

AONB UNIT WORK PROGRAMME 2021/2022

Purpose

To seek members' approval for the proposed business plan for the AONB Unit during the forthcoming financial year, which is subject to new funding agreements with DEFRA and NRW.

Recommendations

That the JAC endorses the AONB Unit Work Programme for 2021/2022

Key Issues

- The attached table sets out the proposed business plan for the AONB Unit in the form of the Work Programme 2021/2022, including the AONB's 50th Anniversary during 2021.
- Activities are assessed for impacts of any potential on-going implications from Covid-19.
- During the year it is expected that the AONB Unit will remain with about 8 FTE posts although some staff and roles will change and capacity of the AONB Unit continues to be stretched.
- Priorities include the development of the AONB Nature Recovery Network Plan, the anticipated implementation of the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme (in England); the delivery of a second year of projects funded through the Welsh Government Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) programme, the culmination of the Restoring Our Amazing River project (on the England side of the AONB); ongoing Green Infrastructure and Natural Flood Management projects; and the promotion and administration of grants through the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) and Herefordshire Community Foundation AONB Fund, responding to requirements and impacts from easing of Covid-19 restrictions, while continuing a range of existing activities and projects and retaining enough flexibility to pursue new funding opportunities and develop new initiatives.
- The core budgets in the Work Programme have yet to be confirmed as new funding agreements are awaited with NRW and DEFRA.
- The AONB Unit budget as presented to the AONB Steering Group is £271,350 and additional funding programmes, grants and match funding is anticipated to exceed £780,000 levered into the AONB during the year.

Reasons

The main tasks in the year ahead are:

- the implementation of the statutory AONB Management Plan 2021-26

- working with farmers and landowners on conservation and enhancement of the landscape through:-
 - the anticipated delivery of the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme;
 - the culmination of the Restoring Our Amazing River (ROAR) Water Environment Grant (WEG) funded project with Catchment Advisors working through the Wye & Usk Foundation
 - continuing the AONB Farming Awards,
 - developing initiatives in the Woolhope Dome area and
 - furthering the Green Infrastructure and Natural Flood Management work through the Lower Wye Project Officer
- developing the AONB Nature Recovery Network Plan and initiatives with a dedicated Lower Wye Nature Recovery Project officer, funded for one year by Welsh Government.
- 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 AONB Management Plan including landscape scale partnership projects and supporting the Offa's Dyke Collaboratory
- Celebrating the Wye Valley AONB's 50th anniversary.

Implications

The AONB core budget for 2021-22 has been proposed as £271,350. New funding agreements are awaited with both Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and DEFRA. Both have reassured that the funding will continue. However, currently the details and funding allocations are yet to be confirmed. The various additional AONB funding programmes, grants and match funding initiatives are anticipated to lever in investment and expenditure in excess of £780,000 through the year.

Welsh Government have confirmed a second year of Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) capital funding and a retained level of the AONB Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) at £100,000.

The Work Programme 2021/22 is facilitated by grant funding from various sources which enables the retention of 2 short term posts; a seconded Catchment Advisor and the Lower Wye Project Officer, with a new Lower Wye Nature Recovery Project officer, additional to the core AONB Unit team of 5 staff. Two members of the core team work 4 days per week. 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 & NRW settlements.

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. Welsh Government continue to offer short term funding which, while welcome, does not facilitate longer term or strategic planning.

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.