

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Wye Valley AONB Joint Advisory Committee Remote Meeting on Monday, 7th March, 2022 at 2.00 pm

PRESENT: County Councillor: A Webb (Chair)

Elected Members (with voting powers)

Monmouthshire County Council

County Councillors: C. Edwards, M. Feakins and M. Lane

Herefordshire Council

Councillors: B. Durkin, P. Symonds and 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

Co-opted Members (with voting powers)

Voluntary Conservation Sector in Monmouthshire – Mr. A. Thomas

Voluntary Conservation Sector in Herefordshire – Mr. B. Nash

National Farmers Union – Mr. M. Price

Co-opted Members (without voting powers)

Wye Valley Society – Mr. C. Barron

Technical Advice Officers:

Wye Valley AONB Manager – Mr. A. Blake

Monmouthshire County Council – Mr. M. Lewis

Monmouthshire County Council – Mr. R. Williams

Herefordshire Council – Mr. J. Bisset

Herefordshire Council – Ms. E. Duberley

Also in attendance:

Elizabeth O'Sullivan

Bridget Vine

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APOLOGIES:

Councillor J. Hardwick, Councillor T. Hale, Dr. G. Peterken, Mr. R. Hesketh, Mr. R. Niblett, Ms. C. Grimstead, Mr. G. Parry and Mr. A. Taylor

1. Declarations of Interest

None received.

2. Chairperson's announcements

The Chair informed the Joint Advisory Committee that:

- Liz O'Sullivan had joined the meeting by invitation of the Chair.
- Sue Middleton had been elected to the role of verderer to the Forest of Dean on 1st March 2022. She is the first woman to be elected to this role. The Chair asked that the AONB Manager writes a letter of congratulations to Sue Middleton on behalf of the Joint Advisory Committee.

3. Public Question Time

No questions received.

4. Confirmation of Minutes

The minutes of the Wye Valley AONB Joint Advisory Committee dated 1st November 2021 were confirmed and signed by the Chair.

5. AONB Unit 2022/23 Work Programme

We received a report regarding the proposed outline work plan for the AONB Unit during the forthcoming financial year, subject to confirmation of funding with DEFRA, Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and Welsh Government.

In doing so the following information was noted:

- The proposed Work Programme for the AONB Unit for 2022/2023 was presented in draft form as budgets for the AONB have yet to be confirmed. The Programme is ambitious but dependent on adequate funding and resources being available.
- New AONB core funding agreements are awaited from both DEFRA and Natural Resources Wales (NRW). Welsh Government also has yet to confirm allocations for the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) and Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) programme. Meanwhile, various project funding bids are being prepared.

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- Dependant on funding, the AONB Unit may be able to expand slightly beyond eight full time equivalent (FTE) posts. However, currently two of those posts are vacant and in recruitment meaning capacity in the AONB Unit continues to be stretched.
- Consequently, only a draft Work Programme could be presented.
- Priorities included the potential expansion of the planning support role, shared jointly with the Malvern Hills AONB Partnership; the successful recruitment of the Farming in Protected Landscapes Officer to take over the running of the grant programme (in England); the successful recruitment of a new Community Links Officer to lead on the promotion and administration of grants through the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) and Herefordshire Community Foundation AONB Fund, and reinvigorate the AONB Volunteers and Youth Rangers; the development of nature recovery in the AONB and delivery of the Lower Wye Nature Networks project; the delivery of a further year of projects funded through the Welsh Government Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) programme; ongoing Green Infrastructure and Natural Flood Management projects, particularly those linked to improving water quality in the Wye; and continuing a range of existing activities and projects; while retaining enough flexibility to pursue new funding opportunities and develop new initiatives.
- The draft AONB Unit core budget as presented to the AONB Steering Group is £275,860 and additional funding programmes, grants and match funding is anticipated to exceed £650,000 levered into the AONB during the year.

Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- With regard to the health of the River Wye, the AONB office will be working with partners throughout the Wye Catchment regarding this matter within the resources and remit of the AONB.
- It is hoped that there will be enough resources to employ a part time Planning Officer. This would allow for fuller monitoring of planning applications within the AONB.
- The AONB office recently promoted the first Wales Dark Skies Week and has been promoting the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) star count.
- The AONB Manager informed the Joint Advisory Committee that he does not know the extent of the AONB Office's resources yet for 2022/23. It is hoped that there will be sufficient uplift to employ at least a further part time post. A Farming and Protected Landscapes Officer is currently being recruited.

We resolved to endorse the draft AONB Unit Work Programme for 2022/2023.

6. Glover Review & Government Response

We received a report regarding the Government's response to the Landscapes Review.

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In doing so the following information was noted:

- The Landscapes Review of National Parks and AONBs in England, led by Julian Glover, was published in 2019 with 27 'Proposals' for Government.
- A Written Ministerial Statement published on 24th June 2021 provided the Government's initial response to the Landscapes Review.
- In January 2022 the Government released the formal response to the Landscapes Review, indicating the Government's preferred direction for England's AONBs.
- A 12 week public consultation period on the Government's response is open until 9th April 2022 with 25 questions.
- The National Association for AONBs (NAAONB) has been co-ordinating discussion and debate and collaborating with key stakeholders in preparation of a considered response to the consultation.
- The NAAONB and other environmental Non-governmental organisations (eNGOs) have noted that the Government's Response falls short of the ambitious, transformational change that Glover envisaged, which AONB teams are keen to see implemented, and which the pressures on these nationally designated landscapes demand.
- There are potential knock-on implications for AONBs in Wales and consequently the Welsh part of the AONB and the integrity of the Wye Valley AONB.
- The AONB Manager will prepare a response drawing on NAAONB commentary and other sources as directed by members.

Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- Forest of Dean District Council has its response to the Government's response to be approved by Cabinet shortly. This information will be sent to the AONB Manager in due course.
- Some parish and town councils consider that the consultation has fallen short in its role as a consultation paper.
- Concerns were raised regarding the re-naming of AONBs as National Landscapes. It was noted that opinion is divided on this matter throughout other AONBs.
- It is understood that the Government's proposal is for the National Landscape name to be a trading name, rather than a legal name. Therefore, AONBs will remain areas of outstanding natural beauty in law but will be referred to as National Landscapes, to put them on a par with National Parks.

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- The AONB Manager welcomed having a ‘sounding board’ from Joint Advisory Committee Members to help prepare a response. Councillors McFarling, Wheeler, Watson and Colin Evers expressed their support to be involved in this matter.

We resolved:

- (i) to welcome the Government’s Response to the Landscapes Review.
- (ii) to establish a ‘sounding board’ comprising of Councillors McFarling, Wheeler, Watson and Colin Evers to assist the AONB Manager in compiling a formal response to the Government’s consultation, aided by commentary from the National Association for AONBs.
- (iii) to delegate the AONB Manager to submit comments on behalf of the AONB Partnership by the consultation deadline of 9th April 2022.
- (iv) to encourage individuals and partner organisations to make their own comments and submissions to the Government’s consultation on the Landscapes Review.

7. Natural England LUC 'All-England Review' of potential areas

We received a report regarding Natural England’s All-England Assessment and intended mapping of potential new Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and other landscape designations.

In doing so the following information was noted:

- In July 2021 the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) was advised of Natural England’s announcement on proposals for two new AONBs and extension of two existing AONBs along with a programme to examine how more areas could be assessed for designation of their landscape.
- Natural England’s ‘All-England Assessment’ of potential designated landscapes has now commenced, led by Land Use Consultants (LUC).
- This visionary mapping project aims to reflect the spirit of the Hobhouse Map that led to the establishment of the first National Parks & AONBs over 70 years ago.
- The Hobhouse map identified an area encompassing most of the current Wye Valley AONB and areas to the east across the Forest of Dean and south Herefordshire from Lydney and May Hill to Much Marcle and Tarrington.
- The known requests made by various interested parties relevant to the Wye Valley AONB designation are for:
 - The Wye Valley AONB to be extended up to the Marcle Ridge.
 - The Forest of Dean to be designated and AONB.

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- The whole 'Forest of Dean and Wye Valley' area of the Hobhouse map to be designated an AONB.

Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- Liz O'Sullivan informed the Joint Advisory Committee that the two most relevant areas for extending the AONB were economic and connectivity. The Old Hobhouse area demonstrates these two issues and there is a solid argument for extending the AONB to incorporate this area.
- Concern was expressed that the Glover Review is being positioned to help implement the Government's Planning White Paper.
- In the previous year, biodiversity and wildlife in the lower Wye Valley has been negatively impacted. It was considered that we should support the ambitions of the Glover Review.
- It was considered that the Joint Advisory Committee along with Forest of Dean District Council and Herefordshire Council need to respond robustly to this review.

We resolved:

- (i) to welcome the initiation of Natural England's new landscape designation programme.
- (ii) to note the three existing local requests for AONB designation & / or extension.

8. Wye Valley AONB Villages Stage 3 Report

We received a report regarding the final Wye Valley AONB Villages Plan for the Future Stage 3 Report covering the main village in the Monmouthshire area of the AONB.

In doing so the following information was noted:

- The Wye Valley AONB Villages Plan has been a joint project between Monmouthshire County Council (MCC), Wye Valley AONB Partnership and the four constituent Community Councils of St. Arvans, Trellech United, Devauden and Tintern.
- The catalyst for the study was road safety issues and excessive traffic speeds in many of the Monmouthshire villages in the Lower Wye Valley but the scope was widened to consider the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the communities.
- ARUP was commissioned in December 2020 by MCC to carry out this study.
- Funding was secured from the Wye Valley AONB Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) and Welsh Government's Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places

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(SLSP) programme along with contributions from MCC and the Community Councils.

- A Steering Group of representatives from the four Community Councils, County Councillors, AONB Manager and MCC officers has been overseeing progress.
- The final Wye Valley AONB Villages Plan for the Future Stage 3 Report is now completed and available to download.
- The preparation of new village gateway signage is underway as an initial project.

Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- It is a good scheme but it does not take in the English side of the A466 through the Wye Valley due to Welsh funding constraints.
- The benefits of its success need to be assessed with a view to replicating it on the English side of the A466 making the scheme integral to the whole of the AONB.

We resolved:

- (i) to endorse the Wye Valley AONB Villages Plan for the Future Stage 3 Report and continue engagement with the local stakeholders in delivering the Plan.
- (ii) to encourage the respective Community Councils to adopt the Plan and provide representatives to sit on the Delivery Group.

9. WyeNAC nominee

We received a report to nominate a representative from the Wye Valley AONB Partnership to the Wye Navigation Advisory Committee (Wye NAC).

In doing so the following information was noted:

- The Environment Agency (EA) is responsible for navigation on the navigable part of the non-tidal Rivers Wye and Lugg.
- The Wye Navigation Advisory Committee (Wye NAC) is serviced by EA, who require appointments to Wye NAC to be reviewed every three years.
- The AONB Manager has represented the AONB Partnership on the Wye NAC since its establishment.
- Several other members of the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) sit on the Wye NAC in other capacities.
- The JAC needs to consider who should represent it on Wye NAC for the next three years.

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We resolved to nominate the Wye Valley AONB Manager, Andrew Blake, to continue to represent the Wye Valley AONB Partnership on the Wye NAC.

10. Farming in Protected Landscapes

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 administer the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme for farmers and land managers to provide benefits for nature, climate, people and places.
- The Local Assessment Panel meets regularly to determine applications for Farming in Protected Landscapes grants and has approved the full allocation of funds for 2021/22.
- The recruitment of a Farming in Protected Landscapes Officer is underway to assist farmers and land managers applying to the programme.

We resolved to endorse the allocations of the Local Assessment Panel for the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme.

11. Joint Statement on the Historic Environment in AONBs

We received a report regarding the Joint Statement on the Historic Environment in AONBs in England, prepared with Historic England and the National Association for AONBs.

In doing so the following information was noted:

- The National Association of AONBs (NAAONB) has been working with Historic England to revise a previous accord on the Historic Environment in AONBs.
- Endorsement by each AONB Partnership is sought before the Joint Statement is launched later in 2022.

Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- The AONB Manager would make enquires regarding why this statement is solely England based and not British based and report back.
- The Joint Statement is missing the inclusion of heritage and the historic environment and its protection in the planning system, particularly with planning applications.

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We resolved to endorse the Joint Statement on the Historic Environment in AONBs in England, prepared with Historic England and the National Association for AONBs.

12. Wye Valley River Festival update

We received a report regarding the progress of the Wye Valley River Festival Community Interest Company (CIC) with the Wye Valley River Festival 2022 scheduled for 27th May - 5th June 2022.

In doing so the following information was noted:

- The Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) supported the establishment of the Wye Valley River Festival Community Interest Company (CIC) to take forward the Wye Valley River Festival.
- The Wye Valley River Festival CIC has been successful with various grant applications to enable it to plan for a Wye Valley River Festival 2022 on 27th May - 5th June 2022.

Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- The AONB Team and the CIC were congratulated for their work in this matter.
- The Wye Valley River Festival will coincide with the Queen's Platinum Jubilee and will be able to make use of infrastructure that is already in place.

We noted the report.

13. AONB Management Plan - Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services

We received a report regarding the context of Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services in the AONB Management Plan 2021-2026, in response to the Public Questions raised in November 2021.

In doing so the following information was noted:

- A number of questions were posed in the Public Question item to the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) meeting on 1st November 2021 relating to Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services in the Wye Valley AONB Management Plan.
- The Wye Valley AONB Management Plan was adopted by the Local Authorities in early 2021 following staged reviews and public consultation between 2018 and 2021.
- Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services are adopted terms and concepts of the British Government that are referenced in the statutory Wye Valley AONB Management Plan.

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- In Wales the concepts of the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources (SMNR) and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 along with the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) are the defining principles.
- The majority of land in the Wye Valley AONB is privately owned over which the JAC has no direct control. Forestry England and Natural Resources Wales manage the Public Forest Estate in their respective countries. Third sector organisations, particularly the Wildlife Trusts and Woodland Trusts also own reserves that are key areas of environmental value.

Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- There is a need to keep a watching brief regarding this matter, in particular, issues around carbon tax, carbon off-setting and biodiversity net gain.
- Concern was expressed that natural capital is being used as a policy tool.

We noted the report.

14. AONB Unit progress reports and updates

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

- AONB 50th Anniversary programme.
- Nature Recovery Plan.
- Undergrounding Powerlines.
- Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) projects.
- Natural Flood Management & Riparian Tree work (England only).
- Peatland Restoration – Cleddon Bog SSSI.
- Youth Rangers & AONB Volunteers.

In doing so the following information was noted:

- Sarah Sawyer, AONB Community Links Officer, had left the AONB Unit in December 2021 after 13 years of Service. The Joint Advisory Committee wished her well for the future.

We noted the report.

15. Dates of next meetings:

Monday 4th July 2022 at 2.00pm.

Monday 7th November 2022 at 2.00pm.

Subject to Covid-19 restrictions the meetings will be held in the Council Chamber, Forest of Dean District Council Offices, Coleford.

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Before the meeting concluded the following points were noted:

- A Heritage Strategy is being prepared in Monmouthshire with support from the Heritage Fund and is primarily a MonLife Heritage Strategy.
- Herefordshire MPs have been raising the state of the River Wye in the House of Commons. There are now more resources going into the Environment Agency and Natural England to focus on the River Wye.
- Bridget Vine, a member of the public, informed the Joint Advisory Committee that she is a citizen scientist and volunteer undertaking water sampling measurements on the River Wye. She referred to a letter sent to Minister for the Environment Rebecca Pow MP regarding the state of the River Wye. She agreed to forward a copy of the letter to the AONB Manager.

The meeting ended at 4.03 pm.