

AONB UNIT & PARTNER REPORTS

Purpose

To advise members of activity of the Wye Valley AONB Unit and other partners.

FOR INFORMATION

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

- a. Farming in Protected Landscapes
- b. Wye Invasive Species Programme (WISP)
- c. Lower Wye Nature Networks Partnership Project
- d. Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP)
 - i. collaborative Dark Skies Wales project
 - ii. Lower Wye Valley Village Halls Energy efficiency & Hub development
- e. Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) & and Herefordshire Community Foundation (HCF) Wye Valley AONB Fund
- f. Wye Valley Walk website
- g. Wye Valley River Festival 2022 update

a. Farming in Protected Landscapes

Anna Stankiewicz joined the AONB Unit in August as the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) Officer. She has taken over the day to day running of the programme from Nick Critchley, AONB Development Officer. She has been very active meeting farmers and landowners, providing advice on potential FiPL projects and supporting the Assessment Panel. The Panel met in September and approved 3 further projects.

- Wye and Usk Foundation INNS control along the Wye
- Brampton Abbots Rectory Orchard restoration
- AONB Noble Chafer habitat enhancement

The Year 2 (2022-23) FiPL allocation from DEFRA for the Wye Valley AONB is £220,110 of which £160,420 has now been committed. Therefore just under £60,000 remains available for FiPL grants up to March 2023. The Year 3 (2023-24) allocation is £219,490 of which £79,600 has already been committed leaving just under £140,000 available for grants.

There are a number of changes on the FiPL Assessment Panel. Rob Edwards has replaced Rachel Bosanquet as the Natural England Catchment Sensitive Farming Advisor, a representative from the NFU will be joining the Assessment Panel, and a new member will replace Andrew Nixon, who has left Herefordshire Wildlife Trust. The Panel wish both Rachel and Andrew well in their respective new roles.

For the full list of FiPL projects supported in Year 1 see

<https://www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk/projects-supported-through-the-farming-in-protected->

[landscapes-scheme/](#) . For further information on FiPL see <https://www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk/farming-in-protected-landscapes/>.

b. Wye Invasive Species Programme (WISP)

Nickie Moore, AONB Lower Wye Project Officer, and Ellie Baggett, Lower Wye Nature Recovery Officer, have been very busy throughout the summer supervising contractors and working with local communities and landowners to stop the spread of the four Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) – Japanese Knotweed, American Skunk Cabbage, Cherry Laurel and Himalayan Balsam – see <https://www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk/caring-for-wye-valley-aonb/our-projects/wisp/>.

Cherry laurel around Cleddon Shoots SSSI:

- The initial (June 2022) cherry laurel treatment work was surveyed again by the AONB team, assessed for regrowth, and re-mapped to update records for the contractor follow-up work
- The adjacent landowner to Cleddon Shoots SSSI is Natural Resources Wales (NRW), and we arranged for an NRW officer to join us to map laurel on their estate, with a view to NRW arranging clearance in the near future.
- The AONB team also carried out a door-knocking exercise, talking to residents and landowners around the SSSI to raise awareness about cherry laurel and offer support with controlling or clearing it.
- Cherry laurel contractor follow-up work is taking place w/c 17/10/22 and 24/10/22

American Skunk cabbage:

Skunk cabbage treatment was carried out (the AONB team and a local contractor) in two sub-catchments in August:

Cleddon catchment:

- 20 sites, 5 landowners, approx. 300+ plants present, 178 treated.
- We are alarmed to see the problem has grown significantly worse since 2020. Every known site, bar one, showed a significant increase in numbers.
- We treated around 180 plants but estimate there's double that number that were inaccessible to us – we've not been able to obtain permission to treat the most upstream sites for the past 2 years and those plants are likely to still be releasing seed each spring.
- We will send all landowners an update and hope to be granted permission to access all sites next year.

Whitebrook catchment:

- 15 sites, 5 landowners, est. 500+ ASC present, 54 plants treated.
- We're still tracking down the source of cabbage seed in this catchment, so we conducted a leaflet drop around properties along one Whitebrook tributary. The second tributary will be visited next spring.
- We treated most of our known sites and one new, abundant site, but a change in ownership meant we were unable to access the most abundant ASC site this year.
- The number of ASC plants in this catchment will continue to grow, until the source(s) is found and contained. We will continue our awareness raising efforts.

Brockweir catchment:

- Managed an area of 21ha (inc. the previous 18 ha + further 3ha) at 5 sites, protecting a 1.9km stretch of the Brockweir tributary

Japanese knotweed:

- The creation of new online 'Report It' and 'Landowner Consent' forms have considerably eased the info and consent gathering processes, but many sites have still needed ground-truthing, and liaising face-to-face with landowners has really helped to build relations and raise awareness of the knotweed problem
- We've managed two contractor teams this year, the Wye and Usk Foundation and Brooke Estate Management.
- Both teams received pesticide stem injection training in August and have purchased stem injection kits. This enabled them to employ this method where appropriate to reduce pesticide use and/or the risk of spray drift impacting non-target plants.
- In total they've treated over 170 JK sites in the lower Wye Valley. 70% of those sites are on the Wales side of the AONB and the large majority of those sites (83%) are within the NLHF Nature Networks Project area.
- In general, the number of sites is still continuing to rise. We cannot attribute this rise in reports solely to it increasingly being spread around – it could also be due to a heightened public awareness resulting in more reports – but, given how easily it can be spread, we will continue to highlight the issues this plant poses and the best practice control – no cutting, no moving, no digging. On the positive side, the knotweed at many of the sites is in retreat or even absent, so much less herbicide is required now.
- Many knotweed plants here have become stunted, a bonsai form, and these can prove hard to eradicate. In 2023, we will investigate alternative methods to herbicide treatment for accessible sites e.g. electrocution/steaming.

Himalayan Balsam:

- We've continued to support Local Action Groups (The Narth, Llandogo, and upstream groups) in pulling balsam this year.
- 29 volunteers have supported the AONB Unit and local landowners in Brockweir managing 4.4ac (1.8ha) and clearing a total 3.12ac (1.26ha)
- We produced a Balsam Action Toolkit - an online resource to help local groups get active in pulling up this pest plant. We've had a few local action groups testing and feeding back on the resource pack. It is due to be translated into Welsh and once we've done that, we plan to fully promote it through all channels Spring 2023, see <https://www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk/caring-for-wye-valley-aonb/our-projects/wisp/balsam-action-toolkit/>.
- We encouraged our key landowner/partner, NRW, to place signs around their woodland estate to encourage users to pull up the accessible balsam before it set seed, and they did, with positive results!

A range of public events and training days have been organised, including community 'Balsam Bashing'. Media coverage has resulted in the following:

- Our Brockweir events social media posts on Facebook reached 15,050 with 530 reactions
- Social media posts on Facebook about our contractors being out treating JK and ASC reached 15,050 people and gained 530 reactions.
- Coverage in the local press and 4 public enquiries stemmed from that.

c. Lower Wye Nature Networks Partnership Project

Nick Critchley, AONB Development Officer, leads on the Lower Wye Valley Nature Networks Project, working alongside Gwent Wildlife Trust and The Woodland Trust. This project aims to improve the condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) within part of the

AONB, as well as improving connectivity between them. This project has been made possible with funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF).

The NLHF has agreed to a 6 month extension of the project (but not an increase in funding) until September 2023. This will enable a further summer season of activity, particularly the INNS control work outlined above.

As part of the project, the AONB Unit have commissioned The Environment Partnership (TEP) to engage with local farmers and landowners and carry out free-of-charge farm visits. To date 10 farm visits have been made, involving a site walkover to collaboratively identify:

- Habitat management and connectivity opportunities
- Soil management options
- Site-wide hydrological flows and management options

A summary report is then produced for the landowner/ manager, highlighting opportunities for wildlife enhancement and habitat connectivity, taking the agricultural business into account.

Following on from the findings of the site visits & Farm Plans, opportunities for projects which would be eligible for grant funding may include:

- Hedge planting and/or gapping up
- Natural Flood Management, e.g. wetland creation, leaky dams, surface water bunds
- Species Rich Grassland creation or restoration
- Riparian habitat management such as coppicing or pollarding of bankside trees and/or fencing and water troughs to restrict livestock access to water
- Tree/woodland planting and/or Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) restoration (with support from the Woodland Trust).

The AONB Unit has match-funding available to help implement some potential works. The offer for Capital Works will be in the region of 50% of total costs. However, funding may be at a higher or lower rate depending on the commercial benefit. Match-funding would be required by the landholder. This can be in the form of cash contributions towards costs, e.g. labour and machinery costs, calculated at current National Association of Agricultural Contractors rates.

d. Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP)

i) collaborative Dark Skies Wales project

Welsh Government have approved SLSP funding for a collaborative 3 year Dark Skies Wales project covering all Wales' 8 Designated Landscape (AONBs & National Parks). The project will run until March 2025 and will include the appointment of a Wales Dark Skies Officer (to accompany the one already in North Wales) to oversee:-

- Creation of Wales wide good practice guidance for external lighting
- Comprehensive ground-based lighting surveys to be conducted by contractor
- Creation and distribution of educational materials
- Implementation of designated star gazing sites
- Retrofitting lights - community and public spaces, including those owned/used by designated landscapes/local authority - exemplar demonstration projects
- Support to local businesses to retro fit dark sky friendly lighting
- Baseline ecological mapping and post implementation studies to measure impacts of retrofitting works on nature recovery and the state of our dark ecological network/habitat connectivity

There is already plenty of good material from existing Dark Skies projects both in North Wales Designated Landscapes, eg: <https://www.discoveryinthedark.wales/project-nos> & <https://www.clwydianrangeanddeevalleyaonb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/DARK-SKIES-GUIDANCE-2.pdf> and also in the Brecon Beacons National Park (see <https://www.breconbeacons.org/discover/top-10-activities-in-brecon-beacons/after-dark>)

The project will apply to the Welsh / Monmouthshire side of the AONB but the English side will be able to benefit from all of that experience. This will complement the Kerne Bridge Dark Skies Project that has been operating in Walford Parish and is moving onto Goodrich Welsh Bicknor and Whitchurch. The Wye Valley Society and local Ward member Cllr Yolande Watson have been supporting 12 enthusiastic volunteers who have been out and about at night taking sky quality meter readings as part of the Kerne Bridge Dark Skies Project. It is believed to be the first time light pollution has been measured in this way in the AONB, and on this scale in Herefordshire. These readings provide a simple benchmark for the presence of dark skies and areas of light trespass (pollution). For more information on the Kerne Bridge Dark Skies Project: www.wyevalleysociety.org.uk/events.php . For additional information and resources on dark skies: www.darksky.org .

ii) Lower Wye Valley Village Halls Energy efficiency & Hub development

Lucinda James, the new AONB Community Links Officer, is managing the SLSP grants to Village Halls to deliver projects under 3 of the key themes:

- Decarbonisation - Projects that will contribute to low carbon communities and enhance the sustainable local economy.
- Resilient and Green Local Communities - Projects that enhance Village Halls by providing improved advice and support for energy efficiency & Hub development initiatives, whether transport or work hubs. These should deliver increased social, environmental, cultural and economic opportunities and outcomes for local communities, as well as potential health and wellbeing benefits for locals and visitors, for example from specific transport/cycle hub development.
- More Sustainable Tourism - Projects that enhance Village Hall Hub development and initiatives (transport or work hub), that help reduce emissions for both tourism businesses and tourists. Projects may include cycling and e-bike infrastructure and other critical infrastructure development that will have health and wellbeing benefits for local communities and visitors. Improved access to these facilities will increase awareness, understanding and appreciation of environmental issues and help to positively influence visitor behaviour in the AONB.

Types of projects that may be supported:

- Energy Audit - paying a consultant to carry out a high-level energy Audit of a Village Hall.
- Improvements to Village Hall Energy Efficiency - implementation of actions highlighted in an Energy Audit, including purchase of small/modest items to improve the efficiency of running the Village Hall, and/or guidance /signposting on other sources of funding for further/larger items.
- Co-working Hub Assessment – paying an expert to advise on what improvements and infrastructure is needed to create a co-working environment in a Village Hall.
- Transport Hub Assessment - paying an expert to advise on what improvements and infrastructure is needed to create a transport hub at a Village Hall.
- Co-working Hub Development Infrastructure - Implementation of actions highlighted though an Assessment report, this could be for further costs in developing proposals up to Planning Permission if required, and/or purchase of items such as work stations/office type furniture, small items of IT equipment etc.

- Transport Hub Development infrastructure - implementation of actions highlighted in an Assessment report, this could be for further costs in developing proposals up to Planning Permission if required, and/or purchase items to create a transport hub, such as a Bike Repair Stand & Bike Pump, bike parking stand, water fountain etc.

A total of £61,250 is available until March 2025. The funding is available to the 11 Village Halls in the AONB (Wales only). Priority will be given initially to Village Halls who are in need of an Energy Audit and/or Advice on hub development. For further information please contact Lucinda at community@wyevalleyaonb.org.uk.

e. Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) & and Herefordshire Community Foundation (HCF) Wye Valley AONB Fund

Lucinda James, the new AONB Community Links Officer, is managing the SDF and HCF AONB Fund grants. Currently £54,453 has been committed to projects meaning that £45,547 remains available for grant applications. For further information see <https://www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk/caring-for-wye-valley-aonb/grants/grants/> and contact Lucinda at community@wyevalleyaonb.org.uk.

The Herefordshire Community Foundation (HCF) Wye Valley AONB Fund has now exhausted the initial 'immediate impact fund' and the Endowment Fund currently holds £55,489.53, meaning that there is about £5,000 available for grants. For further information see <https://www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk/caring-for-wye-valley-aonb/grants/aonb-fund/>. Andrew Blake, AONB Manager, and Lucinda James, AONB Community Links Officer, met with Bridie Sullivan, CEO, and other HCF team members to discuss options and opportunities going forward. Currently negotiations are underway with a potential one-off donor to the Fund.

f. Wye Valley Walk website

Ruth Waycott, AONB Information Officer, has been co-ordinating the renewal of the Wye Valley Walk website on behalf of the Wye Valley Walk Partnership. The new website is now live – see <https://www.wyevalleywalk.org/> - along with a new Passport scheme that has replaced the old stamping stations with QR codes. Once a walker registers and scans the QR codes their digital passport is automatically stamped. Only 12 of the 17 stamps are needed to claim the coveted Wye Valley Walk badge and certificate. The QR codes are in the windows or doors of local shops, cafes, pubs, B&B, tourist attractions or Tourist Information Centres. A few are to be found on church porch noticeboards. They are all accessible at any time, so walkers don't need to worry about arriving after hours. The locations are in the route description and on the route map (see <https://www.wyevalleywalk.org/walk>).

g. Wye Valley River Festival 2022 update

The final event of the Wye Valley River Festival 2022 was 'Alchemy and Artistry – Tintern Fire Garden!' in the grounds of Tintern Abbey on 21st & 22nd October. The 1400 tickets were sold out on both nights. Despite the wet and windy weather the crowds attending were dazzled by hundreds of fire-pots filling the Abbey nave and grounds, dozens of fire sculptures, live music and food & drink stalls.