

## VENUE AND FORMAT OF THE JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETINGS

### ***Purpose***

To determine the venue and format of future meetings of the Wye Valley AONB Joint Advisory Committee.

### ***Recommendations***

That the JAC make appropriate arrangements for the future meetings to be accessible in a hybrid format.

### ***Key Issues***

- The Wye Valley AONB Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) is established jointly under a formal Agreement between the four constituent local authorities.
- The Agreement states that the JAC Clerk is Monmouthshire County Council and JAC meetings are held in Coleford unless or until the Committee decides to make other arrangements.
- Meetings fall under the jurisdiction of the law of the land in which they are held.
- Post-Covid, Council meetings held in England are required to meet face to face, whereas in Wales Councils must give participants the option of attending remotely.
- The English local authorities tend to only have the technology installed for hybrid meetings in small meeting rooms.
- Monmouthshire County Council have the technology for hosting hybrid Full Council meetings at County Hall, Usk.
- Several other AONB Partnerships in England hold hybrid meetings where the technology exists, often purchased by the AONB Partnership.
- The AONB Unit could investigate the purchase, or hire, of bespoke equipment for hybrid JAC and other meetings as necessary, alternatively the JAC could meet in Usk.

### ***Reasons***

The Wye Valley AONB Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) is a joint committee of Forest of Dean District Council, Gloucestershire County Council, Herefordshire Council and Monmouthshire County Council. The JAC was set up in 1972 and in its current form governed by an Agreement between the four constituent local authorities made in 2000 and varied in 2009.

The Agreement says "Until such time as the Committee may decide to make other arrangements the Chief Executive Officer of Monmouthshire County Council shall act as

Clerk of the Committee”.... “The meetings of the Committee shall be convened by the Clerk of the Committee and the said meetings shall be held in the Council Chamber, Forest of Dean District Council Offices, Coleford or such other place or places as the Committee may direct”.

The Forest of Dean Council chamber in Coleford was originally chosen as the JAC venue as it is reasonably central geographically to the AONB and therefore fairly convenient for all JAC members to access. Other ‘hosing’ arrangements for the AONB Partnership are shared between the local authorities partners, notably Herefordshire Council being the treasurer for the AONB Unit, and AONB staff being variously employed by Herefordshire, Monmouthshire & Forest of Dean District Councils.

During the pandemic the JAC met virtually, as everybody else did, enabled by emergency legislation and the adoption of platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. In England the emergency legislation has been removed and now English authorities are required to meet face to face. Consequently, in England any members of a committee wishing to vote need to be in the physical room. In Wales different rules apply and Councils must give participants the option of attending and voting remotely.

The cross-border nature of the Wye Valley AONB Joint Advisory Committee creates a potential conundrum.

### ***Implications***

Aside from pandemic control, remote attendance at meetings is recognised as a way of reducing the carbon footprint of organisations, facilitating reduced travel requirements. However, the social and networking benefits of face to face meetings are also acknowledged.

Differences now exist between the 2 countries over whether Council meetings need to be hybrid or face to face. If the meeting is held in Wales then participants have to be given the option of attending remotely as long as they can see/hear and be seen/heard. If it is held in England then it has to be face to face as per pre-Covid laws. It doesn't matter where the participants are from – the law applies geographically. So if the meeting is held in Usk, participants from both England and Wales can choose whether to attend in person or not. If it is held in Coleford, then it has to happen face to face. However, as an ‘advisory’ body, it is not entirely clear how strictly the legislation applies to the JAC. But under the JAC Agreement “meetings shall be held in the Council Chamber, Forest of Dean District Council Offices, Coleford or such other place or places as the Committee may direct”.

The Forest of Dean Council chamber in Coleford is not set up to hold hybrid meetings, as required of English councils. However the technology exists in smaller rooms and could be bought and installed (or hired) as necessary. Regulations may change in England and the District Council may be required to offer hybrid meetings in the Council Chamber. The same is likely to be the case with Herefordshire Council and Gloucestershire County Council.

Hybrid meetings can be hosted in Monmouthshire County Hall at Usk which has remote attendance functionality. However this would be over 14 miles from the AONB Office, whereas Coleford is under 6 miles. It would most likely require a longer journey for any

member from England wishing to attend in person. Under current circumstances Councillors from the English authorities may be expected to attend in person, which would seem to negate any carbon benefits of holding hybrid meetings in a more distant location.

Several other AONB Partnerships in England have purchased the necessary equipment to host hybrid meetings. It appears they are ones that have tended to use &/or rotate meetings around their AONBs using Village Halls & Community Centres, rather than local authority Council Chambers. However, it may be worth investigating whether purchase, or hire, of such equipment would enable the JAC to meet in a hybrid manner whether in Coleford or another relatively local, appropriately sized venue.

It is not considered proportionate at this stage to completely review and renegotiate the JAC Agreement as a long term solution. But it is for the Committee to direct where and in what manner the meetings should be held; the preferred future format and venue of meetings.

Currently, the fact is that if the JAC were held in Usk it can be done as a hybrid meeting, and if it is held in Coleford then it has to be face to face because they don't have the equipment installed for hybrid functionality. Irrespective of the legislation, the limiting factor on hybrid meetings is availability of the appropriate technology. If the Committee determines to meet in a hybrid manner in future, then a viable solution will be arranged for the next JAC, in consultation with the clerk and the local authorities.

### ***Background***

In 2018 the JAC undertook a detailed review of governance processes and structures against the 'Principles of Good Governance for Designated Landscapes' as outlined in Future Landscapes: Delivering for Wales (2017). The review identified a number of aspects of 'what we do well' and 20 recommendations proposed to address the findings of 'what we could do better'. These did not recommend any significant or radical changes to the governance arrangements but were mostly small and/or administrative changes to procedures. However more resources and capacity were identified as being needed to fully deliver all the recommendations. There are further governance proposals in the Glover Review which would augment these recommendations if enacted in England.