

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, 8th July, 2024 at 2.00 pm**

PRESENT: Elected Members (with voting powers)

Forest of Dean District Council

Councillor C. McFarling

Monmouthshire County Council

County Councillor E. Bryn

Gloucestershire County Council

County Councillor T. Hale

Herefordshire Council

Councillor E. O'Driscoll

Town / Parish Community Councils with voting powers

GAPTC – Mr. C. Evers

Co-opted Members (with voting powers)

Voluntary Conservation Sector in Monmouthshire – Mr. A. Thomas
National Farmers Union – Mr. M. Price

Co-opted Members (without voting powers)

Wye Valley Society – Mr. C. Barron
National Farmers Union Wales – Mr. D. Price

Technical Advice Officers

National Landscape Manager – Mr. A. Blake
Monmouthshire County Council – Mr. M. Lewis
Wye Valley National Landscape – Mr. N. Critchley
Wye Valley National Landscape – Miss R. Ball
Gloucestershire County Council – Mr A. Deb

Others present:

Mr. M. Holland (Trail Riders Fellowship)
Cllr. M. Getgood (Coleford Town Council)

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1. Election of Chair

ML requested nominations for chair for the next year
Councillor McFarling was nominated by Councillor T. Hale, seconded by Councillor E. Bryn. Councillor McFarling elected chair.

2. Appointment of Vice-Chair

Councillor A. Webb nominated as vice-chair by Mr A. Thomas, seconded by Mr. M. Price. Councillor Webb elected vice chair.

3. Apologies for Absence and Introductions

Apologies:

Dr. J Hynes (Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust), Mr B. Nash (Voluntary Conservation Sector in Herefordshire), Ms. Whitehouse and Mr. M. Quine (Environment Agency), Ms. B. Vine (HALC), Cllr Lynn Parker (One Voice Wales), Cllr Ms. A. Webb and Cllr Steven Garrett (MCC), Graham Morgan (GCC), Cllr David Wheeler (FoDDC), Stuart Cox (Coleford TC), Robert Hatton (Monmouth TC).

All present introduced themselves.

It was noted that Nick Critchley will take the minutes as the usual clerk was on annual leave.

4. Declarations of Interest

None.

5. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting - 4th March 2024

The minutes of the Wye Valley AONB Joint Advisory Committee meeting dated 4th March 2024 were confirmed by the Chair, to be signed at the next meeting.

Matters arising:

A further update on Bigsweir Bridge was requested and the impact of the road closure at Monmouth. Monmouthshire highways department have been asked, but no response received to date, most likely due to their being no programme for works. ML to raise issue and follow up.

JAC review – AB has yet to set up the task and finish group.

6. Public Question Time

No questions.

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7. Annual report 2023/24

We received an annual report for 2023/24 and noted the delay in the completion of the tabulated achievements for the Wye Valley AONB Unit/National Landscape Team.

In doing so, the following information was noted:

- The 2023/24 summary financial report on the delivery of the Work Programme for the AONB Unit, which rebranded as the National Landscape Team during the year, was outlined.
- There is a delay in completing the full Annual Report tabulating the achievements of the year against the annual Work Programme. This will be presented to the next JAC.
- High levels of achievement were maintained by the National Landscape Team despite the challenges of some staff turn-over and consequent reduced capacity during recruitment periods.
- The AONB Unit/National Landscape Team turnover in 2023/24 was £1,112,852 resulting in the leverage of over nearly £23 for every £1 of local authority contribution.

Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- The expenditure appears staff heavy, but given the income generated this was considered acceptable. It was noted that Capital funding is hard to deliver without staff resources.
- There is a need to look at how we recruit and retain staff, as there appears to be a high turnover and subsequent loss of expertise. But it was noted that there is a good team currently in place and hopes for continuity. The Government Comprehensive Spending Review is key as financial uncertainty does not help staff assurance.
- All current grant funding agreements finish at the end of March 2025. Only confirmed funding presently in GCC contribution (circa £5k). New funding agreements, potentially for 3 years, are anticipated before the end of 2024.

We welcomed the Annual Report figures and await the finalised Annual Report.

8. Planning Guidance & Position Statements

We received two Position Statements to endorse, which intend to establish the position of the Wye Valley National Landscape Partnership on key planning and development issues affecting the area.

In doing so, the following information was noted:

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- Position Statements help guide the Wye Valley National Landscape Partnership and relevant plan-making and decision-making bodies to articulate how the Wye Valley National Landscape, designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), should be protected, conserved and enhanced, helping to uphold and deliver the vision, priorities and Strategic Objectives of the Wye Valley AONB Management Plan 2021-2026.
- Position Statements are stand-alone documents, providing context and explain why the Partnership is taking this position.
- Both draft Position Statements have had respective formal public consultation periods, following which comments received have been considered and subsequent amendments made. Shared experience from similar Position Statements and Guidance produced by other protected landscapes has also helped inform both Position Statements.
- Position statements are referred to, where appropriate, in representations submitted by the National Landscape Team on planning consultations.
- The Partnership already has two position statements on Housing and Landscape-led Development, both of which were endorsed by the JAC in November 2023.

Both statements have previously been endorsed subject to consultation, which has now taken place.

The following points were noted:

- The Renewable Energy title may be misleading, being focused on wind and Solar, but with little weight given to other forms of renewable. It may be a shortfall of the document that these are omitted.
- It was noted that the position statements are planning documents aimed at landscape impact rather than the wider benefits of renewable energy. Wider benefits are best picked up in the AONB Management Plan.
- A Climate Action Plan is forthcoming which may also pick up the wider benefits of renewable energy. A Management Plan review is also due to start shortly.
- The issue raised is to be followed up between CE and AB outside of the meeting and any necessary amendments to the statement made, before seeking JAC endorsement of the final document via email. Deadline of July 22nd made for resolving the response, with a majority in approval needed to accept position statement.
- Dark Skies statement has been updated with comments from consultation.

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- Request that at 4.1.3. an interference to wildlife and plant species be added. Also noted that vehicle lights not considered.
- Herefordshire County Destination Business Improvement District (BID) Board promoting Dark Skies as a big tourist opportunity. A request will be made to the BID Board to endorse the position statement.
- With new government now in place and potential relaxation of planning, this statement is needed at haste.

We endorsed the position statements, subject to circulation of final edits, and all recommendations were accepted.

9. Lower Wye Tracks & Trails Strategy

We received a report to endorse the Lower Wye Tracks and Trails Strategy, an Integrated Recreational Access Strategy for the Monmouthshire part of the Wye Valley National Landscape, and the associated Action Plan.

In doing so the following information was noted:

- The Monmouthshire part of the Wye Valley is home to an extensive network of tracks and trails that allow residents and visitors wide-ranging access to explore the natural beauty and Special Qualities of the National Landscape.
- The tracks & trails network, forming part of Monmouthshire's Highways and Public Rights of Way, are an evolution of historic transport routes in the lower Wye Valley.
- The Lower Wye Tracks & Trails Strategy and Action Plan is appended and was commissioned by the Wye Valley National Landscape Team, with the support of Monmouthshire County Council, Natural Resources Wales and a range of other stakeholders and interested parties.
- The preparation of the Strategy included in-depth research on the extent and type of tracks and trails and the nature of visitors and users, backed up with a widespread consultation of both public and professional interests.
- The vision is for the Lower Wye Valley's Tracks & Trails to be a resilient, well managed and welcoming network for all responsible users, with the Strategy and Action Plan outlining how these routes should be looked after, enhanced for a wider audience and conserved for the longer term.
- Generally the Strategy recognises that for the vast majority of the Tracks and Trails the appropriate response is to maintain the status quo on how they are managed, whilst recognising that certain routes need more intensive management and new solutions putting in place.

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- The associated Action Plan will be an evolving document overseen by a sub-group of the Monmouthshire Local Access Forum, with subsequent iterations and updates reported back to the JAC, and other groups as appropriate.

Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- Due to the strategy being funded by Welsh Government, it only considers the Monmouthshire part of the National Landscape.
- Recommendation that coordination is made with bus companies to encourage sustainable transport in accessing the countryside. A meeting is already planned with Newport Bus who run the 69 and 65 services. The National Landscape Team are also cataloguing their walks archive and how they connect with bus routes.

We endorsed the strategy.

10. Hedgehog Species Action Plans (SAP)

We received the Hedgehog Species Action Plan for endorsement, the second of 5 Species Action Plans being prepared for the National Landscape under the Colchester Declaration.

In doing so the following information was noted:

- The Colchester Declaration – a ‘declaration for nature’ was produced by the National Association for AONBS (NAAONB) and supported by all the AONB partnerships in 2019.
- Five species, or assemblage of species, were chosen as representative of the Wye Valley National Landscape Special Qualities.
- The second Species Action Plan, for the Hedgehog, as a locally iconic species and relating to boundary habitat diversity & connectivity, has been published and is appended to the report.
- The National Landscape team is working on the production of the remaining Species Action Plans and an accompanying Wye Valley National Landscape Nature Recovery Plan.

The following points were noted

- In Wales the 20mph speed limit might have a positive impact on reducing road kill and increase recording as a result.

We endorsed the Species Action Plan.

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11. AONB Partnership Study Tour 2024

We received recommendation to endorse the date and outline programme for the Annual National Landscape Partnership Study Tour.

In doing so the following information was noted:

- The Wye Valley National Landscape Partnership Annual Tour will be held on Friday 20th September.
- The programme is still being finalised but will focus predominantly on projects supported through the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme and land management issues in the Herefordshire part of the National Landscape.
- Initial invitations for expressions of interest to attend will be sent out shortly.
- Invitations would be extended to representatives from our neighbouring Designated Landscapes and other appropriate partner organisations in the interest of sharing good practice and broadening collaboration.

We endorsed the proposals.

12. FiPL, SDF & HCF Grants update

We received an update on the progress of the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme, the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) and the Wye Valley National Landscape Fund with Herefordshire Community Foundation (HCF).

In doing so the following information was noted:

- The DEFRA funded Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme in England has an allocation of £362,384 for 2024/25, which is currently the final year of the programme.
- The FiPL Assessment Panel has approved grants totalling £303,675 in 2023/24 with £35,387 remaining. For 2024/5, £157,270 has already been allocated, leaving £205,113 remaining in what is understood to be the last year of the programme.
- Guidance and assistance to farmers and land managers applying to the FiPL programme is provided by Anna Stankiewicz, National Landscape Farming in Protected Landscapes Officer, along with Farm Advisors from the Wye & Usk Foundation and Herefordshire Meadows.
- The Welsh Government Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) currently has £80,103.50 allocated from the £100,000 available for 202/25, leaving £19,896.50 available. This is the final year of the current funding allocation.

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- Community groups, local organisations and individuals wishing to apply for the SDF can get assistance from Lucinda James, National Landscape Community Links Officer.
- The Wye Valley National Landscape Fund hosted by the Herefordshire Community Foundation (HCF) is currently closed for applications and opportunities to grow the Fund need to be sought.

The following points were noted

- It was noted that two FiPL projects were for a disproportionately large amount. The Historic Building Restoration Grant is separate and additional funding from the main FiPL allocation. The National Landscape benefits additionally through these projects as it receives extra Advice & Guidance budget, which can offset other revenue costs.
- It is possible to see more detail on of all the approved FiPL projects on the National Landscape website.

We welcomed the report and update.

13. Partner and National Landscape Team progress reports and updates

We received a report advising members of activity of the Wye Valley National Landscape Team and other partners.

The following points were noted:

- At the National Association Conference recently National Grid provided positive feedback about the Landscape Enhancement Initiative (LEI) application. However, formal approval is yet to be received,
- There are requests for Redbrook Bridge to have signage for no motorbike and horse access. A meeting is required with MCC engineers and highways. ML will raise with MCC highways.
- Proposal for the state of the Wye to be a standing item on the JAC agenda. As a highly political issue this had not been put on the agenda before the General Election. However, a River Wye Action Plan has been produced and a new chair recently appointed to the Wye Catchment Partnership. With Labour in government in both Westminster and Cardiff now, it is hoped there may be more joined up thinking.

The report was taken as read.

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14. Date of next meeting

Monday 4th November 2024 at 2.00pm.

The meeting will be held in the Council Chamber, Forest of Dean District Council Offices, Coleford.

The meeting ended at 3.59 pm