

Detailed guide: Areas of outstanding natural beauty (AONBs): designation and management

Updated: Improved wording on what Natural England takes into consideration when prioritising designation proposals.

An area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB) is land protected by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW Act). It protects the land to conserve and enhance its natural beauty.

The CROW Act sets out the roles and responsibilities that different organisations must follow to manage AONBs. There are 34 AONBs in England. See the [map of AONBs](#) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This guidance is for England only. Visit the relevant websites for AONB management in [Wales](#) and [Northern Ireland](#).

Natural England's responsibilities

Under the CROW Act, Natural England can make orders to designate AONBs or vary the boundaries of existing ones. These powers apply to England only.

Natural England has the discretion to consider whether to assess and designate an area as an AONB. Natural England will prioritise proposals by considering if:

- evidence suggests the land might meet the natural beauty criterion
- there's local authority agreement that designation is appropriate
- it has the available resource to evaluate the proposal
- it's more important than other corporate priorities

For existing AONBs, Natural England must:

- give advice to local planning authorities on development proposals in an AONB
- consider the conservation and enhancement of AONBs in its work, for example when carrying out land management activities or giving permission for statutory bodies to carry out works in an AONB

Meet the natural beauty criterion

Before Natural England proposes an area becomes an AONB, it must meet the 'natural beauty criterion'. This could be a combination of factors, such as:

- landscape quality, where natural or man-made landscape is good quality
- scenic quality, such as striking coastal landforms

- relative wildness, such as distance from housing or having few roads
- relative tranquillity, where natural sounds, such as streams or birdsong are predominant
- natural heritage features, such as distinctive geology or species and habitat
- cultural heritage, which can include the built environment that makes the area unique, such as archaeological remains or historic parkland

Designation process

To designate an AONB, Natural England must issue an order under section 82 of the CROW Act for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of that area.

Before making an order to designate or vary an AONB, Natural England must:

- decide if a proposal meets the natural beauty criterion
- decide if it's desirable to designate for the purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty
- define a detailed boundary

Natural England must also:

- consult each local authority affected by the proposed order (or variation order)
- publish the proposals in [The Gazette](#) and local newspapers of each affected local authority
- consider all representations made against the proposals and make any necessary modifications
- submit the order to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, including any unresolved representations or objections

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs can confirm, refuse, modify or vary any order made by Natural England to designate or vary the boundary of an AONB.

Local authority responsibilities

Under the CROW Act, you, the relevant local authority, must make sure that all decisions have regard for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB. Your decisions and activities must consider the potential effect it will have within the AONB and land outside its boundary. Read more on [development proposals affecting AONBs](#).

Delegate authority

You can give authority to 'AONB partnerships' to:

- manage an AONB
- create a management plan

You can't give an AONB partnership the authority to make decisions on

development proposals or strategic planning (see [‘Development proposals affecting AONBs’](#)).

An AONB partnership could be:

- a joint advisory committee
- an AONB committee

You can also request that the Secretary of State establishes a conservation board with delegated powers to manage the AONB for you.

AONB management plans

Each AONB must have a management plan. It must be in place within 3 years of an AONB’s designation. A review must take place within 5 years of the start of the plan.

All plans must be available to the public. See the management plans available on each AONB’s website through the list of links on the [Landscapes for Life](#) website.

You’re responsible for producing and reviewing the plan. Its purpose is to consider conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB with continuity and consistency over time.

The plan should include:

- an assessment of the special quality of the AONB, such as a landscape character assessment that includes its condition and vulnerability to change
- cross reference to existing plans, such as local transport plans or biodiversity action plans
- a strategy, such as a 5 year plan, of how you’ll manage change
- other special sites that exist in the AONB, such as scheduled ancient monuments or sites of special scientific interest
- an action plan, for example who’s doing what, why and by when
- a monitoring plan to show how you’ll measure the AONB’s condition and effectiveness of management

Development proposals affecting AONBs

Only local authorities or the Secretary of State can give permission for development in, or affecting, an AONB. As a local authority, you must make sure that any proposals have regard for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB, for example when:

- adding utility services, like gas pipes and telecommunications cables
- creating public access as part of rights of way improvement

You can [consult Natural England](#) where development might have a significant impact. Read guidance on [how to review planning applications in a protected area](#) before you make a planning decision.

You can use AONB management plans to help:

- shape [local](#) or [neighbourhood plans](#)
- make decisions on development proposals

Consult Natural England

Email planning proposals to: consultations@naturalengland.org.uk

Natural England Consultation Service

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