

ANNUAL REPORT

Purpose

To present the annual report figures for 2023/24 and note the delay in the completion of the tabulated achievements for the Wye Valley AONB Unit/National Landscape Team.

Recommendations

That the JAC welcomes the Annual Report figures and awaits the finalised Annual Report on AONB/National Landscape achievements for 2023/24.

Key Issues

- The 2023/24 summary financial report is outlined below on the delivery of the Work Programme for the AONB Unit, which rebranded as the National Landscape Team during the year.
- There is a delay in completing the full Annual Report tabulating the achievements of the year against the annual Work Programme. This will be presented to the next JAC.
- High levels of achievement were maintained by the National Landscape Team despite the challenges of some staff turn-over and consequent reduced capacity during recruitment periods.
- The AONB Unit/National Landscape Team turnover in 2023/24 was £1,112,852 resulting in the leverage of over nearly £23 for every £1 of local authority contribution.

Reasons

The Annual Work Programme Report for the AONB Unit is usually presented to the July JAC. However the Report is not yet complete due to other work commitments. The Work Programme Report for the AONB Unit 2023/24 will tabulate the achievements of the AONB Unit, which rebranded as the National Landscape Team during the period. The Work Programme Annual Report is also presented to DEFRA and Welsh Government as part National Landscape/AONB Partnership annual grant claims to the two government core funding partners.

Implications

The AONB Unit rebranded as the National Landscape Team following the national rebranding in November. During 2023/24 the Team reached 9.5FTE with the Wye Adapt to Climate Change Programme Officer seconded from Herefordshire Wildlife Trust. Through 2023/24

Team members continued to operate a hybrid working system with some staff predominantly Working from Home with most of the team working more flexibly from the office as needs required. This has helped reduce the Unit's carbon footprint. Extensive use of Microsoft Teams has continued, also contributing to operational efficiency, but hopefully not at the expense of networking and building stakeholder relationships.

However, Staff capacity fluctuated during the year with the new Business Support Assistant settling in after the departure at the end of the previous year of the Finance and Administration Officer. Capacity was further reduced after the Nature Recovery Officer left in September to join the Natur am Byth partnership in Wales and the Lower Wye Project Officer left in November and in due course joined Natural Resources Wales (NRW) as a River Restoration Officer in the Upper Wye Catchment. Successful recruitment of replacements to the two posts was not secured until February due in part to a recruitment moratorium in the host authority. This delay did impact on delivery of some projects. Consequently some grant aid was not maximised, particularly the Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places enhancement of a section of the Wye Valley Walk.

The Annual Report tabulating the achievements of the AONB Unit/National Landscape Team will be presented to the JAC at the next meeting in November. Significant achievements during 2023/24 include: the continued co-ordination of the Wye Invasive Species Programme (WISP) focusing on control of Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) namely Japanese Knotweed, American Skunk Cabbage, Himalayan Balsam and Cherry Laurel, with WISP winning a Gloucestershire CRPE Award; the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme went from strength to strength awarding grants and land management advice & guidance to farmers and landowners on the English side; Team members collaborated on the preparation of the successful Wyescapes – food, nature, water Landscape Recovery 2 bid, led by Herefordshire Rural Hub; the Lower Wye Nature Networks project was concluded with the final report submitted to the National Lottery Heritage Fund; AONB volunteers continued to meet and carry out practical task supervised by the Community Links Officer; the Team hosted a field trip as part of the National AONB Conference, based in Bath; there was a public consultation to inform the Lower Wye Valley Tracks & Trails Strategy; the (shared) AONB Planning Officer worked jointly between the Wye Valley and Malvern Hills National Landscapes responding to planning applications.

The overall turnover of the AONB Unit increased in 2023/24, mostly accounted for by the income and expenditure of the DEFRA Farming in Protected Landscape programme and the Partnership projects such as the Lower Wye Nature Networks Lottery funded project. Total turnover in 2023/24 was £1,112,852. The leverage of the AONB Partnership means that for every £1 of local authority contribution, the AONB Unit brought in £22.60.

Background

The AONB Unit Work Programme Plan is reviewed by the AONB Technical Officers' Working Party (TOWP) and AONB/National Landscape Steering Group.

Wye Valley AONB Unit Accounts	2022/23	2023/24
Expenditure		
	£	£
Staff costs	298,462	£392,083
Unit Operating costs	40,930	£35,054
Farming in Protected Landscapes	155,775	£296,112
Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places	221,132	£109,092
Sustainable Development Fund	100,000	£100,000
Partnership projects	256,722	£180,511
TOTAL	1,073,021	1,112,852
Income		
Local Authorities core contributions	49,182	49,182
DEFRA Core grant	151,855	151,855
DEFRA Access for All	~	53,908
Welsh Government	50,000	50,000
Farming in Protected Landscapes	220,110	306,582
Sustainable Development Fund	100,000	100,000
Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places	233,000	132,915
National Lottery Heritage Fund	~	105,552
Natural Resources Wales Grant	49,000	49,000
Income from other sources	219,874	113,858
TOTAL	1,073,021	1,112,852

