

ANNUAL REPORT

Purpose

To present the annual reports for 2020/21 on the achievements of the Wye Valley AONB Unit.

Recommendations

That the JAC welcome the Annual Report of AONB achievements for 2020/21

Key Issues

- The 2020/21 Annual Report on the Work Programme for the AONB Unit is appended, along with a summary financial report.
- High standards of achievement were maintained by the AONB Unit despite the Coronavirus Pandemic restricting many activities.
- The AONB Unit has levered in over £16 for every £1 of local authority contribution during 2020/21.

Reasons

The Annual Work Programme Report for the AONB Unit is usually presented to the July JAC. However the Report was delayed due to work pressures in completing projects carried over from 2020/21 due to the Coronavirus Pandemic. The impacts of Covid-19 have obviously affected many aspects of life over the past 20 months.

Upon Covid-19 Lockdown in March 2020, a comprehensive review was undertaken of the AONB Unit Work Programme Plan for 2020/21. AONB Unit Initiatives were risk assessed and categorised as Green=ok; Yellow=possible disruption; Red=severe disruption, in relation to Covid-19 guidance. This was reviewed again in May 2020 by the AONB Technical Officers' Working Party (TOWP). The majority of works could continue with AONB staff 'Working from Home' with extensive use of Microsoft Teams and occasional outdoor site visits as appropriate/ necessary. TOWP reviewed the Covid risk-evaluation again in October 2020 with some minor variations to the Work Programme.

Implications

Collaboration and partnership working with established stakeholders managed to be reasonably effective on-line, primarily using Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Consequently delivering the revised Covid-assessed programme was not dramatically effected beyond

physical restrictions of lockdown. However, convening new partnerships and generating fresh initiatives with different individuals or organisations was felt to be less effective. More meetings could be held but with less rapport for any new members. It is unclear whether this will adversely impact on future project development and funding bids.

Site works and commissioning contractors on the ground was difficult at times, working with/around Covid & lockdown restrictions. This created delays with gaining specifications for works, tendering, site visits and site works. However funders were invariably accommodating of these issues, mostly extending claim deadlines to allow for extended delivery time.

Similarly all tasks and events with volunteers, whether practical conservation tasks or guided walks etc. had to be severely curtailed. It is difficult to evaluate the impact of this beyond the 'work not done' during the year. It is hoped old volunteers will return with vigour and new volunteers come forth inspired by the need to connect with nature after lockdown.

Pressure on the natural environment has been significant in places, particularly near to populations, as lots of people were taking local walks and lots of mountain-bike trails have been and are being built in woods (often illegally). However in other places wildlife was left relatively undisturbed. Management of all these activities and public expectation was challenging without the access, resources or jurisdiction to deal effectively with the impacts, particularly given the constraints noted above.

However, the AONB Unit was able to progress most aspects of the Work Programme to some extent. The Wye Valley River Festival and the 50th anniversary programme were both rearranged to deliver activities online for the most part. The River Festival, as previously reported, was considered a significant success, given the constraints. Many lessons are being learned and fresh opportunities and ways of working accommodated. For example, the AONB Unit is utilising more video and digital engagement as a way of sharing content about the AONB Management Plan, Special Qualities, SDF etc.

There have been a number of highlights in the 2020/21 that will carry AONB Partnership activity forward. Progress with the Wye Valley River Festival governance and handover options; the recruitment of the Lower Wye Project Officer and co-ordination of Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) control and Natural Flood Management (NFM) initiatives; The progression of the Monmouthshire Wye Valley AONB Villages study; finalising of the AONB Management Plan 2021-26 and AONB Memorandum of Understanding 2021-2024; new government programmes of the Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places in Wales and the Farming in Protected Landscapes in England.

The overall turnover of the AONB Unit increased in 2020/21 from 2019/20. This was accounted for by the income and expenditure of the Wye Valley River Festival 2020, the increase in the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) and the introduction of the Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places programme by Welsh Government. Consequently, the leverage of the AONB Partnership in 2020/21 means that for every £1 of local authority contribution, the AONB Unit has brought in over £16 to the Wye Valley AONB.