

**NORTH WESSEX DOWNS AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY
COUNCIL OF PARTNERS**

**MINUTES of a meeting held at
Woodlands St Mary Village Hall, WOODLANDS ST MARY, Berkshire
Tuesday 8th November 2016**

Present

Mr E Hiscocks
Cllr G Sumner
Cllr A McNair-Scott
Cllr Charles Mathew
Cllr Fleur de Rhe-Philippe
Mr A Smith

Representing

Chairman
Swindon Borough Council
Hampshire County Council
Oxfordshire County Council
Wiltshire Council
Natural England – Thames Valley Area Manager

Community & Parish Interest Group Members

Mr B Castle
Mrs P Brookman
Mr Nigel Titchen
Dr J Sharp

Historic Environment Interest Group Member

Mr P Lemon

Nature Conservation Interest Group Member

Mrs M Chambers

Recreation & Tourism Interest Group Members

Mr M Crane
Mr R Clarke

Also present

Mr D Sherlock

In attendance

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Mr N Mottram | Oxfordshire County Council |
| Ms C Riggs | Swindon Borough Council |
| Mr R Broadhead | NWD AONB MWG Chairman & Wiltshire Council |
| Mr G King | Hampshire County Council |
| Mr Paul Hendry | West Berkshire Council |
| Mr C Slack | Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council |
| Mr H Oliver | Director, NWD AONB |
| Mr O Cripps | Projects & Development Manager, NWDAONB |
| Mrs R Davies | Planning Officer NWD AONB |
| Mrs S Clarke | Partnership Coordinator NWD AONB (job share) |
| Ms C McCorquodale | Partnership Coordinator NWD AONB (job share) |

1. Apologies. Apologies for absence were received from:

| | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| <u>Name</u> | <u>Representing</u> |
| Cllr P Giddings | Test Valley Borough Council |

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Cllr E Gillespie | South Oxfordshire & Vale of White Horse District Councils |
| Mr C Musgrave | Farming and Rural Business Interest Group / Country Land and Business Association |
| Mrs A Ingham | Nature Conservation |
| Mr D Bibby | Test Valley District Council |

Mr Ted Hiscocks left the meeting; Cllr Fleur de Rhe-Philippe took the Chair

2. Constitutional Item (paper 1)

The members noted that Cllr Paul Miller has replaced Donald Sherlock who has stepped down as the Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council representative.

The members agreed unanimously to extend the current Chairman's term for a further two years.

ACTION: TH be confirmed as Chairman for a further two years from March 2017.

Members discussed the merits of an invitation from the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust (NWDLT) to nominate a person as a trustee. Issues of potential conflict with the work of the AONB were explored. **GK** explained that there would be the option for up to 12 trustees, and that the objects of the NWDLT would be aligned with those of the AONB. The person nominated would not be representing the Council of Partners (CoP) but would act as a mechanism for communication and collaboration; he saw no potential for conflict. In response to the recommendation in paragraph 12 RC questioned the need for a reciprocal arrangement with NWDLT as this will effectively further increase the size of the CoP. NT did not support an increase in membership of the CoP and urged that the representative be identified within the existing membership.

ACTION

- (1) Mr. Ted Hiscocks be nominated as a NWDLT trustee; and
- (2) the NWDLT take a permanent place on the Council of Partners and the Partnership Agreement and Terms of Reference be amended accordingly.

Mr. Ted Hiscocks rejoined the meeting and took the Chair.

3. Minutes of Previous Meeting (paper 2)

It was agreed that the Minutes of the previous meeting held on Tuesday 12th July 2016 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

4. Matters Arising from Minutes

The Story of the North Wessex Downs - the next training session on 7th March 2017 was full.

ACTION: A further training session to be arranged by RS (*Note: subsequently arranged for 15th March at the AONB Office at Denford Manor RG17 0UN*)

5. Chairman's remarks

Mr. Ted Hiscocks commended the work of the small dedicated team that relied on partnerships and working with others to deliver a demanding work programme.

6. Partnership Round Table

NM notified the CoP that Oxfordshire County Council was drafting an Infrastructure Strategy across areas of transport, education, health and green infrastructure; it should be published in the next few months and the AONB would have an opportunity to comment.

MCh – drew attention to recently published guidance – Harvesting Woodfuel from Hedges produced by the Organic Research Centre with funding from a number of sources including the NWD SDF fund.

JS – reported that the exercise with Oxford University students on improving the NWD social media profile, (important to reach young people) was progressing and there would be a report to the March meeting

RC – reported that Visit Wiltshire had secured a Discover England Fund grant to develop the Great Western Way. OC is due to attend a branding meeting with consultants commissioned by Visit Wiltshire later this month.

AMcNS reported on the improved street lighting for Basingstoke which has reduced light pollution.

OC drew the meeting's attention to the availability of SDF grants and urged members to encourage applications (size of a typical grant is £1,200).

DS reported that the NWDLT had been granted charitable status and a report would be made to the next meeting.

CS introduced himself as the new officer from Basingstoke and Deane BC and was welcomed by TH.

GS reported that the recent Story of the NWD presentation had been successful; it was public-focussed and engaging and they hoped to roll it out to schools. Land at Wanborough/Liddington would be planted with trees as part of the longstanding Great Western Community Forest initiative.

RB reported that, further to the discussion at the last meeting regarding the Management of Motor Vehicles on Unsealed Unclassified Roads and Byways Open to All Traffic, he had been invited to a Defra stakeholder workshop in Crewe. He would be representing the North Wessex Downs, the NAAONB and Wiltshire Council. The problems of managing these routes are not uniform across England & Wales. He will report back to a future meeting.

MCr pressed for a positive approach to small-scale developments of affordable homes in rural areas and the need to take into account rural business; rather than take a reactive approach, the AONB Unit should make positive recommendations. **HO** explained that it was the statutory duty of the AONB Partnership to conserve and protect natural beauty rather than find sites for development. He pointed out that the current planning climate was hostile to environmental conservation, forcing staff to prioritise damage limitation, but cited the new bakery at Chieveley as an example of a positive approach to business development on the part of the AONB Unit.

RC added that it was the AONB's role to advise and guide and drew attention to the work done by the High Weald AONB that had worked with English Heritage to identify areas where housing development could be accommodated within existing farmsteads without a detrimental impact on landscape character to ease the pressure for housing elsewhere.

MCh pointed out the need to engage with farmers. Working towards a strategy to provide for small-scale development might be the start of a conversation with landowners and farmers, with the AONB taking a positive approach in planning to support healthy rural business.

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

HO explained that there may be some underspend as a result of staff turnover. The rent review had not yet concluded. **PL** asked what was being done to look at alternative office accommodation; he reminded members that he had previously suggested a specific opportunity, but this had not been picked up by the Unit. **RB** explained that Wiltshire Council (WC) had changed its policy and was charging organisations for its IT service if the buildings were not in its ownership. Currently NWD AONB receives the IT service valued at approx. £10,000 p.a. for no charge as the arrangement is longstanding, even though WC does not own the building. WC is also quickly divesting itself of many properties and so there would be little opportunity for relocating to a WC-owned building. **PL** stated that this was a significant change in policy however

it was agreed that **PL** and **TH** look at a property near Hungerford to consider whether in the light of this new information relocation would be a viable proposition. Members noted the paper. **ACTION TH** and **PL** to make a site visit.

8. Value for Money Report

HO explained that at Wiltshire Council's request an assessment of value for money from the AONB Partnership in terms of cash, in-kind and reputational benefits had been produced. He outlined the structure and some headline. He undertook to circulate the full report and also produce a summary if time allowed for members' information and use when working on behalf of the Partnership. **RC** suggested the summary be in the form of an 'infographic', i.e. displaying information in graphic form as well as text. Main points:-

North Wessex Downs LEADER 2009-13

- £1.49m grant
- 65 projects
- £3 million+ total investment

Stepping Stones 2012-15 the Project:

- created, improved or worked on 344ha of chalk grassland;
- grew over 23,000 wildflower plug plants and planted them on strategically important sites;
- engaged 28 farmers in landscape-scale conservation work across the North Wessex and West Wiltshire Downs; and
- delivered many hundreds of hours of volunteer time (650 hours on the WWT Wellbeing Project alone).
- Cash value to the North Wessex Downs AONB estimated as in the region of £63,000.

Sustainable Development Fund 2007 – 2015

- 122 Projects enabled
- £290,000 total grants made

ACTION: HO to circulate the full report to members and if possible also produce a summary/infographic.

9. Corporate Strategy Review Progress report (paper 4)

Members were anxious to ensure that the AONB was portrayed as a proactive and positive influence. They asked that the Strategic Objectives be amended during the review process by deleting in the first strategic objective "for example from inappropriate development" and by adding at the end of the second strategic objective "and encouraging good practice".

HO noted their concern and reminded them that the designation was primarily to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONB.

TH thanked those involved in working on the report and contributions from the partners, without which much of this work could not be achieved. **RC** had facilitated the first meeting helping to focus the exercise.

RC felt it was important to apply a timetable to this work. He explained to the meeting that Defra was requesting AONBs nationally to report on the amount of non-exchequer funding that they attracted. The NAAONB with HLF funding had produced a toolkit for AONBs endeavouring to build long term relationships with the private sector and he recommended this to the Partnership. **ACTION: RC** to supply information on the NAAONB toolkit for reference in the review.

PL felt strongly that working relationships with landowners and farmers was vital. He had attended the AGM of the Marlborough Downs Nature Enhancement Partnership which had evolved from the Nature Improvement Area. It had been well attended and informative with a

presentation on the GWCT's Allerton project – research into the effects of different farming methods on wildlife and the environment.

He reiterated the need to concentrate on income in order to continue after 2020.

ACTION Report by **PL** sent to **TH** will be circulated to all members.

The CoP was supportive of the options identified in the Way Forward section of the report paragraphs 12 – 18. With respect to para 17 – AONB as agri–environment enabler **HO** explained that Rowan Whimster had asked that this be included but as everyone is aware there are high levels of uncertainty. **MCh** felt that the NWDLT could be involved with this.

FdRP reminded the members of the housing allocation pressures on local planning authorities.

OC reminded the members that this document should inform the work programme of the Team and also inform the review of the North Wessex Downs Management Plan that will begin in 2017. It will be important to ensure that the plans are part of a performance framework to ensure that actions are prioritised and sufficiently resourced.

PB expressed an interest in the activities linked to the NWDLT.

RB with **HO** are looking at the timing of the next Management Working Group meeting that will consider the resources available, prioritise and report to the meeting in March recommending the work programme for 2017/18.

ACTION: Members to email **HO** with offers of help and these will be considered by the Management Working Group as they draw up the work programme for 2017/18.

10 **DEFRA 25-Year Plan and Implications of Brexit**

Andy Smith gave a verbal report on Natural England's strategic work. Main points:

- Confident that the ministerial team are committed to the natural environment.
- All EU legislation will be adopted initially and the parts not required will be repealed in due course.
- Natural England will have a strategic voice in policy development for food, farming and the natural environment.
- HLS is continuing. New Countryside Stewardship schemes are being entered into until 2018. No end point has been identified.
- The 25 Year Plan has the natural environmental capital strand running through it.
- NE working at a landscape scale, not driven by KPIs.
- NE now has delegated more down to Area Managers which will enable more engagement with the NWD.
- Locally NE commented that earlier collaboration between NE and NWD might have influenced the planning decision on the solar array at Wroughton.

HO responded that signing new contracts sent a positive message and welcomed the shift in NE's focus. He responded that the NWD Planning Advisor had liaised with NE and EH early on regarding the Wroughton application.

HO reiterated that the AONB wished to renew the written collaboration protocol with Natural England.

11 **Charging for Officer Time – (paper 5)**

HO and **RD** presented the report on charging for pre-application and other advice. A survey of current practice across the AONB family had indicated that this was not uncommon and is under active consideration across the sector. Developers expect to pay for pre-application advice. Positive feedback from the Chilterns AONB indicates that the introduction of charging has not deterred applicants from approaching the AONB for pre-application advice.

RD explained that the Scale of Charges had taken into account the need for planning advice to be accessible to parishes, community groups, and the charitable sector and included the AONB's absolute right to exercise discretion in the charging of fees for officer advice.

The proposal for charging for pre-application advice related to planning and landscape-led work and other officer costs was approved and the situation was to be reviewed after one year.

ACTION: HO to implement the Scale of Charges and report back to the Council of Partners after the scheme has been in operation for one year.

12 Spending priorities to March 2017 (paper 6)

The Council of Partners agreed the spending priorities listed. However they expressed concern about the transfer of funds from the SDF budget (which is 100% Defra-funded) and possibly other funds to the NWDLT. In the light of the National Audit Office scrutinising Defra grant in aid to AONBs any funds transferred must be on the basis of credible contractual arrangements with a clear audit trail.

ACTION: The agreed priorities to inform reallocation of any available funding by the AONB Team.

13. Director's Report (paper 7)

HO presented the report. The Annual review to end March 2016 was made available to members and is available to download from the website. **HO** indicated that staff turnover may affect delivery of the Work Programme
Members noted the report.

14. Planning Update (paper 8)

RD presented the report. She was pleased to report that the appeal against the refusal by the Vale of White Horse for residential development of 40 dwellings on land to the north of Lower Road, Chilton (P16/V0660/O) had been dismissed and would be beneficial in the appeal at Greensands, East Hendred (P/16/V0235/O),

Provided an update that she had been invited to attend stakeholder consultation events for Didcot Garden Town proposals and South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse joint Green Infrastructure Strategy which should both be working side by side. In respect of the Taylor Wimpey site (P14/V2873/O), the garden town consultants advised that they would liaise with the developer with the aim of getting the garden town principles integrated into the already approved scheme.

CM queried a proposed development for gravel extraction at Sutton Courtney and **GS** raised the changes in the Redlands Airfield proposals specifically the school which could result in sports pitch lighting on the edge of open countryside. **RD** advised that she would investigate both and make comments if necessary.

15. Any Other Business

GS identified significant developments in Swindon that would benefit from closer partnership working between Swindon BC and the AONB. **HO** suggested that this was a good opportunity to review and renew the collaboration protocol with local authority partners.

ACTION: HO and **RD** to liaise with **GS** and **CR** to review liaison arrangements with Swindon Borough Council.

ACTION: SC to respond to **BC's** request for the most recent film of the AONB for Marlborough Town Council.

This was Oliver Cripps's last Council of Partners meeting. The Chairman thanked Oliver on behalf of the Council of Partners for his valuable contribution to the work of the AONB over the last seven-and-a-half years and was joined by the members in wishing him every success for the future.

- 16. The next meeting of the Council of Partners is Tuesday 7th March 2017 at Chilton Village Hall, Chilton, Didcot, Oxfordshire.**

(Meeting closed at 12.15pm)

Signed.....

Date.....