

TECHNICAL OFFICERS'
WORKING PARTY REPORT

WYE VALLEY AONB
JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE
4th March 2019

AONB & PARTNER REPORTS

Purpose

To advise members of activity of the AONB Unit and various partners.

FOR INFORMATION

The AONB Manager will update on the following AONB Unit and partners initiatives:-

- a. Ecosystem Services checklist
- b. Fixed Point Photography
- c. Herefordshire Meadows Facilitation Group
- d. Lower Wye Catchments NFM & GI Project
- e. Ross riverside
- f. West Midlands Deer Priority Area

Ecosystem Services checklist

Through the National Association for AONBs, the AONB Unit have taken up the offer of free consultancy support to help embed the Ecosystem Approach in management planning and decision making. Through the completion of a 6 question checklist, participating AONBs are helped to:

- Understand how much they understand about the Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services in their landscapes, and what the key knowledge gaps are.
- Link actions to improve and expand biodiversity with the benefits this can provide for people both within and beyond the AONB.
- Review the effectiveness of their Management Plans and Partnerships.

The AONB Manager and Development Officer are currently half way through this process with the consultant. This will be completed by the end of March 2019 and will be valuable for the development of the new Management Plan.

Fixed Point Photography

In Autumn 2018, the AONB Unit designed a programme of fixed point photography to monitor long term habitat and landscape change. Initially, consideration was given to surveying from key viewpoints but many of these are already well photographed and it was thought this would not provide coverage of all AONB landscape types. The AONB Management Plan identifies 16 Landscape Management Zones (LMZs) and it was deemed

important that all LMZs be included in the fixed point photography to ensure good coverage of AONB landscapes.

In order to generate random fixed point photography locations, which were not subject to officer or surveyor bias, the AONB was divided into 4km grid squares, using the centre point as the photograph location. This method generated a large number of sample locations which was felt to be unfeasible for surveying with existing staff resources. To create fewer fixed point locations, the AONB was then split into 6km squares, using the centre point as the fixed point location. This method generated 41 locations, with a least one point covering each LMZ. For ease of access the fixed photograph location was placed at the nearest publicly accessible place to the centre point. In order to be able to view the landscape at different times of year each location will be photographed annually, in the autumn one year and late spring / summer the next. Photos are taken in 4 directions, North, South, East and West. The first 20 sites were photographed in October 2018 and the next 21 will be photographed in May 2019. As a catalogue of photos is built up over time, this will provide a valuable insight into the changing landscape.

Herefordshire Meadows Facilitation Group

The Herefordshire Meadows Group has expanded to over 50 core members, with many in the Wye Valley AONB. As a Natural England funded Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Group, the Herefordshire Meadows Group is now half way through 5 years of funded support. The purpose of Facilitation Funding is to help groups of farmers, foresters and land managers improve the natural environment. These groups are normally focused on a tight geographical area and made up of neighbouring farmers, but the Herefordshire Meadows Group is different in that it is a network of farmers with a common interest across a much larger landscape area. The group organise and host a variety of well attended farm events throughout the year to share best practice and experience of meadow management and creation. A number of events have taken place in the Wye Valley AONB. The group are currently considering work for pilot meadow creation work in 2019.

Lower Wye Catchments Natural Flood Management (NFM) and Green Infrastructure (GI) Project

The Project Officer has been making good progress since commencing in post last October and the project is on target with outputs.

Investigate solutions to long standing access issues:

- Chapel Hill Road & Limekiln Brook

Issues include erosion from flash flooding and water runoff from catchment, stream and springs combining with unclassified highway at various points, exacerbated by vehicle access. High rainfall events can block trash screen & culverts within 10 minutes at Tintern and further increase damage to the unclassified highway. Atkins consultancy have just been appointed to identify NFM opportunities in the Limekiln Brook catchment and to look at water sources, pathways and impacts. Once the impacts on the unclassified highway have been identified, works to improve the highway condition can be considered.

- Whitebrook Byway

An analysis of options for Whitebrook Byway has determined that remedies are too costly for this project. Solutions may also require proactive woodland management in NRW woodland and do not directly relate to water management issues.

- Options for additional highway run-off issues may be investigated in the project area, with some consultant input.

Farm management advice

The Wye & Usk Foundation (WUF) have been commissioned to undertake Farm Advice visits. They have visited four farms with visit reports being finalised through the project. Additionally a further six farms will be visited through an SDF grant. Priorities for project capital spend are being assessed based on the Farm advice reports.

Invasive weed mapping and control

With the acknowledged time constraints of the project, the focus is on

- Himalayan balsam control in a small sub catchment with volunteers.
- Japanese Knotweed control of known stands carried out by contractors, while establishing records of other stands in project area with partner/volunteer support.

Pilot NFM work

Opportunities for pilot work is being established: following WUF farm visits, from research following access issues, working with project partners and through other contact with private landowners. Contact has been made with a number of other NFM projects, collaborating to share ideas and best practice. These include the Stroud Rural Sustainable Drainage Project, Pickering Slow the Flow project, Hereford NFM Project and the Forest of Dean Beaver release project. Partnership engagement has included guided walks, talks and information sharing events. The Project Officer is negotiating with partners over anticipated consents for NFM interventions, which will come down to local decision making due to the lack of any national framework.

Ross riverside

Partnership working with Ross Town Council is continuing at the riverside in Ross-on-Wye. The willow river bank revetment has been well used by anglers throughout 2018, and they have been pleased with the improved accessibility it has provided to the river. There are discussions ongoing about how similar work can be taken forward during the coming year.

The Town Council have continued to proactively manage two areas of amenity grassland managed as traditional meadow habitat, cutting infrequently and removing arisings to reduce nutrient levels. A visit was arranged with the Floodplain Meadow Partnership to seek expert advice on management, and following surveying and soil sampling, a brief report has been produced with recommendations for management. Nitrogen levels are now reducing in the grassland sufficiently for work to enhance the floral diversity of the area to be taken forward.

West Midlands Deer Priority Area

Since autumn 2016 the Deer Initiative have been contracted by Natural England and the Forestry Commission to focus on three Deer Priority Areas in the West Midlands: Dinmore Hill, the Woolhope Dome and the Lower Wye Valley. In terms of deer species for deer

management the focus is on the sustainable management of fallow and muntjac. The objectives of the project are:

- to return woodland SSSIs into favourable condition
- to support commercial woodland management
- to support conservation woodland activities
- to reduce agricultural damage caused by deer
- to reduce road traffic accidents caused by deer
- and, to reduce the risk of disease transfer to domestic livestock.

The activities delivered between April 2018 and March 2019 include:

- Landowner awareness raising events (10 completed)
- Landowner advice on deer management operations - including the provision of deer management plans (31 completed)
- Deer Activity and Impact surveys (32 planned Feb, March, April)
- Deer stalker training and Best Practice events (1 on 15/03/19 and 2 planned tbc)
- Organisation of collaborative cull days in each of the Action Areas during the winter (female) season

Dinmore: Nov 6th, Dec 4th, Jan 8th, Feb 5th, March 5th

Woolhope: Nov 7th, Dec 5th, Jan 9th, Feb 7th, March 7th

Lower Wye: Nov 13th, 15th, 23rd, Dec 13th, 14th, 21st, Jan 15th, 17th, 25th, Feb 12th, 14th, 22nd, March 12th, 14th, 22nd.

These collaborative days

- offer a landscape scale approach (necessary due to the herding and movement of fallow deer)
- focus on discrete geographical areas (any deer movement on the day yields additional chances to cull)
- assist with positioning and preparation of high seats
- provide a chiller trailer to ensure high quality venison enters the food chain.