

## Cotswold AONB Management Plan Consultation - Ratley and Upton Parish Council key points:

- It's good to see that the Management Plan is being updated to reflect and align with the evolving national policy and fast-moving pace of economic, political and environmental challenges we are facing. It's essential that such plans do stay up to date and relevant to the people and places they underpin and also critical that such Management Plans do enable protected landscapes to evolve as we face new challenges. We are all acutely aware that our climate, our natural environment, and the impact of the growing economic crisis on peoples' livelihoods and health (mental and physical) have particularly escalated in their importance in recent years.
- We are pleased to see that tackling climate change is high on the agenda throughout the plan (**Outcome 1**) - whilst we agree with the Management Plan that the new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELM) is a potential delivery mechanism for tackling climate change adaptation and mitigation measures( Page 35), to our knowledge ELM does not currently contain specific measures which are easily identifiable to the layperson as contributing to climate change mitigation or indeed adaptation. More needs to be done to help make these new schemes clearer in terms of their objectives and easier to navigate and identify with. On page 21, the Management Plan talks about the Board having commissioned a Carbon Footprint Assessment. This is a laudable and ambitious task. But as the Board recognises it's others who will do the delivery, so much more needs to be done to support and direct the many 1000's of SME's and private individuals which populate the Cotswold Protected Landscape towards understanding their own carbon footprint and map out their own journey and personal management decisions to reach net zero. Energy efficiency of traditional and listed buildings is given special mention and should be encouraged, but more needs to be done to make such update/retrofitting economically viable. Materials and specialist knowledge can be prohibitive and often leads to such buildings being held in a perpetual state of energy inefficiency and falling into disrepair as result.
- We would strongly agree with the Management Plan in its statement that the natural and cultural capital of our protected landscapes (**Objective 2**) are generally poorly understood and valued. There is currently a growing interest in the emergence of new private markets to pay for these services - including amongst others, carbon storage. These markets are currently very immature and largely unregulated or defined exposing people and businesses to unacceptable reputational and economic risk. The Cotswold National Landscape should proactively work with other national Protected Landscapes bodies, other stakeholders and the Government who we understand are now starting to look more closely at this to help develop and promote new codes of good practice. This will in time enable high quality markets to evolve and be invested in with confidence.
- It is also good that the Management Plan acknowledges that tackling climate change is not just about focussing on mitigation, but also recognising that landscapes will in the meantime also need to evolve and adapt. For example, it's inevitable and well-documented that some elements of our current biodiversity will naturally change in their spatial distribution patterns in response to shifts in our climate, so landscapes like the Cotswolds need to facilitate movement through the landscape via the good management/enhancement of natural corridors such as field hedges and watercourses. We cannot ring-fence our protected landscapes and the biodiversity they support and try to hold them forever in a kind of historical time capsule. Therefore, it is good that there is recognition of the need for this movement and that the need for greater connectivity of habitats is reflected (**Outcome 9**). It is also good to see that the AONB is supportive of local measures and projects for rainwater harvesting and storage and also for sustainable drainage (SuDs) schemes to

help address some of the inevitable impacts of predicted dryer summers and wetter winters (Page 22/23).

- We would strongly support the need for working together (**Outcome 3**). Too often a hierarchical top down approach is taken to the planning and execution of objectives within protected landscapes and the Boards of such protected landscapes, like the Cotswolds, can seem remote and detached. Outcomes can only be achieved if there is genuine buy-in from those actually living and working in these landscapes. This must not simply be lip-service but there needs to be evidence of genuine partnership. This will help address some of the concerns about inconsistency in approach across what is a complex geographical boundary, as well as the point about collective motivation to deliver on the outcomes set out in the Plan.
- **Outcome 10** references the fine balance of land uses within the protected landscape. Very few landscapes within the British Isles can be described now as being truly natural. Many of the rural businesses which still exists today within our Cotswold landscape have contributed to shaping it and making it what it is today (as recognised on page 24) - they should not be treated as mutually exclusive/competing in terms of their desired outcomes. It's therefore important for the Management Plan to recognise and enable business to contribute positively towards the landscape. For example, many of our privately owned local farm businesses which manage by far the majority (c. 87% as stated on page 34 of the Management Plan) of the land within the Cotswolds can (with the right information and support) contribute positively to the production of food, fuel, fibre alongside recreation, renewable energy production, climate change (both adaptation and mitigation) and nature recovery and other ecosystem services (clean air, water, better soil etc etc).
- The need for better coordinated and more joined up deer management across the Protected Landscape is specifically noted (page 36) and it's a bit of a personal hobby horse but we do think we should support that. The population is growing and causing increased damage to woodlands as well as increased risk of increasing road traffic collisions. The Deer Initiative was formerly supported by the Government via Natural England, but we understand this support has now dwindled to nothing. It seems ironic to us that on one hand we're talking about the impact of methane emissions on our climate from farmed red meat and then we have a natural source of potentially high quality, lean red meat in the form of venison. It's been talked about much as (albeit small) part of the solution for years, but lack of coordinated management and lack of suitably local butchery and refrigeration facilities are the blocker. What could the AONB do to help here? It also seems hypocritical that on one had we are encouraging tree planting to help mitigate climate change and at the same time turning a blind eye to the growing (fatal) tree damage from the increasing deer population which is undermining new planting programmes.
- Whilst the Cotswolds is a protected landscape, it also needs to ensure the local communities which live within it - many in smaller rural towns, villages, and hamlets, do not suffer from inferior infrastructure. Too often national policies to tackle levelling up are focussed on the north-south divide and fail to recognise there is as much, if not even greater, disparity between rural and urban communities. It is good to see under **Objective 11** that this need is recognised. Rural communities should not feel left behind and receive a second class access to good infrastructure services, road and public transport links and broadband etc. However, we think we should remind the AONB that they need to stand by their statement on page 39, that such major infrastructure projects, such as road or energy projects, should "be exemplars for how they have regard to the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the National Landscape". We are thinking here specifically about the visual impact of the current bio-gas proposal. This isn't about unilaterally objecting to such developments, but it is about encouraging them to "lead the way" on what is possible to make these projects work sympathetically within protected

landscapes with a little time, innovation and thought and be genuine leaders in green energy and infrastructure.

- We are pleased to see that on page 43 the Management Plan does recognise the special need to ensure those who care for the landscape (often farm workers) but also other key workers in our rural communities can actually afford to live in the AONB and find suitable homes close to where they are needed to be, sometimes at unsociable hours. Appropriately sited affordable housing and small developments to support key workers where they are actually needed not miles away in towns where there is no sustainable public transport to, should be actively supported by the AONB Board.
- A protected landscape that is rich with historical features and cultural heritage (**Objective 8**) should not simply equate to an outdated and tired landscape - that will only result in social and economic decline which will eventually also undermining the third pillar of sustainability - ie, the environment. Thriving communities and local businesses are far more likely to invest (economically, emotionally, and socially) in positive management and custody of our special landscape. Done well, new buildings, new business enterprises and new/improved infrastructure can contribute positively to protected landscapes as long as they are done to a high standard, sympathetic with their surroundings/materials and with genuinely environmentally sustainable credentials (and not greenwash). However, done badly, as we have experienced in our own Parish with the Edgehill quarry development, this can lead to an undermining of tranquillity (hence undermining **Outcome 6**) through daily noise pollution and unacceptable physical and visual damage to surrounding road surfaces. Therefore, the Management Plan needs to encourage and be supportive development that adds to the long-term management and enhancement of the landscape and it's communities and does not undermine it.
- Since the start of the pandemic in 2020 we have experienced first-hand the increased interest in access to our natural environment. Protected landscapes like the Cotswolds became honeypots for people seeking the mental and physical benefit of being out and about in the countryside (**Objective 12**). However, it is well recognised that the increased interest also added pressure to our local networks of public footpaths and rights of way - in some cases causing conflict and upset with trespass, inappropriate camping (as we saw in the Edgehill woods), car parking, fly tipping (again as we have seen locally) and BBQ fires etc.. The Management Plan makes several good sensible and constructive points on page 46/47, most of which we would support. However, it should set out more strongly what needs to be done to help visitors and residents feel welcome, respected and safe? The Julian Glover Review of National Parks and AONB's back in 2019 stated that many people feel intimidated and scarred going for a walk when visiting the countryside and the Government has pledged to address this. The Parish Council agree that as residents of a rural parish, we don't want to simply see this tackled via an increased "urbanisation" and sanitisation of the countryside making it into a theme park. Instead we need better coordination by all local stakeholders to proactively promote the newly revised Countryside Code so everyone both visiting, living and working in our Cotswolds countryside is more aware, educated and at ease. It's easily said, but we know the messages simply aren't getting to those who need to be aware of it and it's just sitting somewhere on an impenetrable Government web page which your average person is simply not going to actively seek out to read just ahead of going for a walk in the countryside. More targeting coordinated campaigns are required using a range of media platforms. The Cotswold AONB can play a more proactive coordination role here along with other the national Protected Landscapes.
- **Outcome 13** - We are already blessed with an extensive rights of way network, therefore rather than necessarily simply adding yet more, there should perhaps be a focus on helping to promote and enhance what is already there? So, for example, better and more informed

signage (and exploring new innovative opportunities to deliver this as opposed to just installing more physical waymarks and noticeboards cluttering up the countryside), better repaired and maintained infrastructure (gates/stiles etc.). Also, going back to the earlier point above, about feeling intimidated when walking in the countryside, we believe livestock do present a particular fear for lots of people. Many are fearful of walking in fields with cattle - so working with local landowners/managers to facilitate opportunities for alternative temporary permissive routes to avoid cattle during certain times of the year seem to us to be obvious but remains elusive. The current process is cumbersome, time consuming and inflexible so generally prohibitive in providing a much-needed solution for all.