

AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN - NATURAL CAPITAL AND ECOSYSTEM SERVICES.

Purpose

To inform members of the context of Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services in the AONB Management Plan 2021-2026, in response to the Public Questions raised in November 2021.

FOR INFORMATION

Key Issues

- A number of questions were posed in the Public Question item to the JAC meeting on 1st November 2021 relating to Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services in the Wye Valley AONB Management Plan. These are appended.
- The Wye Valley AONB Management Plan was adopted by the Local Authorities in early 2021 following staged reviews and public consultation between 2018 and 2021.
- Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services are adopted terms and concepts of the British Government that are referenced in the statutory Wye Valley AONB Management Plan.
- In Wales the concepts of the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources (SMNR) and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 along with the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) are the defining principles.
- The majority of land in the Wye Valley AONB is privately owned over which the JAC has no direct control. Forestry England and Natural Resources Wales manage the Public Forest Estate in their respective countries. Third sector organisations, particularly the Wildlife Trusts and Woodland Trusts also own reserves that are key areas of environmental value.

Reasons

The Government's 25 Year Environment Plan (25YEP) recognises that its use of a natural capital approach is a world first. This is in part to the ground-breaking work of Professor Dieter Helm's Natural Capital Committee (NCC). The 25YEP notes that "over coming years the UK intends to use a 'natural capital' approach as a tool to help us make key choices and long-term decisions". The 25YEP refers to 'natural capital' over 100 times, the Glover Landscapes Review mentions 'natural capital' 30 times.

The Welsh Government commissioned the State of Natural Resources Report (SoNaRR) as a country-wide assessment of the health and resilience of ecosystems and the extent to which Wales is sustainably managing its natural resources. SoNaRR recognised that the full value of natural resources and ecosystems were not fully considered and that new tools and techniques are required to understand the value of the contribution that ecosystems make.

Implications

The Wye Valley AONB Management Plan 2021-2026, Chapter 4 states “The guiding principles that underpin the approach to managing the AONB are sustainable development, natural resource management, the ecosystem approach and the landscape approach.”

These are elaborated on under the subsequent sections:

- 4.1 Sustainable development
- 4.2 Natural Capital
- 4.3 Ecosystem services
- 4.4 Landscape approach
- 4.5 The setting of the AONB

There is no ‘overriding principle’ that gives Natural Capital initiatives precedent over Sustainable Development or the Landscape approach.

It is well recognised, particularly in the environmental sector, that there are challenges and limitations with using a Natural Capital approach. Nevertheless it is currently part of government policy and the AONB Management Plan, as a statutory document for a nationally designated Protected Landscape, has to reflect national policy. But the primary purpose of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (and National Parks) is to conserve and enhance natural beauty.

Section 4.2.3 of the Wye Valley Management Plan 2021-26 states “However, it is critical in undertaking any valuation exercise that intrinsic and incalculable value delivered by ecosystem and cultural assets are recognised. A balanced approach to natural beauty and its conservation and enhancement cannot be fully economically valued, so cannot be fairly weighed against developments which would destroy or damage those ecosystem stocks in simple economic terms.”

Section 4.3.2 states “Therefore an ecosystem approach is more than managing the environment as an integrated system; it involves managing societal and economic drivers as part of this system. This is fundamental to achieving sustainable development. A fully functioning landscape should continue to provide these services; therefore it also correlates closely with landscape scale management and the sustainable management of natural resources (SMNR).”

Section 4.3.3 states “However, while the ecosystem services and SMNR frameworks are useful means of assessing the benefits that the AONB provides to people, these need to be examined in conjunction with the primary purpose of AONBs which is to conserve and enhance natural beauty. This should help to secure ecosystem services, but these are an additional benefit of AONB designation. The intrinsic value of natural beauty therefore needs to be recognised alongside the ecosystem services approach. These sets of values are important, distinct and complementary.”

Section 1.1.4 & 1.1.5 outline the review and consultation process that the Management Plan has been through.

Section 1.3 outlines ‘What is Natural Beauty?’. As part of the Wye Valley AONB’s 50th Anniversary celebrations during 2021, a national symposium was hosted on 1st December entitled ‘What is Natural Beauty?’. One of the keynote speakers Sally Marsh FLI, co-Director of the High Weald AONB, concluded explaining “evidence from neuroscience suggests that beauty is not related to our desire to possess something, and if beauty is not about possession, how then can it be monetised or traded?”

