

Public Document Pack

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Wye Valley AONB Joint Advisory Committee held at The Council Chamber, Forest of Dean District Council Offices, High Street, Coleford, GL16 8HG on Monday, 4th November, 2024 at 2.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Chris McFarling (Chair) (Forest of Dean District Council)

Elected Members (with voting powers)

Monmouthshire County Council

County Councillor Steven Garratt

Town / Parish Community Councils with voting powers

National Farmers Union – Mr. M. Price

HALC – Ms. B. Vine

One Voice Wales – Councillor L. Parker

Co-opted Members (with voting powers)

Voluntary Conservation Sector in Monmouthshire – Mr. A. Thomas

Technical Advice Officers

National Landscapes Manager – Mr. A. Blake

Monmouthshire County Council – Mr. R. Williams

Gloucestershire County Council – Mr A. Deb

Others present:

Mr. C. Barron (Wye Valley Society - dissolved)

Mr. S. Cox (Coleford Town Council)

Mr. R. Hatton (Monmouth Town Council)

Mr. M Sweeney (Monmouth Town Council)

Mr. M. Holland (Trail Riders Fellowship)

APOLOGIES:

County Councillors: Emma Bryn, Dale Rooke, Ann Webb

Mr. B. Nash, Mr. D. Price, Mr. A. Lee, Mr. M. Quine, Dr. J. Hynes, Ms. M. Getgood,

Ms. C. Bosley.

1. Declarations of Interest

None received.

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2. Public Questions

It was requested that the 'Dark Skies and Artificial Light Pollution' Position Statement be shared with Parish & Community Councils. The Position Statement will shortly be uploaded to the Wye Valley National Landscape Website having been endorsed by the Joint Advisory Committee at the July 2024 meeting. Parish and Community Councils will be notified accordingly.

3. Confirmation of Minutes

The minutes of the Wye Valley AONB Joint Advisory Committee meeting dated 8th July 2024 were confirmed and signed by the Chair.

In doing so, the following updates were received:

- It is understood that the resurfacing of the Wye Bridge will commence in the spring of 2025. This work is currently on hold to allow the road works on the A40 to be completed. Concern was expressed that the current road closures were having a negative impact on Bigsweir Bridge and on the residents of Wyesham. The Wye Valley National Landscape Manager will write to Monmouthshire County Council expressing the concerns raised.
- The task and finish group to review the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) will be established shortly with a view to convening before the end of December 2024. A report outlining its findings will be presented to the next meeting of the Joint Advisory Committee in March 2025.
- The Forest of Dean District Council Chamber now has the technology in place to hold hybrid meetings. The Task and Finish Group will discuss this matter as part of its review with the option of holding future hybrid meetings of the Joint Advisory Committee.
- The National Landscape Planning Officer has reviewed the proposed amendments to the Position Statement in respect of the Renewable Energy in the Wye Valley National Landscape and its Setting. She will shortly circulate these amendments to the Joint Advisory Committee for endorsement. Once finalised the Parish Community and Town Councils will also be notified accordingly.

4. National Landscape Funding and Memorandum of Understanding

We received a report regarding the Wye Valley National Landscape Funding and Memorandum of Understanding 2025 - 2028

In doing so, the following information was noted:

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- A number of confirmed and indicative funding awards, allocations and bids are being made from National Grid, DEFRA, Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales for the future management and duties of the Wye Valley National Landscape.
- Herefordshire Council acts as treasurer for the budgets managed by the Wye Valley National Landscape Team and will accept these awards, allocations and grants as and when confirmed on behalf of the Wye Valley National Landscape Partnership.
- The Wye Valley National Landscape Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is intended to give medium term security and commitment to the continued effective operation, management and governance of the Wye Valley National Landscape Team, with the next MoU proposed to run until 2028.
- The contributions from the local authorities form the foundation to the Wye Valley National Landscape budgets which lever in and match-fund the various awards, allocations and grants where necessary.
- On average in recent years, for every £1 of Local Authority contribution to the National Landscape, the Team has levered in over £20 for the area.

Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- DEFRA and Welsh Government provide the majority of the core funding allocations for the Wye Valley National Landscape Team. However, it was noted that the funding is managed as a whole and concentrated on staff and schemes within the National Landscape which may operate on either side of the national border. Project funding tends to be more focused and restricted to administrative boundaries.

We resolved:

- (i) to endorse the acceptance of the confirmed and indicative funding awards, allocations and bids from National Grid, DEFRA, Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales.
- (ii) to request the constituent local authorities to commit to the agreed financial contributions in a renewed Memorandum of Understanding for 2025-2028.

5. Annual Report 2023/24

We received a report regarding the annual reports for 2023/24 on the achievements of the Wye Valley AONB Unit / National Landscape Team.

In doing so, the following information was noted:

- During 2023/24 all Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) rebranded as National Landscapes.

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- High levels of achievement were maintained 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 nearly £23 for every £1 of local authority contribution.

Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- No applications had been received via the Landscape and Biodiversity Enhancement Grant element of Welsh Government's Sustainable Development Fund (SDF). These schemes were limited to grant funding not exceeding £3000. Some landscape and biodiversity enhancement projects have been funded through other schemes.

We welcomed the Annual Report on AONB / National Landscape achievements for 2023/24.

6. Species Action Plan & Nature Recovery Plan

We received a report regarding the third of the five National Landscape Species Action Plans, for the Bumblebee Assemblage, under the Colchester Declaration.

In doing so, the following information was noted:

- The Colchester Declaration – a 'declaration for nature' was produced by the National Association for AONBS (NAAONB) and supported by all the AONB partnerships in 2019.
- Five species, or assemblage of species, were chosen as representative of the Wye Valley National Landscape / AONB Special Qualities.
- The second Species Action Plan, for the Hedgehog, was adopted at the last Joint Advisory Committee meeting, and the first Species Action Plan for Noble Chafer beetle was adopted in July 2023.
- The third Species Action Plan has been published focusing on a bumblebee assemblage, to encourage the sustainable management of its habitat of species-rich and semi or un-improved grasslands.
- The National Landscape Team is working on the production of the remaining Species Action Plans.
- The suite of Species Action Plans accompanies the Wye Valley National Landscape Nature Recovery Plan, which will be published shortly as a public consultation draft.
- A Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) is being prepared in both Herefordshire and Gloucestershire, with both counties undertaking public surveys before publishing their respective LNRS for consultation.

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Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- The introduction of pine marten into the Wye Valley has been very successful. Pine marten have expanded their range since being released which is being closely monitored. A further update will be presented to the Joint Advisory Committee at the next meeting.
- As outlined in the Species Action Plan, the habitat management for the the Bumblebee Assemblage requires careful attention, particularly in late summer, to ensure the network is enhanced. There is an opportunity for citizen scientists and schools to get involved in this programme which could be promoted by the National Landscape Team.
- A Hedgehog rescue programme has been established with volunteers. The promotion of hedgehog tunnels will be launched in the spring of 2025 with a view to monitoring hedgehog presence in the locality.

We resolved to endorse the Bumblebee Assemblage Species Action Plan and welcome the on-going work on the preparation of the Wye Valley National Landscape Nature Recovery Plan and remaining Species Action Plans.

7. Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL), Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) and Herefordshire Community Foundation (HCF) Wye Valley National Landscape Fund

We received a report regarding progress of the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme, the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) and the Wye Valley National Landscape Fund with Herefordshire Community Foundation (HCF).

In doing so, the following information was noted:

- DEFRA has provided additional allocations in 2024/25 for the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme in England, resulting in the Wye Valley National Landscape benefiting from a FiPL total of £841,264 in this final year of the current programme.
- The FiPL Assessment Panel has approved grants utilising the full amount available, totalling £727,916 of grants and £74,526 of administration, advice and guidance, so the programme is closed for applications unless there are any unspent grants returned in time before the end of the financial year.
- DEFRA has confirmed the extension of the FiPL Officer post for two years but the provision of the FiPL grants programme is uncertain and dependent on the government's Budget and Spending Review.

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- The Welsh Government Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) currently has £87,103.50 allocated from the £100,000 available for 202/25, leaving £10,783.50 available.
- This is the final year of the current SDF allocation, but it is anticipated that Welsh Government will renew the SDF, subject to the Spending Review and Budget settlement.
- The Wye Valley National Landscape Fund hosted by the Herefordshire Community Foundation (HCF) is currently closed for applications while opportunities to grow the Fund are sought.

Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- A butchery unit has received grant funding of £17,000. This allows for local farmers to process their own meat on site helping to keep local farms viable.
- DEFRA has not confirmed whether the FiPL grants programme will be extended beyond March 2025.
- FiPL has enabled the provision of advice and guidance to farmers and land managers on a range of management practices including floodplain grassland restoration and river friendly farming.

We resolved to endorse the recent allocations of grants under the FiPL programme, SDF and HCF National Landscape Fund.

8. Management Plan Review Draft Timetable

We received a report outlining the programme for the preparation and publication of the AONB Management Plan 2026-2031.

In doing so, the following information was noted:

- The existing Wye Valley AONB Management Plan (2021-2026) needs to be reviewed, under the Countryside & Rights of Way (CROW) Act Section 89, by the end of 2026.
- The current Wye Valley AONB Memorandum of Understanding 2021-2024/25, signed by the four local authorities, delegates the Management Plan review to the AONB Partnership.
- Following the previous Management Plan review it was recognised that a comprehensive review was required, rather than a 'light touch' approach.
- Natural England and Natural Resources Wales (NRW) are due to finalise production of guidance for AONB Management Plan reviews.

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Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- The Chair suggested that the review be undertaken using the Gunning Principles.
- County Councillor Garratt stated that he would liaise with Monmouthshire County Council's Scrutiny Manager with a view to extending an invitation to the Wye Valley National Landscapes Manager to attend a Scrutiny Committee meeting in the new year, regarding this matter. The Chair stated that he would contact Gloucestershire County Council's Scrutiny Manager to consider extending a similar invitation.

We resolved:

- (i) to requests that the four local authorities delegate the preparation and production of the next Wye Valley AONB Management Plan to the Wye Valley National Landscape Team.
- (ii) to endorse the programme for the review and publication of the AONB Management Plan 2026-2031.

9. River Wye Update

We received a report regarding the latest proposals and activities to improve water quality, reduce excess nutrients and help restore the River Wye.

In doing so, the following information was noted:

- The River Wye is not failing its nutrient target for the Special Area of Conservation (SAC) but it is close at some locations, whereas the River Lugg is, which flows into the Wye at Mordiford at the northern extent of the Wye Valley National Landscape.
- New research from Cardiff University indicates that Phosphate is not the sole or main cause of algal blooms in the catchment.
- Since the General Election there has been much renewed focus on river restoration and water quality issues including high level meetings, correspondence, setting of priorities and recognition of the need for a cross-border approach.
- The Environment Agency (EA) is working on the Wye Diffuse Water Pollution Plan (DWPP), as part of the Nutrient Management Plan (NMP) for England, which is on track to be completed by the end of March 2025, and Welsh Government is funding the evidence base for the NMP covering the Welsh part of the catchment.
- The Wye Catchment Management Plan, covering the whole of the Wye catchment, is also intended to be completed in spring 2025, through the Wye Catchment Partnership.

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- The Environment Agency (EA) & Herefordshire Rural Hub held workshops over the summer with farmers and other stakeholders to consider what additional measures and mechanisms could support nutrient reductions.
- In November 2024, Herefordshire Council is hosting a second Rivers Conference, with a focus on sustainable practices for arable farming.
- Natural Resources Wales (NRW) recently launched the Upper Wye Restoration Project and is shortly holding a River Restoration Seminar.
- The March for Clean Water took place in London on 3rd November 2024, supported by Friends of River Wye, Save the Wye, the Wye Salmon Association, CPRE and many others.
- The Wye Valley National Landscape Team continues to manage partnership projects and collaborative initiatives including through the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme, Wye Adapt to Climate Change? and Wyescapes Landscape Recovery to support farmers and land-managers in and around the National Landscape.

Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- Cardiff University, School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, has completed research on “Determining causes and solutions for harmful algal blooms on the Wye River” (2024) and has released its interim report. The final report will be released in the new year.
- Over the next year, the emphasis will shift to identify broader solutions with closer cross border working between Welsh Government and DEFRA.
- The National Landscape Team sits on a number of bodies relating to the river and provides feedback on river issues within the AONB.
- It is vital the Wye Valley National Landscape is represented on any boards established to improve water quality and restore the River Wye.

We noted the report.

10. **National Updates**

We received a report regarding activity nationally relating to National Landscapes in England and Wales.

In doing so, the following information was noted:

- DEFRA officials maintain regular contact with National Landscape Lead Officers, both directly and through the National Landscapes Association.

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- Similarly in Wales, good relations and communication are maintained with Welsh Government, including through Tirweddau Cymru Landscapes Wales.
- Andrew Blake, Wye Valley National Landscape Manager, currently holds the chair of Tirweddau Cymru Landscapes Wales.
- The next Tirweddau Cymru Landscapes Wales Seminar will be hosted in the Wye Valley, in late April 2025.
- The National Landscapes Association AGM and Chairs' Conference is in London on 28th November 2024.
- The next Lead Officers Meeting is in Birmingham in mid-February 2025.
- A meeting between the Welsh Government Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs and the Chair of the National Landscapes Association was hosted in the Wye Valley, facilitated by the National Landscape Manager.

We noted the report.

11. Partner and National Landscape Team Progress Reports and Updates

We received a report regarding the activity of the Wye Valley National Landscape Team and other partners relating to:

- AONB Partnership Study Tour 2024 feedback.
- Lower Wye Tracks & Trails Strategy, Action Plan & Steering Group.
- Wye Valley Walk.
- Off Road Wheeling weekend.
- Volunteer activity.
- Young Adventurers.

Having received the report, the following points were noted:

- The Off Road Wheeling weekend had been well received.
- With regard to the closure of Lydbrook's Black Bridge, clarification is being sought from Gloucestershire County Council regarding its refurbishment.

We noted the report.

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12. Next Meetings

Monday 3rd March 2025 at 2.00pm.

Monday 7th July 2025 at 2.00pm.

Monday 3rd November 2025 at 2.00pm.

The meetings will be held in the Council Chamber, Forest of Dean District Council Offices, Coleford.

The meeting ended at 3.40 pm.