

CONSULTATION RESPONSE TO PROPOSED AONB. - THIXENDALE PARISH COUNCIL SUBMISSION

Dear Ms Spain,

I'm writing to you in my capacity as Chair of Thixendale Parish Council on behalf of the Council and our local community . . Thixendale is a small rural parish on the edge of the Yorkshire Wolds within North Yorkshire abutting the East Riding of Yorkshire and is included in the proposed Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty subject to the current round of consultation .

We corresponded with Natural England during the pre consultation phase in 2022 outlining our objections to being included in the AONB area being taken forward for this formal consultation phase. This followed a Parish Poll being conducted correlating with the terms of the Local Government Act 1972 with an overwhelming majority of residents objecting to our parish being included in the AONB . Our objections at that time were disregarded on the grounds that this was a pre consultation exercise and not part of the statutory consultation exercise . This was a disappointing and unsatisfactory response to the representations we made at that time.

We therefore request that during this phase of the exercise our views are given appropriate statutory consideration and we will be writing to our local MP and the Secretary of State overseeing Natural England to seek assurance that on this occasion our views are given detailed and careful consideration given the unique democratic mandate that informs our Parish's position on the matter.

Turning to the consultation itself the proposed area was we understand, initially put forward jointly by East Riding and the former Ryedale District Councils during 2022 . Natural England appointed a consultancy to undertake a preliminary engagement exercise in 2022 at a number of locations in the proposed area including one in Thixendale village in July 2022 . . Unfortunately as a parish council we were never formally consulted at any point by Ryedale District Council or North Yorkshire council in advancing this proposal or in the subsequent development of the formal consultation proposal now being considered .

Following the engagement session in 2022 we became aware as a council of significant concerns amongst our local residents about the proposal and considerable opposition to it . Consequently we convened an extraordinary parish council meeting within the terms of the Local Government Act to determine if we should hold a Parish Poll under the remit of this legislation. A well attended meeting voted unanimously to undertake a parish poll to obtain local opinion on the question:

“ Should Thixendale Parish be included in Natural England's proposed Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty? Yes/No “

We initially approached Ryedale District Council to hold the poll but having received unaffordable costings for them to run the poll, we undertook the poll ourselves as a secret ballot closely matching the provisions of the Local Government Act on the 23rd July 2022. Ballot paper packs were delivered to every household in our parish with just over 200 residents eligible to vote .Whilst the number of voters is relatively small, we are a geographically large sparsely populated parish. The ballot question was approved by the returning officer of Ryedale District Council .

We had an excellent turnout for the poll with 109 (55%) of eligible electorate casting valid votes. 70 (65%) voted against the proposal and 39(35%) voting in favour . We believe, given the high turnout, this parish poll expresses a clear democratic mandate against the inclusion of our parish in the proposed AONB. Whilst two years have elapsed since we undertook this poll, following further discussion at our Parish Council in October 2024 , we consider its outcome to still be valid and democratically representative of our Parish . It is of course the case that some residents are in favour of the proposal but the overwhelming majority still do not support it

Natural England held a further consultation event in Thixendale village in November 2024 and I represented the Parish Council at that event and talked through in detail the background of our 2022 Parish Poll and the broader matters of concern raised during our community consultation exercise. I have to say I was disappointed at the attitude of the Natural England officers at the event who were rather patronising and dismissive of the significance of our Parish Poll as a formal democratic exercise. They intimated that the consultation was very much a “done deal” and that the criterion of “natural beauty” would completely override any community objections, even if democratically expressed.

I would point out that as a public body Natural England cannot and should not feel empowered to override democratically expressed will of our small community. Our objections must be given due respect. To include our community against the unequivocally expressed mandate of the people who live here would be exceptionally undemocratic and unreasonable.

It would be helpful too to summarise the key objections of the majority of our residents as evidence that is behind the ballot results.

Thixendale is already a very popular tourist destination sitting as it does in the centre of the Wolds Way footpath. This has, particularly since the pandemic, created issues especially at weekends, of overcrowding in the village centre with large numbers of parked cars causing obstructions. This has impeded access for residents and created particular difficulties for farms in the parish who are at times unable to undertake key operations involving large vehicle and livestock movements. We have considered what steps we can take ourselves to alleviate this but unfortunately the unique topography of Thixendale sitting at the centre of a steep narrow valley with only single track roads surrounding the village means finding alternative parking provision for visitors is simply impractical. Consequently the likely increased visitor numbers likely to come with AONB status is causing grave concern, particularly for our residents living on the main street in the village notwithstanding the benefits extra visitors would bring for our hospitality businesses. It was of concern when I raised this issue with your officers at the Thixendale consultation event they suggested that AONB status may afford funding to address this is yet when I sought evidence of other AONB areas being given assistance to address parking issues, not one example could be given. The reality is that peppercorn funding would simply not address the deleterious impact of additional tourism.

A key concern is the additional considerations required for planning and development under AONB status. This applies to both local businesses and residents. We have a number of successful farm diversification businesses that in actual fact provide the greatest employment for our village. These light industrial enterprises are legitimately concerned about potential restrictions and additional bureaucracy in navigating planning processes as their businesses grow which as a council we are keen to encourage to create a sustainable community. There is a real risk, as has occurred in other protected landscapes, that these kind of vital assets are discouraged by the restrictions of AONB status and locate elsewhere.

Residents have expressed real concern too at the restrictions AONB status brings for permitted development and the evidence from other AONB areas that under such status planning authorities tend to impose more stringent conditions on small scale domestic developments. The streetscape of Thixendale whilst sitting in an attractive setting, is unremarkable with adequate existing protection in place for the solitary listed property. The current streetscape includes environmentally sensitive fixtures such as solar panels which because of the unique topography of the village must face the street which would generally not be permitted under the more restrictive planning regime of AONBs.

A further concern is the likelihood, again based on experience in other AONB's, is the prospect of increased house prices as the status increases the desirability of property in these areas. We have already experienced exponential property price increases since the pandemic, rendering the village increasingly unaffordable, particularly for younger less affluent families in an area with depressed

average incomes . We would not wish to exacerbate this problem as it affects the sustainability of our community in which accessibility for young families plays a key part. It is of concern that the school roll in the primary school that serves Thixendale (in neighbouring Leavening) has been falling in recent years as younger families struggle to afford to buy or rent property in the area. This is a trend we would not wish to see exacerbated as further reductions in pupil numbers would bring the viability of the school into question.

Another relevant piece of evidence is well made by our local farmers who poignantly point out that generations of their families have in fact created the very landscape that you may be seeking to protect as almost none of the land in the proposed area is not either cultivated or actively managed through grazing or other agricultural activity. It begs the pertinent question of why is landscape protection actually necessary ? In their view which we as a council support, it is not.

As a council representing the community we are elected to serve we would urge you to consider the need to protect our community holistically which extends considerably beyond landscape amenity and tourism . We are committed to building a sustainable long term future which we genuinely consider will be more harmed than protected by AONB status .

At the recent consultation event your staff suggested that excluding an area within the proposed area would be challenging and administratively untidy . We would suggest this does not constitute a legitimate reason to ignore our democratic mandate.

I realise you may be a little surprised about an area actively opposing AONB status as has been pointed out to us by your staff but having weighed up the potential benefits and drawbacks of such status, we have a clear strong majority against it and to impose it upon our small but close knit community against our express and informed will would we believe, be wholly inappropriate.

I would be grateful for your observations and response .

Yours faithfully

D J Griffin QPM. Thixendale Parish Council Chair