

**Issues and priorities affecting the Binevenagh AONB Management Plan**  
**Consultation Results June 2009**  
**37 sent out - 9 returns (3%)**

**Revised Issues list June 2009 - (Issues are not in any ranked order)**

**I1 Awareness and Understanding**

There is a significant lack of awareness of the range and purpose of designations in the area. People do not understand the AONB designation. There is also a lack of awareness of the rich cultural history and the traditional crafts and industries which were once very common practice within the area. There is a need to ensure that memories are kept alive for future generations.

**I2 Planning Policy**

The status of AONBs is not strong in Northern Ireland planning policy. The designation is passive, not proactive. There is no tradition of green belt or landscape status. Under PPS14, there was a presumption against development in open rural areas but the new Draft PPS 21 considers that there are a range of types of development which in principle are considered to be acceptable.

The planning policies are weak on siting issues but better on design. There is a presumption for employment generation. This can be to the detriment of the natural and built heritage as little cognisance is paid to the contribution that the natural and built heritage can make to job creation.

Any relaxation of policies may lead to the degradation of environmental quality within the AONB. Particular concerns were expressed about the planning policy approach to the Magilligan area and Castlerock village.

**I3 Minor Development**

There is a need to look at land use changes within the AONB, especially across administrative boundaries. There is a fear that new developments could spoil the AONB if they do not reflect the local distinctive character, a concept that is not well explained.

Traditionally, most developments are clumped together with just the occasional isolated dwelling or farmstead. Scattered new dwelling would change the area's character, leading to bungalow blight. Second homes is an issue, making homes too expensive for locals. The building of homes to satisfy this market impacts significantly on landscape.

There are particular coastal strip planning issues related to caravan parks and other buildings, particularly in Castlerock, Downhill & Benone. Castlerock is a pleasant seaside village under threat. Its built heritage is at risk with the streetscape being eroded by the development of apartments and second homes. This has a detrimental effect on the social and economic fabric of the existing settlement.

The provision within Draft PPS21 (CTY10) for farm businesses to be able to build one new dwelling every 10 years puts considerable pressure on the landscape. While many of these new dwellings should be close to existing farms, sharing common access to roads, some will not be. In addition there is provision for more replacement or repair of old, even ruinous buildings in the countryside.

Caravan Parks present a significant issue with the potential to become more or less

permanent housing estates. Genuine caravans can legally be replaced with much more solid structures that are “demountable”. This threat has become a reality in parts of Co Down. The Planning Service often has no power to prevent this, except where there have been technical breaches of existing planning consent e.g. discharges.

#### **I4 Major Development**

*Renewable Energy:* An important response to climate change is the move towards renewable energy sources. There is a conflict between the need for sustainable environmental management and the enhancement of landscape quality.

Biomass cultivation may be an issue but most farms in the AONB are too small to be viable unless they form cooperative ventures.

Wind Turbines are an issue but are unlikely to be built on the land in the foreseeable future. The issue in relation to turbines will be along the AONB boundary, especially out to sea, such as the proposed off-shore farm on the Tuns plateau.

Hydro-schemes can alter hydrology (and therefore habitat) on watercourses. This is of particular concern to those involved with the valuable salmon angling sector of the tourism industry in the area who would argue that hydro-schemes should not be permitted below natural barriers that are impassable to migratory fish.

*Quarrying and landfill:* South eastern corner of AONB is under significant pressure from existing quarries and proposed land-fill operations (Planning Applications C2007 0069 & C2007 1136). Existing sites have become interesting habitats in their own right. There may be issues associated with increased traffic on minor roads effecting landscape.

*Shell fish farming in Estuary:* This could have a relatively major impact on the landscape quality of the Estuary although the SAC designation will deter such developments

#### **I5 Cultural Heritage**

There is concern about the lack of resources to conserve and enhance the archaeological monuments and sites and historical settlements, buildings and features in the landscape. There needs to be an on-going programme of high standard conservation. Built heritage is being lost due to neglect and use of sites for new dwellings. The scheduled monuments face challenges from agriculture and development and access and interpretation is lacking.

For those archaeological sites that are not scheduled, protection can only encouraged through good management by liaison with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and Department of Environment.

Note: Owners who are participating in agric-environment schemes must retain and protect archaeological monuments on their property. Farmers can receive an area based payment as part of their agri-environment schemes for maintaining monuments on their farm. The NIEA has a countryside management officer dedicated to providing management advice on historic monuments to landowners participating in agri-environment schemes. This person also liaises with forest service on the management of monuments within their estate and also in areas where private planting schemes grant aided by Forest Service are proposed.

#### **I6 Natural Heritage**

Natural heritage is being lost due to lack of management, mismanagement, habitat loss and disturbance.

There is a lack of resources to manage/monitor the current SAC/ASSIs within the AONB and

to consider the designation of new sites, data needs upgrading.

There is not enough focus on the designation of local sites (SLNCIs and Local Nature Reserves) and the encouragement of local management and interpretation.

There is a risk of undergrazing of grassland habitats

### **17 The Coast**

The coastal zone is a significant feature of the Binevenagh AONB. There needs to be the appropriate management of the sand dunes and beaches with a consistency of coastal zone management across the boroughs. The long term threats are from sea level rise, invasive species, pollution and coastal erosion; which will need to be managed. In particular, the unique Magilligan polder may be lost to sea level rise.

The Bann Estuary also suffers from disturbance to wildlife (mainly from recreation) and is under threat from new built developments. The links golf courses and railway line act as a buffer zone and offer some protection along the coast.

### **18 Water Quality**

Much of the AONB drains into the River Roe, designated as an SAC under the Habitats Directive because of its salmon population. The many small streams that run through the area contain and support populations of fish such as brown trout; are rich in invertebrates; support birdlife and contribute significantly to the biodiversity of the area. It is important that fish stocks are not endangered by abstraction, pollution and siltation.

Water quality within the estuary is a big issue due to the quality of water carried by the River Bann (storm water, farm effluent etc.) and the knock-on effect for wildlife e.g. salmon.

The implementation of the Water Framework and Nitrates Directives should result in significant improvements in water quality in the forth coming years.

### **19 Farming**

Agriculture is a dominant industry affecting the landscape.

It was reported that most farmers enter for Single Farm Payment, and are bound by Good Agricultural and Environmental Cross Compliance guidelines. This applies to all farmers in receipt of the Single Payment. One of the conditions is to keep all farmland in Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition. Failure to do so can result in loss of the Single Payment.

Those farmers who have entered into a Countryside Management Scheme are bound by additional guidelines on habitat management. The scheme encourages farmers to act in a more environmentally beneficial way, by rewarding maintenance and enhancement of natural and man-made heritage. There is an issue as to how many of the AONB's farmers have entered such a scheme (approximately 40% of landholders within NI as a whole participate in agri-environment schemes).

The recent Review of the Less Favoured Area may have considerable effect on upland farming if it is put into practice. The available funding is likely to be targeted on the Severely Disadvantaged Area and the generally lower-lying Disadvantaged Area will lose its support payments.

There needs to be a better understand of the socio-economic proofing of agriculture within the AONB (numbers employed; age; income; full-time / part-time mix)

### **I10 Forestry**

Forestry is an important sector within the AONB, especially on the uplands. The Forest Service management can have a significant impact on the landscape, ecology and hydrology of the area. The legislation covering forestry in NI is currently undergoing revision. The present single remit of the Forest Service (to produce timber) could be expanded to include amenity, recreation and care for the environment.

Badly planned felling and re-forestation – can be visual scare on landscape. There is a call for meaningful consultation regarding replanting (incorporating more visual breaks, following contours closely, protecting and respecting historic antiquities e.g. Giants Sconce, incorporating more broad-leaved species, varied and ‘softer’ forest edges.

This is reflected within the Forest Strategy for the area.

### **I11 Recreation and Tourism**

Binevenagh is particularly well placed between the Giants Causeway and the Walled City of Derry, which are two of NITB’s Signature Projects. It also lies on the route connecting the Causeway Coast to Donegal. The challenge is to persuade the through traffic to spend some time in the AONB when it is not currently perceived as a destination. There is a high potential that is not being realised. If the area is to benefit from this position then there needs to be investment in access, signing, interpretation, marketing and appropriate product development.

The Causeway Coastal Route, Lower Bann and forest areas offer great potential for recreation but they are under-utilised. The future management of the beaches is important but there is an issue of vehicles parking on them causing sand compaction. There are concerns for the beautiful landscape in the area. There is a call for investment in countryside management to minimise a future risk of damage to the natural environment through inconsiderate / uniformed use by the public. The salmon angling tourism asset of the Bann and Roe is important to the local economy. Afforestation should be planned so as to not encroach to within 50 meters of the banks of rivers and tributaries.

But recreation is not a statutory duty, so it is not clear who will champion the sector. Councils do have a duty with regard to footpaths and the Review of Public Administration offers an opportunity to increase responsibilities, possibly through a statutory duty. The Forest Service may have its remit expanded during the review of its legislation.

### **I12 Transport**

Binevenagh enjoys good access by public transport which would support the development of a sustainable tourism industry. There are fears that both the rail-line and ferry may be under threat. Some concerns have been expressed about the roads upgrading programme within AONB.

### **I13 Litter**

The landscape is blighted by fly-tipping especially on the high ground. Litter on the beaches degrades their value as a recreational resource and poses a threat for wildlife.

### **I14 Resources**

There are not enough funds for the strategic and localised management of the area leading to a lack of co-ordination on the part of the key players in AONB management.

**I15 Public motivation**

Lack of motivation on the part of local people who can be intimidated by the use of jargon and bureaucratic processes.

**I16 Review of Public Administration**

This could affect the AONB in a range of ways. Unfortunately the AONB will still lie within two council areas, but they will be bigger Councils and Binevenagh may be lower down their agenda than it is with the current arrangement. The new Councils will have responsibility for planning, access and hopefully have a statutory duty towards biodiversity, all of which are important to the AONB.

**I17 Climate Change**

The impacts of Climate Change are little understood and the management of adaption and mitigation is not in place. The Magilligan / Benone / Downhill shoreline is particularly vulnerable to sea-level change and the possibility of increased storminess and storm surges. Drier summers will have implications for wildlife and agriculture as well as water resources. Wetter winters could lead to increased flooding and risk of landslip on some less stable slopes. There is an increased risk from the spread of invasive alien species and plant and animal diseases which could seriously impact the environment.

**Revised Priorities list June 2009 (Priorities ranked by MFC)****General points made by consultees**

- There seem to be a great many priorities. It might be more productive to narrow the field a bit.
- Quite few of the topics are effectively duplicates, either within the subject area or between two areas.
- Once the list has been tidied up a bit another stakeholder workshop might be able to hammer out the ranking, certainly within subject areas.
- Sustainability is a difficult concept, and all too often means quite different things to different people and in different contexts. Some form of definition would be necessary if the term is used in the plan.
- It might be helpful to identify at a fairly early stage who might be responsible for each of the identified priorities. This could help to eliminate some that are totally unrealistic, but more importantly could give stakeholders a stronger sense of involvement.

**P1 Co-ordination**

Identify lead bodies for all actions within the Management Plan and co-ordinate the actions of the disparate bodies who currently impact upon the Binevenagh area.

Engage key local and regional stakeholders to make the AONB relevant to their future plans and strategies.

Secure consistent policies and strategies that impact upon the Binevenagh area.

Secure management agreements for the delivery of public services in the area.

Develop a Recreation Master Plan to allow for all abilities and all users.

Develop a Trail Management Plan integrated with the Countryside, Access and Activities Network.

Develop a single coastal zone management strategy for the area.

Develop a tourism strategy for the area.

Link with the Causeway Coast and Giant's Causeway to create a marketable tourism product.

## **P2 Awareness and appreciation**

Achieve a shared understanding and a process of participation recognising of the special qualities of the area by local people, visitors, businesses and decision makers as a matter of urgency.

Develop and promote events (workshops / public meetings / guided tours) and publications to increase appreciation and awareness of the area.

Celebrate the lives of local people by supporting projects and activities that conserve, record, value, understand and celebrate local culture, including traditional skills, and that promote cultural growth.

Improve links between schools, colleges, universities and specialist field centres to the area and develop curriculum topics and research programmes.

Promote sustainable and affordable transport links to and within the area.

Promote trails, attractions and opportunities for Learning outside the classroom e.g. Eco-Trails.

Build up a solid base of visitors to justify future investment in infrastructure by an investment marketing and appropriate product development.

## **P3 Sustainability**

Agree a Binevenagh definition of 'sustainability'.

Ensure that economic and social development within the AONB is sustainable.

Support sustainable land management practices that secure the special qualities of the area.

Support the development of small businesses and niche markets that exploit the special qualities of Binevenagh and lead to the enhancement of the natural beauty.

Agree an AONB protocol on alternative energy (biomass, wind turbine, hydro schemes).

Secure a new ring-fenced 'AONB sustainable development fund' to seed-corn new enterprises.

Develop a Binevenagh sustainable development demonstration centre.

Complete a Strategic Environmental Assessment of the AONB Management Plan.

## **P4 Infrastructure and facilities**

Link town and village to recreational access lands and sites in a sustainable way.

Retain and develop affordable public transport and promote its use as part of a sustainable recreation / tourism strategy.

Create circular walks from each settlement, linked to supporting infrastructure and materials (such as easy-to-follow walking guides).

Develop the infrastructure needed to enable the tourism sector to grow sustainably.

Develop and promote trails, attractions and opportunities for learning outside the classroom e.g. Eco-Trails

## **P5 Social Well-being**

Support communities to be involved in their own development and to realise opportunities that improve the quality of life, their social, economic, environmental and cultural development, and that enhance their local identity.

Encourage volunteering opportunities that further the purposes of AONB designation.

Promote leisure and recreation opportunities in relation to their benefits to health and wellbeing as this area has the highest rate of heart failure and cancer in NI.

Co-ordinate the implementation of health, education and environmental strategies to secure sustainable communities and landscapes.

**P6 Planning**

Encourage the strategic planning and enforcement of policies aimed at conserving and enhancing the AONB.

Lobby Planning Service to produce a Design Guide based the special qualities and features of the AONB.

Identify sites and habitats at risk from development.

Secure tourism accommodations and facilities that respect the purposes of AONB designation.

**P7 Maintenance**

Ensure that protection, conservation and enhancement is undertaken at a landscape scale.

Conserve the individual features that contribute to local distinctiveness and resist the gradual loss of landscape character.

Restore, extend or enhance landscapes and habitats where the character or condition has been lost or degraded.

Conserve and improve the historical buildings and landscapes.

Develop training courses and publications to support specialist crafts and trades (such as lime rendering, hedge laying, wall building) to create local 'green' employment.

**P8 Advocacy**

Encourage that the continued consideration of AONB designation is taken into account by decision makers.

Call for greater protection for the AONB designation and demonstrate the weaknesses in the current protection.

Secure biodiversity and public access duties for the new councils under Review of Public Administration.

Secure statutory management plans for AONBs.

Secure a public right of access to open land (in particular to all Forest Service land and military land along the coast).