

Cannock Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

Position Statement – SAC Partnership Car Parking and Site User Detailed Implementation Plans

The Cannock Chase AONB Partnership brings together local authorities, statutory agencies, landowners and community representatives from Cannock Chase to look after this special place, with core funding provided by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

This Position Statement sets out the views of the AONB Partnership to the proposals put forward by the Cannock Chase SAC Partnership on car parking and site user infrastructure and engagement on Cannock Chase.

Key Messages

Cannock Chase is one of England's finest landscapes, and part of a worldwide Protected Landscapes Family that includes our own National Parks and those of North America and elsewhere.

Cannock Chase is a great place to get outdoors, enjoy the fresh air and be active. The AONB currently receives an estimated 2.5 million visitors each year, within its 26 sq. miles. This number is predicted to increase by 15% over the next decade due to increased levels of local housing and a growing local population.

AONBs have one statutory purpose – to conserve and enhance natural beauty. Recreation is not an objective of designation, but AONBs are landscapes for everyone and the demand for recreation should be met so far as this is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and local economic uses.

Visitor pressure on Cannock Chase is damaging the special qualities of the AONB, undermining its protected status and reducing the quality of the visitor experience for all. To ensure that Cannock Chase remains special a strategic area-wide and consistent approach to visitor management is essential, based on a robust understanding of the issues.

The SAC Partnership proposals for car parking and site user infrastructure, education and engagement set out a way forward to provide for future recreational use at Cannock Chase (across the AONB) without compromising the landscape, wildlife and heritage interests.

Implementation of the plans offers the potential for up to £7.8 million of new investment in visitor infrastructure on Cannock Chase over the next twenty years. This is developer-funded investment provided at no extra cost to the taxpayer.

Existing access rights on the Chase will be unaffected by the proposals, and visitor infrastructure and facilities will be improved, creating a visitor welcome and experience befitting a nationally important landscape.

Introduction

Recent months have seen increased public interest in car parking provision on Cannock Chase and the proposals put forward by the Special Area of Conservation (SAC) Partnership to safeguard the internationally important heaths that form the heart of the AONB from the adverse effects of visitor pressure.

The SAC Partnership and AONB Partnership are separate bodies with different purposes, however, they share a common objective: the welfare of Cannock Chase – the place, its landscape, wildlife and heritage.

This Position Statement sets out the views of the AONB Partnership to the proposals put forward by the Cannock Chase SAC Partnership on car parking and site user infrastructure and engagement on Cannock Chase.

Legal requirements

Cannock Chase is part of a worldwide family of protected landscapes. It was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1958 for its diverse landscapes, abundant wildlife and rich cultural heritage. Its wildness and tranquillity are in striking contrast to the surrounding busy towns. At its core is the largest surviving area of heathland in the West Midlands; designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and European Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

These are among the highest levels of protection in the world, and there are legal requirements on landowners and authorities to conserve and enhance its landscapes, wildlife and heritage. This often means pro-actively intervening in the management of the land and its uses to safeguard those interests for the benefit of current and future generations.

AONBs have one statutory purpose – to conserve and enhance natural beauty. In pursuing that purpose, account should be taken of the economic and social needs of local communities. Recreation is not an objective of designation, but AONBs are landscapes for everyone and the demand for recreation should be met so far as this is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and local economic uses.

The AONB Partnership brings together local authorities, statutory agencies, landowners and community representatives from the area to care for this special place, with core funding provided by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). Its agenda for the management of Cannock Chase is published in a statutory AONB Management Plan as required by Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW) 2000, the most current version of which runs between 2019-24. The AONB is governed by a Joint Committee which has devolved authority from the five local authorities which cover the Chase (Staffordshire County Council, Stafford Borough, Cannock Chase District, South Staffordshire District and Lichfield District).

Visitor use on Cannock Chase

Cannock Chase is a landscape for everyone and a much-loved and valued recreational resource for residents and visitors. There is a range of statutory and permissive access that gives the public some 4,000 hectares to explore and enjoy (58% of the AONB).

9,200 people live in the AONB, with a further 2 million living within 30 km. The Chase receives an estimated 2.5 million visitors each year. Around 90% of these are day visitors – most of whom travel to the AONB by car.

Put into context, Cannock Chase receives between 4-5 times the density of visitors per hectare when compared with visitor density in the Lake District National Park. (The Lake District receives the largest number of visitors of any protected landscape in England).

The number of visitors to Cannock Chase is predicted to increase by 15% over the next decade due to increased levels of local housing and a growing local population.

The large number of visitors and their concentration within a relatively small area creates pressures that are damaging the special qualities and features of Cannock Chase and undermine its international and national designations. It will also reduce the quality of the visitor experience.

Cannock Chase has a considerable number of formal and informal parking locations (in excess of 120). Due to pressures on budgets, many of these are in poor condition and have become difficult to maintain. Their large number and wide geographic spread make visitor engagement difficult, impacts on wildlife and landscape, and can allow anti-social behaviour problems to go unchecked.

The visitor offer and experience is not all that it should be for one of England's finest landscapes. Information, interpretation and signage is uncoordinated, confusing, tired and out of date. Facilities for visitors are of variable, often low, quality.

Way forward

To ensure that Cannock Chase remains a special place for landscape and wildlife as well as people, a strategic area-wide and consistent approach to visitor management is essential, based on a robust understanding of the issues. This encompasses influencing, directing and accommodating visitors to and within the AONB.

The AONB Partnership believe that the SAC Partnership proposals for car parking and site user infrastructure, education and engagement propose a way forward to provide for future recreational use of Cannock Chase (across the AONB) that will not compromise the landscape, wildlife and heritage interests. Their plans are informed by an evidence base of visitor surveys, recreational use and impacts, and ongoing footpath and habitat monitoring. These are consistent with the policies set out in the Cannock Chase AONB Management Plan 2019-24. As individual schemes for car parking provision are developed,

impact assessments will help to ascertain and address any potential impacts on access for low income households and disabled people.

A range of measures are included in the plans which need to be considered as a package in order to maximise their benefits:

- Reviewing the number of parking locations
- Car park improvements
- Opportunities to reduce car-use
- Introducing car-park charges that can be specifically ring-fenced for infrastructure improvements and conservation projects
- Improved signage and waymarking to better direct visitors
- Enhancing visitor infrastructure, such as, path routes and centre facilities
- Raising awareness of the special value of the Chase through interpretation, education, working with volunteers and face to face engagement.

Implementation of the plans offers the potential for up to £7.8 million of new investment in visitor infrastructure on Cannock Chase over the next twenty years. This is developer-funded investment provided at no extra cost to the taxpayer.

Existing access rights on the Chase will be unaffected by the proposals, and visitor infrastructure and facilities will be improved, creating a visitor welcome and experience befitting a nationally important landscape.

Cannock Chase AONB Joint Committee
29 September 2020



www.cannock-chase.co.uk