



Campaign to Protect
Rural England
SUSSEX

Left-out, and the door is about to shut

Re-drawing the boundaries of the South Downs National Park is causing communities across Sussex to question their exclusion

Ever felt left out? Not pleasant is it? But it's a feeling which the residents of a handful of Sussex towns may have to get used to. Following a 17-month Public Inquiry into proposals for the designation of the South Downs as a national park, the inspector has produced a report recommending a number of variations to the boundary as set out in 2002. Some additions have been proposed, but many of these changes reflect the overly restrictive view that the bounds of the national park should be limited to the chalk ridge of the Downs. The consultation period during which local organisations and members of the public can respond to the new boundaries closes on 24 September. So time is running out.

At issue is the inspector's move to exclude a large tract of countryside and a number of market towns from the area which would have enjoyed the environmental protection afforded by national park status. The largest exclusion zone is the western Weald which includes Petersfield in the west, extending to the outskirts of Haslemere in the north and of Pulborough in the east and also including the towns of Liss, Midhurst and Petworth. The exclusion of this sizeable area is being hotly contested by the South Downs Campaign and many of its 110 constituent organisations which include such national bodies as the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), Friends of the Earth (FOE), Ramblers Association and the Youth Hostels Association (YHA).

Further east, the towns of Arundel, Steyning, and Lewes and the village of Ditchling, all falling within the boundaries proposed in 2002, are now also facing exclusion. In Arundel, where the new boundary will now separate the town from its most famous feature - the castle, the change has been greeted with incredulity. District Councillor Paul Dendle, who says that he is not actually in favour of the national park, admits that "it's crazy to have one part of the town inside the park and one part out". And Town Clerk, Peter Welch adds that "people are surprised and disappointed that they are being left outside the national park". He also makes the point that there is concern that water-meadows adjoining the A27, south of the town, will not have the protection that the more stringent planning regulations of the national park would have provided.

In Lewes too, there is concern at the town's exclusion. Although there was a feeling that Lewes merited inclusion by virtue of being embedded within the Downs, the inspector's decision to exclude the plain of the river Ouse to its north has left the town open to the argument that it is no longer surrounded by national park land. John Cheesman, chairman of the Friends of Lewes, says that many people are unhappy that the town is likely to be left out. He points out that in addition to its location, Lewes scores highly in terms of its historic character and its cultural heritage, making it the obvious gateway to the national park.

A similar situation has arisen at Ditchling where the inspector's assertion that land north of the village is not of appropriate quality to be included in the national park has led to the exclusion of the whole village, on the basis that settlements must be fully surrounded by park land if they are to be included. This argument is particularly hard to sustain in the case of Ditchling where the relationship of the village to the Downs, surmounted by Ditchling Beacon, is self-evident. There is a strong two-way visual connection between the village and the Downs and the transition between the two is seamless with the uphill slopes of the Downs starting within the village boundary.

Brian Clutterbuck, chairman Ditchling Parish Council and Tom Dufty, chairman Ditchling Society are mounting a joint campaign which, while acknowledging that land north of the village does not meet the Park criteria, re-asserts the widely-held local view that the village should be included. Both emphasise the benefits which the village brings to the Park: a view from the Downs of a rural settlement with its boundaries still clearly defined and its historic medieval footprint still visible; an example of a village where, historically, those who worked the Downs lived and practised their trades; and a reminder of the strong link between the geology of the Downs and the materials used in village buildings, more than 80 of which are listed.

Of the settlements excluded from the national park proposal, Ditchling has the strongest claim to be included. "It is" says Brian Clutterbuck, "an integral part of the Downs". Tom Dufty agrees, drawing attention to the high level of awareness of the issue in the village; "A lot of people have signed the petition forms in the village shops or written to the Minister. I'm confident we've got village support".

Commenting on the continuing National Park debate, Roy Haycock CPRE Sussex chairman, says "It's heartening to see local challenges being mounted to boundary changes which threaten to separate communities from the surrounding countryside. The South Downs National Park should be more than the high chalk ridge between Eastbourne and Winchester. It should also include those historic settlements whose inhabitants have put their imprint on the Downs. I would urge all those who value this landscape and its history to write to the Minister responsible for National Parks to tell him why the original boundaries should remain unchanged".

Letters should be sent to Jonathan Shaw MP, Minister for the South East, DEFRA, Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, London SW1P 3JR, to reach him not later than 24 September 2007.

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CPRE, the Campaign to Protect Rural England, is a charity which promotes the beauty, tranquillity and diversity of rural England. We advocate positive solutions to the long-term future of the countryside. Founded in 1926, we have 60,000 supporters and a branch in every county. President: Bill Bryson. Patron: Her Majesty The Queen