

Item 5

Public question from Jenny Desoutter

Madam Chairman

We have all witnessed the exponential increase in visitor numbers to The Surrey Hills in recent months. Our lovely countryside remains open and free to all 24/7/365, and all may therefore freely access its benefits. While this is in itself desirable, capacity is not limitless, and all footfall has impacts, in particular on the local residents who sustain Surrey's economy, and on the resident wildlife and its habitats which give Surrey its character and value. Some of the problems that have arisen from this increase in tourism are well-known - littering, illegal parking etc. The issues for nature and wildlife from erosion, disturbance, damage and littering are less easy to quantify.

Not all of the increase in numbers can be attributed to current health and economic circumstances. Given that government and SCC policy is to promote access to our countryside and that in pursuance of this policy advertisements for the Surrey Hills have recently been displayed in places such as London rail stations, can you:

- give details of what advertisements or other marketing initiatives actively to attract visitors have been commissioned by the AONB and whether any such marketing/ advertising is current or is being planned;
- explain what action or reaction is being taken by the AONB in response to the recent problems generated by the increase in tourist numbers attracted; and
- explain what procedures are in place to minimise impacts of this increase in tourism on habitats and wildlife, and their biodiversity, and how these are being monitored?

Thank you

Jenny Desoutter

Draft AONB Board Response

Thank you for your time and interest in putting a question to the Surrey Hills AONB Board. We are aware of the massive visitor pressure on the Surrey Hills AONB, particularly as a result of the easing of lockdown. With the restrictions on public transport, this has seen a large growth in cars and parking chaos across much of the Surrey Hills. This is not a surprise, as evidence from Google insights indicates that the Surrey Hills ranks amongst the most popular of all the National Parks and AONBs in the country reflecting its proximity to London.

In response to your specific points:

1. The Surrey Hills AONB Board has worked with our train and bus operating companies on advertising campaign. The AONB Communications Lead has provided a level of coordination and commissioned artwork with the advertising funded by the operators themselves, including posters at London mainline stations. There are plans to extend the campaign in 2021 work with our Community Rail Companies (North Lines CRP and the Surrey Hills to South Downs CRP) including promoting walking and cycling from stations.
2. Providers in the Surrey Hills have not been as well equipped as we would have wished to cope with the increased tourist numbers as these have been unprecedented times. In May a

'Stay Safe, Stay Local' campaign encouraged visitors not to venture into the Surrey Hills. This was promoted as the banner of the website throughout the period, and the AONB Director appeared 4 times on the radio giving this message. The AONB Board also coordinated a Respect Campaign to try to influence the behaviour of visitors to the area. This campaign was collaborated with Visit Surrey and posters were distributed throughout the Surrey Hills to our land managers, including the National Trust and Guildford Borough Council.

3. The Surrey Hills AONB Board is very keen to learn about the impact of visitors on the landscape and habitats, and how this can be monitored. One example is hearing from landowners, land managers and the public about damage done by mountain bikers. The AONB Director is coordinating strategy with Cycling UK and the Forestry Commission to look at best practice in understanding how the proliferation of wild mountain bike trails can be controlled and managed.

The AONB Board would welcome the opportunity to listen to advice on specific issues outlined in your letter, and will continue to learn from colleagues in other National Parks and AONBs.

Heather Kerswell

Surrey Hills AONB Board Chair