

Housing Numbers in the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This paper has been produced by a group of parish councillors who have been involved in neighbourhood planning in the district of Rother, East Sussex, 83% of which is in the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). It has been prepared as a response to the Government's proposals for housing numbers in the 'Changes to the Current Planning System' consultation document and the Planning White Paper.
- 1.2 Government proposes a binding housing requirement for each local planning authority to be set centrally and based on the new standard method for calculating housing need, adjusted for constraints. The Planning White Paper says on p33 "We have published a separate consultation on proposed changes to the standard method for assessing local housing need which is currently used in the process of establishing housing requirement figures. The future application of the formula proposed in the revised standard method consultation will be considered in the context of the proposals set out here. In particular, the methodology does not yet adjust for the land constraints, including Green Belt. We will consider further the options for doing this and welcome proposals".
- 1.3 **This paper suggests two ways in which the standard method could be adjusted to take into account the percentage of LPA area that is covered by AONB. This has been prepared as a response to the Government consultations but is also applicable to any Local Planning Authorities preparing Local Plans ahead of the new planning system proposed in the White Paper.**

2.0 Background

Legal Requirements

- 2.1 The 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act made provision for the designation of AONBs to 'preserve and enhance natural beauty'. The Countryside Act 1968 stated that 'the preservation of the natural beauty of an area shall be construed in the same way as references in the Act [1968] to the conservation of the natural beauty of an area.' Thus, the purpose of an AONB is to 'conserve and enhance natural beauty'.
- 2.2 Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 placed a statutory duty on all relevant authorities requiring them to have regard to the purpose of AONBs when coming to decisions or carrying out their activities relating to or affecting land within these areas. This is known as the 'duty of regard'.
- 2.3 Section 84 of the same Act states that a local planning authority whose area consists of or includes the whole or any part of an AONB has power to take all such action as

appears to them expedient for the accomplishment of the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of that area.

National Policy Requirements

- 2.4 Despite the focus on increasing housebuilding in the NPPF, policy on AONBs has not been weakened in any way, indeed it has been strengthened, with a new twice repeated instruction in paragraph 172 for AONBs to be enhanced, as well as conserved, bringing the policy in line with the primary legislation relating to AONB, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. In addition, a new sentence has been introduced into the NPPF which requires that the scale and extent of development within AONBs should be limited. Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) has also been updated with clearer advice that NPPF policies for protecting AONBs may mean that it is not possible to meet objectively assessed needs for development in full through the plan-making process, and they are unlikely to be suitable areas for accommodating unmet needs from adjoining (non-designated) areas.
- 2.5 The standard method for calculating housing need is just the starting point for establishing the appropriate housing requirement for a local authority. This requirement will also need to take into account other factors such as any unmet needs from neighbouring areas which could increase the number and any 'assets of particular importance' in the area that could reduce the number of homes and other development that can be accommodated without damaging those assets. NPPF paragraph 11 says that local planning authorities should provide for objectively assessed needs for housing and other uses, as well as any unmet needs from neighbouring areas, unless "the application of policies in this Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a strong reason for restricting the overall scale, type or distribution of development in the plan area".
- 2.6 The assets referred to are listed in footnote 6 and include Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The most relevant policy in the Framework for AONBs is paragraph 172, the first part of which states:
"Great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues. The conservation and enhancement of wildlife and cultural heritage are also important considerations in these areas and should be given great weight in National Parks and the Broads. The scale and extent of development within these designated areas should be limited".
- 2.7 Planning Practice Guidance, revised July 2019, states *"The National Planning Policy Framework makes clear that the scale and extent of development in these areas should be limited, in view of the importance of conserving and enhancing their landscapes and scenic beauty. Its policies for protecting these areas may mean that it is not possible to meet objectively assessed needs for development in full through the plan-making process, and they are unlikely to be suitable areas for accommodating unmet needs from adjoining (non-designated) areas. Effective joint working between*

planning authorities covering designated and adjoining areas, through the preparation and maintenance of statements of common ground, is particularly important in helping to identify how housing and other needs can best be accommodated...” Paragraph: 041 Reference ID: 8-041-20190721.

3.0 High Weald AONB Context

3.1 The HWAONB spreads itself over 11 different Local Planning Authorities (excluding Counties) and each LPA has a different percentage of its surface area within the HWAONB, from Tonbridge and Malling with 0.4% coverage to Rother with 83% coverage. The Table below sets out these details and more pertinently the numbers of dwellings allocated under each authority's current Local Plan, the current but so far unutilised standard method and the proposed standard method suggested by the White Paper.

Local Authority	% of LPA in AONB	% of AONB in LPA	Adopted Local Plan dpa	Current Standard Method	Proposed Standard Method
Ashford	14%	6%	1,093	970	1,211
Crawley	1%	0.03%	340	476	598
Hastings	18%	0.4%	215	451	453
Horsham	7%	2.5%	800	920	1,715
Mid Sussex	49%	11%	964	1,114	1,305
Rother	83%	29%	335	736	1,173
Sevenoaks	16%	4%	165	711	820
Tandridge	4%	0.7%	125	646	533
Tonbridge & Malling	0.4%	0.07%	425	843	1,440
Tunbridge Wells	69%	16%	300	678	893
Wealden	53%	31%	450	1,225	1,199

3.2 Wealden, Rother and Tunbridge Wells together cover over 75% of the High Weald AONB and their current housing numbers would increase by 2,180 dwellings per year or 200% under the proposed standard method. Rother in particular is the LPA most affected by both the current and proposed standard methods. For Rother, the current standard method would require a 120% increase in dwellings per year and the proposed standard method would mean a 250% increase in dwelling per year – within an LPA whose area is 90% covered by a combination of the High Weald AONB and RAMSAR designations. **This level of growth, and the scale of housing sites likely to be required to meet it, cannot be accommodated within the High Weald AONB without destroying the natural beauty for which it was designated.**

3.3 The group also considers that the proposed standard method is flawed in that it does not deliver on one key purpose - to direct the new housing in the main to urban areas. Not only does it reduce the target for many in the midlands and the north in a somewhat unpredictable way, but it brings pressure to bear on rural areas in the south east, which contains a very high proportion of landscapes that are specially protected, namely AONB, National Park, Green Belt and designated habitats.

- 3.4 The High Weald has a landscape that is of outstanding natural beauty, but also of great heritage value as a largely intact late 14th century landscape, the only remaining one in Northern Europe. An important characteristic is its human scale and dispersed settlement pattern which requires very sensitively designed small developments that can nestle into the existing landscape. Large scale developments have a particularly damaging impact on this type of landscape.

4.0 Proposed Adjustment to Standard Method in AONBs

- 4.1 The group has put forward two ways that the standard method could be adjusted for AONBs (and also extended to other protected areas) so as to protect them from over-development. The effect of these options is also estimated nationally, but calculations for each LPA would be needed to verify these estimates. The attached spreadsheet shows the calculations that have been made, and also gives the internet addresses for the basic data used, most of which are from either ONS or MHCLG.

Option 1

- a) For the urban area within an LPA, use the standard formula based on population percentage in the urban area.

Urban area = % urban population x Baseline x Final adjustment factor

- b) For the rural area, go back to basics. Take the current dwelling stock (which is used in the standard formula but in practise not applied to south-eastern LPAs) and increase it by 0.5% per annum. Do not include any affordability factors. This aims at organic and sustainable growth in the rural areas which could then be focused on affordable housing. Then apply a factor to reduce the target by the amount of the area which is protected.

Rural area = % rural population x (0.5% of dwelling stock) x (1 - % protected land area)

Note: There is no single ONS spreadsheet that gives the % of rural population figure. It was covered in the 2011 census and some authorities (e.g. Kent) have updated these figures to 2019. The Kent and East Sussex figures are on the county websites. However, it would be relatively simple for ONS to create such a spreadsheet (i.e. rural-urban split at the local authority level) as all the data is there.

Option 1	% pop rural - see notes	% LPA land which is AONB	0.5% of current dwelling stock	BASELINE for standard formula	Using standard formula		Suggested Option 1		
					Final Adjustment factor	Total pa for LPA	Component 1 for rural area	Component 2 for urban area	Total
Eastbourne	0%	0%	244.63	288.9	1.68	486	0	486	486
Hastings	0%	18%	222.09	193.2	2.04	394	0	394	394
Lewes	23%	0%	229.29	366.1	2.19	800	53	616	669
Rother	52%	83%	228.01	504.6	2.32	1173	20	563	583
Wealden	45%	53%	350.15	601.9	1.99	1199	74	659	733
Tunbridge Wells	37%	69%	256.70	347.4	2.57	893	29	562	592
Sevenoaks	48%	60%	252.57	314.8	2.61	820	48	426	475
England	17%	15%	122,000	160,000	2.11	337,000	17,629	279,710	297,339

National Implications of Option 1

- 4.2 The effect of this on the whole country is calculated as follows (figures are rounded):
- There are 24.4 million dwellings in England
 - The standard formula would increase these by 337,000 which is 1.38% (an optimistic growth rate since the maximum growth in the housing stock in the last twenty years is 1%, and the average is less than 0.8%)
 - Rural areas have approximately 17% of the total population of England
 - Therefore there are 4.1 million dwellings in rural areas (17% of 24.4 million) (assuming that house occupancy is the same over all areas)
 - Component 1 - these would grow by 0.5% of the current dwelling stock each year (0.5% of 4.1 million = 20,500)
 - Reduce this by the % of protected areas. AONBs cover approximately 15% of the area of England, so reduce by 15% (to 85%) to give about 17,500 rounded to 18,000
 - The remaining 20.3 million dwellings are in urban areas
 - Component 2 - the standard formula is set to increase these by 1.38% - (1.38% of 20.3 million = 280,000)
 - Total per annum would be 298,000 (18,000 + 280,000)
- 4.3 The additional data required for this formula to be calculated is:
- the % of rural population in each LPA and
 - the % of protected area in each LPA. This was given in the “Application of proposed formula for assessing housing need with contextual data” published 14 September 2017. One column gave, for each LPA, the “Proportion of Local Authority land area covered by Green Belt, National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty or Sites of Special Scientific Interest” - calculated from publicly available data from DCLG, Natural England and the ONS. This provides an indication of land that is not generally available for development, to illustrate the point in the consultation document that not all authorities will be able to meet their need in full within their own area.
- 4.4 There are variants on this option:
- Use the total protected area (AONB, Green Belt, National Parks, RAMSAR, SSSIs etc). This is estimated to be about 35% of the land area in England (AONB is about 15%)
 - Use a different % growth factor on the current dwelling stock (1% in example).

These variants change the national figures as follows:

		0.5% growth of housing stock	1% growth of housing stock
AONB areas only (15%)	Component 1	18,000	35,000
	Total	298,000	315,000
All protected areas (35%)	Component 1	13,000	27,000
	Total	293,000	307,000

This table illustrates that all variants are close to the target of 300,000.

Option 2

- a) For the urban area, use the standard formula based on population percentage in urban area.

Urban area = %urban population x Baseline x Final adjustment factor

- b) For the rural area (again treated differently to the urban area), use the standard formula based on population percentage in rural area, but also apply a factor for the amount of the rural area which is protected. So for Rother, for example, there is only 17% outside the AONB, so the standard formula would be multiplied by the % rural population and then also by the % NOT protected – that is by roughly 9%.

Rural area = %rural population x (1-% protected land) x Baseline x Final adjustment factor

Option 2	% pop rural - see notes	% LPA land which is AONB	BASELINE	Using standard formula		Suggested Option 2		
				Final Adjustment factor	Total pa for LPA	Component 1 for rural area	Component 2 for urban area	Total
Eastbourne	0%	0%	288.9	1.68	486	0	486	486
Hastings	0%	18%	193.2	2.04	394	0	394	394
Lewes	23%	0%	366.1	2.19	800	184	616	800
Rother	52%	83%	504.6	2.32	1173	104	563	666
Wealden	45%	53%	601.9	1.99	1199	254	659	913
Tunbridge Wells	37%	69%	347.4	2.57	893	102	562	665
Sevenoaks	48%	60%	314.8	2.61	820	157	426	584
England	17%	15%	160,000	2.11	337,000	48,697	279,710	328,407

National Implications of Option 2

4.5 The effect of this on the whole country is calculated as follows:

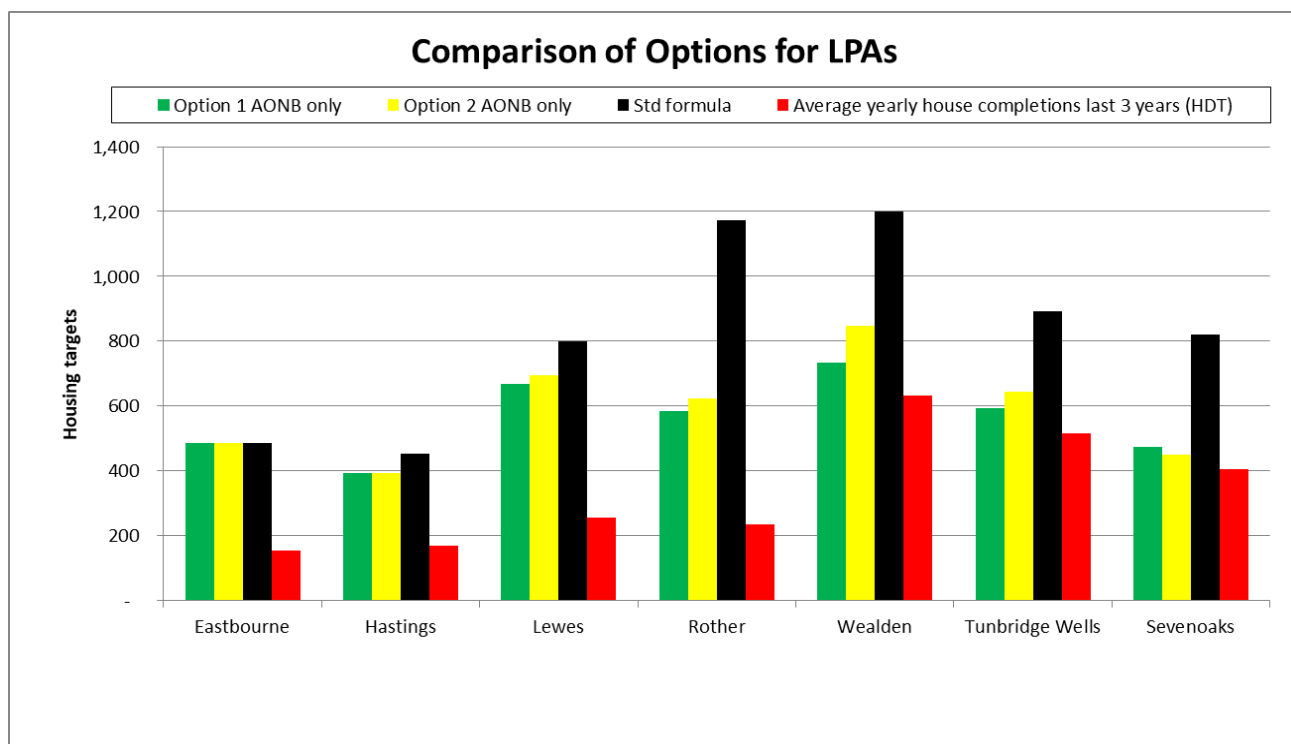
- Component 1 - The rural 4.1 million dwellings would be increased by 1.38% but then be reduced by the % of rural population (17%) and again reduced by the protected areas (which for AONB account for about 15% of the land). This gives a total reduction to $(0.17 \times 0.85) = 14\%$. So the standard formula would have been growth of 1.38% on 4.1 million = 56,000. This figure is reduced by 14%, that is to 48,000
- Component 2 - The urban 20.3 million dwellings would be increased by 1.38% - that is to 280,000.
- Total per annum would be 328,000 (48,000 + 280,000)

4.6 The additional data required for this is:

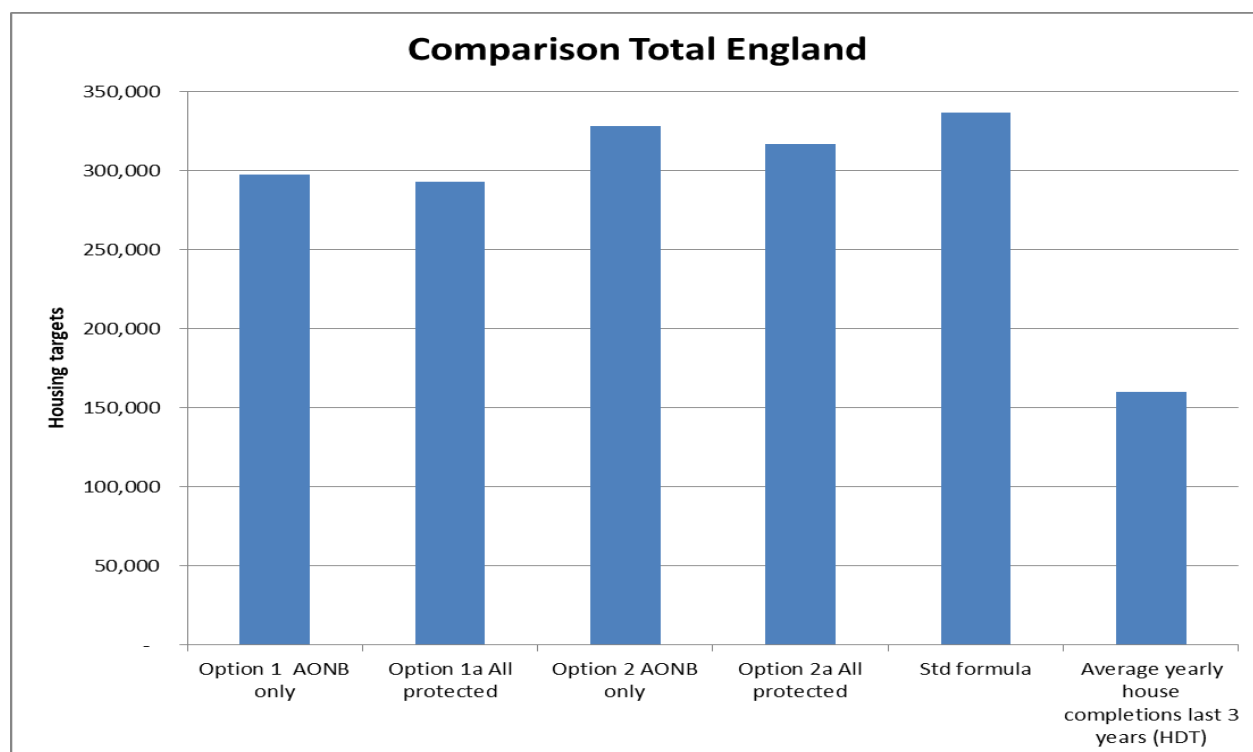
- the % of rural population in each LPA (as for option 1) and
- the % of protected area in each LPA (as for option 1).

4.7 Again there is a possible variant to use all protected land as in Option 1, which would give a total of 317,000.

- 4.8 Two charts show the effect of these options versus the standard formula, first on the 7 LPAs used. The current average yearly house completions are also given.



- 4.9 The estimated effect of the options for the whole of England is shown below, together with the figure for average house completions over the last three years.



Conclusion

The Prime Minister announced on Monday 28 September that he intends to protect 30% of the UK's land by 2030. The Government press release confirms that existing National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and other protected areas already comprise approximately 26% of land in England, but an additional 4% – over 400,000 hectares – will be protected to support the recovery of nature. This commitment is very welcome, but will be ineffective if the existing Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are required to take the volume of new development which is indicated by the new standard method for calculating housing need.

Our group has put forward two options for how this standard method can be adjusted to more sustainable levels in AONBs whilst still achieving approximately 300,000 homes per year across the country. We would ask you to take these suggestions into account before deciding binding housing numbers for the Local Planning Authorities.

**Rother Parish Group
28.09.2020**