

TECHNICAL OFFICERS'
WORKING PARTY REPORT

WYE VALLEY AONB
JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE
3rd July 2017

AONB & PARTNER REPORTS

Purpose

To advise members of activity of the AONB Unit and Partners, relating to:-

- a. Welsh Government Access Grant
- b. Wye Valley River Festival 2018
- c. AONB Farming Awards
- d. Roadside Verges
- e. mindSCAPE
- f. Youth Rangers
- g. Wye-Being
- h. The Ash Project

FOR INFORMATION

a. Wye Valley AONB Access Grant 2016/17

Welsh Government provided the opportunity in autumn 2016 to bid for capital funding for 'access improvements in National Parks and AONBs'. A bid was submitted on behalf of the AONB Partnership by Monmouthshire County Council's Countryside Access team. A grant of £48,500 was approved against total costs of £50,500.

Inevitably the choice of projects had to reflect the need to complete the works over the winter period but nevertheless the grant has enabled some valuable improvements to Rights of Way in the Monmouthshire part of the AONB, addressing some priority issues. The improvements undertaken were as follows:

- Fingerpost Replacement – 118 roadside way marker / finger posts at various locations across the Monmouthshire part of the AONB
- Resurfacing the Wye Valley Walk at Chepstow School - part of the route 355/P2 leading to Piercefield Woods which has suffered from repeated wash out due to drainage issues and 376m has been tarmacked to provide a long term solution.
- Resurfacing of Bridleway 382/119 at Whitelye – 146m of bridleway resurfaced to a 3m width. This bridleway link between unclassified roads was previously in a poor and boggy condition.
- Bridge replacement at Trellech – replacement of a 3m footbridge on footpath 382/161

Total costs incurred were £50,530 including project management costs. The grant of £48,500 received from Welsh Government was match funded by Monmouthshire County Council's Rights of Way budget.

Whilst some longer term access improvements were also identified to Welsh Government as part of the original bid it is not yet clear if this grant funding will be repeated in 17/18. In anticipation that further funding may become available work is currently underway to assess options for some longer term projects, including improving the condition of the Wye Valley Walk between the Monmouthshire Show Ground and the “Duke of Beaufort” bridge in Monmouth.

The AONB Unit and MCC’s Countryside Access team will continue to liaise with Welsh Government in anticipation that a longer term programme can be developed.

b. Wye Valley River Festival 2018 update

Following the research and development phase earlier in the year, ideas, proposals and sites have been reviewed by the Festival Development Team - Phill Haynes, Desperate Men and the AONB Unit. Letters of Support and offers of funding have already been received from various organisation, including Environment Agency, Forestry Commission, Shire Hall Monmouth and the Woodland Trust of both in-kind and cash match funding. Applications for funding are currently being prepared for Arts Council England and Wales. Discussions continue with various partners, artists and local communities. However, until the funding base is built up it is difficult to be more specific about detailed engagement, projects and outcomes.

c. AONB Farming Awards

Now in its tenth year, the Wye Valley AONB Farming Awards celebrate farmers and land managers who are doing outstanding work to conserve and enhance the landscape. The deadline for entries was early May and the shortlisted finalists were visited by judges in late May. The judging panel consisted of Andrew Blake (AONB Manager), Caroline Hanks (Farming4Wildlife), David Price (NFU Wales) and Jim Herbert (Lewstone Farm – 2015 Winner). The 2017 competition winner will have been announced at the Monmouthshire Show on Saturday 1st July. The four finalists are:-

- Cheery Orchard Farm; 120 acre farm in Penallt running a successful and steadily growing suckler cow unit and box scheme, selling their beef to the public and wholesale to local pubs. They are also planning to enter Glastir in 2018, delivering more biodiversity enhancements on the farm.
- Coppett Hill Common Trust; 250 acres of common, one of Herefordshire’s largest Local Nature Reserves (established in 1985) and forms part of the iconic view from Yat Rock. Owned and managed by the community, the hill is managed for conservation and access and is in both Higher Level Stewardship and Woodland Grant Scheme agreements. It is partially grazed by a commoner and is home to a variety of important species.
- Gadr Farm; 160 acres of mainly sheep pasture and woodland. A previous winner of the Award, with a large amount of environmental work on the farm under agri-environment schemes, managing woodland, grassland, ponds and boundaries for conservation.
- Square Farm; 190 acres, last year’s Runner-up, a traditional mixed organic farm incorporating cattle, sheep, pigs, chicken, ducks and geese, cereal and root crops and market garden vegetables. A farm shop on site stocks their organic meat and

vegetables alongside a widening choice of products. Environmental work takes place through an agri-environment scheme.

The winner takes home £400 and the prestigious Wye Valley AONB Farming Award Trophy, designed by Forest of Dean ironwork sculptor and blacksmith Steve Bluett

The Monmouthshire Show have been keen to promote the AONB Farming Awards more widely at the Show. Information boards detailing previous winners have been produced for display around the Countryside Ring, along with banners promoting the Awards.

d. Roadside Verges

The AONB Unit are engaged in the development of two roadside verge enhancement projects with Plantlife. A number of AONBs across the country are working with Plantlife to develop a partnership project to enhance biodiversity on Trunk Road verges. Targeted verges on the A40 and A49 through Herefordshire have been surveyed by the AONB Unit to establish current condition and existing species. The AONB Unit are currently considering initial ideas around species rich grassland enhancement and hedgerow establishment and management based on the survey results.

The second project is an AONB wide initiative. Plantlife are applying for funding for a national partnership project with AONBs to raise awareness of the importance of roadside verges for biodiversity and carry out improvement work. The AONB Unit have developed a two year programme for inclusion in this application around the promotion of important verges and best practice management.

e. mindSCAPE

The mindSCAPE project is now in its fourth and final year of Big Lottery funding. It continues to be well received and runs at capacity, delivered by Artspace Cinderford and now predominantly based at the Orchard Trust in Lydbrook.

To celebrate and promote the successful 4 year project, a conference is being organised on Thursday 5th October at Lindors Country House Hotel, near St Briavels. Sharing best practice and experience from the project, the conference will be aimed at other organisations planning similar projects, health professionals and the local community.

The mindSCAPE project has secured funding through the Forester's Forest HLF Landscape Partnership to continue in a modified format.

f. AONB Youth Rangers



The end of 3rd cohort of Youth Rangers will be marked with a Camp on 1st and 2nd July 2017. In total 45 young people will have taken part in the programme over the 3 cohorts to date. From May 2017 Youth Rangers is part funded by the Foresters' Forest HLF Landscape Partnership.

Activity this year included: Charcoal making with GWT; film making with Foresters' Forest Literary Group; Coppicing with Plantlife; Symonds Yat Crag clean up with Forestry Commission & Local climbing groups; climbing; dystone walling at Staunton Meend; navigation & orienteering with AONB staff; veteran tree survey with AONB staff. AONB Youth Rangers are working towards completing the John Muir Award. Other awards include; basic first aid, 1*kayak and Rural Media film making.

The next (4th) cohort will be recruited in autumn 2017. The AONB Community Links Officer continues to promote the scheme to schools and young people in and around the Wye Valley AONB.

Meanwhile the Volunteer Leaders have recently undertaken navigation training with Mountain Training (<http://www.mountain-training.org/>) a British Mountaineering Association supported network. They are working towards their Lowland Leader certification, due in the autumn after completing and logging 20 long walks and completing an assessment of group leadership and navigation skills, plus expedition leader. This is a recognised and transferable qualification.



g. Wye-Being

Since October 2016 the Wye Valley AONB Unit have been developing a new initiative 'Wye-Being'. This is responding to the need to provide opportunities for greater access to nature, alongside experiential activities in the landscape and to address the thrust of Wales' Well-Being and Future Generations Act. The AONB Community Links Officer is working on two Wye-Being projects which have emerged from the establishment of new partnerships:

1) 'Dads Can' in Monmouthshire, with Monmouthshire Housing Association. 'Dads Can' work with young men, usually fathers, who are tenants who need a range of support, emotional, practical, life skills and accredited training that can improve career prospects of the participants in the scheme. The AONB Unit has developed a selection of activities which offer these young men opportunities to learn rural skills in the landscape; including drystone walling, green woodworking and vegetation management for conservation aims. It is early days however the indications are that this work has a beneficial influence on participants. For example, one young man after his experience of drystone walling has been inspired to sign up to a brick laying course having previously had little motivation for a career. As the scheme develops we will institute a structured evaluation of the benefits of the work and time spent in the landscape. At this stage we are still developing relationships and adapting activities to suit participant's needs. A full programme of activity is planned going forward, with roughly 8 sessions between now and September.

2) In Gloucestershire, the Community Links Officer has been working with Artspace, the Forestry Commission and Forest of Dean District Council to deliver 'Active for Life – Health & Wellbeing Week in June' http://artspacecinderford.org/files/Active_For_Life.pdf. The AONB aspect of this initiative is a collaboration between the mindSCAPE group and the Walking for Health Groups from the Forest of Dean & Chepstow. On Monday 19th June 50 participants enjoyed a healthy walk together followed a subsidised healthy lunch created by students at the Forest of Dean College. The students developed an affordable menu based on the Blue Zone principals of healthy living and landscape (see National Geographic article <https://bluezones.com/#section-1>). The Blue Zone philosophy makes the clear link between longevity, environment, activity, diet, social groups and personal 'value', creating a rounded picture of what is required for human health and wellbeing. These goals are achievable with structures that ease and support human access to the countryside, in supportive group settings and with good nutrition. That was the focus of the 19th June activity. Following evaluation, measuring participant's enjoyment and personal benefits alongside gauging participant's future needs and interests, the activity may be developed in a number of ways.

h. The Ash Project www.theashproject.org.uk

Ash dieback is widely accepted to be untreatable and could see the demise of up to 95% of these trees over the next decade. The Ash Project is an urgent cultural response to the devastating effects of ash dieback, led by the Kent Downs AONB Partnership.

As part of the project a book on Ash Trees and Ash Landscapes will be published in partnership with the Woodland Trust. Several AONBs, including the Wye Valley AONB, have contributed to the cost of the book and will be properly recognised in the publication. Work on the book has started and the author and photographer, Archie Miles, is out and about in the landscapes of Britain taking pictures of amazing Ash Trees and Ash Landscapes.