

# Chilterns Tranquillity Study

**Summary report on the  
Participatory Appraisal  
consultations in the Chilterns  
Area of Outstanding Natural  
Beauty**

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**PEANuT Project  
Participatory Evaluation and Appraisal  
in Newcastle-upon-Tyne**

**Courses in Participatory Appraisal  
[www.northumbria.ac.uk/peanut](http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/peanut)**



## Introduction

It is clear that whatever 'tranquillity' is, and wherever it is to be found, it is important. Recognition of the importance of 'tranquillity' underpinned the pioneering participatory appraisal consultations and GIS work that was undertaken in the Northumberland National Park and the West Durham Coalfield as part of the northeast-based 'Tranquillity Mapping:' project in 2004. It was the further appreciation that, in essence, 'geography matters' with regards to perceptions of tranquillity that underpinned the perceived need to extend the investigation of understanding of tranquillity beyond the initial project area. This was for three main reasons: to investigate the general 'transferability' of the consultation approach; to allow for any further methodological developments that emanated from the northeast work to be explored; and, finally, in exploring how people experience and value tranquillity in the countryside in a second area of Britain, to provide a firm basis for the examination of similarities or differences in perceptions of 'tranquillity' across space (and, in particular, across different 'types' of landscape in Britain).

This summary report, therefore, is specifically focused on the participatory appraisal consultations (and the approach employed) during the Chilterns AONB Mapping Tranquillity extension project (referred hereafter as the 'Chilterns Tranquillity Project'). It provides summary details of the approach used in undertaking these consultations, and briefly documents the responses made during these sessions, thereby generating an understanding of how countryside users in the AONB perceive tranquillity. However, it can of course be read in conjunction with the reports from the previous northeast-based work, which provide a detailed background to the issue and previous study of tranquillity, as well as allowing a more detailed comparison of the approaches used, and/or the findings between these two areas of Britain, alongside the other reports focused on the Chilterns work in more detail. The former reports are available in PDF form from a variety of sites:

- The main 'Mapping Tranquillity' project web-site at <http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/tranquillity>
- The PEANuT project web-site at [http://northumbria.ac.uk/sd/academic/sas/sas\\_research/pa/consultres/](http://northumbria.ac.uk/sd/academic/sas/sas_research/pa/consultres/)
- The 'Countryside Quality Counts' website at <http://www.countryside-quality-counts.org.uk/links.htm>
- Campaign to Protect Rural England website at <http://www.cpre.org.uk/publications/index.htm>

**The latter reports can be accessed . . .**

or for more information about this project, please contact:

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## Background to the Chilterns consultations

The precursor to the Chilterns Tranquillity Study, the northeast Mapping Tranquillity' project has already established the ability for changes in tranquillity to be identified and mapped over time, as well as identifying the more and less tranquil area within a given study area, whether this is at the national, regional or local scale. It also differs from the previous work on tranquillity mapping by gathering definitions of what tranquillity is and is not perceived to be from extensive public consultations, and by the usage of more advanced GIS modelling techniques that have allowed the mapping of the diffusion of variables' impact over space, thereby also allowing the production of continuous surface maps of relative tranquillity, rather than zones of tranquil/non tranquil, or high/medium/low tranquillity. The Chilterns AONB Tranquillity Study emanated from a desire to explore the utility of the consultation approach across different areas (to see how well it 'travelled'), whilst also exploring the similarities and/or differences in responses to what local countryside users envisaged tranquillity to be across different areas.

## Study Area

The Chilterns AONB (one of 41 AONBs across England and Wales) web-site notes that despite lying relatively close to the north-west extremities of London (Figure 1) it is, 'an unspoilt area of rolling chalk hills, magnificent beechwoods, quiet valleys and charming brick and flint villages. A wonderful mosaic of woods, fields, hedges, sunken lanes and clear streams'.



Figure 1 – 'Map showing the Chilterns AONB extending from the Thames in the South West to just beyond Luton in the North East' (Source: <http://www.chilternsaonb.org>)

The web-site continues: 'The gently rolling hills are swathed in beech woodland and chalk downland, providing a haven for wildlife. Wildflowers found on the downland in summer include abundant orchids and the rare Chilterns gentian. In the southern Chilterns the spectacular red kite, a reintroduced bird of prey, is very visible for most of the year. In the valleys attractive villages with their traditional brick and flint cottages nestle around medieval churches. Prehistoric trackways such as the Ridgeway and the Iron Age hill forts scattered along the Hills give a sense of the ancient history of the Chilterns. Today, the area continues to provide a living for farmers and foresters and is home to 100,000 people'.

### **The Participatory Consultation Exercise**

Participatory appraisal is one of a growing family of participatory approaches that is recognised as taking a “whole community approach” to conducting action research. It involves the consultation area populations in the research in order to build up a representative, realistic and inclusive portrait of the issues that matter to them. PA is an example of a community research method through which the views of local people can be heard and by which they can consequently be involved directly or indirectly in defining policy. Principles of community research generally include valuing local knowledge, using an interactive rather than an extractive approach to information gathering, and verifying each stage of the process by using a variety of methods to elicit the same information. It requires the full involvement of local people and a regard for them by outsiders as the main subjects rather than objects of research.

Information resulting from community research activities such as maps, various types of diagrams and ranking matrices is analysed by each group as part of the community research process. Main points of discussion are recorded in various ways and are an important source of qualitative information that often cannot be accessed by other means. Participatory analysis provides an effective complement to the data derived from other sources. It may also help to develop a framework for discussion and analysis between professionals and local people, thereby having the potential to overcome barriers of local, cultural and national concerns and which can outlast the project time-frame. PA combines three distinct elements: - research, education and collective action – and makes use of a variety of tools, techniques and exercises.

### **A Participatory Project**

As with the northeast work the consultation exercise drew upon the expertise of actual *users* of the Chilterns AONB (alongside the various stakeholders who attended the AONB Planning conference). The study subsequently progressed with two different forms of PA session, distinguished here as ‘field’, and ‘non-field’-based sessions. In general terms the field-based work involved users of the study areas accessed at suggested (by other participants, and members of the steering group) outdoor locations within the two main project areas. It was important that similar, if not the same questions were asked during the Chilterns work as had been used during the consultations in the northeast (or at least that no new, or radically different questions were introduced). As such, the facilitators focused discussion around features and/or factors that make an area more or less ‘tranquil’, general perceptions of ‘tranquillity’, perceived meanings of ‘tranquillity’, what a ‘tranquil’ area looks like, and impacts perceived ‘tranquil’ areas have



For each of these questions, a range of tools was identified as potentially being the most fruitful for generating discussion. These included 'graffiti walls', mapping tools, and various forms of pictorial representation. In sum, there were a total of 14 field-based PA sessions undertaken during the study period, and one non-field-based session, which took place at the Chilterns AONB Planning conference held on the 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2004.



From the outset of the consultation period a reporting procedure was put in place to ensure that all responses made during the PA sessions were recorded as wholly and accurately as possible, and which mirrored that used in the northeast work. One verification event took place at the study centre at the Ashridge National Trust Estate in Berkhamstead. For the Chilterns verification rather than one person 'theming' all the responses made during the PA sessions (cutting stuff out, deciding what is 'interesting' etc) prior to verification, only repeat responses were removed (with, for example, six 'peace and quiet's becoming one, whilst 'peace and quiet' and 'peace' were both included). Essentially this approach was attempted as a more open way of proceeding in that it was intended to remove the researcher from the equation. As a result, due to the large number of responses each participant was greeted and presented with a list of the main sub-themes (you see, you hear, and so on) and allowed to choose one of these to use their votes on; conclusions could now be drawn from what sub-theme they chose, and after that, where their dots went. The number of responses in each category from which participants were asked to identify their top three choices was as follows:

Category	What is tranquillity?	What is not tranquillity?
You hear...	39	132
You do not hear...	14	
Of the mind...	299	21
Doing...	97	11
You see...	361	272
You do not see...	115	
Experiencing...	51	8

In very general terms, this means there was a much lower probability of a response being chosen from some categories (such as 'you see') compared to others (such as 'you hear'). It also became clear that the extent to which participants had adhered to the instructions regarding allocations of dots (3-2-1) also varied. These issues, and

their implications, are returned to in subsequent sections. However, in this section, the combined top 50 scoring responses are noted in terms of the number of dots they received, with the top 10 ranking responses being further specified. In total the PA team consulted 38 people during the indoor, non-field-based, 'stakeholder' sessions, and 418 during the outdoor, field-based PA work. In addition, 138 people attended the verification event held at Ashridge.

## **Findings**

A wide range of responses was made to the question 'what is tranquillity'.

### ***Perceived links to 'nature'***

A large proportion, and a wide range, of the responses made during the research linked 'tranquillity' to hearing, seeing and/or experiencing various aspects of perceived 'nature' and 'landscape'. These links to 'nature' had aural and visual aspects. Aurally, respondents noted the specific importance of a variety of 'Natural sounds', of being 'able to hear nature'. For many experiencing the 'countryside', a 'natural environment', or 'beautiful' elements of it was a key idea, with a wide range of related aspects being suggested such as the setting, scenery, and/or shape of the land. Some respondents focused on elements of the 'English countryside', including beaches, hills, valleys, and mountains. The importance of 'Water' and related aspects was emphasised by many respondents. Within a range of comments, respondents suggested that tranquillity is enhanced by seeing calm water, running water, streams, fountains, rivers, and the sea. Other responses focused on related aural aspects of water - 'Running water –noise', 'sound of sea or streams', 'sound of the sea', 'sound of water', 'sound of waves', 'sounds of running water', and 'sounds of sea'.

Many respondents focused on 'greenery' (or other perceived 'natural' related 'colours') as central to their understanding of tranquillity, such as blues, bright colours, and various greens. Linked to this many participants in the research noted the importance of 'trees', 'woodlands', 'forests' and other vegetation of various types and forms. Another range of comments related to the importance of 'views' and 'wide vistas', and, seemingly linked to this, the notion of 'open space', the sky and 'remoteness'. '[E]ncounters with wildlife other unexpected things' were perceived by many respondents to also be very important to their notions of tranquillity, with respondents specifying a range of creatures from cows and deer, to kingfishers and vultures. Finally, in relation to perceived 'natural' elements, a focus for some respondents was the weather, and the difference it can make to a tranquil experience.

### ***Tranquillity 'of the mind...'***

Whilst the many interrelated aspects of 'nature' were highly valued by many respondents during the research, another key aspect of tranquillity related to 'internal' as opposed to 'external' influences. Much of this reasoning was seemingly related to the ambiguous notion of (achieving) 'peace'. As was noted in the northeast work, 'peace' can be used to refer to a complete lack of noise; alternatively, it could mean a lack of noise so that 'natural sounds can be heard', or, and moving beyond simple aural aspects, the notion of being 'at peace' – a mental or psychological feeling of well-being. Many respondents noted the importance of 'no noise', stressing the need for 'peaceful quiet spacious and natural surroundings'. However, a large number and range of other responses were made that could be considered to infer meaning beyond an absence of noise – as something 'in the mind', as being 'good for the soul', of being 'in balance', or being related to a 'state of being'. Other responses

linked tranquillity to a sense of 'calm', to the ability to 'de-stress', the ability to de-stress 'forget about your troubles', and 'get away from hassles', to 'happiness', and 'mental health'. For some respondents 'peace of mind' and 'peacefulness' was key, 'relaxation', and/or spiritual renewal'.

### ***Doing things***

Many respondents identified a wide range of activities that they considered added to their experiencing of tranquillity – as 'Doing something you like doing'. These included 'a day at the museum', 'a newspaper', 'a nice place to drink and eat with no smokers', the 'Ability to walk where you want - freedom to roam', 'Meditating on a beach next to the sea', and 'sleeping'.

### ***Perceived human related benefits***

Whilst much of the focus of participants' comments concerned perceived 'natural' factors, some respondents suggested certain human-related aspects could also be important in heightening the experiencing of tranquillity. These included human-related noises (such as music), human-related (urban) developments (such as bright lights), or the mere presence of people.

### ***What is not tranquillity?***

A large majority of the many responses to the question 'what is *not* tranquillity' (and some responses to being asked what is) focused on the impact of humans in a variety of different forms. On a general level, it was the mere presence of humans that detracted from tranquillity for many respondents. Participants suggested their sense of tranquillity is reduced when there is 'a lot of us around', by 'closely crowded people', by intrusion', and simply 'too many people'. Other responses focused on 'noisy children', 'screaming children', and 'large groups of noisy teenagers'.

Beyond simply being present, certain types of behaviour and/or activities undertaken by humans were considered as detracting from tranquillity, much of which revolved around the issue of unwanted noise and/or disturbance (both visual and aural) – indeed, 'anti-social behaviour' and 'ill mannered people -no respect for surroundings' were the two highest scoring responses at verification, with 22 and 15 votes respectively. Participants highlighted the negative impacts of a large range of behaviours and issues, including 'Bad manners', 'crime', 'inconsiderate behaviour', 'mobile phones' 'noise - man-made, not birds', 'people that shout', and 'The beat of modern music'. A key issue concerned the perceived spoiling of tranquillity through 'eyesore –litter', 'Dogs, dog mess', and 'rubbish and untidiness', and/or noise (of many forms. Some respondents identified a range of negative impacts relating to how being in the wrong frame of mind can detract from perceived tranquillity. They noted the potential importance of 'anything that breaks concentration e.g. noise, rubbish, showing people have been 'disrespectful', 'hustle bustle', and 'worrying fretful state of being'. The negative impacts of various forms of transport and vehicles were commented upon by many respondents, both in terms of their visual and aural presence. Other responses focused more overtly on transport-related noise. A more general form of negative impact concerned various forms of 'development' in the landscape, again in both visual and aural terms, including various forms of 'pollution'.

### ***Tranquil Places***

During the research a number of perceived 'Tranquil places' were suggested by the research participants, either as a result of being asked to identify such places directly, or by volunteering them as representing or illustrating what tranquillity meant to them. Other respondents identified a wide range of unnamed places of varying sizes/scales/specificity which they associated with having a tranquil experience.