

**NORTH WESSEX DOWNS AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY
COUNCIL OF PARTNERS
6 July 2021 at 10.00am
Virtual Meeting via Microsoft 365 Teams**

Minutes

Present	Initials	Representing
Ms Sarah Nichols	SN	Chair
Cllr Paul Miller	PM	Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council
Cllr Paul Barrow	PB	Vale of White Horse District Council
Cllr Catherine Webber	CWe	Vale of White Horse District Council (Deputy)
Cllr Hilary Cole	HC	West Berkshire Council
Cllr Nabil Najjar	NN	Wiltshire Council
Cllr Gary Sumner	GS	Swindon Borough Council
Community & Parish		
Dr John Sharp	JS	Advisory Member
Mr Donald Heath	DH	Advisory Member
Farming & Rural Business		
Mr Christopher Musgrave	CBM	Advisory Member
Mr Tim Bamford	MV	Country Land and Business Association
Mr Peter Lemon	PL	Advisory Member
Ms Andrea Witcombe	AW	National Farmers' Union
Historic Environment		
Ms Susie Brew	SB	Advisory Member
Recreation & Tourism		
Mr Richard Clarke	RC	Advisory Member
Nature Conservation		
Dr Katrina Easterling	KE	Advisory Member
Tom Hayward	TH	Advisory Member
North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust (NWDLT)		
Mr Donald Sherlock	DS	Representative (Chairman)
In Attendance		
Ms Haidrun Breith	HB	Oxfordshire County Council
Mr Tim Goodridge	TG	Test Valley Borough Council
Mr Dominic Lamb	DL	South & Vale District Councils
Mr Paul Hendry	PH	West Berkshire Council
Mr Garry King	GK	Hampshire County Council
Mr Jonathan Wilshaw	JW	Swindon Borough Council
Ms Natasha Gumbrell	NG	Wiltshire Council
Mr Henry Oliver	HO	Director NWD AONB
Mrs Susan Clarke	SC	Partnership Coordinator NWD

PART 1

The Chairman opened the meeting by confirming that in respect of items in Part 1 and listed below, contributions, comments and questions had been invited to be submitted by email for action prior to the meeting and that the required responses had been circulated.

The questions and responses are attached to these minutes at Annex 1 to complete the record and have been circulated to those present with the minutes.

- 1.1 Minutes of the meeting held on 9 March 2021 (paper 1)
- 1.2 Partner Reports
- 1.3 End of Year Financial Reports 2020-2021 (paper 2)
- 1.4 Budget Update 2021-2022 (paper 3)
- 1.5 Planning Update (paper 4)
- 1.5 Director's Report (paper 5)

PART 2

2.1 Declarations of Interest – Garry King declared that he is a Trustee of the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust.

2.2 Welcome

The Chair welcomed the new Councillor representative for Wiltshire, Cllr Nabil Najjar, and officer representative Natasha Gumbrell. She understood that Hampshire County Council had appointed a member who unfortunately could not be present today and that a decision on the elected representative from Oxfordshire County Council was under consideration.

She notified the Council of Partners (CoP) that a previous member and supporter of the AONB, Cllr Bryan Castle, had passed away last month, and she would send condolences on behalf of the Partnership.

Richard Clarke has completed his final term of office at this meeting and the CoP thanked him for his support and contribution over the last six years.

The Chair thanked the Vale of White Horse DC and the NWDLT for their partnership reports and urged others to submit reports to help the flow of information across the AONB Partnership.

2.3 Apologies for Absence were received from Michelle Leek, Christopher Slack, and Michael Valenzia.

2.4 Constitutional Item (papers 6a and 6b)

The Council of Partners (CoP) resolved to appoint Dr Katrina Easterling and Mr Tom Hayward to serve on the Council of Partners as Advisory Members (Nature Conservation) for an initial two-year term. Proposed by SB, seconded by RC,

The Council of Partners (CoP) resolved to appoint Jane Howes, Gillian Swanton and Alison Rasey to serve final two-year terms until July 2023 as members of the Management Working Group (MWG) and (b) Cllr Paul Miller to serve a final two-year term until March 2023 as Chairman (of the MWG). Proposed by SB and seconded by RC.

2.5 Chair's Report (paper 7)

The Chair explained to the CoP that at its last meeting the MWG had addressed the need for clarity in identifying clear objectives for the next three-year period. Since 2018 when the North Wessex Downs (NWD) Corporate Strategy was published there have been significant changes including Brexit and the emerging Environmental Land Management Scheme; the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme that will be considered later in the meeting; the Glover report and associated organisational and funding arrangements; and environmental and planning legislation. Four main areas had been identified and small working groups had been set up and attached to each.

1. Funding alternatives are developed and targeted.
2. Farming and post-Brexit initiatives are delivered, and relationships maintained and developed.
3. The NWD AONB profile is expanded both locally and nationally, with proactive intelligence gathering in the political landscape.
4. Diversity and inclusion are proactively encouraged

Work needed to be done to raise the profile with residents and visitors that they were in a protected landscape and the Vice Chair was pleased to report that Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council (B&DBC) were working with the Whitchurch Community and the highway authority, Hampshire County Council (HCC) to sign the entry point into the AONB. There was a need to be aware of the recommendations of the Glover Review in respect of terminology when designing signage.

The Chair pointed out that local authority partners were crucial in delivering the objectives for the AONB. She asked what local authorities were engaged with in respect of both the environment and planning reforms. She noted that the Vale of White Horse District Council (VoWHDC) and South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) have set up a Biodiversity Steering Group with the aim to advise the district councils on biodiversity strategy and nature recovery. In connection with this VoWHDC ran a Climate Change and Biodiversity Forum for parish councils. What are others doing? Local authorities propose major development within the AONB or its setting. There have been planning decisions taken that are not easily understood and some larger applications where the Planning Inspectorate has determined the application, the thinking in support of their decision has not been understood and has, on occasion, been to the detriment of the AONB and its setting. Should the planners in the partner local authorities work more closely together? Currently the NWD Principal Landscape & Planning Officer is supporting Swindon BC at a Public Inquiry for a Science Park at Inlands Farm that is taking a significant amount of her time.

A local authority member expressed the view that there were structures in place for local authorities and the AONB to work together.

Perhaps the need to do so should be reiterated as there are concerns about planning reform.

Action: Local authority members asked for bullet points from AONB Team identifying key areas of concern to raise as individuals with their MPs.

The Chair asked where local authorities were on Nature Recovery? She understood that the local authorities had to produce plans at a local level. It would be helpful if they were joined up across the AONB. The AONB Team are working closely with the Oxfordshire conservation community and it is intended to produce an overarching Nature Recovery Plan for the AONB. It was proposed that the AONB Team contact the local authorities at officer level and ask for the information they need. How are local authorities engaging with the CoP26 taking place in November this year? The NAAONB have a collaborative group drawn from a number of the AONBs working on this.

The Chair briefed the CoP that she had attended a round-table meeting with George Eustice MP, Secretary of State for the Environment, and it was clear that Defra would be engaging with AONBs not only through the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme but other aspects of the Glover Report and that there would be a hard look taken at governance. Access and health & wellbeing are also high on the government's agenda.

There were greater visitor numbers because of the pandemic, and it had been recognised that the Countryside Code should be a key education element in initiatives to manage this. The partners drew attention to initiatives in Wiltshire bringing together Visit Wiltshire, the Great West Way, and the World Heritage Site. In West Berkshire a "Respect" campaign has been launched to educate residents and visitors. It is promoting the updated Countryside Code to explain how to use the public right of way network and open spaces to achieve a positive experience.

The Country Land and Business Association (CLA) and Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF) have produced a teacher resource pack to promote the Countryside Code to KS2. It was noted that the curriculum is full and it can be difficult to include additional learning.

The Pewsey Vale Tourism Partnership is working with Tidworth and Amesbury Town Councils to link up walking routes and information, and with a couple of parishes just over the border in Hampshire on a new walking route. Walking and cycling are marketed to locals and visitors as part of the local health and well being agenda with Wiltshire Council. SB urged parishes and towns to work with existing walking groups and to set up Walkers are Welcome groups.

PL reported that visitors on his land are respectful and follow signs.

It is clear that there is an understanding and activity in promoting the health benefits of the natural environment. The Chair asked which local authorities are engaging with Clinical Commissioning Groups to explore opportunities for green prescribing?

The Chair closed the discussion reaffirming the need to work together and communicate effectively.

2.6 Farming in Protected Landscapes Programme—for information and approval (paper 8) Report by the Director

The Director took the paper as read and asked for questions. He emphasised that Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) is a programme not a scheme and is time limited from 1 July 2021 to 31 March 2024. It is a significant step up in resources. The AONB's provisional overall allocation for the financial year 2021/22 is £749,026. This is roughly three times DEFRA's total core and project contribution to the North Wessex Downs AONB this year. The vast majority of this is for allocation as grants, with a maximum of £34,000 for administration.

Paragraphs 17 – 23 of the report set out the immediate actions needed and the process for successfully administering the programme.

The Director confirmed that the projects submitted are not means tested and the percentage of grant is linked to the degree of commercial benefit. The programme will be up and running once staff, processes and systems are agreed and in place. Questioned about the lack of a biologist on the Panel the Director confirmed that ecological expertise was among the criteria for membership of the panel.

The Council of Partners agreed the actions detailed in paragraphs 17-23 of the report.

2.7 50th Anniversary of Designation – for discussion (paper 9)

Report by the Director

The Partnership fully supported the opportunity to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the North Wessex Downs' designation as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty on 1st December 1972. It was noted that it was also the year of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. The MWG had discussed the opportunities and recommended an approach that encourages and enables local communities to mark the anniversary with their own initiatives and possibly forge new local partnerships in line with the Management Plan, Work Programme and Corporate Strategy. Specifically to (1) raise awareness of the AONB designation and work of the Partnership; (2) Commission an anniversary logo for use in AONB Team (and, wherever possible, partners') communications throughout 2022; (3) Badge all appropriate AONB events and activities from spring/summer to December 2022 as part of our 50th Anniversary (e.g. including the Walking Festival, Forum, project events, webinar programme, Annual Review); and (4) see the anniversary as a peg on which to hang a package of attractive content which can be used to secure high-profile coverage of the North Wessex Downs AONB, for example on BBC Countryfile.

The view was expressed that the opportunity should be taken to access hard to reach groups and to address issues of inclusion and diversity. The option of seeking additional funding was also supported. The CoP noted that the Anniversary would be on the Agenda at every MWG meeting.

2.8 Guidance on the Selection and Use of Colour in Development

Presentation by the Director

2.9 Dark Skies of the North Wessex Downs: a Guide to Good External Lighting

Presentation by the Project Officer

2.10 Any Other Business

Donald Sherlock, Chairman of the Landscape Trust (LT) drew members' attention to the report of the NWDLT circulated under Partnership Reports and explained the origins of the Trust and its aspirations. Looking to the future he asked that the CoP consider how its funding contribution can be increased and asked whether FiPL offered that opportunity. The Director responded by thanking the Trust for delivering a successful grant programme but explained that the Trust would not be eligible for funding from Defra under FiPL unless it applied on behalf of and in partnership with farmers or land managers.

Date of Meetings for 2021 Tuesday 9th November.

.

Meeting closed 11.57am