

AONB MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING 2024 - 2027

Purpose

To note progress with the AONB Memorandum of Understanding between the four local authorities for 2024 – 2027.

Recommendations

That the JAC

- A. encourage the constituent local authorities to finalise and agree the AONB Memorandum of Understanding for 2024 – 2027
- B. Welcomes the provisional allocations of funding until March 2027 from Natural Resources Wales (NRW)

Key Issues

- The AONB Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is intended to give medium term security and commitment to the AONB Partnership.
- The current MoU ends in March 2024 and a revised three year edition, until March 2027, is being prepared between the four local authorities.
- When the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill amendments becomes law, local authorities in Wales retain the 'duty of regard' to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, whereas in England relevant authorities 'must seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty' of the AONB.
- DEFRA and Welsh Government are not signatories to the MoU but their grant offer letters are appended to the MoU. Their current AONB grant funding allocations extend to March 2025.
- Natural Resources Wales (NRW) have proposed outline offered allocations of AONB project funding until March 2027.
- The MoU includes the minimum contribution expected from the local authorities which form the foundation of the budget managed by the AONB Unit. Contributions are proposed to remain at existing levels.
- AONB leverage in 22/23 brought in £21.80 for every £1 of Local Authority contribution.

Reasons

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) provides a framework for the delivery of duties and obligations in the Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) arising from Part IV of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (as amended) including the operation and management of the AONB Partnership and the AONB Unit. The MoU is intended to give medium term security to the AONB Partnership and sets out a shared vision for, and

commitment to, AONB management by the funding local authority partners. The MoU outlines the functions of the AONB Unit and the expectations on all parties to achieve the shared vision, which includes the understanding that:

- AONB management structures should be strongly supported by partners and relevant authorities.
- the statutory requirement to produce a Management Plan provides an important opportunity to strengthen partnerships and achieve better outcomes.
- security of funding and flexibility of funding for the AONB will deliver better outcomes.
- there should be a “can do” culture which is not risk-averse but where lessons from novel approaches are encouraged and learnt from, in both success and failure.
- monitoring of environmental outcomes is essential and needs to be undertaken to develop a sound, spatially-relevant evidence base.
- opportunities should be taken to maximise the synergies between the outcomes of the Management Plan with the plans of other Parties, and of the wider network of nationally designated Protected Landscapes.

The MoU complements the JAC Agreement, which constitutes the JAC, signed between the four local authorities. The current DEFRA Grant Funding Agreement references the current MoU and it is anticipated that the new DEFRA Grant Funding Agreement will do likewise.

Implications

The anticipated grant funding in both England and Wales has increased over recent years in response to the Reviews of National Parks and AONBs in England and Wales. Future grant funding levels are currently under review by both DEFRA and Welsh Government in preparation for new allocations and agreements in 2025. Meanwhile Natural Resources Wales (NRW) have offered provisional Strategic Allocated Funding until March 2027 of £49,000 per annum at 75% towards AONB projects that deliver the AONB Management Plan and Well-being Objectives in the NRW Corporate Plan to 2030.

The amendments to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill increase the responsibility of relevant authorities in England, who “must seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty” of the AONB. The Secretary of State may also make provision to require relevant authorities in England “to contribute to the preparation, implementation or review” of an AONB Management Plan. Relevant authorities in Wales retain the ‘duty of regard’ to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty and the requirement to produce an AONB Management Plan, under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

The Wye Valley AONB Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is the framework to help the local authorities deliver their duties and obligations arising from legislation and to ensure medium term security and commitment to the AONB Partnership. The contributions from the local authorities are used to make up the 25% match-funding for core AONB initiatives from DEFRA and Welsh Government.

The AONB Unit operational turnover in 2022/23 was £1,107,021 with core costs of £345,465 and the budget for 2023/24 is £1,106,060 with core costs of £368,890. A considerable amount of the AONB Unit’s core and project work (planning / promotion / advice / preparation & delivery of the Management Plan etc.) goes towards supporting each Local Authority in fulfilling its duties and responsibilities to the AONB. Through project delivery the AONB Unit also supports the Local Authorities’ Statutory Duty for biodiversity, under the Environment Act 2021 and Environment (Wales) Act 2016.

The following Local Authority partner contributions are requested for each year in the 2024-27 MoU. They are based on an established historical formula aligned with the land area in the AONB. The MoU states that the local authorities retain the discretion to increase contributions, if or when appropriate. However the request is to carry forward the same contributions at a flat rate mirroring successive recent years.

	Annual contribution	
Funding Partner	2021-24	2024-27
Herefordshire Council	£23,860	£23,860
Monmouthshire County Council	£15,716	£15,716
Forest of Dean District Council	£5,826	£5,826
Gloucestershire County Council	£3,600	£3,600
Total LA contributions	£49,002	£49,002

Beyond the AONB Unit core costs, the remainder of the Wye Valley AONB budget is made up from managing externally funded partnership and initiatives projects with a value in excess of £750,000. These include the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme from DEFRA, the Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) programme and Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) from Welsh Government, Natural Resources Wales (NRW) Strategic Allocated Funding, Wye Valley Walk Partnership, AONB Youth Rangers etc. These externally funded projects extend the work of the AONB Unit and allow project investment as well as some elements of cost recovery. The leverage of the AONB Partnership in 2022/23 meant that for every £1 of local authority contribution, the AONB Unit brought in nearly £22.

The AONB Unit is constantly reviewing the structure and delivery of services in the AONB alongside income streams. The AONB Steering Group, made up from officers of the 4 local authorities and Natural England, on behalf of DEFRA, and NRW on behalf of Welsh Government, ensures that staff and resources are maximised and operational structures are fit for the future in the face of the budgetary uncertainties.

Background

The local authorities established the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) and commissioned the AONB Partnership to operate as a cross-border co-ordinating body, engaging with local communities and other partners to collaboratively develop and deliver both localised projects and AONB wide initiatives. The AONB Unit staff report to the JAC and are employed through the local authorities and work on behalf of the AONB Partnership to carry out the preparation and review of the statutory AONB Management Plan, to advocate its policies and work in partnership to deliver a range of actions defined in the agreed annual Work Programme.