

AONB UNIT WORK PROGRAMME 2022/2023

Purpose

To seek members' approval for the proposed outline work plan for the AONB Unit during the forthcoming financial year, subject to confirmation of funding with DEFRA, NRW and Welsh Government.

Recommendations

That the JAC endorses the draft AONB Unit Work Programme for 2022/2023

Key Issues

- The proposed Work Programme for the AONB Unit for 2022/2023 is presented in draft form as budgets for the AONB have yet to be confirmed. The Programme is ambitious but dependent on adequate funding and resources being available.
- New AONB core funding agreements are awaited from both DEFRA and Natural Resources Wales (NRW). Welsh Government also have yet to confirm allocations for the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) and Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) programme. Meanwhile various project funding bids are being prepared.
- Dependant on funding the AONB Unit may be able to expand slightly beyond 8 FTE posts. However currently 2 of those posts are vacant and in recruitment meaning capacity in the AONB Unit continues to be stretched.
- Consequently only a draft Work Programme can be presented.
- Priorities include the potential expansion of the planning support role, shared jointly with the Malvern Hills AONB Partnership; the successful recruitment of the Farming in Protected Landscapes Officer to take over the running of the grant programme (in England) ; the successful recruitment of a new Community Links Officer to lead on the promotion and administration of grants through the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) and Herefordshire Community Foundation AONB Fund, and reinvigorate the AONB Volunteers and Youth Rangers; the development of nature recovery in the AONB and delivery of the Lower Wye Nature Networks project; the delivery of a further year of projects funded through the Welsh Government Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) programme; ongoing Green Infrastructure and Natural Flood Management projects, particularly those linked to improving water quality in the Wye; and continuing a range of existing activities and projects; while retaining enough flexibility to pursue new funding opportunities and develop new initiatives.

- The draft AONB Unit core budget as presented to the AONB Steering Group is £275,860 and additional funding programmes, grants and match funding is anticipated to exceed £650,000 levered into the AONB during the year.

Reasons

For a number of years the Wye Valley AONB Unit received multi-year funding agreements from both DEFRA and Natural Resources Wales (NRW). However for the last 2 years DEFRA has only been able to commit to single year offers. Also NRW has transformed its grant procedures and in August last year offered single year project funding along with a 7% cut in supporting core AONB functions. The respective AONB grant offer funding agreements from DEFRA and NRW for 2022-23 have yet to be announced. Meanwhile Welsh Government have yet to confirm allocations for the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) and Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) programme. However, Welsh Government have proposed new revenue funding for AONB Units to consolidate team capacity. This is awaiting approval in full Welsh Government budgets.

Implications

The AONB core budget for 2022-23 has been estimated at £275,860 based on a current flat-line budget. Both Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and DEFRA have advised that new funding agreements are forthcoming but the details and funding allocations are yet to be confirmed. Therefore it is difficult to calculate what the impacts and implications will be for the AONB Unit, its core staff and delivery of the core functions. For example, if there are sufficient funds available the planning support role, shared jointly with the Malvern Hills AONB Partnership, could be expanded and consolidated from a call-off contract to a FTE position. This would relieve the AONB Manager and AONB Finance & Admin Officer of much of the workload in dealing with Planning Applications and comments on strategic Development Plans. If this occurred it would substantially increase capacity enabling development of new initiatives and funding bids to further enhance delivery of the AONB Management Plan.

The Welsh Government have yet to confirm the funding levels of the Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) programme and the AONB Sustainable Development Fund (SDF). The programmes are unlikely to be cut significantly but some reduction is possible. The scale of funding, and subsequent administration of schemes, similarly has implications for AONB staff capacity, as does the recruitment to fill the Community Links Officer post that leads on the SDF. Consequently a range of flexibility is required to accommodate the current uncertainty.

The Work Programme is enhanced by projects and partnership initiatives with funding and grants from a variety of sources. For example the Lower Wye Nature Recovery Officer helps deliver the Lower Wye Nature Networks project supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) Nature Networks Fund. The range of externally funded projects, grants and match funding initiatives, adding value to the core AONB activities, are anticipated to lever in investment and expenditure in excess of £650,000 through the year.

Consequently there are a number assumptions, caveats and contingencies included in the ambitious, but draft, Work Programme outlined below. These may be relieved or exacerbated depending on the new DEFRA & NRW settlements and Welsh Government funding. Where required AONB budgets and grant match-funding commitments can be supplemented by drawing on AONB reserves.

Long term security of funding for the AONB Unit and future AONB work programmes will depend on the way both DEFRA and Welsh Government progress recommendations in the respective Reviews of Designated Landscapes in England and Wales about appropriate levels of funding and staffing for AONBs. It is hoped that government support for the nationally designated AONBs can move beyond short term funding to facilitate longer term and strategic planning, more akin to the nation’s other nationally designated landscapes, the National Parks.

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| <p>AONB Unit (draft) Work Programme 2022-23 priorities <i>{subject to budget confirmation & resources}</i></p> |
| <p>AONB Management Plan 2021-2026</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Publicise and promote Wye Valley AONB Management Plan Monitor use of Management Plan in Planning Applications, Public Inquiries and by stakeholders |
| <p>Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme [England only]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide advice & guidance, as directed by DEFRA, to farmers and land managers to develop applications to help deliver bigger and better outcomes under the themes of Climate, Nature, People and Place. Service the Local Assessment Panel in determining applications and allocating funding. Manage delegated grants (<£5k) Administer grant payments and monitor and report to DEFRA Consider using the AONB Farming Award to present to a notable project. |
| <p>Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places [Wales only]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Deliver & manage Welsh Government capital investment scheme focussed on:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Promoting Biodiversity and nature recovery</i> <i>Accelerating Decarbonisation</i> <i>Supporting Resilient and Green communities</i> <i>Delivering Sustainable tourism.</i> <p><i>including</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Wye Valley AONB Villages Plan implementation</i> <i>Engagement in collaborative projects across multiple Designated Landscapes</i> |
| <p>Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) [Wales only]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Promotion of SDF to potential applicants</i> <i>Assist potential applicants with application process and project development</i> <i>Service SDF Assessment Panel for allocating SDF funds.</i> <i>Manage delegated grants and Landscape & Biodiversity Enhancement Grants (<£3k)</i> <i>Training for SDF Assessment Panel members</i> <i>Administration of grant scheme and reporting to Welsh Government</i> |
| <p>Wye Valley AONB Fund with Herefordshire Community Foundation (HCF)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote Wye Valley AONB Fund with Herefordshire Community Foundation (HCF) |

AONB Unit (draft) Work Programme 2022-23 priorities

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to potential applicants

- Assist potential applicants with application process and project development
- Collate applications for the SDF Assessment Panel and liaise with HCF
- Service SDF Assessment Panel recommending allocations to HCF.

Nature Recovery & Landscape connectivity

- *Develop AONB Nature Recovery and Species Action plans to focus priority areas for habitat creation and connectivity particularly between woodland, species rich grassland, riparian habitats, orchards and veteran trees.*
- *Complete Species Action Plans for Orchards (Noble Chafer), River (Water Crowfoot), Woodland (Woodland Butterfly assemblage), Grassland (Bumblebee assemblage), and Hedgehogs.*
- *Manage the Lower Wye Nature Networks Project with National Lottery Heritage Fund and Gwent Wildlife Trust and Woodland Trust.*
- *Continue Lower Wye Green Infrastructure (GI) initiatives working with local land owners, managers & stakeholders*
- *Manage control of Invasive Non Native Species (INNS) particularly Japanese Knotweed, Himalayan Balsam and American Skunk Cabbage through Wye Invasive Species Programme (WISP)*
- *Promotion of Natural Flood Management (NFM) & Riparian Trees initiatives*
- *Organise regular volunteer task days, including on partner sites and Reserves*
- *Host Woolhope Dome workshop and collaborate over outputs and outcomes*
- *Collaborate and support landscape connectivity initiatives including 'Wye to Wyre'.*
- *Investigate opportunities for the National Grid Visual Improvement Programme (VIP) for area between Ross & Goodrich with Herefordshire Wildlife Trust & landowners*
- *Continue liaison with Herefordshire Meadows Network, Monmouthshire Meadows and Parish Grassland Project.*
- *Develop and support partnership projects that deliver landscape scale conservation activity and initiatives within and adjoining the AONB particularly those linked to improving water quality in the Wye.*

Climate Emergency Action

- *Prepare & implement action plan from Carbon Neutral Designated Landscapes Organisation assessment*
- *Develop action plan from Wales Designated Landscapes Carbon Footprint Programme*
- *Continue Peatland Restoration initiatives particularly at Cleddon Bog SSSI*
- *Support grassland sequestration investigations with Herefordshire Meadows and Floodplain Meadows Partnership*

Undergrounding

Continue working with Western Power & local communities to identify power-lines within the AONB suitable for undergrounding, via Western Power South Wales Protected Landscape Undergrounding group and the West Midlands Undergrounding group.

Wye Valley Walk

- *Support Wye Valley Walk Partnership*
- *Launch new website www.wyevalleywalk.org including replacement of Passport scheme*
- *Continuing Piercefield Walk enhancements with Gwent Wildlife Trust and landowner*
- *Audit & co-ordinate refreshing of way-marking*

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- *Collate counter data along route and review options*
- *Review Cicerone Route Guide*
- *Facilitate future options for Lydbrook Bridge and Redbrook Bridge.*
- *Progress Monmouth riverbank erosion solutions*
- *Review & republish 'Easy Access' walks.*

Overlooking the Wye legacy

Continue to develop heritage & Community projects as part of the legacy of the Overlooking the Wye Landscape Partnership Scheme

- *Continuing Cleddon Falls & Wordsworth Walk enhancements with landowner(s)*
- *Review & reprint of Walks leaflets*
- *Audit and repair & maintenance of Overlooking the Wye infrastructure*

Offa's Dyke Collaboratory

- *Investigate opportunities for future cross border partnership projects along the corridor of Offa's Dyke, promoting archaeological research and investigation into the landscape significance of the 8th century monument*
- *Participate in Collaboratory conferences, meetings and events*
- *Support community based research and events.*

Communications & social media

- *Regular social media posts e.g. Facebook, Instagram and twitter*
- *On-going updating and management of www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk.*
- *Regular publication of on-line AONB newsletter 'Picturesque'*
- *Revise and publish AONB Map & Guide*

Outreach Activities

Promote the AONB through

- *Talks/presentations to local groups*
- *Stands at relevant shows.*
- *Promote, sponsor &/or lead guided walks, events, activities and countryside craft /rural skills courses in and around the AONB*
- *Support the Wye Valley River Festival 2022*

Youth Rangers

- *Review programme and further opportunities to continue the model of engaging young people in conservation and heritage*
- *Train new Leaders and scope for next Cohort, as required/appropriate*

AONB Planning & Development Control

- *Review contract for Planning Advice support jointly with Malvern Halls AONB Partnership.*
 - *Comment on relevant Planning Applications and strategic planning documents*
 - *Annually monitor and review development trends and the approach taken by planning authorities to issues that affect the AONB*
 - *Engage in development and consultation on national strategy in liaison with NAAONB*
- Deliver CPD & training for LA Planning staff & members*

Governance

- *Service and set agendas for JAC, TOWP and Steering Group*
- *Organise AONB Partnership Annual Study Tour of key sites &/or issues in late September 2022*

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- *Run AONB Partnership Seminar/forum in winter*
- *Continue implementation of recommendations from AONB Good Governance Review*

Local Partnerships & Collaboration

Influence & attend partnerships as appropriate; eg:

- Local Nature Partnership (LNP) in Herefordshire and Gloucestershire and Monmouthshire Environment Partnership
- Wye Catchment Partnership
- Wye Navigation Advisory Committee (WyeNAC)
- Wye Valley & Forest of Dean Tourism Association, South East Wales Tourism Forum, Visit Monmouthshire, Visit Herefordshire and Eat Sleep Live Herefordshire
- Support Town, Parish & Community Councils with advice & guidance as appropriate

National Collaboration

- Support and engage with the National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (NAAONB) and attend appropriate seminars & events
- Work with Welsh Government and Landscape Wales (National Designated Landscapes Partnership) and other stakeholders, including NRW & NAAONB
- Work with DEFRA and others in progressing the Glover Review of Designated Landscapes in England, including Natural England & NAAONB

Monitoring

- Ongoing updating of the AONB GIS and State of the AONB data,
- *Complete Phase 1 Habitat Survey mapping & digitising*
- Progress Nature Recovery Network map & ground-truthing
- *Investigate opportunities to update heritage, tourism and recreation monitoring.*
- Monitor and review implementation of the AONB Management Plan
- Undertake Fixed point photography across the AONB

Funding and resources

- Prepare grant bids and claims for Natural Resources Wales, Welsh Government and DEFRA, and other funding bodies as required.
- Continue pursuing funding and develop opportunities for external funding and securing sources for strategic and partnership projects
- *Develop fundraising campaign for Herefordshire Community Foundation (HCF) Wye Valley AONB Fund*

Work placements

Support the needs of student placements/group projects.

- *Investigate new under-graduate and post-graduate research opportunities*