

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**Minutes of the Wye Valley AONB Joint Advisory Committee
held at The Forest of Dean District Council Offices, Coleford on
Monday 2nd November 2015 at 2.00pm**

PRESENT: Councillor P. Cutter (Chairman) (Herefordshire Council)

Elected Members (with voting powers)

Monmouthshire County Council: Councillor D. Blakebrough
Councillor D.L.S. Dovey

Herefordshire Council: Councillor P. Cutter
Councillor E.J. Swinglehurst

Forest of Dean District Council: Councillor G. Davies

Co-opted Members (with voting powers)

Voluntary Conservation Sector in Monmouthshire: Mr. A. Thomas
Voluntary Conservation Sector in Herefordshire: Mr. B. Nash
Country Land and Business Association: Mr. S.W.B. Dereham
One Voice Wales Councillor T. Phillips

Co-opted Members (without voting powers)

Wye Valley Society: Mr. C. Barron
River Wye Preservation Trust Mr. S.W.B. Dereham
National Farmers Union Wales Mr. D Price
Local Tourism Representative Mr. J. Theophilus
Wildlife Trusts Representative Mrs. H Stace

Technical Advice Officers:

Wye Valley AONB Officer: Mr. A. Blake
Monmouthshire County Council Mr. M. Lewis
Gloucestershire County Council: Mr. R. Niblett

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1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE / INTRODUCTIONS

Apologies for absence were received from the following:

- County Councillor A.E. Webb, Monmouthshire County Council.
- County Councillor B. Durkin, Herefordshire County Council.
- County Councillor J. Hardwick, Herefordshire County Council.
- District Councillor P. McMahon, Forest of Dean District Council.
- Dr. G. Peterken, Voluntary Conservation Sector in Gloucestershire.
- Mr. M. Price, National Farmers Union.
- Mr. A. Lee, Herefordshire Local Access Forum.
- Ms. H. McDowell, Natural England.
- Mr. J. Fry, Forestry Commission.
- Mr. J. Bissett, Herefordshire Council.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following Councillors declared interests as Planning Committee Members of their respective Authorities in matters that may arise relating to development control issues:

Cllr P. Cutter
Cllr D. Dovey
Cllr G. Davies
Cllr D. Blakebrough
Cllr E.J. Swinglehurst

3. CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting dated 6th July 2015 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

No questions were raised by members of the public.

5. WYE VALLEY AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN 2015-20

We received the AONB Management Plan 2015-2020.

The JAC had previously recommended that the AONB Management Plan be adopted by the local authorities and government agencies, subject to the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA).

We were informed that:

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- The SEA and HRA have been completed and the responses were appended. An Environment Report, summarising the outcomes of the SEA and HRA will be published shortly.
- It was also a requirement in Wales for a Future Generations Evaluation (including the Equalities and Sustainability Impact Assessments) to be carried out, the latter is also good practice in England. This has been completed and was appended.
- The necessary minor modifications from the SEA, HRA and Future Generations Evaluation, are being made to the final version of the AONB Management Plan 2015-2020 and which can then be formally adopted by the local authorities and government agencies.

We welcomed the positive results of the Strategic Environmental Assessment and Habitats Regulation Assessment.

We resolved to endorse the Future Generations (including the Equalities and Sustainability Impact Assessments) of the AONB Management Plan.

Mr Blake said the Management Plan would now be put to Local Authorities for adoption as soon as possible.

Cllr D. Blakeborough and Mrs H. Stace joined the meeting at 2.15pm.

6. REVIEW OF DESIGNATED LANDSCAPES IN WALES

We received a report on the review of Designated Landscapes in Wales.

We were informed that:

- The Independent Panel's final Report on the Review was published on Friday 30th October and included 69 recommendations covering a raft of proposals and observations on purposes, principles, vision, governance models, planning and funding for Wales' AONBs and National Parks.
- The Minister wants to "ensure that our designated landscapes are best equipped to meet current and future challenges while building upon their internationally recognised status".
- The Minister has asked Lord Dafydd Ellis-Thomas AM to lead a Future Landscapes Working Group to explore the Report's recommendations and the case for reform, and to report findings next year.
- There will be significant implications for the Wye Valley AONB, particularly as a cross-border designated landscape if purposes and duties are modified in Wales.

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Mr Blake said he was pleased to see that the recommendations were reasonable and workable. They presented good opportunities for AONBs. He would be meeting with other AONBs and the Welsh Government next week for further discussions. He said there would be opportunities for the JAC to feed-back comments to the Future Landscapes Working Group.

In response to questions raised by JAC members, Mr Blake said that, contrary to reports in the Press, there were no recommendations to re-name the Wye Valley AONB.

Responding to a member's question about why the review had been confined to Wales and had not been part of a national UK review, Mr Thomas said the National Government had not carried out a review of the effectiveness of the system for running AONBs and National Parks. The Welsh Government had conducted a number of other reviews, some of which had raised questions about National Parks and the current local government structure in Wales. He said he felt the review was a positive step and was pleased to see that further discussions will take place before decisions are made.

Mr Thomas also noted the statement issued by Dr. Ruth Williams and asked if the statement had been supported by the other Review Panel members. Mr Blake said he was only aware that the statement represented Dr. Williams' views and had been issued after the Panel work had been completed. The Chairman said her views were welcomed and were very useful.

We welcomed the Independent Panel's final report and resolved to work with the Future Landscapes Working Group.

7. WYE NAVIGATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

We received a report on the membership of the Wye Navigation Advisory Committee and noted the following:

- The AONB Officer, Mr Blake, has represented the AONB Partnership on the Wye Navigation Advisory Committee (NAC) since the establishment of Wye NAC in 2003 and his fourth term ended on 30th September.
- Several other members of the JAC sit on the Wye NAC in other capacities.
- The Environment Agency (EA) services Wye NAC and has membership guidance which recommends that appointments should not exceed 10 years unless there is good reason.

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- The JAC needs to consider who should represent it on Wye NAC for the next three years.

We noted the Environment Agency's advice and concluded that there were good reasons for Mr Blake to continue to act as the JAC representative. We also agreed that Mr Critchley, AONB Development Officer, should be appointed as Mr Blake's deputy in the event of his absence.

8. LOCAL AUTHORITY MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

We received a report on the finalisation of the AONB Memorandum of Understanding between the four local authorities supporting the AONB partnership.

We noted the following:

- The previous Memorandum of Agreement between the funding partners of the Wye Valley AONB expired on 31st March 2015.
- The funding partners have been negotiating a new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that is intended to give medium term security and commitment to the AONB Partnership. The MoU was appended to the report.
- The MoU complements the JAC Agreement, which constitutes the JAC, signed between the local authorities.
- Defra and Natural Resources Wales are not signatories to the MoU but were party to the negotiations and their funding offer letters are appended to the MoU.

Responding to a member's question, Mr Blake said the four Wye Valley AONB authorities stood shoulder to shoulder in support of the AONB. If any major changes emerged from the Welsh Government Review of Designated Landscapes, these would be assimilated in order to get the best value for the Wye Valley and the AONB. The Chairman added that one of the prime purposes of the JAC was to ensure that all authorities are involved and have an input.

Mr Lewis confirmed the current joint approach by the four authorities enabled the most effective delivery for the AONB. Part of the role of the Future Landscapes Working Group should be to take account of this.

We agreed to note and support the contents of the report.

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9. CHALARA / ASH DIEBACK – UPDATE

We received a report on Ash Dieback and noted the following:

- Chalara or 'Ash Dieback' is a serious disease of ash trees caused by a fungus called *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*.
- The disease has now spread to every county in England and is found in 23% of all 10km grid squares in the UK, including those in the north, east and south of the Wye Valley AONB.
- Ash Dieback causes leaf loss, crown dieback and bark lesions and usually leads to tree death in Common ash, which is the third most common native broadleaved tree species in Great Britain after oak and birch.
- Approximately 30% of the Wye Valley Woodlands Special Areas of Conservation is Ash dominated woodland.
- There are several other tree diseases that also pose a direct threat to local woodlands, such as Acute Oak Decline, *Phytophthora* species and *Dothistroma* (Red Band) Needle Blight.
- The compound impact of all these diseases could be very significant on the woodlands of the Wye Valley.

Mr Blake said he had recently attended a Forestry Commission Ash Dieback seminar which had painted a very depressing picture. However the Wye Valley possesses very old and diverse woodland which should be robust to change. For the moment he advised proceeding with awareness and caution in the face of Ash Dieback and other threatening diseases. Mr Blake read out a statement from Dr. Peterkin which generally supported this standpoint.

Mr Dereham said Ash was a fast growing tree and it was to be hoped that resistant strains could be found and used to replenish the population lost to disease.

10. HEREFORDSHIRE CORE STRATEGY

We received a report updating on the Core Strategies and Local Development Plan and noted the following:

- Herefordshire Council's Core Strategy, the Herefordshire Local Plan, which sets the overall strategic planning framework for the county up to 2031, was adopted by the Council on 16 October 2015.
- Monmouthshire Local Development Plan (LDP), to 2021, was adopted in March 2014.
- The Forest of Dean District Council adopted their Core Strategy, to 2026, in February 2012.

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Mr Blake said he was now assured that the AONB was adequately covered by the Core Strategy and said it would be used going forward when dealing with planning applications. Parish Plans and Neighbourhood Development Plans will become the next layer and will help to define where new houses will be built. He said he would be working with parishes where appropriate.

We agreed to note the report.

11. FRACKING IN THE AONB

We received a report on the protection afforded to the AONB against potential fracking and noted the following:

- In August and September the Government's Oil & Gas Authority consulted on the Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) of grid squares/blocks proposed for the next (14th) Onshore Oil and Gas Licensing Round.
- Part of the Wye Valley AONB is covered by two licencing blocks.
- Under new regulations fracking can only take place in AONBs below 1200 metres.
- The AONB Officer responded to the Oil & Gas Authority HRA consultation on behalf of the AONB Partnership.

In addition, Mr Blake said the AONB would be further protected by the provision of fracking buffer zones around European protected rivers and bat roosts. He said the Welsh Government had already decided that there would be no fracking in Wales. However this did not prevent the potential for lateral extraction and this would also apply to the AONB. Mr Blake said it was unclear what the impacts would be of lateral drilling at depths in excess of 1200 metres. Nevertheless, as far as surface features are concerned, they appear to be protected. In response to a member's question, Mr Blake said any development adjacent to the AONB boundary or in the setting of the AONB having a significant impact on the AONB would carry weight in planning and would be assessed on a case by case basis.

We agreed to note the report and to await the National Government's decisions.

12. AONB PARTNERSHIP STUDY TOUR FEEDBACK

We received a report following the recent AONB Partnership Study Tour and noted the following:

- A total of 30 people attended the annual AONB Partnership Tour, with a good turn out of Town, Parish and Community Council representatives.

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- There was a good spread of representation from throughout the AONB even though the Tour was focused predominantly on the Gloucestershire part of the AONB.
- Feedback from attendees of the Tour was extremely positive.
- The clash with the Herefordshire Council's Full Council needs to be avoided in future.

The Chairman said a great deal of work goes into preparing the tours and he expressed gratitude to Mr Blake and his staff for their efforts.

Mr Blake said he had been very pleased with the turn-out. It had been a good opportunity for people to visit some parts of the AONB with which they might have been less familiar. It was unfortunate that the tour clashed with Herefordshire's full Council meeting and he would seek to avoid this in the future.

Mr Thomas said it was noticeable how much tidier Stowfield Quarry had become since the last visit several years ago. He was pleased to see evidence that the quarry restoration plan was in operation.

13. AONB UPDATES

We received a report regarding the activity of the AONB Unit and other partners.

- **Wye Valley River Festival 2016:** The majority of funding has been secured and the dates of the Festival set as 29th April – 15th May 2016.
- **LEMUR+ Placements:** Phase 1 Habitat Surveys at Woolhope Dome have been completed. Sophie Marley has been offered a 12 week contract to continue her work with the Unit.
- **National Association for AONBs Chairmen's Conference:** Mr Blake will represent the AONB at the conference on 19th November 2015.
- **Youth Rangers:** The third cohort of Wye Valley AONB Youth Rangers is currently being recruited and will commence a range of activities on 10 days a year over the next 2 years commencing at the end of November.
- **AONB Farming Awards 2015:** The awards were presented at the Monmouthshire Show on 27th August 2015 by Cllr. Cutter. He thanked Mr Blake and the other judges for their work and said the awards were an excellent opportunity to showcase some of the outstanding work being carried out by the agricultural industry.

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Cllr Dovey said celebrations were planned to mark the 200th anniversary of the Wye Bridge in Chepstow in 2016 and he invited the AONB Unit to become involved. Mr Blake said it had been planned that the proposed River Festival for 2016 would not involve the Wye Bridge in Chepstow so as not to detract from bi-centenary celebrations. However he would discuss further with Chepstow Town Council to ensure that the AONB was involved with the celebrations in an appropriate way.

14. DATES FOR JAC MEETINGS IN 2016

It was noted that dates **and venues** for meetings in 2016 will be as follows:

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| 2.00pm Monday 7 th March | <u>Shire Hall Monmouth</u> |
| 2.00pm Monday 4 th July | Council Chamber, Forest of Dean District Council |
| 2.00pm Monday 7 th November | Council Chamber, Forest of Dean District Council |

There being no other business, the meeting closed at 3.30pm