

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**Minutes of the meeting of Wye Valley AONB Joint Advisory Committee held
at The Council Chamber, Forest of Dean District Council Offices, High Street, Coleford,
GL16 8HG on Monday, 6th March, 2023 at 2.00 pm**

PRESENT: County Councillor: A. Webb (Chair)

Elected Members (with voting powers)

Monmouthshire County Council

County Councillors: S. Garratt and D. Rooke

Gloucestershire County Council

County Councillors: G. Morgan and T. Hale

Herefordshire Council

Councillor Y. Watson

Forest of Dean District Council

Councillors: C. McFarling and D. Wheeler

Town / Parish Community Councils with voting powers

GAPTC – Mr. C. Evers

Herefordshire Association Local Councils – Mr. R. Gething

One Voice Wales – Miss R. Edwards

Co-opted Members (with voting powers)

Voluntary Conservation Sector in Monmouthshire – Mr. A. Thomas

Co-opted Members (without voting powers)

Wye Valley Society – Mr. C. Barron

River Wye Preservation Trust – Mr. R. Hesketh

Local Tourism Sector – Ms. R. Clay

Technical Advice Officers:

Wye Valley AONB Manager – Mr. A. Blake

Monmouthshire County Council – Mr. M. Lewis

Monmouthshire County Council – Mr. R. Williams

Wye Valley AONB Planning Officer - Mr. J. Bailey

Others present: Ms. E. Whitehouse – Environment Agency
Ms. M. Getgood – Coleford Town Council

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APOLOGIES:

Councillors: B. Durkin, J. Hardwick and P. Symonds
Mr. B. Nash, Mr. M. Price, D. Price, Mr. R. Niblett and Mr. M. Quine

1. Introductions & New Members

On behalf of the Wye Valley AONB Joint Advisory Committee, the Chair welcomed Rebecca Clay, Head of Tourism - Forest of Dean and Wye Valley Tourism, to her first meeting.

2. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Yolande Watson declared a personal and prejudicial interest in respect of agenda item 8 – Farming in Protected Landscapes Update as she and her partner's business had received a Farming in Protected Landscapes grant for the year ending 31st March 2023. She left the meeting taking no part in the discussion or voting thereon.

3. Public Questions

None received.

4. Confirmation of Minutes

The minutes of the Wye Valley AONB Joint Advisory Committee dated 7th November 2022 were confirmed and signed by the Chair.

In doing so, the following points were noted:

- The Forest of Dean District Council does not currently have the facility to hold hybrid meetings from its Council Chamber. The Council will be considering this matter after the local elections in May 2023. Therefore, for the time being, meetings of the Wye Valley AONB Joint Advisory Committee will continue to be held in person in the Council Chamber at the Forest of Dean District Council Offices, Coleford.
- A vacancy exists for the Gloucestershire County Voluntary Conservation Sector serving on the Wye Valley AONB Joint Advisory Committee. The AONB Manager informed the Committee that he was in the process of preparing for recruiting a new member.

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5. AONB (shared) Planning Officer

We received a verbal report by the AONB Manager regarding the appointment of a shared AONB Planning Officer. Josh Bailey had been appointed as the Wye Valley AONB Unit Planning Officer, shared with Malvern Hills AONB Unit. Josh had been in post for one month and it had been acknowledged that the appointment was already proving to be beneficial to the AONB Unit.

In doing so, the following information was noted:

- The AONB Manager informed the Joint Advisory Committee that training events were being arranged for local authority planning officers and members later in the year regarding planning issues relating to the Wye Valley AONB and its setting.
- The AONB Manager would inform the local parish and community Councils of the appointment of the AONB Planning Officer.
- The AONB Manager would liaise with the AONB Planning Officer with a view to whether the AONB website could hold details of applications within the AONB that are being looked at by the AONB Planning Officer.

We noted the verbal update.

6. AONB Unit 2023/24 Work Programme

We received a report regarding the AONB Unit Work Programme 2023/2024.

In doing so, the following information was noted:

- During the year it is expected that the AONB Unit will remain with 8.4 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) posts, although a partnership project with Herefordshire Wildlife Trust may enable the secondment of a Farm Advisor to work with the AONB Unit.
- Priorities include the on-going development of the AONB Nature Recovery Plan and Species Action Plans; promotion and delivery of the Farming in Protected Landscapes grant programme (in England); the distribution and administration of grants through the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) and Herefordshire Community Foundation AONB Fund; the conclusion of the Lower Wye Nature Networks Fund project; the delivery of the second year of projects funded through the 3-year tranche of Welsh Government's Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) programme; including ongoing control of Invasive Non-Native Species, support for Village Halls and enhancements to the Wye Valley Walk; being a co-host for the National AONB Conference and continuing a range of existing activities and projects; while retaining enough flexibility to pursue new funding opportunities and develop new initiatives.

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- The AONB Unit core budget for 2023/4 presented to the AONB Steering Group is £361,000 with additional funding programmes, grants and match funding anticipated to exceed £710,000 levered into the AONB during the year.

Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- In response to a question raised regarding the use of KPI's to monitor scrutiny of the activities and outcomes arising from the work programme, the AONB Manager informed the Committee that the outcomes are identified in the management plan based on NAAONB metrics. However, this information is not systematically reported back to the Joint Advisory Committee. The AONB annual report will be presented to the Joint Advisory Committee at the next meeting with further information on this matter.
- National Gird Landscape Enhancement Initiative - funding had been applied for two years ago but had been unsuccessful.
- The AONB Unit continues to put forward proposals for undergrounding low voltage power lines.
- 13km of powerlines within the AONB have already been undergrounded.
- The Strategic Objectives relate to the AONB Management Plan with implementation delivered through the AONB Business Plan which gradually evolves over a period of time.

We resolved to endorse the AONB Unit Work Programme for 2023/2024.

7. Designated Landscapes Review in England and Wales

We received a report regarding the Review of Designated Landscapes in England and Wales.

In doing so, the following information was noted:

- DEFRA has published Government's Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 as the first revision of the 25 Year Environment Plan (2018).
- Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) 2023 focuses on 10 goals including "Thriving plants and wildlife", "Clean and plentiful water", "Mitigating and adapting to climate change" and "Enhanced beauty, heritage, and engagement with the natural environment".
- Under the 'enhanced beauty' goal the Government will "invest in a new national landscapes partnership for National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and National Trails" and "extend the delivery of our Farming in Protected Landscapes programme".

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- The Welsh National Designated Landscapes Partnership, Tirweddau Cymru Landscapes Wales (TCLW), is hosting a seminar on the role of Designated Landscapes in the nature emergency, on 9th-10th March 2023 in Gower, Swansea.
- Tirweddau Cymru Landscapes Wales (TCLW) has three new seconded staff taking strategic leads for the AONBs and National Parks. Andrew Blake, Wye Valley AONB Manager, has been appointed vice-chair of TCLW for 2023-25.
- The National Association for AONBs (NAAONB) continues to liaise and co-ordinate collaboration with both governments and key stakeholders over progressing the agenda for AONBs.

Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- It was considered that the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) 2023 has not delivered appropriate improvements.
- In response to questions raised, the AONB Manager informed the Committee that more is being asked of the AONB Unit. Some additional resources have become available, however, not to the levels of resources and staff as proposed in the Glover Report.
- The rebranding of AONBs as 'National Landscapes' is a concern for many AONBs across the UK due to the removal of 'Natural Beauty' from the title. The AONB Manager will shortly receive a briefing on the proposed re-branding.
- In response to questions raised regarding the cleanliness of the River Wye, the AONB Manager informed the Committee that he sits on various steering groups regarding this matter and it was noted that there has been significant political engagement and activity in recent years with a view to rectifying the problem.
- It is anticipated that it will take up to 10 years for the River Wye to return to a pristine condition.
- County and District Councils located within the AONB are aware of the condition of their rivers and are adding their influence to aid in improvements to river quality.
- Concern was expressed that the wildlife within the AONB will be severely impacted before the river Wye is returned to a pristine condition. Significant improvements are required now to improve the cleanliness of the River Wye.
- The AONB Partnership Seminar will be discussing the enhancement of water catchment through innovative land management. The seminar will be held at Goodrich Village Hall on Thursday 16th March 2023 between 10.00am and 3.00pm. Experts in soil and land management, agroforestry and natural flood management will be presenting.

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We resolved:

- (i) to note the report;
- (ii) that the AONB Manager presents a briefing report to the next meeting of the Joint Advisory Committee regarding an update on the condition of the river Wye.

8. Farming in Protected Landscapes update

We received a report regarding progress of the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme.

In doing so, the following information was noted:

- Each AONB and National Park in England has an allocation from DEFRA to provide grants through the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme for farmers and land managers to provide benefits for nature, climate, people, and places.
- The original FiPL programme was for the period 2021/22 to 2023/24. The programme has now been extended for a further year to March 2025.
- The Farming in Protected Landscapes Officer can assist farmers and land managers applying to the programme.
- The Local Assessment Panel meets regularly to determine applications for Farming in Protected Landscapes grants and has approved the full allocation of funds for 2022/23.

We welcomed the extension of the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme and endorsed the allocations of the Local Assessment Panel.

9. Sustainable Development Fund & HCF AONB Fund allocations

We received a report regarding the AONB Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) and the Wye Valley AONB Fund with Herefordshire Community Foundation (HCF).

In doing so, the following information was noted:

- The Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) currently has £54,453 allocated from the £100,000 offered by Welsh Government for 2022/23, with £45,547 remaining.
- At least two more applications are expected to be appraised imminently, with a combined value of about £35,000.

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- The Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) had previously endorsed the principle of allocating remaining SDF at end of year to specific projects such as the Wye Valley River Festival.
- The National Association for AONBs has commissioned an independent evaluation of the SDF for Welsh Government.
- Herefordshire Community Foundation (HCF) hosts the Wye Valley AONB Fund for which the 2022/23 Quarter Three balance was £65,399.70. This included a £10,000 donation to the Endowment Fund from Bad Wolf Productions.
- Applications are welcome for both sets of funding for 2023/24.

We endorsed the allocations of the SDF for 2022/23, including allocation of any remaining funds to the Wye Valley River Festival.

10. National Association for AONBs

We received a report regarding an update in respect of the National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (NAAONB).

In doing so, the following information was noted:

- The National AONB Conference will be held on 5th - 7th September 2023, with the focus on 'Investing in Landscape'.
- The Conference will be held at Bath University with field trips to the co-hosting AONBs of Cotswolds, Cranborne Chase, Mendip Hills, North Wessex Downs, Quantock Hills and Wye Valley.
- The NAAONB is organising a staff development programme in the AONBs in Wales.

We resolved to:

- (i) welcome the opportunity to co-host the National AONB Conference on 5th - 7th September 2023 and provide a fieldtrip to the Wye Valley AONB;
- (ii) encourage AONB partners to attend the AONB Conference at Bath University;
- (iii) support the AONB staff development programme in Wales.

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11. Partner and AONB Unit progress reports and updates

We received a report regarding the activity of the Wye Valley AONB Unit relating to:

- AONB Partnership Seminar - 16th March 2023.
- Cleddon Bog SSSI & NRW Peatland funding.
- AONB Species Action Plans.
- Lower Wye Nature Networks Partnership Project.
- Integrated Recreational Access Strategy - Monmouthshire.
- Wye Valley Villages signage (Monmouthshire) & Delivery Group.
- Wye Valley River Festival.

In doing so, the following information was noted:

- Joint Advisory Committee Members were saddened to hear of the death of Jon Beedell, one of the founding Artistic Directors of the Wye Valley River Festival. He will be sorely missed.
- The securing of funding to undertake the proposed works at Cleddon Bog was welcomed.
- Integrated Recreational Access Strategy – This relates to a complex network of public rights of way with a view to accommodating all users.
- Newland Parish Council is looking at establishing a green lane whereby motorcyclists have indicated that they would be willing to maintain it. It was noted that similar projects are being looked at on the Welsh side of the border. It was considered that there needs to be a strategic view undertaken of the whole area. A briefing document is in the process of being finalised before it is presented for public consultation.

We noted the report.

12. Dates of next meetings:

- Monday 3rd July 2023.
- Monday 6th November 2023.

The meetings will be held in the Council Chamber, Forest of Dean District Council Offices, Coleford and will commence at 2.00pm.

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It had been acknowledged that there would be local elections in England in May 2023 for some local authorities. Therefore, the Chair thanked the members of the Committee for their service on the Joint Advisory Committee who will be standing for election in May.

The meeting ended at 3.54 pm.