

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: Landscape Protection and Enhancement Support Scheme (England) 2017 - 19 Application to European Commission February 2017

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1. Introduction

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) are fine landscapes, of great variety in character and extent, whose distinctive character and natural beauty are so outstanding that it is in the nation's interest to safeguard them. They are designated under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act (NPACA) 1949 and the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000. There are 34 designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England, one of which is cross border with Wales.

Each AONB has been designated for special attention by reason of its qualities. These include the flora, fauna, historical and cultural associations as well as landscape and scenic views. AONB landscapes range from rugged coastline to water meadows to gentle downland and upland moors.

The statutory purpose of the designation is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area.

2. How is the AONB purpose delivered?

Ministers of the Crown and public bodies whose area an AONB lies within must have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of any AONB within its area when carrying out their functions in relation to that area.

In the majority of cases, it is the relevant local authority / authorities that oversee the delivery of the AONB purpose. However for two AONBs, an independent Conservation Board under the CROW Act has been established to carry out the relevant functions. Where a Conservation Board is established, it has an additional purpose to increase the understanding and enjoyment by the public of the special qualities of the area.

Conservation Boards have been established for Cotswolds and Chilterns AONBs. Membership of the Boards includes Secretary of State, local authority and parish Members.

The relevant local authorities or Conservation Board have a duty to prepare a Management Plan for the AONB which sets out their policy for the management of the Area and how they propose to carry out their functions in relation to it. Each AONB will develop a delivery programme that is relevant to its area and to its Management Plan.

Implementation of the Plan is co-ordinated directly through a Partnership of the relevant local authorities, or by a Conservation Board, working with local stakeholders. Action is taken by these bodies to plan, carry out, or promote the carrying out by others, of actions that will meet the objectives of the Management Plan.

3. AONBs for which the Scheme will apply to

The Scheme will apply to all AONBs in England. These are:

Arnside & Silverdale; Blackdown Hills; Cannock Chase; Chichester Harbour; Chilterns; Cornwall; Cotswolds; Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs; Dedham Vale; Dorset; East Devon; Forest of Bowland; High Weald; Howardian Hills; Isle of Wight; Isles of Scilly; Kent Downs; Lincolnshire Wolds; Malvern Hills; Mendip Hills; Nidderdale; Norfolk Coast; North Devon; North Pennines; North Wessex Downs; Northumberland Coast; Quantock Hills; Shropshire Hills; Solway Coast; South Devon; Suffolk Coast and Heaths; Surrey Hills; Tamar Valley; Wye Valley.

Contact details for each AONB can be found at <http://www.landscapesforlife.org.uk/>

4. Strategic objectives

Key objectives for the AONB family are to:

- conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of AONBs, ensuring they can meet the challenges of the future
- promote public understanding and enjoyment of the nature and culture of AONB and encourage people to take action for their conservation.
- support the economic and social well-being of local communities in ways which contribute to the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty
- value, sustain and promote the benefits that Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty provide for society, including clean air and water, food, carbon storage and other services vital to the nation's health and well-being.

5. Provision of support to farmers and land managers

To facilitate delivery of the AONB Management Plan, AONBs work with land managers and farmers and their representative bodies and with the public to educate and promote heritage conservation in their respective areas.

In pursuance of specific Management Plan objectives AONBs will offer support to farmers and land managers to conserve, restore and enhance the distinctive landscape and cultural heritage of the area. Such aid may include the provision of grants to carry out conservation and restoration tasks that contribute to the unique character of the area. Grants will either be made available to land managers to carry out approved schemes or the AONB team may carry out such work itself.

The programme will provide support which adds value to existing agri-environment schemes. Agri-environment schemes are targeted on national priorities and therefore do not necessarily address the special qualities and local needs that have led to the designation of each AONB.

The Authorities will therefore provide funding to extend the availability of agri-environment schemes and environmental investment measures to achieve local environmental priorities identified in the statutory AONB Management Plan and thereby address any gap in conservation support.

Work under this scheme will therefore take into account the availability of other schemes and aid intensity rates will be respected (see section 8).

6. What work will support be provided for?

Support will include in particular:

- a) the renovation of boundary features: dry stone walls, hedges, wrought iron railings and gates, and dry and wet ditches
- b) the removal of scrub
- c) the planting of hedges
- d) the fencing of woodland of high environmental value to prevent grazing by livestock
- e) the pollarding of trees
- f) the planting of small copses and feature trees
- g) the provision of ponds and other wet landscape features
- h) the management and renovation of archaeological sites
- i) the renovation of historic agricultural buildings using traditional materials
- j) the provision of water troughs to enable improved management of rich grassland by livestock

7. Eligibility

Support will be made available to farmers and land managers who manage land within the designated AONB area or close to its boundary or which is in some other way capable of affecting the AONB.

Only SME(s) or micro enterprises as defined in Annex I of EU 702/2014 will be eligible for support through the Scheme.

8. Applications and monitoring

Each AONB will be informed by Defra about the Scheme availability and details will be published on the Defra website.

Support and advice provided by each AONB may be targeted to specific individuals or may be open to all eligible applicants who wish to attend, depending on the nature of the technical support needed. Information about the availability of events / advice / training will

be made available by AONB officers through media in the local area and where appropriate direct to business and through business support organisations.

9. Funding

Each AONB will have its own administrative process in place when offering technical support to determine eligibility under the Scheme, including application and monitoring processes. Landowners and managers will be required to demonstrate eligibility for support under the Scheme as to location and business status.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) provides annual grant aid to each AONB Partnership or Conservation Board to support delivery of the AONB Management Plan.

The relevant local authorities also contribute funding, normally at a rate equivalent to 25% of the individual Defra grant for core functions – mainly staff costs.

Funding for landscape protection and enhancement works will be provided from these budgets and will be determined and managed by each AONB. The total budget for the duration of this Scheme is £0.6m

No aid will be paid directly to the beneficiaries. The AONBs will provide advice and training through their own staff where possible or if not through a suitably qualified provider. If the work is outsourced the provider will be chosen and remunerated according to market principles.

10. State Aid Regulation

European law restricts the amount of State Aid given to agricultural businesses. This document sets out the parts of the scheme that are subject to agricultural State Aid regulations and are covered by Article 21 of EU 702/2014. Aid for knowledge transfer and information actions shall be compatible with the internal market within the meaning of Article 107(3) of the Treaty and shall be exempted from the notification requirement of Article 108(3) thereof where it fulfils the conditions laid down in paragraphs 2 to 6 of this Article and in Chapter I.

Aid shall cover vocational training and skills acquisition actions, including training courses, workshops and coaching, demonstration activities and information actions. The aid will not involve direct payments to beneficiaries, but be paid to the provider of the knowledge transfer information actions.

Aid to non-agricultural businesses and activities under this scheme will be provided in accordance with EC Regulation 1407/2013 on *de minimis* aid. *De minimis* aid is a certain category of aid which does not need to be notified to the European Commission providing that the recipient does not receive more than €200,000 worth of *de minimis* aid over 3 years from all Government sources.

11. Duration of the Scheme

The scheme will begin on 1 April 2017 and will close on 31 March 2019

12. Contact details for the Scheme

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