

The proposed Dorset National Park: some facts



Some parish and town councillors have asked for the views of the Dorset National Park Team on recent statements by Chris Loder MP. We hope the following are helpful. We have provided several references so statements can be evidenced.

Councillors will know that the Government made a commitment in its election manifesto to create new National Parks for England. The Prime Minister confirmed that commitment in November last year when he launched the Government's Plan for a greener economic future. The Government would surely not have made this commitment if they thought the result would be to "deplete communities of local people", "force young people to leave Dorset", "turn half of Dorset into a museum", "leave parishes outside the National Park severely impacted going forward by large housing quotas" and "threaten the future of village amenities." Rather, the Government sees the benefits of National Parks for their communities, economy and environment, as part of a successful, thriving, greener future.

What are the facts?

Dorset's environment is our greatest economic asset¹. It is why many of us live and work here and why so many visit our area. But it has not been immune to the nature emergency and the loss of green space and wildlife. National Parks bring additional resources and expertise, including government funding. They have the responsibility to:

- Conserve and enhance the environment and cultural heritage;
- Promote enjoyment and understanding of the environment and heritage, and public health and well-being;
- Foster the economic and social well-being of local communities and respond proactively to local housing needs.

In Dorset, a National Park would replace the existing Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and would work closely in partnership with the Dorset Council, as the AONB now does. A crucial difference is that the National Park would have far higher funding from central government. The AONB Partnership made plain in last year's Report that it lacks the funds fully to do its job in looking after the precious landscape, habitats and heritage in its area. The National Park would bring those funds, without cost to local people and businesses.

The Manager of the Dorset AONB has noted that Dartmoor, for example, with 20% less area than the Dorset AONB has 15 times the level of Government funding. National Parks bring the scale of funding needed, and Dorset deserves and needs such additional support.

The Government's view

The Government's 25 Year Environment Plan reflected its manifesto commitment to "*leave the environment in a better condition than we inherited it*". It praised the good work that National Parks do for their communities, economy and environment. Of course, they could always do even more, and Dorset can learn from the experience and achievements of others – especially the South Downs National Park with its working farmed landscape, towns and villages.

¹ "Dorset's Environmental Economy", report for Dorset County Council, Ash Futures

The Government sees creating new National Parks as part of its future economic plans including for opportunities in the “green/blue” economy. The evidence suggests:

- National Parks are home to successful, vibrant businesses including small businesses². They work in partnership with economic stakeholders and communities to plan for and meet their needs for economic and employment spaces. Indeed, National Parks “need to accommodate growth, development and investment in all rural areas at an appropriate scale and form.”³
- National Parks promote local products, including food and drink, and could boost the Dorset brand at home and abroad.
- A majority of businesses in National Parks believe that National Park designation has had a positive impact on their business⁴.
- The economies of National Parks are more resilient in economic downturns and their overall unemployment rate has been half the national rate⁵.
- A report by Bournemouth University concluded that National Parks sustain the natural environment and capital of their areas whilst also contributing to local communities, visitor enjoyment and their local economies. It concluded that a Dorset National Park could add many millions of pounds in value to the county's economy in tourism and other sectors.⁶
- Evidence from the South Downs National Park, which like Dorset is a working farmed landscape, shows how it works in partnership with farmers and landowners. A Dorset National Park also would value them as guardians of the countryside and producers of quality foods as well as providers of vital ecosystem services (such as clean water, flood resilience, healthy soils and woodlands which contribute to carbon capture, and access to the countryside for recreation and health.) It would support them in securing new “public benefit” farm funding and in appropriate diversification⁷.

What about bureaucracy?

It is helpful that Chris Loder now seems to accept that a National Park would not add another layer of bureaucracy. A National Park would bring greatly increased resources and expertise and contribute, as a partner, to Dorset Council’s aims and work and support local services such as rural buses. There would indeed be no overlap.

What about housing pressures on adjacent areas?

Many people are concerned about possible new housing numbers based on a central algorithm in the draft Dorset Council Local Plan. If there were to be a Dorset National Park, then national planning guidance would enable the Dorset Council and the National Park to sit down together and develop a local approach to assessing Dorset’s housing needs **for the whole of the Dorset Council area**. The Dorset National Park Team has also proposed that the Dorset Council and Dorset National Park should develop and deliver a shared Local Plan, through a joint planning team, when the plan which is currently being developed comes to be updated.

² *A Report on the Economic Cost-Benefit Analysis on the Creation of a National Park within Dorset and East Devon* Kyle Dyett, Professor Davide Parrilli and Dr Ishmael Tingbani, Bournemouth University, Jan 2018

³ Government Circular to National Parks, paragraph 70

⁴ *The Economic Benefits of a Dorset National Park*, Cumulus Consulting, November 2018

<https://www.dorsetnationalpark.com/post/economic-benefits>

⁵ *A Report on the Economic Cost-Benefit Analysis* etc op cit

⁶ *A Report on the Economic Cost-Benefit Analysis* etc op cit

⁷ See eg evidence from the South Downs <https://www.dorsetnationalpark.com/post/new-farming-case-studies>

What about house prices and help for young families?

House prices are high in areas of the country that are desirable places to live. National Parks are not alone in being such places. In Dorset, house prices are high both within and outside designated areas like the AONB. National Parks have a duty to be proactive in meeting local housing need, including for truly affordable homes. Currently Dorset has a shortage of appropriate homes (as a report for Dorset CPRE makes clear)⁸ to meet the needs of local people – including to keep and attract young families who are vital to the future of communities and the economy. The South Downs National Park includes policies to help meet these needs in its Local Plan.

What about local accountability?

Currently around 25% of the Board of the Dorset AONB are Dorset councillors (Dorset Council, town and parish councillors). With a National Park that would rise to around 75%. Town and parish councillors would for the first time be involved in an effective way in making decisions on planning, including on a shared Local Plan and planning proposals.

Would establishing a National Park involve a major reorganisation?

No. The Dorset Council would remain the lead authority for all rural Dorset responsible for major functions such as social care, education and highways. A National Park would bring additional funding and work in partnership to help councils and communities tackle Dorset's environmental, eco and climate challenges, support planning and other local services, and provide a multi-million pound economic boost to all of Dorset. The benefits make a National Park a compelling investment in Dorset's future prosperity, its communities and environment.

The future

The Government has committed to establish new National Parks. When we see what the Government proposes, we can all work together to ensure that any Dorset National Park has the duty, the imagination, the resources, the staff and the appropriate democratic control to achieve true stewardship of our county's magnificent heritage, to help local people and visitors to enjoy our countryside, towns and villages while addressing tourism pressures, and to fulfil its statutory responsibilities to promote the well-being of Dorset's local communities and economy.

Chris Loder says that our priority should be *"to ensure the sustainability of our village shops, primary schools, village halls, pubs, and parish churches. In order to do this, we will need to ensure a very modest level of development, enabling local people to afford to live in the area where they grew up."* We agree...With a National Park, the level of housing and other development can be determined by Dorset, taking account of local needs. A Dorset National Park would work in partnership with our communities and the Dorset Council for a thriving successful future as envisaged by the Government. It would benefit our communities and economy as well as our environment and help us all to pass on Dorset's outstanding countryside and heritage to future generations.

*The Dorset National Park Team,
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⁸ <https://dorset-cpre.org.uk/news/current-news/item/2250-dorset-housing-needs-evidence-report-june2020>