

Regional Plan threatens South Downs

Watering down of national policy protection along with large-scale development proposals, particularly road building, threatens nationally designated landscapes in the region

The South Downs Campaign (SDC) [1] is submitting this week its response to the consultation on the draft South East Plan which ends at 5pm, this Friday (23 June, 2006) [2]. The SDC is supporting a number of ‘cross-cutting’ policies within the Plan which aim to protect the region’s quality of life and reduce environmental impacts in the future. However, the SDC is objecting to many other policies within the Plan which are in direct conflict with these ‘cross-cutting’ policies and which if implemented will cause lasting damage to the environment and the region’s quality of life.

Nationally designated landscapes such as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and National Parks cover 35% of the region and the South East has more designated areas than any other region. They are an acknowledged asset to the region but nevertheless are given less prominence in the Plan than Green Belt and Strategic Gap policies. They are also threatened by the fragmented and often conflicting way that they are dealt with within the Plan or by the fact that key issues, such as tranquillity, are ignored altogether. These failures run right throughout the Plan [3].

Robin Crane CBE, Chairman of the SDC said:

“Apart from some worthy overarching policies at the beginning, the South East Plan is very worrying. The emphasis on building houses and roads is threatening the very special qualities that we cherish in the region. We strongly object to the watering down of national protection for landscapes such as the South Downs. Once built upon there is no turning back and they will be lost forever. Rather than improving our quality of life this Plan threatens it.

“Public opinion is very much in favour of protecting our countryside yet it features very little within the Plan and has not been reported in the consultation documents. Unless we look after our environment and landscapes such as the South Downs, they cannot look after us. The South Downs is essential for local people’s quality of life, a place to exercise, lift one’s spirits or just to get away from it all. It is also very important for the regional economy supporting 8,000 jobs and bringing in £333 million every year [4]. The Plan needs to recognise this and give the South Downs the proper protection they deserve.”

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Notes to Editors:

[1] The South Downs Campaign is a network of over 100 organisations. As well as many national conservation, environmental and amenity organisations who are members, the SDC has a growing number of members who are parish and town councils as well as many other local organisations – a full list of members is available on request. The SDC is generously supported by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation.

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[2] SEERA is carrying out the consultation on behalf of the Government Office for the South East (GOSE). All responses have to be sent to the Panel Secretariat Office by 5pm, Friday 23 June, 2006 either by email to response@eipsoutheast.co.uk, by filling in forms on the web or by post to: Mrs Sue Morgan, Panel Secretariat, Bridge House, RSS EIP South East, 1 Walnut Tree Close, Guildford, GU1 4GA.

[3] Some of the failures identified by the SDC within the draft South East Plan are:

- inconsistent wording of policies (e.g. giving different priority to AONB and national park protection and enhancement)
- failure to protect land included in the South Downs National Park and not designated as AONB
- factual inaccuracies (e.g. stating that it was DEFRA that approved the South Downs National Park Designation Order when it was the Countryside Agency)
- missing issues completely (e.g. tranquillity)
- splitting up landscape issues so that they are not properly addressed (e.g. Heritage Coasts from AONBs, farm diversification from landscape management, historic rural environment from landscape management)
- failure to monitor the full impacts of the Plan, particularly with regard to AONBs and national parks.
- failure to fully recognise the economic importance of the countryside and in particular AONBs and national parks
- failure to promote sufficiently investment in green infrastructure
- potentially giving weight to a new reservoir at Hardham near Pulborough in West Sussex which could threaten important wildlife sites there and harm the South Downs National Park, rather than steering development away from such sensitive sites
- the promotion of large amounts of roadbuilding in the region which is likely to increase carbon dioxide emissions and cause significant damage to landscapes such as the South Downs.
- undermining national policy and protection, particularly for areas with important environmental designations, such as the South Downs.

[4] Para 5.6, Page 49, A Survey of Recreational Visits to the Proposed South Downs National Park – October 2003, the Countryside Agency, by Tourism South East Research Services with Geoff Broom Associates

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