

# Economic Growth Overview & Scrutiny Committee

**Dorset County Council**



Date of Meeting	12 October 2016
Officer	Peter Moore (Service Director – Environment)
<b>Subject of Report</b>	<b>Proposal for a Dorset and East Devon National Park</b>
Executive Summary	<p>A locally-led group has been established to campaign for the establishment of a Dorset and East Devon National Park based on, but not restricted to, the area covered by the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), the East Devon AONB and the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site. An application has been made to Natural England, the Government's statutory adviser on protected landscapes, to consider the establishment of a National Park on this basis. Natural England considers such applications in sequence and is expected to give the proposal further consideration in due course. A motion to full Council supporting the idea of a National Park was submitted and debated at Dorset Council Council's meeting in July 2016, as a result of which a resolution was passed that the matter be referred to the next meeting of the Economic Growth and Overview Scrutiny Committee.</p>
Impact Assessment:	Equalities Impact Assessment: the proposal for a National Park originates with a third party and is at an early stage so EqIA would be premature.
	Use of Evidence: a summary of the available evidence in relation to the case for and against a National Park is included in the report.
	Budget: there are no budget implications of this report.

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	<p>Risk Assessment: having considered the risks associated with this decision using the County Council's approved risk management methodology, the level of risk has been identified as:</p> <p>Current Risk: LOW Residual Risk: LOW</p>
	<p>Other Implications:</p> <p>No other implications identified.</p>
<p>Recommendation</p>	<p>That the Committee notes the proposal for the establishment of a Dorset and East Devon National Park and the evidence assembled in relation to this, and agrees to keep the matter under review.</p>
<p>Reason for Recommendation</p>	<p>The proposal for a National Park could potentially support the County Council's corporate outcomes in relation to a healthy and prosperous Dorset. However, the proposal is still at a developmental stage and, as Dorset County Council would not be the key decision-maker in whether or not a National Park is established, no decision is required at this point beyond noting the evidence assembled to date and agreeing to keep the issue under review.</p>
<p>Appendices</p>	<p>None.</p>
<p>Background Papers</p>	<p>None.</p>
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# Proposal for a Dorset and East Devon National Park

## 1. **Background**

- 1.1 A locally-led group has been established to campaign for the establishment of a Dorset and East Devon National Park based on, but not restricted to, the area covered by the Dorset AONB, the East Devon AONB and the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site. A motion to full Council supporting the idea of a National Park was submitted and debated at Dorset Council Council's meeting in July 2016, as a result of which a resolution was passed that the matter be referred to the October 2016 meeting of the Economic Growth and Overview Scrutiny Committee.

## 2. **Purposes and role of National Parks**

- 2.1 The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 established the National Park designation, the purpose of which is to conserve and enhance landscapes whilst promoting public enjoyment of them whilst, following an amendment by the Environment Act 1995, fostering the social and economic well-being of those living within National Parks.
- 2.2 At the time of the initial tranche of National Park designations after the war, the area now known as the Dorset AONB was considered as a candidate for National Park status but was deemed not to have passed the necessary tests, but was subsequently designated as AONB.
- 2.3 National Parks are nationally funded and governed by National Park Authorities (NPAs), membership of which is drawn from a combination of local nominees (e.g. from local authorities) and those appointed by the Secretary of State. National Park Authorities act as local planning authority for the area designated, and deliver a range of other services relevant to their purposes.

## 3. **Process of designating a National Park**

- 3.1 Natural England is the body responsible for designating protected landscapes (National Parks and AONBs) on behalf of Government. Natural England has a duty to review whether any area meets National Park designation criteria and does so in line with a Designations Strategy. The barriers to entry for an area to be put forward for consideration via this process are relatively low – i.e. anyone can propose potential designations or extensions.
- 3.2 Periodically, Natural England conduct a sift to rule out proposals they deem unsuitable. Proposals which survive this sift then remain on the table for further consideration against a series of tests (see below). The priority then given to proposals is a matter of judgement within Natural England, and the various influences it is subject to. Natural England's designations team is small so they tend to go through the list of priority cases sequentially, and the process can therefore be a lengthy one.

## 4. **Tests to become a National Park**

- 4.1 Under Natural England's Designations Strategy, to be considered for National Park status, an area must pass two key tests, relating to (i) natural beauty, and (ii) opportunities for recreation and public enjoyment. If and when Natural England apply these tests to the Dorset and East Devon proposal, those areas which are already designated AONB should logically pass the first test on natural beauty. Any non-AONB areas included in the proposal would, however, require further assessment against this criteria.

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4.2 In relation to the second test on recreation and public enjoyment, it is not difficult to envisage the coastal zone of the proposed National Park area passing this test, though this may be harder to achieve in some of the inland areas where access and recreational opportunities are more limited.

### 5. **Current status of the proposal**

5.1 The proposers of the National Park submitted a package of evidence to Natural England for consideration in line with its Designations Strategy in 2013. The proposal passed a subsequent 'sift' by Natural England. This should not be taken to imply endorsement by Natural England, rather it means that the proposal remains on the table and has not been ruled it out.

5.2 Stakeholders should have ample notice if and when Natural England start looking at the Dorset and East Devon proposal in more detail, at which point the County Council, and the various Partnership Boards of the AONBs and the WHS, may need to take a more definitive view of the proposal. At this stage, the proposers are at the stage of raising awareness and building support. They do, however, have a significant list of supporters – including Town & Parish Councils, environmental and community groups.

### 6. **Potential benefits of a National Park**

6.1 Key potential benefits of a National Park as highlighted by the proposers are:

- Potential economic benefits: National Parks have made efforts collectively to counter the perception that they are a 'barrier' to economic development – see ['National Parks: Open for Business'](#) which makes the case for National Parks as rural economic powerhouses, and serves as an offer to Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) to collaborate in maximising the economic opportunities National Parks present. The proposers of the Dorset and East Devon National Park commissioned a report which set out the evidence on how National Parks offer economic benefits, promote thriving communities (including through the promotion of affordable housing, employment and skills) and bring financial resources including Government funding.
- More coherent and efficient approach to planning across a wider area: the performance of National Parks as planning authorities is generally good. Natural England advise that they often process applications faster than conventional local planning authorities. In the context of current arrangements in Dorset (6 local planning authorities covering the area, each with their own planning functions and overheads), the introduction of a National Park Authority could be seen to represent a more efficient and coherent mechanism for planning, achieving more consistent decision-making, with the added advantage of being nationally funded.
- Access to national funding streams: National Parks and AONBs are currently funded from DEFRA's Protected Landscapes budget of approx £80-90m, about £7m of which supports 38 AONBs, the remainder being divided up between 9 National Parks. While this budget is unlikely to grow, a new National Park could expect a much larger share of this funding than the same area currently covered by AONB designations. It is estimated that a Dorset and East Devon National Park could attract some £10 million per year in central Government funding.
- Prestige/reputation: while WHS and AONB designations are prestigious assets in their own right, the National Park identity is a strong one, offering significant economic opportunity as both a visitor destination and via leveraging of the National Park 'brand' (e.g. to add value to local products and services).

## 7. **Potential concerns**

7.1 The main concerns which might be raised by a National Park proposal are:

- Concern about potential constraints on development and economic growth: a National Park might be perceived as a barrier to development, though it should be noted that AONBs and National Parks already enjoy equal status in terms of landscape protection since the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, so any constraints should in theory be no greater than those already associated with the AONBs. While any protected landscape inevitably brings a degree of constraint, this must be weighed against the economic opportunity it presents.
- Transfer of planning functions: the transfer of planning functions from local authorities to a National Park Authority inevitably implies a loss of local control over planning decisions. This was a contentious issue in the establishment of the newest National Parks, though it was resolved in the South Downs where the NPA now buys in planning services from the constituent local authorities.
- Democratic deficit: while National Park Authorities are structured such that local nominees outweigh those appointed by the Secretary of State, there are still perceptions of a 'democratic deficit' in the absence of direct elections. Government has recognised this and is seeking to address it through, for example, consideration of direct elections and other measures to improve the accountability of National Park Authorities. The proposers have pointed out that a National Park Authority's members are drawn 75% from local elected representatives and a third of these are from local parish and town councils.

## 8. **The National Park proposal and Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)**

8.1 The proponents of the National Park, supported by a number of Town & Parish Councils, had asked the nine Dorset local authorities collectively whether the National Park proposal could be considered as part of the future settlement for local government in Dorset in the context of the current 'Shaping Dorset's Future' consultation. It was concluded that, as the National Park proposal would not be a decision for the local authorities, would be taken to a different timeline and involved parts of Devon which were not party to the conversation around LGR in Dorset, it was not possible for the National Park question to be resolved in the current consultation and decision-making process around LGR. The proposers have accepted this but have maintained their request for local authorities to give the proposal 'serious consideration'.

## 9. **Conclusions**

9.1 Designation of a National Park would ultimately be a matter for Government and not a decision for the County Council. While the County Council is not, therefore, required to endorse the proposal or otherwise at this stage in the debate, we continue to maintain an open mind and consider the evidence as and when it comes forward. The Economic Growth Overview & Scrutiny Committee is therefore recommended to note the summary of evidence provided above and to agree to keep the issue under review as it develops.