

**NORTH WESSEX DOWNS AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY
 COUNCIL OF PARTNERS
 08 March 2022 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 Juliet Henderson	JH	Hampshire County Council
Cllr Rhydian Vaughan (Deputy)	RV	Hampshire County Council
Cllr Sally Povolotsky	SP	Oxfordshire County Council
Cllr Gary Sumner	GS	Swindon Borough Council
Cllr Paul Barrow	PB	Vale of White Horse District Council
Cllr Nabil Najjar	NN	Wiltshire Council
Community & Parish		
Dr John Sharp	JS	Advisory Member
Mr Donald Heath	DH	Advisory Member
Farming & Rural Business		
Mr Chris Musgrave	CM	Advisory Member
Mr Peter Lemon	PL	Advisory Member
Historic Environment		
Ms Susie Brew	SB	Advisory Member
Recreation & Tourism		
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		
Mr Christopher Slack	CS	Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council
Ms Haidrun Breith	HB	Oxfordshire County Council
Mr Dominic Lamb	DL	South & Vale District Councils
Mr Paul Hendry	PH	West Berkshire Council
Mr Garry King	GK	Hampshire County Council
Mr Tim Goodridge	TG	Test Valley Borough Council
Ms Lynn Trigwell	LT	Wiltshire Council
Mr Henry Oliver	HO	Director NWD AONB
Ms Corinna Woodall	CW	Senior Project Development & Funding Officer
Mrs Susan Clarke	SC	Partnership Coordinator NWD

PART 1

The Chair opened the meeting by expressing the intention that the next meeting on 9 July will be in-person and it is intended that it is held at the Hungerford Corn Exchange. The information items listed below were noted and she confirmed that questions received from the members should be raised under item 2.7 - The Proposed AONB Unit Work Programme 2022-23 (paper 10).

- 1.1 Minutes of the meeting held on 9 November 2021 (paper 1) Agreed
- 1.2 Budget Update – for information (paper 2)
- 1.3 Interim Budget 2022-23 – for information (paper 3)
- 1.4 Planning Update – for information (paper 4)
- 1.5 Director's Report – for information (paper 5)
- 1.6 Green List Pilot – for information (paper 6)

PART 2

2.1 Declarations of Interest – None.

2.2 Welcome and apologies

Apologies for absence from Tim Bamford (CLA), Sharon Egan, Andrea Witcombe, and Dr Michelle Leek (Natural England).

The Chair welcomed Lynn Trigwell, Head of Natural and Historic Environment, Wiltshire Council supporting Cllr Nabil Najjar.

2.3 Constitutional Items (paper 7)

It was agreed that (i) Jonathan Welfare join the Council of Partners representing Community and Parish Interests; and (ii) Members note the number of vacancies on the Council of Partners (CoP) and seek to recruit suitable individuals to join the Partnership.

The Chair asked that members pass details of proposed candidates to her or to the Director. She thanked Peter Lemon and Dr John Sharp for their engagement and contribution over the past six years. She also thanked them for their continued engagement and support of the AONB through Peter working with the farmer clusters and John continuing with the Management Working Group (MWG). Cllr Paul Miller also thanked them both for their work and involvement with the Partnership.

2.4 Chair's Report followed by Partnership Round Table (paper 8)

The Chair explained that Susan Clarke was leaving and thanked her for her work and for her advice and support advising on governance in the local authority context. SN advised that she will continue with her roundtable meetings with the local authorities to forge and to foster closer working relationships. A key area she has identified is communications: vital in raising the profile of AONB. Recently a one-hour briefing session organised by NN for Wiltshire Councillors and delivered by the Director and the Principal Landscape & Planning Officer was well received and she encouraged other local authorities to request a similar briefing.

The emerging impact of Government expectation and initiatives for nature, climate and people will increase scrutiny of the performance of National Parks and AONBs. In response the AONB is part of a IUCN Green List pilot led by Howard Davis the ex-CEO of the National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (NAAONB). The pilot is focussed on

working with the AONB Team to equip them to prioritise and respond to this emerging government agenda. It is a mix of governance, business planning, performance management and leadership capability, updating the approach to monitoring and performance management. It is the first of its kind and if successful will be rolled out to other AONBs.

In this context the Corporate Strategy will be revisited by the MWG and it is intended to report to the July meeting on progress. In addition, there will be a report on the progress of the IUCN pilot .

In respect of profile-raising at a national level all seven MPs have been invited for a walk in the AONB in June as part of the Walking Festival and five have signed up already. They are keen to set up a parliamentary sub-group for the AONB. The aim is to get them talking and focussed on the needs of the AONB particularly in terms of governance and funding.

The Director and SN are meeting Lord Benyon in April to give our take on Glover. In addition with the help of Cllr Juliet Henderson we have been asked to sit on a panel with Maria Miller in April. There is a head of steam gathering with MPs and local authorities.

The SN thanked member local authorities for their written reports. *(Note: the reports were circulated to all members of the Partnership after the meeting).*

Basingstoke & Deane BC. PM added to the officer report highlighting work being undertaken to move the diversity and inclusion agenda forward. Working with members of the BAME community encouraging access to the countryside. Making the links between nature and health and mental wellbeing. He noted that BDBC were working closely with their Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), Hampshire & the Isle of Wight, as most local authorities are doing.

Hampshire CC. In addition to the submitted report GK briefed the meeting that HCC had submitted a formal response to the government's Biodiversity Net Gain consultation. Also relevant to the AONB is the emerging HCC Minerals & Waste Local Plan and the Transport Strategy. JH added that as part of the drafting of the Transport Plan, the HCC Transport Select Committee was looking at a default 20 mph speed limit in villages and residential areas as walking and cycling are a key component of the Plan. She reported huge support from residents. She echoed PM's messages on inclusion and diversity. She thanked SN & HO for their work in communicating the message and cited a recent meeting hosted by CPRE where HO had explained the AONB vision in respect of Sparkling Streams and Dark Skies when the response and follow up from residents had been extremely positive. She noted that the Chair's work on communicating consistently and clearly from local through to national level was creating a strong message.

Oxfordshire CC SP highlighted aspects of the written submission. OCC are currently working on a new Local Transport and Connectivity Plan with a big push on cycling/walking as central to everything we do. As in Hampshire the Council are introducing 20 mph speed limits and about 70 communities have signed up to the first tranche. The Oxfordshire Plan 2050 is looking at how best to accommodate the housing requirements within environmental constraints. Pension Committee is considering divesting itself of fossil fuel investments and looking at Green Bonds. The Council has been shortlisted to test Natural England's Green Infrastructure Framework although there is little information about what this means and it will be included in a future report.

SN asked to talk to SP about signage into the North Wessex Downs and for information on the appropriate communications contact.

Swindon BC – GS was pleased with the Inlands Farm appeal decision on a proposed ‘Science Park’ between the A419 and Wanborough abutting the AONB . The Inspector agreed with Swindon BC and the AONB and dismissed the appeal on landscape and heritage grounds. He reported that the Local Plan would be delayed by a year and so the Borough does not have a 5-year housing land supply because the council withdrew a site at Highworth after pressure from residents that included a 5,000 signature petition. The Borough is also adopting a 20 mph speed limit and there has been enormous interest. He drew attention to the extension of the recovery grant to October by government to support bus services. Once this finishes bus companies will be under pressure to reduce services and rural areas will become more isolated. Local authorities do not have the funding to step in.

Test Valley BC TG thanked SN for her visit with the Leader and noted topics included signage and communications; villages within the designation are proud of being within the AONB. The Local Plan is out for consultation, seeking views on policies such as climate change and access to the countryside, the latter linked closely to issues of inclusivity. The Council is also in the process of compiling a response to both the Landscape Review and to the Biodiversity Net Gain government consultations. There is a new economic development officer in post and TG will provide the Team with her details.

Vale of White Horse DC & South Oxfordshire DC – PB added to the report for VWH explaining that on 10th May VoWHDC is organising an online nature recovery and biodiversity forum for parishes seeking to identify what might be done in their own back yard and generating ideas. The intention is then for parishes to speak to officers in a few weeks to work up ideas and hopefully work together.

DL explained the written report dealt with both councils. He added that VoWHDC had launched a Climate Action Fund to £50k open to local parishes, town councils and community groups available in the AONB for projects addressing climate change. Both councils were also responding to the Biodiversity Net Gain consultation.

West Berkshire Council – PH noted key points from the written submission. West Berkshire are working with an organisation called Biocap who are using evidence based mapping to locate the optimal areas for carbon offsetting projects such as tree planting and rewilding, always being aware that the AONB is in part an open landscape. BBOWT manage the Council’s estates working on biodiversity networks. There is a project running to map verges to maintain biodiversity by putting suitable management regimes in place. Also responding to Government consultations, particularly the Landscapes Review.

Wiltshire Council – NN explained that he had taken on the portfolio for the Environment alongside the Arts, Heritage & Tourism portfolio that he already holds . As part of the Council’s budget setting process the budget has been agreed to continue to fund the AONB for the next four-year period to 2025 which he hoped would give some assurances about how significant the Council sees the AONB as being in Wiltshire and gives a platform to raise match funding from Defra. In addition the Council’s Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy (GBI) and Climate Strategy both seek to contribute to biodiversity net gain, conservation and the wider climate change agenda. Again the Council sees the AONB as integral to that and the next challenge will be the Local Plan. He has been working with the AONBs, the North Wessex Downs and Cranborne Chase, to brief councillors so that they better understand what the AONB is and the role it plays and importantly engage more actively. It has worked well and he encourages other colleagues to replicate Wiltshire Council’s approach.

LT explained to the Partnership that Wiltshire Council had created a new Environment Directorate with its emphasis and focus on responding to the challenges coming out of the

Environment Act. The GBI overarching Strategy that sets the vision and three goals around people, nature and climate is being rolled out with local pilots at Calne and Devizes. Wiltshire Council has applied to be the Responsible Body for Nature Recovery for the area covering Wiltshire & Swindon; the decision is with the Secretary of State. The Council won its planning appeal to stop housing in Wilcot Road with the Inspector dismissing it on AONB grounds.

SN asked if Wiltshire Council is engaging with the AONB Team for the Calne and Devizes pilots. LT advised that the Team would be involved in this and other projects and the invitations were being sent during this week.

PL supported the 20 mph speed limits but felt strongly that the behaviour of cyclists in villages and rural communities should be looked at when walking and cycling policies were being developed. He knew of one fatality of a pedestrian caused by a cyclist. Cyclists do not reduce speed as they come into settlements as [some] other road users do.

SP responded that the new hierarchy in the highway code may help and cyclists can be prosecuted for causing danger on the highway. However, she took the view that proportionally there are more fatalities involving cars than cyclists. JH felt that there was an issue of communication and changing behaviours as highway authorities promote cycling and walking safely. She will raise this at the Police and Crime Commissioner round-table meeting later this month.

SB briefed the partnership that whilst the Pewsey Vale Tourism Partnership was trying to improve accessibility working with GWR to promote access by train services, the services were being cut. The Department of Transport have told GWR to save money and so there is now a shuttle service between Bedwyn and Reading. *(Note: Details provided by the Bedwyn Trains Passenger Group was circulated to the Partnership after the meeting)*. She recommended communities/parishes seek accreditation from "Walkers are Welcome" as a way of promoting the walks and providing the infrastructure to support the rights of way network. Pewsey are setting up a footpath group with a grant from the Area Board similar to that operating in Bedwyn. She was happy to provide more information if there is interest.

JS drew the Partnership's attention to a planning application for large development on the Harwell campus site within the AONB of four of units 3.500 square metres on heavily wooded sites. Tree removal is part of this and asked RD if she could look at the application. He noted that the parish council will be responding

2.5 Corporate Strategy Review Update - oral briefing by the Chair

A small group has continued to look at market strategy, business planning and funding focussing on business processes, revenue sources and relationships. What can the AONB offer, what are the benefits and why us? We know we are good at winning bids and have extensive knowledge of which "buttons to press", we have many networks and can convene interested parties in areas such as planning, dark skies and nature recovery. The Sparkling Streams project would not have happened if we had not pulled it together. We have robust financial processes and an understanding how to report into Defra and into government generally. We are looking at competition: what can we achieve, with what resources and in what timeframe? The working group will be working with CW and the Team to revisit the funding plan and the communications strategy building on our networks and relationships.

Farming is another strand and the Chair thanked Gillian Swanton, a member of the MWG and a local farmer on the Marlborough Downs. There is little clarity for farmers on future government funding and work is being done with the Farming in Protected Landscapes

Programme (FiPL) Team to understand what the future might look like. More farmer expertise is needed on the MWG.

PM noted that Diversity and inclusion have been part of various discussions during the meeting. It is intended to provide regular progress reports to partners that may on occasion include a request for assistance. The aim is to distil a three-year business plan manageable for the AONB and local authorities to achieve a better pace of delivery. It is planned to submit a Corporate Strategy document to the meeting in July.

Action: Corporate Strategy to be submitted to the July meeting.

2.6 Government Response to the Landscapes Review – for discussion and approval – Report by Director (paper 9)

The Director outlined the background to the consultation. In 2018 the Government committed to an independent review of England's protected landscapes in DEFRA's 25 Year Environment Plan. The Review, led by Julian Glover, reported in September 2019. In January 2022 the Government published its formal response to the Landscapes Review. The deadline for responses is 9th April.

The Director drew attention to a number of areas of interest nationally and then more locally. There was greater detail in the papers circulated with the Agenda.

The purpose "to conserve and enhance" - should that have more explanation to cover such issues as climate change, nature recovery and health & well-being? Resources - the ambition needs to be matched by funding as the AONBs are chronically underfunded. He gave the example that the South Downs NP first year grant was more than the total annually for all AONBs. AONBs had demonstrated that they could respond to increases in funding effectively evidenced by the successful FiPL.

In terms of Planning, the Duty of Regard could be strengthened as often there is tension at local level as local authorities endeavour to deliver the Government housing allocation that has been made without apparently taking into account environmental constraints. A document that could support the implementation of the Management Plan and deliver consistent decision making across the designated landscape and its setting would be useful.

There is support for reducing motorised vehicles using BOATs and this should be supported as it will impact archaeology, biodiversity and on the Ridgeway and green lanes. Working with the Green Lanes Environmental Action Movement to push for a less litigious and less costly process for local authorities to enforce Traffic Regulation Orders.

The report does not say very much of significance about on governance, however the NAAONB is anxious to use the work being done through the IUCN Green List Pilot to demonstrate AONBs are pushing forward on this.

The Director asked for comments to him from the Partnership as soon as possible allowing the response to be drafted.

The CoP agreed to delegate responsibility for approving its response to the Management Working Group.

Action. The MWG to agree the response to the Landscape Review for submission by 9 April 2022.

Break 11.17 return 11.27

2.7 Proposed AONB Unit Work Programme 2022-23 – for approval - Report by the Director (paper10)

The Director presented the Work Programme for 2023-2023 and identified using FiPL funding for projects under the umbrella of the Big Chalk Project. The launch of the new website will allow the Comms Officer to focus on more day-to-day activities such as liaison with journalists and others to promote the AONB. He noted the Fiftieth Anniversary and the beginning of reviewing the Management Plan in the last quarter.

TH asked for more information about the Landscape Recovery Scheme and how that would influence the work programme. HO responded that he did not have a definitive answer at this stage but work is being done with a number of external partners. Using the momentum of the Sparking Streams project, partnerships forged and the mode of operation he would like to replicate that and roll it out into other catchments and other projects in the AONB. He is expecting the first draft of the Nature Recovery Strategy to be drafted and made available to partners over the next couple of months. It sets high level ambition and would be the over-arching document for Local Nature Recovery Strategies. It would be the starting point for looking at Landscape Recovery bids. Support could be given to farmer clusters (10 operate within AONB) and looking at landscape connectivity around heathlands with BBOWT.

The Big Chalk pilot addresses landscape recovery on a landscape scale. The challenge is creating projects within the Big Chalk as taken as one project is too large for a single funding stream. There are currently a series of workshops running with stakeholders.

DH noted that the Dark Skies three-day Festival held in October 2021 to raise awareness had been a success. DH wanted to emulate the initiative delivered in towns and villages across Exmoor National Park and expand it to others communities across AONB through CoP.

HO noted that there had been discussions between officers of Marlborough TC and the AONB Team. It was agreed that the focus for the 2022/23 Work Programme would be the promotion and dissemination of the "Good Lighting Guide" through training, presentations and advice (a short training session had been delivered to Marlborough TC and had been well received). There is also the intention to investigate International Dark Skies Association status and looking at what actions would be needed and the resources needed to achieve this. Although no resources are available in 22/23 conversations will continue.

Action: DH asked members of the Partnership who may be interested in holding Dark Skies events to contact him.

KE briefed the Partnership about the findings of a ground-breaking research study on light pollution and its impact on wildlife by Butterfly Conservation, the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, and Newcastle University; it was published in 2021. The study was based on streetlighting in the south of England it found that lighting reduced moths & caterpillars by one third on roadside verges and in hedgerows by half. (*Note information and link sent circulated to the Partnership on 8 March 2022 www.butterfly-conservation.org/news-and-blog/streetlights-reduce-moth-populations*)

HO responded that staff were considering whether anything could be done as part of FiPL to support land managers with dark skies / good lighting as light pollution harms biodiversity and public enjoyment. JH commented that it is a compelling argument and asked that Partners are advised on what they can do to get the message out. HO explained that wildlife

was referenced in the Good Lighting Guide and so communicating clearly would be of immense benefit.

Action: The Council of Partners agreed the Work Programme 2022/23

2.8 Joint Statement on the Historic Environment in AONBs – for approval
Report by the Director (paper 11)

This new Joint Statement will re-establish and strengthen the working relationship between all the 34 English AONBs, Historic England and the NAAONB and will enable greater collaborative working between the AONBs and Historic England. The intention is that this initial statement is not overly onerous on any parties but rather consolidates a mutually positive relationship from which to develop ambitions to help safeguard and celebrate our Historic Environment.

Action: The Council of Partners agreed to endorse the Statement

2.9 50th Anniversary Plans – for information by the Director

Key points to note:

- New logo will be launched with the Walking Festival 2022
- The Walking Festival will be badged 50th Anniversary Walking Festival 11th-26th June.
- Beginning of summer holidays: “50 Things” about the AONB will be posted on the website. It will be very visual. AS has asked for input from CoP and there is still an opportunity to respond.
- Responding to the Glover Review in respect of diversity and access and looking ahead to the next 50 years: what can protected landscapes do for our populations particularly in our urban areas? We will engage communities in Basigstoke and Deane and Swindon. Emma Wood, volunteer from Winchester University, will be running this project. It has no specific outcomes, the aim is to open conversations build trust, listen to what communities want to do and work to enable. A small budget will be attached to this work.

2.10 Any Other Business

SB noted Pewsey Vales Circular Long-Distance Cycling & Walking Route launched . In respect of the inclusion Agenda accessible boats are available from Bedwyn .

HB notified the Partnership about a consultation on a Regional Water Resources Plan. Water companies in the SE are thinking strategically about management of the water resource. OCC is responding to this. Consultation ends 18 March.

JS followed up by saying that there is an intention to create a very large reservoir south of Abingdon to enable Thames Water to supply London. All local authorities involved are objecting. The Director confirmed that the Principal Landscape and Planning Officer (RD) was engaged with this issue.

Date of Meetings for 2022 Tuesday 5th July, 8th November

Meeting closed 11.55 am