it”. The Management Plan will fulfil this duty for the next five years and help protect and enhance this important nationally designated asset and also an area to the north and west of the current designated AONB referred to as the Stour Valley.

What are the key issues to consider?

4. Suffolk County Council is host to the Dedham Vale AONB staff team and is the largest local authority funder of the Partnership. As such the Council demonstrates leadership for this national asset.
5. The Management Plan has been subject to 12 months of consultation with local communities, professional interests and the Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley Partnership.
6. The Dedham Vale AONB is recognised at a local, national and international level as being a special place because of its wildlife, landscape and heritage qualities. The Management Plan will ensure that the natural beauty and special qualities of the nationally designated AONB, around 35 square miles, and the wider Stour Valley (around 82 square miles) are conserved and enhanced for the people that live in, work in and visit the area.
7. As well as being an important environmental and cultural asset, the Dedham Vale AONB is a valuable economic asset. The value of tourism in the Dedham Vale AONB was calculated at approximately £51 million per year in 2014 (*Volume and Value of Tourism in Dedham Vale AONB* commissioned by staff team in 2015). This contribution to the economy depends upon a high quality landscape to attract visitors and tourists. This Management Plan will ensure that the environment is protected and continues to attract visitors and tourists to the area.
8. Given the contribution the AONB makes to the economy it is crucial that the environment is protected and enhanced. Development needs to be sustainable and high quality to reflect the characteristics of the area. A good example of this approach is the way in which the Partnership has responded to the proposed National Grid proposal to strengthen the electricity distribution network, responses to development proposals and support for sustainable visitor projects.
9. It should be noted that the AONB brings in significant external project funding in addition to the core budget. This includes £1 million for the Heritage Lottery Funded 'Managing a Masterpiece' Landscape Partnership Scheme (2010-2014), River Stour Enhancement Project (£40,000 per annum) and funding through an Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem) allowance to underground low voltage power cables running through the AONB. This has a value to date of around £3.5 million in landscape enhancement works.
10. In addition the AONB team supports several community groups undertaking environmental action in their local neighbourhood and directly facilitates around 600 volunteer days per year (equivalent to three full time members of staff).

What are the resource and risk implications?

11. The County Council currently contributes around 12% (c£28,238) of the c£238,292 core budget per annum. Around 59% of the budget comes from the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). The remainder comes from the other Local Authorities and a small amount from partners, sponsorship and sales.
12. The AONB staff team has restructured and reduced costs by around 23% during the last Comprehensive Spending Review period to reflect reduced

contributions from the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and Local Authorities. The team has amalgamated with the Suffolk Coast & Heaths AONB team, to maximise efficiencies and remove duplication for Suffolk tax payers.

13. The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in his Autumn Statement in 2015 that the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) will make a national four year settlement with AONB that included protection of existing levels of national funding and an annual uplift of 1.72% per annum for the period 2015/16 to 2018/19. This was confirmed in writing in spring 2016.
14. The Management Plan itself does not commit Suffolk County Council to further funding over and above its existing financial support (£28,238 in 2016/17) and the hosting of the staff team.
15. Given the leadership Suffolk County Council already demonstrates as host to the staff team and largest local authority funder, a delay in the County Council approving and endorsing the Plan may incur a loss of credibility and goodwill, and possibly put external funding opportunities at risk. There may also be indirect resource implications for the County Council if individual partners have to undertake statutory functions and work themselves that the AONB could deliver more efficiently.

What are the timescales associated with this decision?

16. The Management Plan covers the period 2016-2021. All councils in the Partnership are being asked to endorse the plan during the period of April to July 2016.

Alternative options

17. Cabinet could choose to propose changes to the Plan but, given the number of partners involved, it could be a considerable amount of time before a revised Management Plan could again be brought forward for approval and adoption. Any revised Management Plan would again require the agreement of all the relevant authorities.

Who will be affected by this decision?

18. There are around 15,000 people living in the Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley Project area, although far more people from Suffolk and beyond benefit from the area's natural beauty.
19. The Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley's partners, in the public, private and voluntary sector, rely on a clear Management Plan to ensure the national asset is managed sympathetically and continues to benefit the visitor experience and encourage appropriate sustainable development.
20. The Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley area has strong community spirit. The Management Plan will provide guidance to the hundreds of volunteer days on landscape, access and wildlife projects as well as many successful community environmental projects.

Main body of report

What is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)?

21. An AONB is a landscape that has been recognised as being of national importance and has received special protection from the UK government. AONBs can be designated under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act (1949) and their management was strengthened through the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000). AONBs form part of a 'family' of protected and defined landscapes that, together with National Parks and Heritage Coasts, include our finest countryside. There are 46 AONBs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The first AONB was designated in 1956, and the Dedham Vale had its designation confirmed in 1970. Suffolk has two AONBs, reflecting the very high quality natural environment found here - the Dedham Vale and the Suffolk Coast & Heaths.

What is the Stour Valley?

22. The Stour Valley (recognised as around 82 square miles for the purposes of the Plan) is an area to the North and West of the currently designated Dedham Vale AONB, an area of around 35 square miles, which for many years has benefitted from an 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' (AONB) service. The Partnership has an aspiration to include part of this area in the designated Dedham Vale AONB. The Management Plan seeks to co-ordinate activity across both the AONB and the wider Stour Valley to conserve and enhance its natural beauty and special qualities and continue to develop the area as an outstanding place to live, visit and work in.

What is the purpose of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)?

23. The statutory purpose of AONB designation is to conserve and enhance natural beauty. In pursuing this purpose, account should be taken of the needs of agriculture, forestry and other rural industries as well as the economic and social needs of local communities. Particular regard should be paid to promoting sustainable forms of social and economic development that in themselves help to conserve and enhance natural beauty. Recreation is not an objective of designation but the demand for recreation should be met and managed, in so far as this is consistent with the purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty.

The Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and Stour Valley Partnership

24. To ensure the efficient and co-ordinated management of the AONB, the Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley Partnership was formed in 1993. The Partnership is made up of organisations with a particular interest in the area who work together to implement the Management Plan. It encompasses local authorities and statutory agencies as well as private, community and voluntary organisations active in the area. The Partnership has a public commitment to work together to implement the Management Plan. The AONB Partnership is made up of 17 organisations.

The Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and Stour Valley Joint Advisory Committee

25. A Joint Advisory Committee, made up solely of Local Authority representatives, provides a function to scrutinise finances, business planning and operational processes.

The purpose of the Management Plan

26. The Management Plan sets out six themes for the effective management of the Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley project area. These are: The Countryside; Villages and Residents; Enjoying the Area; The River and its Tributaries; Climate Change and Working Together.
27. The Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley Management Plan 2016-2021 is set in the context of national and local policy and strategy. It has a role in supporting Local Plans of the local authorities (which themselves contain many references to conserving the area). The plan outlines 36 Management Plan Policies categorised in the six themes.
28. The Management Plan seeks to deliver a ten year vision for the area. The vision is reproduced below:

“The Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley Project area is a distinctive landscape with agriculture and wildlife at its core that retains its natural beauty and special qualities, which is conserved and enhanced by a wide ranging partnership. It is an area where residents feel a strong sense of belonging, visitors are welcomed to enjoy the countryside and the heritage is understood and appreciated by all.”

29. It is important to note that the Management Plan is a Partnership document; no one organisation is responsible for its implementation, rather the Management Plan sets out the Partnership’s joint priorities and a joint way of operating in the area. However the DEFRA and Local Authority funded staff team, hosted by Suffolk County Council, is crucial to its delivery.
30. The Management Plan does not constitute Supplementary Planning Guidance. The County Council’s Ecologists have carried out a Strategic Habitats Regulations Assessment under *The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010; Regulation 61 Assessment*, to determine the effect of the Plan on the integrity of the European Designated Sites within the AONB. It is the opinion of the Suffolk County Council Ecologists that;

“An Appropriate Assessment has been carried out and has concluded that there will not be an adverse effect on the integrity of the Special Protection Area or Special Area of Conservation.

“Because of the suite of safeguards, including project-specific Habitats Regulations Assessments, it is the opinion of Suffolk County Council’s Ecologists that possible negative effects upon the integrity of the European Site or upon the Ramsar Criteria as a result of the Strategic Objectives and Policies of the Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley Project Area Management Plan 2015-2021, can be carefully considered, professional

ecological advice obtained, mitigation sought and compensation agreed in order to reduce or negate any likely significant negative effects.”

Sources of further information

- a) Draft Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and Stour Valley Management Plan 2016-2021:
<http://www.dedhamvalestourvalley.org/about-us/aonb-management-plan/2016-2021-management-plan/>
- b) Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) Initial Screening: [EIA](#)