

AONB UNIT WORK PROGRAMME 2020/2021

Purpose

To seek members' approval for the proposed business plan for the AONB Unit during the forthcoming financial year.

Recommendations

That the JAC endorses the AONB Unit Work Programme for 2020/2021

Key Issues

- The attached table sets out the proposed business plan for the AONB Unit in the form of the Work Programme 2020/2021.
- During the year it is anticipated that the AONB Unit will consolidate at just under 8 FTE staff which builds on the reduced capacity in the previous/current year.
- Priorities include the publishing of the revised AONB Management Plan 2020-2025, delivering the fourth Wye Valley River Festival; the Gilpin2020 celebrations; the Restoring Our Amazing River project (on the England side of the AONB); ongoing Green Infrastructure and Natural Flood Management projects (predominantly in the Monmouthshire part of the AONB); and the Welsh Government 'Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places' funding, while continuing a range of existing activities and projects and retaining enough flexibility to pursue new funding opportunities and develop new initiatives.
- The capacity of the AONB Unit is stretched but the budgets in the Work Programme have been approved by the AONB Steering Group and submitted to DEFRA and Natural Resources Wales (NRW).
- The AONB Unit budget is £270,750 and additional funding programmes, grants and match funding is anticipated to exceed £1million levered into the AONB during the year.
- This is the final year of a 3 year funding agreement with NRW and will be the start of a new core funding settlement with DEFRA, the details of which are yet to be confirmed.
- Welsh Government are working on the new one year Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) capital funding programme and are proposing to increase the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) for the year, the details of which are dependent on confirmation of the Welsh Government budget settlement.

Reasons

The main tasks in the year ahead are:

- finalising the adoption and publication of the statutory AONB Management Plan 2020-25
- delivering the Wye Valley River Festival 2020 and Gilpin2020 events to raise awareness and appreciation of the area
- working with farmers and landowners on conservation and enhancement of the landscape; with the 2 Catchment Advisors working through the Wye & Usk Foundation and the

Restoring Our Amazing River (ROAR) Water Environment Grant (WEG) funded project in the English part of the AONB, continuing the AONB Farming Awards, developing initiatives in the Woolhope Dome area and furthering the Green Infrastructure and Natural Flood Management work through a Project Officer in the Monmouthshire part of the AONB

- continuing working with diverse groups through the Youth Rangers and mindSCAPE programmes, both part funded through the Foresters' Forest Landscape Partnership with ArtSpace Cinderford leading on mindSCAPE with Arts Council England funding
- delivering ongoing partnership initiatives, such as the recreation promotion work with the Wye Valley Walk Partnership and the cultural heritage legacy opportunities related to the Overlooking the Wye scheme
- developing and submitting new projects, partnership initiatives and funding bids for the future delivery of the new AONB Management Plan including landscape scale partnership projects and supporting the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory
- Commencing the Wye Valley AONB 50th anniversary celebrations for 2021.

Implications

The AONB Budget for 2020-21 has been approved at £270,750. It is anticipated that the various additional funding programmes, grants and match funding levered into the AONB will lead to investment and expenditure in excess of £1million through the year.

This will be the start of a new DEFRA funding allocation and the last year of a three year grant programme with Natural Resources Wales (NRW). Welsh Government have advised of a new one year Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) capital funding programme and an increase of the delegated AONB Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) up to about £100,000. These are all awaiting confirmation of the national budget and the respective settlements for DEFRA and Welsh Government.

The Work Programme 2020/21 is facilitated by grant funding from numerous sources which enables the retention of 3 short term posts, the two Catchment Advisors and the Lower Wye Project Officer, additional to the core AONB Unit team of 5 staff. Two members of the core team also revert to full-time hours to consolidate capacity for the duration of the Wye Valley River Festival. However, over the year the AONB budgets and grant match-funding commitments will be supplemented by drawing on AONB reserves. This may be relieved or exacerbated depending on the new DEFRA settlement.

The long term security of funding for the AONB Unit and future AONB Work Programmes will depend on the way both DEFRA and Welsh Government respond to the recommendations in the respective Reviews of Designated Landscapes in Wales and England about appropriate levels of funding and staffing for AONBs. Currently Welsh Government are offering short term Capital funding which, while welcome, actually aggravates capacity issues rather than resolves them.

Overall the AONB Unit business plan, based on the Work Programme, focuses on maximising the benefits for the local communities, the local economy and the outstanding landscape, while optimising the resources available. Best use is made of opportunities for collaboration and maintaining a level of flexibility and capacity to lever in funding and resources wherever possible.