

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, Coleford on Monday,
7th November, 2016 at 2.00 pm**

PRESENT: PRESENT:

Councillor: P. Cutter (Chairman) (Herefordshire Council)

Elected Members (with voting powers)

Monmouthshire County Council

County Councillors: D. Dovey and E. Hackett Pain

Gloucestershire County Council

Councillor P. Molyneux

Herefordshire Council

Councillor J. Hardwick

Forest of Dean Council

Councillor G. Davies

Co-opted Members (with voting powers)

Voluntary Conservation Sector in Monmouthshire - Mr. A. Thomas
Voluntary Conservation Sector in Gloucestershire - Dr. G. Peterken
Country Land and Business Association - Mr. S.W.B. Dereham
One Voice Wales - Councillor T. Phillips

Co-opted Members (without voting powers)

Recreation Sector - Mr. A. Lee
Wye Valley Society - Mr. C. Barron
Local Tourism Sector - Mr. D. Broadbent
Wildlife Trusts - Mr. A. Nixon (Herefordshire Wildlife Trust)

Technical Advice Officers

Wye Valley AONB Manager - Mr. A. Blake
Gloucestershire County Council - Mr. R. Niblett
Monmouthshire County Council - Mr. M. Lewis
Monmouthshire County Council - Mrs W. Barnard
Natural England - Ms. D. Griffiths

Also Present:

Voluntary Conservation Sector in Herefordshire – Mrs. V. Morgan
representing Mr. B. Nash

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Ramblers Association and Monmouthshire U3A – Mrs. J. Robbins

APOLOGIES:

County Councillors Mrs D. Blakebrough and Mrs A. Webb, Councillor Mrs H. Molyneux and Mr. M. Price.

1. Apologies for Absence and Introductions.

The Chair received apologies for absence, welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.

2. Declarations of Interest.

There were no declarations of interest from Committee Members.

3. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting.

The minutes of the meeting dated 4th July 2016 were confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

4. Public Question Time.

No questions were raised by members of the public.

5. Local Authority contributions.

We received a report, the purpose of which was to request contributions from the four constituent local authorities to the budget for the Wye Valley AONB Partnership for 2017/18 as outlined in the AONB Memorandum of Understanding between the four local authorities.

The recommendation that the JAC request from the constituent local authorities the agreed financial contributions for the Wye Valley AONB was agreed.

6. Wye Valley River Festival 2016 reports.

We were presented with evaluation reports for the Wye Valley River Festival in 2016, and detailed discussion and decision was made as follows.

6.1 WVRF 2016 Evaluation and Reflection Report.

The Festival Manager's final report was received, following presentation of the main outcomes at the last meeting. The report will be published on the website and it was recognised that the event was a considerable success. The Committee were reminded

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that the original business plan was to hold three biennial festivals (2014, 2016 and 2018).

A query was raised regarding the concluding event at Chepstow Racecourse and it was confirmed that it is intended that the festivals will not necessarily follow the same format each time. Each event is intended to be creative and different, explaining why the 2014 firework display in Chepstow was not repeated. Linked to this point, it was explained that discussions were also held with Chepstow Town Council to ensure that there was clear separation between the River Festival and the celebrations to mark the Chepstow Bridge Bicentenary this year. One of the lessons learned was that concluding the Festival on Sunday evening not a good time to attract visitors and this will be done differently in 2018.

Further information was sought regarding the involvement of young people in the 2016 event and ongoing to the 2018 event. It was confirmed that engagement with young people this time was a great success, and the intention is to build upon this success for 2018.

It was suggested that there would be a trees and woodland theme for the 2018 event which is with festival management team for consideration. It was agreed that the proposed theme offered a lot of potential to utilise fresh sites and opportunity for artistic interpretation accordingly. The suggestion was supported and it was agreed that this was a good opportunity to change perceptions and increase appreciation of the contribution and impact of woodlands and trees in the environment. Dr. G. Peterken offered his expertise to the organisers. It was commented that the management of the trees in the Wye Valley has been neglected for many years affecting access to and enjoyment of the surroundings.

The Committee were advised of the Bicentenary of Bigsweir Bridge is coming up and it was suggested that plans for a celebration should be considered as the bridge is a significant example of an elegant engineering solution to cross the river.

It was commented that some Wye Valley views are inaccessible and that there was a need to reinstate access and refurbish some of the Picturesque walks to attract more visitors. It was suggested that this proposal could be added to the planning for the 2018 event. Reassurance was provided that the Overlooking the Wye project cleared several viewpoints and funding has been secured to conserve some of the of the views next year.

It was suggested that there is not enough attention given to the industrial heritage of the area (quarrying, timber, bark for tanning leather etc.) and the point was revisited that the Wye Valley should be awarded World Heritage Site status in recognition of its industrial history. It was noted that a previous application in 2011 was rejected.

6.2 WVRF CCRI final report.

The Final Report of the Countryside and Community Research Institute was received. The purpose of the report was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Wye Valley River

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Festival 2016 and it was reported that it was evident that it was a positive experience for those attending and also those participating.

6.3 PR & media report.

A detailed report of Press and Media coverage of the Wye Valley River Festival 2016 was received.

We resolved to accept the recommendations, that the JAC:

- A. Welcomes the evaluation reports for the Wye Valley River Festival 2016 and the conclusions and lessons learned; and
- B. Endorses commencing the development process for a Wye Valley River Festival 2018.

7. WVRF 2016 Evaluation and Reflection Report.

8. WVRF CCRI final report.

9. PR & media report.

10. Local Authority changes and proposed alternative delivery.

We received a report outlining changes in three of the four constituent local authorities and the proposed relationship to the alternative delivery models developing in Monmouthshire County Council and the Forest of Dean District Council.

A summary of the changes in each area was provided. In doing so, it was advised that AONB line management in Herefordshire Council has moved to the Built and Natural Environment Service and the job title of the AONB Officer has been changed to AONB Manager (under the same terms and conditions). A Member expressed concern that a decision to change the job title of the AONB lead officer was taken without consultation with the Committee. Whilst it was commented that the new job title adequately reflected the role, the Chair agreed to investigate the circumstances of how the decision was reached, and to provide an answer to the Member.

The Committee was informed that it was unclear at present what the impact on the AONB would be with the formation of Teckal companies in Monmouthshire and the Forest of Dean to deliver improved value for money and services. However priorities and advice to the local authorities would continue to be set in this Committee.

It was explained that Herefordshire Council, Forest of Dean District Council and Monmouthshire County Council employ the AONB team members and the implications of changes in each council are awaited. It was explained that discussions have taken place with other AONB lead officers that have experienced similar circumstances and a set of criteria to address changes has been produced to ensure that statutory obligations are met and appropriate services continue.

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The proposal to repeat the 2011 survey of Partnership members to obtain up to date perceptions was discussed.

The Committee, with the exception of Mr. A. Thomas, resolved to accept the recommendations, that the JAC:

- A. Acknowledges the move in Herefordshire Council of the 'AONB Officer' to the Built & Natural Environment Service and change of job title to 'AONB Manager'.
- B. Notes the proposed changes and alternative delivery models developing in Monmouthshire County Council and the Forest of Dean District Council.
- C. Endorses the Core Messages for AONBs and AONB partnerships and the 18 questions for services relating to the Wye Valley AONB Partnership.
- D. Supports repeating the 2011 survey of AONB Partnership members on their perceptions of the Wye Valley AONB, the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) & the AONB Unit.

11. **Sustainable Development Fund (SDF).**

The Committee received a report to consider and endorse the allocations of the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) for 2016/17.

It was noted that the funding is issued directly from Welsh Government, and of the £55,000 granted this year, £35,000 has been allocated. The next Assessment Panel will consider schemes within the available funding. Attention was drawn to alterations to the purpose and targets in line with the Well-Being and Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

We resolved to accept the recommendations that the JAC:

- A. Welcomes the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) being awarded direct from Welsh Government and notes the new Purposes and Targets;
- B. endorses the recent allocations of the SDF for 2016/17; and
- C. supports apportioning any unallocated funds to contribute towards Wye Valley AONB Partnership initiatives that support the SDF Purposes and Targets.

12. **Farming Awards updates & changes.**

We were presented with a report, the purpose of which is to seek approval for a broadening of the AONB Farming Awards eligibility criteria.

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The Committee agreed that it was very important to engage the farming community. The Chair referred to coverage of the award on BBC Countryfile and the Hereford Times. The opportunity for the public to view the winning farm on Open Farm Sunday was recognised as a benefit. It was commented that levels of applications fluctuate year on year. The need to review the criteria with a proposal to include land management organisations to provide breadth to the awards was acknowledged. It was noted that the timing of the Monmouthshire Show has been changed to early July instead of late August, and that the launch date and timescales will have to be altered accordingly. It was commented that it will be necessary to judge using different criteria, and this point will require further consideration.

It was suggested that an update on grassland projects could be provided at the next meeting to enhance our understanding.

The Committee resolved to accept the recommendations as presented:

That the JAC agrees to the broadening of the AONB Farming Awards to include organisations and individuals managing land that also make an outstanding contribution to conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the Wye Valley AONB.

13. Forthcoming Landscape Enhancement Projects.

The Committee received a report to seek its support for two forthcoming landscape enhancement projects. In receiving the report, the following points were made:

Concern was expressed that sufficient efforts are not being made to contain or restrict the wild Fallow Deer population. The suggestion of a wild venison feasibility study was welcomed. Additionally, it was requested that deer statistics are reinstated as an agenda item. Support was expressed for the feasibility study generally, and also to record the Muntjac and Roe Deer population. It was confirmed that population and cull figures continue to be collected and can be made available. It was acknowledged that the impact of more numerous deer on woodlands and their flora was detrimental and increasing.

The Committee discussed potential of marketing Wye Valley Venison and the supply and demand issues of venison. The need to encourage natural regeneration in the woodlands and to reduce deer to a sustainable level was debated, with the suggestion of utilising sustaining woodland as a marketing message for the sale of Wye Valley Venison. It was agreed that a strong business plan would be required. It was identified that there are one or two commercial deer farms in the area, and that they may be good partners to assist development of a strategy.

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It was commented that the deer population was attractive for tourism and also for shooting enthusiasts. It was agreed to add wild boar to our future discussions.

The Committee resolved to agree to the recommendations presented that the JAC:

- A. Supports the Coughton Enhancement Project application to National Grid's Landscape Enhancement Initiative (LEI).
- B. Support the development of a wild Venison Feasibility Study in the lower Wye Valley.

14. Lydbrook Bridge & other Wye Valley Walk considerations.

The Committee received a report on the current situation with the former Lydbrook Railway Bridge and other aspects of the Wye Valley Walk long distance trail.

It was noted that the bridge has been closed for most of the year by Gloucestershire County Council on safety grounds. The bridge is a part of Wye Valley Walk and provides a strategic link. Following a full structural survey, a preferred solution and associated costings are awaited. It was noted that there is no desired intention to close the bridge permanently. It was commented that diversion signage needs to be improved around the bridge, decking has been removed and some fencing is broken.

Consideration of this matter drew attention to other infrastructure issues along the Wye Valley Walk. It was explained that work is being undertaken to define issues. The Committee was advised that funding from Welsh Government of £50,000 will enable several projects to improve rights of way along the route to retain viability.

We resolved to accept the recommendations as presented, that the JAC:

- A. Supports the continued promotion and development of the Wye Valley Walk as a long distance regional recreation trail co-ordinated through the Wye Valley Walk Partnership;
- B. Supports Gloucestershire County Council and Herefordshire Council in finding a viable solution to reopen the former Lydbrook railway bridge on the Wye Valley Walk; and
- C. Welcomes the investment of the Welsh Government in aspects of the Wye Valley Walk in Monmouthshire.

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15. NAAONB update.

The report was received for information advising members of activity through the National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (NAAONB). The NAAONB Chairman's Conference and AGM on 24th November 2016 and will be attended by the AONB Manager. On behalf of the NAAONB, the AONB Manager attended the Ministerial launch of the State of Natural Resources Report (SoNaRR) by Natural Resources Wales.

16. AONB updates.

The AONB Manager provided a verbal update for information on a range of projects and initiatives including:

- Future Landscapes Wales programme & the Review of Designated Landscapes in Wales
- AONB Partnership Study Tour feedback, attended by 31 people
- Chalara, Ash dieback, update
- LEMUR+ trainee placement contract extensions
- Europarc visit by 9 Germans from 6 National Parks
- MindSCAPE Year 2 report and forthcoming presentation at the 'Delivering the health and wellbeing benefits of the natural environment' seminar in Bristol on 16th November 2016.

The Chair thanked Mr. M. Lewis and Mr. A. Blake and the AONB team for their outstanding work.

17. Proposed dates of meetings for 2017:

We noted that the next meeting will be held in the Council Chamber, Forest of Dean District Council Offices, Coleford, on Monday 6th March 2017 at 2.00pm, and subsequently on the 3rd July 2017 and 6th November 2017.

The meeting ended at 3.50 pm