

NORTH WESSEX DOWNS AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY
COUNCIL OF PARTNERS

**MINUTES of a meeting held at
Chilton Village Hall, Chilton,
Tuesday 7th March 2017**

Present

Mr E Hiscocks
Cllr G Sumner
Cllr Charles Mathew
Cllr P Miller
Cllr D Boeck
Cllr P Giddings
Mr A Smith

Representing

Chairman
Swindon Borough Council
Oxfordshire County Council
Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council
West Berkshire Council
Test Valley Borough Council
Natural England – Thames Valley Area Manager

Community & Parish Interest Group Members

Dr J Sharp

Historic Environment Interest Group Member

Mr P Lemon

Nature Conservation Interest Group Member

Mrs A Ingham

Recreation & Tourism Interest Group Members

Mr M Crane
Mr R Clarke

North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust

Mr D Sherlock

In attendance

Ms C Riggs	Swindon Borough Council
Mr G King	Hampshire County Council
Mr P Johnston	Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council
Mr H Oliver	Director, NWD AONB
Mr I Hepburn	Planning Advisor NWD AONB
Ms R Somerset	Communications Officer NWD AONB
Mrs S Clarke	Partnership Coordinator NWD AONB (job share)
Ms C McCorquodale	Partnership Coordinator NWD AONB (job share)

EH opened the meeting with an apology for the lateness of the papers.

1. Apologies. Apologies for absence were received from:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Representing</u>
Cllr E Gillespie	South Oxfordshire & Vale of White Horse District Councils
Cllr Fleur de Rhe-Philippe	Wiltshire Council
Cllr Anna McNair Scott	Hampshire County Council

Mr R Broadhead	NWD AONB MWG Chairman
Mr Paul Hendry	West Berkshire Council
Mr D Lamb	Vale of White Horse District Council
Mr N Mottram	Oxfordshire County Council
Mr D Bibby	Test Valley Borough Council
Mr N Titchen	Community & Parish Interest Group
Mrs Penny Brookman	Community & Parish Interest Group
Ms Lois Philips	Farming & Rural Business Interest Group

2. Constitutional Item (paper 1)

It was agreed that Councillor Paul Miller be appointed to the Management Working Group as the local authority elected member and Vice Chairman of the Council of Partners, initially for a period of two years from March 2017.

It was noted that Councillor Dominic Boeck has been appointed to the Council of Partners representing West Berkshire Council, replacing Councillor Keith Chopping.

It was noted that, as agreed at the last meeting, Mr Ted Hiscocks will serve for a further two years as Chairman of the Council of Partners with effect from March 2017.

3. Minutes of Previous Meeting (paper 2)

It was agreed that the Minutes of the previous meeting held on Tuesday 8 November be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

4. Matters Arising from Minutes

EH reported that **PL** had made a site visit to potential alternative AONB offices south of Hungerford but part of the office space had been recently let. **EH** also noted that currently IT support (valued at approx. £10,000 p.a.) was part of Wiltshire Council's longstanding commitment as host authority. This would change should the Unit move to new accommodation. **EH** explained that he was actively working with Donald Sherlock to look at accommodation possibilities.

Written protocol with Natural England – **HO** reported that he had talked to **AS**.

ACTION: **HO** to resend the protocol to the three Natural England Area Managers namely **AS**, Fran Davies and Matt Beard.

SC confirmed that Marlborough Town Council had the right version of the AONB promotional film.

5. Chairman's remarks

EH welcomed the Dominic Boeck, the new local authority member, and Ian Hepburn, the Planning Advisor covering Rebecca Davies' maternity leave.

He drew attention to a number of events and asked for the members' active support either as the audience or as helpers. He informed the meeting that the 2017 Forum will be held jointly with the Ridgeway Partnership on Wednesday 18 October (venue to be confirmed but not too far from the Ridgeway National Trail). He noted that the AONB helped to establish the Ridgeway Partnership in 2015 when the AONB chaired the Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails Management Group. The general theme will be along the lines of "The Great Outdoors: recreation and access to the countryside".

The Friends, now the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust, have been busy laying the foundations for an enthusiastic support group.

He noted that work on the Corporate Strategy Review continues and thanked those who are actively involved.

He explained that he is continuing to try to arrange meetings with MPs and councillors. These sessions have two main objectives: for the Partnership to hear how they think it can serve their constituencies and councils better, and to check that they are fully aware of the status and importance of the landscape of the North Wessex Downs.

He invited members to a light lunch giving an opportunity to network and explained that RS would be running a training session during the afternoon on the "Story of the North Wessex Downs". Those who wish to attend other training sessions should please see RS.

He thanked those present for their ongoing support and involvement.

6. Partnership Round Table

CM – Reported the establishment of the Wild Oxfordshire conservation charity which consisted of conservation and wildlife groups and ecological recorders and the three AONBs in Oxfordshire. The Wild Oxfordshire State of Nature Report is being launched on 21st March at Blenheim Palace. **EH** will attend on behalf of the NWD AONB Partnership.

Oxfordshire Council is collaborating with CPRE Oxfordshire to reprocess the Night Blight! dark skies data to allow greater interrogation at a higher resolution.

The Oxfordshire Historic Landscape Characterisation is well under way with a steering group meeting in March. Rowan Whimster had been asked whether he would attend for the AONB.

Oxfordshire Unitary proposals will be submitted to the DCLG at the end of March

MC - The Great West Way is an initiative focussed on the route from Bristol to London and led by Visit Wiltshire, with an initial grant of £250k from Visit England. The intention is to bid for a further £1m as a next stage to develop and promote itineraries, enabling overseas travel agents to make arrangements for visitors. He explained that it is becoming clear that there is enough to see but not sufficient accommodation. 'The Great West Way Conference' is taking place in Wiltshire on Thursday 30 March 2017 at Grittleton House nr Chippenham. AONB staff would attend.

DB – West Berkshire is dealing with development pressures and there is currently a call for sites for the next Local Plan review.

PM – the Manydown urban extension to Basingstoke is moving ahead and PM wants to address the apparent reluctance of the Project Team to respond to concerns raised by the Planning Advisor. He is proposing a mini sub-group to look at the issues.

PG - The Test Valley Local Plan has been confirmed following a legal challenge.

JS – Oxford University Students are working on an app for use on the Ridgeway.

He highlighted development pressures on the Harwell site: Vale of White Horse District Council was again proposing very large-scale housing in the AONB, this time on the northern side of the Harwell campus. (Previous proposals for 1,200 houses in the AONB had been dropped after the Inspector conducting the Local Plan examination ruled them unsound last year in the absence of exceptional circumstances.) The Greensands Appeal took place last week and the outcome is awaited.

PS Called for closer dialogue between SBC and AONB staff as over the next 10 years 8,000 – 10,000 homes will be built as the new Swindon Eastern Villages development. There are also a further 80 homes planned at Burderop Park, which has been bought by Town & Country Homes and which could set a precedent for development within the AONB. He also advocated greater dialogue and response by AONB staff to Swindon's Green Infrastructure Strategy.

AS Reported that Natural England's discussions with Environment Agency and Forestry Commission colleagues to bring together their respective plans for the Thames region were well under way and he will share this with the AONB team in April. He hoped that in particular there would be close working with the AONB on housing development applications.

7. **Budget Update for 2016-17 (paper 3)**

CMC explained that the actual figures were recorded to the end of January 2017. She explained that the 12 columns were April to March. The projects listed separately were SDF-funded activities and were provided to give members more details relating to the SDF budget line.

CM pressed for information on income generation and asked for the budget figure for income generation. He stated that access to the source material for the figures that were presented to the meeting would be helpful.

CM identified a significant overspend against the Projects & bid development and asked for a detailed list of projects.

HO explained that additional funds available due to staff vacancy had been used for projects and Oliver Cripps had been contracted to deliver an expanded SDF programme. There had been further investment in website development. He confirmed that currently the projection was for a small underspend of £1,376 but this was subject to change.

ACTION: CM to be provided with details of the spend on the Projects & bid development budget line that was showing a significant overspend.

8. **Proposed Budget Allocations 2017 -2018 (paper 4)**

HO presented the report and drew out the key point that Defra contributed 75% to the core budget, matched with 25% local authority contributions. The allocated SDF budget was funded 100% by Defra. The grant however can be used as a single pot. The budget Defra offer includes a 1.72% inflation increase. It is part of a four-year settlement. **HO** reported that he had emailed the constituent local authority officers and so far received five responses. **CM** requested that any correspondence with supporting local authority officers be copied to the elected member.

HO reported that the vacant post had prompted a rethink of the structure of the team and he was considering two part-time posts one for project development, bid writing and fundraising and the other as a project officer. **HO** reported that the recent HLF bid to fund display materials for the Story had been unsuccessful; it had ticked all the boxes but it was not seen to be good enough value for money in the face of stiff competition for funds.

HO presented the expenditure allocations published in Table 2 of the report. He explained that the final figure listed under "Other Projects and bid development (inc. SDF)" was not assigned as it was not clear what match funding would be needed for specific projects.

CM requested information about income generation activities. **HO** responded that there were sub-licensees for office space, the sale of merchandise such as the icons greetings cards and prints. At members' request a small charge (£10) was now levied for attendance at events to offset some costs. In respect of the latter he cited Cranborne Chase AONB that charged £40 per head for similar events and reportedly this had not dampened interest. He reminded the meeting that at the last meeting it had also been agreed to charge in some cases for officer time. There were some initial administrative problems with Wiltshire Council in respect of raising invoices for small businesses or householders. Network Rail was already being invoiced for work on mitigating the landscape harm from GW electrification. **CM** asked for an indication of how much income could be realized from charging for officer time. **HO** responded that because it was dependent on external pressures the income was very unpredictable.

RC reminded the meeting that Defra over the next four years expected AONBs to be seeking to generate non-exchequer funding. Few AONBs were tackling this issue effectively.

EH indicated that the projects in the Strategic Review should open doors and identify new income opportunities.

DB asked about the basis for setting local authority contributions. **HO** explained that the agreed formula was based on a flat rate plus the proportion of the AONB covered by unitary authorities and county councils rather than population or the economy.

MC asked about the LEADER Project. **HO** explained that this was EU money and was not included in the AONB figures although clearly it brought resources into the AONB and levered in large private sector contributions.

RC asked whether the five authorities that had responded had indicated whether or not they agreed to meet the additional cost.

HO explained that Wiltshire Council had indicated that it would not meet the additional cost. **CM** stated that Oxfordshire County Council would meet the cost this year but it was unlikely that it would do so in future years. There were difficult choices to be made in the area of social care where, with an ageing population, the need for resources was continuing to grow against a background of government reductions in funding. In addition more children were in the care of the local authority.

(note for the minute: Wiltshire Council will meet contribution requested for 2017/2018)

DB undertook to chase up West Berkshire's response. He explained that the Council is considering discontinuing all discretionary spending even though this may raise other problems, but budget pressures are severe.

EH took the view that other sources of non-exchequer income should be explored to plug the gap that may be in the region of £600. It may be that reluctantly we may not be able to claim the full amount from DEFRA. **PL** felt strongly that we should raise income to plug any gaps.

There was disquiet expressed by those local authorities who had agreed to meet the additional costs, in order to achieve the Defra grant offer in full, that others were not prepared to do so.

AS advised that NE's budget was now made up of 20% non-exchequer income. The AONB was an attractive brand and should be capitalized on. **CM** felt that over the next two to three years the AONB Unit should be tasked with generating 10% of the total budget from external sources. **PM** supported **AS's** view and felt that there were opportunities with developers to link them with the AONB and to generate funds through CIL. There was an opportunity to invest in a Heritage Centre in the Eastern Villages (Swindon) and other opportunities through the Green Infrastructure Strategy. **HO** noted that staff had discussed the green infrastructure strategy with Swindon BC over the last six years.

CM proposed and it was agreed that a report be tabled at the next meeting on the AONB Unit's approach to planning gain in each local authority. **CM** reinforced the need to take a positive approach to getting CIL

It was agreed that the budget be approved with the caveat that should some authorities not meet the additional costs that there would be a reduction in the total AONB budget to reflect those decisions (including the 3:1 DEFRA contribution we will be unable to claim for each local authority

pound); the budget for Other Projects may be allocated in response to match funding requirements.

Action: A paper to be brought to the next meeting on the AONB's engagement with CIL(Community Infrastructure Levy) and information on any monies that may be available to the AONB through CIL or Section 106 agreements.

9. Proposed Revised Work Programme 2017- 2018(paper 5)

HO presented the proposed Programme and explained that it was ambitious, included projects currently running and reflected the changes in AONB staff.

EH queried the absence of a Design Guide. **HO** responded that with a new officer covering the Planning Advisor's maternity leave he judged that there was not the capacity in the coming year but that it was identified within the five-year plan.

HO drew attention to the addition of the Landscape Enhancement Initiative that was a new and significant addition. The contacts database will allow targeted communications. The Great West Way and Lifecycles and Landscapes will require greater resources than in the previous year. He anticipated working with the NWD Landscape Trust and will progress the Corporate Strategy Review work streams particularly in response to **PL's** proposal for a farmer cluster in the Bourne Valley.

Watercress and Winterbournes have the key objective of cleaning up the rivers at source. The AONB did not have the "off the shelf" projects ready to go requested at this early stage but he will keep the initiative under review with the aim of engaging where possible.

HO explained that Wildflower Verges is a Plantlife-led initiative looking to employ project officers to liaise directly with the highway authorities in AONBs.

Collaboration will continue with partners on the Big Chalk. **HO** explained that there are plans to establish a research hub, possibly in collaboration with Southampton University.

EH reminded the meeting that the Management Working Group would be monitoring the delivery of the Work Programme.

The proposed Work Programme 2017-2018 was agreed.

10 Guidance for Equestrian Development & Land Management within NWD AONB (paper 6)

IH presented the guidance document and commended it to the Meeting. He explained that with the volume of planning applications for equestrian related development this was invaluable in reducing the time needed to give advice.

It will be made available on the website and to interest groups. The issue of charging was discussed but it was agreed that it was important that this was freely available to ensure development in line with AONB policies and objectives. The document will be proofed prior to publication.

PM & PG thought it was a very valuable document. **CM** raised the issue of the impact of the proposed changes to the NPPF and it was agreed that the document be reviewed in a year unless earlier revisions were required.

HO explained that this added to the suite of other documents in Renewables, Setting and Housing. In respect of the latter **HO** informed the meeting that the Housing Position Statement was out of date and out of step with the current Management Plan and was actively under review. Minerals & Waste is in draft and Dark Skies will follow in the next few months.

The Council of Partners congratulated Rebecca Davies on producing such a succinct and well written document and asked that the Chairman send a letter expressing their appreciation.

The Council of Partners agreed the Position Statement for publication.

ACTION: The document be published subject to final drafting amendments and reviewed in one year unless earlier revisions are needed.

11 Director's Report – (paper 7)

HO presented the report. There was significant debate about the recommendation by the Management Working Group that the life of the existing Management Plan 2015 -2019 be extended by three years to 2022 by which time they contended that the outcome of Brexit would become clearer. **HO** explained that the uncertainties in respect of policy and regulation for farming, environmental and related issues had led the MWG to recommend an extension to the current Plan. It was intended to be a light touch and update the existing Plan factually. **HO** had discussed this approach with **AS** and with the CoP approval would approach Defra. He explained that to undertake a full review it was necessary to start this year. He also explained that his thinking and approach to the Work Programme for 2017-2018 had been influenced by the recommendation of the MWG.

RC did not support this approach and reminded the meeting that a core statutory purpose of the AONB Partnership was to consult on and publish a vision for the protected landscape. It is necessary to be mindful of the Brexit negotiations but continue to develop and promote a Vision for the AONB. In 2019 it will be the 90th Anniversary of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act and the next NAAOB Lead Officers' Meeting will be preparing guidance on how to use this occasion to raise further the profile and reinforce the importance of protected landscapes and if the CoP takes the route of merely extending the life of the existing Management Plan it will be out of step with the other protected landscapes. There is a need to be proactive and reaffirm the Vision whilst accepting that processes may change.

AS felt that the need to express ambition and the Vision for the AONB was very powerful and should be carefully considered.

PL felt strongly that we should continue to lead and express our Vision and not sit back and wait for Brexit. **CM** agreed and expressed the view that even after five years we may not be clear what Brexit means; it will take a very long time to identify the full impact.

HO responded that to undertake the full Management Plan process it would be necessary to employ an officer and to revise the 2017 -2018 Work Programme.

RC advised that to water down a specific primary purpose of the existence of the AONB Partnership could threaten future funding and the Management Working Group should be aware of this.

EH invited both **RC** and **AS** (Natural England) to engage with the MWG. The next meeting is scheduled for 6 June 2017. It was agreed that the MWG look again at its recommendation to

extend the life of the current plan and report to the Council of Partners on 4 July 2017. There was concern expressed that this was causing delay.

ACTION: The MWG be asked to review their recommendation to the Council of Partners at to the next meeting on 6th June 2017. RC be invited to attend.

HO highlighted the Woodland Forum on 3 May where it is hoped to attract around 40 participants. This activity is being delivered with the Forestry Commission SE and SW and Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB.

The Story of the North Wessex Downs– Members expressed the view that the proposed display materials are the sort of activity that should attract commercial sponsorship.

Big Chalk - AI suggested that the landfill tax be investigated as a source of funding.

RC expressed concern that the Director's report did not reflect the work the NAAONB had undertaken in positioning the AONB family to respond to the challenges of Brexit. The NAAONB has produced a briefing for SEPL, provided a platform for discussion pulling in speakers such as Dieter Helm, to inform the debate at the Chairmen's meeting. The NAAONB has facilitated debate across the National Parks and AONB authorities. A paper is going to the next National Association Board of Trustees on 14th March and after that meeting the NAAONB will have an agreed position on Brexit. HO explained he felt there had been some resistance from the CEO of NAAONB to responding to SE&EPL lead officers' strong request to take a lead by drafting a paper for discussion on AONB principles for Brexit in advance of the Chairmen's meeting in November. RC explained that this was because any position statement had to be developed and agreed with the Trustees of the NAAONB. RC disputed the reported lack of engagement and stated that a measured and constructive approach was being taken to this complex issue and that the Director's report was not a reflection of the current situation.

Rose Somerset presented some highlights of her work on Communications with particular regard to the Lifecycles and Landscapes project and the new website. She thanked JS for his involvement in raising the media profile of the AONB.

12 Strategic Review

HO reported that the MWG at its last meeting had discussed Three Project Briefs:-

- Corporate Strategy document – Lead HO, support RW;
- Land Managers Forum (Focus the Bourne Valley) – Lead PL, support Gill Swanton;
- Corporate Engagement and Products & Services have been rolled into one - Lead Gerry Hamersley/Robin Edwards, support NT/CM.

JS has also produced a Project Brief for a Resources Group supported by NT.

HO informed the meeting that some administrative support would be available to the Project Lead.

13. The North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust

DS informed the meeting that the Trust was registered as a charity and was opening a bank account. He advised that there were two new trustees, EH and Horace Mitchell. The next meeting of the Trust was 20th March where they would be planning strategy.

14. **Planning Update (paper 8)**
IH presented the paper and in respect of paragraph 8 is meeting the applicant to reinforce the comments made by RD.

15. **Any Other Business**
None

EH noted that Amanda Ingham would no longer be attending the Council of Partners: he thanked her for her contribution and wished her well.

16. **The next meeting of the Council of Partners is Tuesday 4th July Aldbourne War Memorial Hall**

(Meeting closed at 12.30pm)

Signed..... K. J. S. Hiscox

Date..... 4 July 2017