

AONB UNIT REPORTS

Purpose

To advise members of activity of the Wye Valley AONB Unit.

FOR INFORMATION

Below are brief update reports on the following AONB Unit initiatives: -

- a) Farming in Protected Landscapes Programme update
- b) Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) projects
 - i. AONB Office decarbonisation refurbishment
 - ii. Chapel Hill Road, Tintern
 - iii. Old Station Tintern decarbonisation & refurbishment
 - iv. Wyesham riverbank consolidation of Wye Valley Walk
 - v. Designated Landscapes Wales seminar
- c) Lower Wye Valley Nature Networks project with Gwent Wildlife Trust and Woodland Trust: £258,500 awarded by National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF)
- d) Lower Wye Catchments projects in Monmouthshire & Gloucestershire
 - i. INNS control – WISP
 - ii. Cleddon Falls
- e) AONB Volunteers & Youth Rangers

a) Farming in Protected Landscapes Programme update

The Farming in Protected Landscapes programme has been developing with Nick Critchley, AONB Development Officer, taking the lead until a Farm Advisor can be recruited. The Local Assessment Panel has been established and will shortly hold its first meeting. The first grant approval has been made by the AONB Manager under the delegated procedures for amounts under £5,000. Nick has been visiting a number of farmers and landowners interested to share ideas and potentially applying to the programme.

There have been a number of public workshops hosted by DEFRA and/or the National Association for AONBs for potential applicants. DEFRA have also held several training sessions for AONB and National Park staff involved in delivering the programme. Meanwhile following discussions nationally between DEFRA and National Park and AONB representatives there is currently on-going negotiation over re-profiling the funding over the three years.

The AONB Unit have identified with Wye & Usk Foundation that farm wetland enhancement sites upstream of the AONB may be eligible for a proportionate amount from the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme, subject to their positive impact on water quality downstream in the AONB. However, to date no applications have come forward for this.

b) Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) projects

i. AONB Office decarbonisation refurbishment

The main refurbishment work to the AONB Office is completed and the AONB team have started moving furniture and filing back into the office from storage. The main challenge is resolving what paperwork needs to be retained, as the vast majority of the paper files have not been missed after nearly 18 months of staff 'working from home' due to the pandemic. It is hoped that Covid restrictions will not prevent the use of the new meeting room, after it has been cleared of boxes.

ii. Chapel Hill Road, Tintern

Six months after installation, the transverse log water-bars have settled in satisfactorily, diverting run-off from 5 springs and weathering various downpours well. The wear from the legal motorbike and 4X4 traffic does not seem excessive and on the whole the lane is much drier and more solid underfoot. Monitoring will continue and lessons learned may be applied to other routes in the area.

iii. Old Station Tintern decarbonisation & refurbishment

The full planning applications, and where appropriate listed building consent, have been made for the following:-

- Shower/Toilets – installing 2 pods to upgrade facilities and accessibility to meet current requirements for campers.
- Doors & Windows – installing secondary glazing to original windows.
- Solar Panels - installing flexible PV film over the two railway carriages.

Western Power will be installing a new power supply to allow capacity for the two 7kw public Electric Car Charger units to be installed.

Work is about to start on installing the new Heat/air handling units in the two railway carriages.

iv. Wyesham riverbank consolidation of Wye Valley Walk

The Lower Wye Projects Officer, Nickie Moore, has been co-ordinating progressing with the investigation for the Wye Valley Walk just downstream from the Duke of Beaufort Bridge at Wyesham. There are difficult sections where the path traverses the steep riverbank and a badgers' sett, squeezed between the end of peoples' gardens and the river. Designs have been drafted by consultants Capita, with proposals to avoid where possible creating retaining walls or new structures except over the badger sett. An Ecological Appraisal has also been undertaken and discussions are now underway with Natural Resources Wales over consenting such works. Next steps will be finalising the design work and establishing viable costs. Once resources are identified it is hoped plans will be to be ready for works to go in during 2022/23.

v. Designated Landscapes Wales seminar

Tirweddau Cymru Landscapes Wales, consisting of the 8 AONBS & National Parks in Wales, hosted an on-line seminar in mid-October promoting the work carried out with the SLSP funding. Presentations focused on the SLSP themes of: decarbonisation; Nature based solutions; Sustainable tourism and Green recovery. There were Question & Answer sessions under each theme with wide ranging discussions from the panel of lead officers from the 8 Designated Landscapes and Welsh Government, providers of the SLSP programme. 60 people attended from across Wales.

c) Lower Wye Valley Nature Networks project with Gwent Wildlife Trust and Woodland Trust:

The Wye Valley AONB Unit has been awarded £258,400 by National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) towards project cost of £278,400. The AONB Unit developed the Lower Wye Nature Networks project bid in partnership with Gwent Wildlife Trust and the Woodland Trust, and in collaboration with Monmouthshire County Council and Natural Resources Wales. The project will run from November 2021 until March 2023 and will deliver:

- conservation and enhancement of 7 SSSIs / 2 SACs; ancient woodland, species-rich grassland and riverine sites, improving condition and resilience, and enabling safer public access.
- Targeted nature conservation and habitat connectivity advice for landowners, and working at landscape scale to improve connectivity to and from designated sites: including hedgerow restoration, Natural Flood Management activity, tree planting and species rich grassland creation.
- Breaking unwanted connections in and around designated sites through management of a range of Invasive Non Native Species (INNS). Working with volunteers and contractors reducing the current extent of INNS and building capacity to prevent further infestation.
- Volunteer activity within every aspect of project delivery.

The NHLF Nature Networks Fund (NNF) aims to strengthen the resilience of Wales' network of protected sites, supporting a green recovery for nature and communities. Improving the condition of protected sites will enable them to function better at the heart of nature networks – vital areas of ecological resilience in which habitats and species can thrive and expand. Restoring connectivity in these networks will prevent further declines in species and habitat condition, and enhance capacity to adapt to climate change.

d) Lower Wye Catchments projects in Monmouthshire & Gloucestershire

i. INNS control – WISP

The Wye Invasive Species Project (WISP) combines a number of funding sources to support local communities in the lower Wye Valley, across the catchments south of Monmouth, in tackling 3 Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) – Himalayan Balsam, Japanese Knotweed and American Skunk Cabbage. These plants are causing significant problems and are found in many places throughout the lower Wye Valley. Over the summer and early autumn Lower Wye Projects Officer, Nickie Moore, and Lower Wye Nature Recovery Officer, Ellie Baggett, co-ordinated contractors and volunteers in identifying and controlling these INNS.

- 127 Japanese Knotweed sites successfully treated (95 sites in Wales and 32 sites in England)
- 14 American Skunk Cabbage Sites successfully treated (9 sites in Wales and 5 sites in England)
- 78 landowners and residents supported in controlling these invasive species (52 landowners in Wales and 26 landowners in England) Plus more that we treated but do not have contact details for!
- 5 local contractors employed over 12 days
- 4 public events and volunteer group work parties

ii. Cleddon Falls

During the summer Technical Access team, iBEX, completed the restoration of the gorge-edge path. Whilst roped-up they rebuilt the steps beside the seasonal waterfall and installed new timber edging for the permissive path. They also cut and hauled out cherry laurel growing at the base of the falls and treated the stumps with eco-plugs to help stop the spread of this Invasive Non-Native Species. The private landowner has also been busy clearing the steps and coppicing undergrowth that was leaning into the path. Ross Smith of Anvil Forge Blacksmithing then installed 25 meters of hand forged bespoke handrail along the path. The route will shortly be reopened as soon as appropriate safety signage has been approved by the landowner.

e) AONB Volunteers & AONB Youth Rangers

Sarah Sawyer, AONB Community Links Officer, has been ensuring whenever possible that the AONB Volunteers and AONB Youth Ranger are out on site undertaking conservation tasks and training activities. A new cohort of Youth Ranger has started activities. All events are carefully risk assessed to ensure Covid restrictions are adhered in England and Wales.