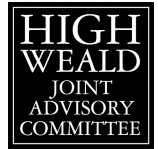


HIGH WEALD JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE – Management Board Minutes – 24 June 2015 at 10.30 am, at Acorn Tourism, WEC, Flimwell



Samantha Nicholas
Clerk to the High Weald AONB
Joint Advisory Committee

Present: Members:
 Cllr B Kentfield Rother District Council (Chairman)
 Mrs J Davison Sevenoaks District Council (Vice-chairman)
 Cllr Mrs S Tidy East Sussex County Council
 Cllr B Acraman West Sussex County Council

Also Present:
 Sally Marsh AONB Director (job share)

Apologies

1. The following persons gave their apologies for absence:
Cllr C Hersey, David Marlow, Cllr M Balfour

Members' Interests

2. There were no declarations of interest from the Members of the Management Board.

Minutes of the Management Board meeting held on 5 March 2015

3. The minutes of the last meeting, held on 5 March 2015 were agreed as a correct record.

High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee – Annual Return 2014/15

4. Thomas Alty confirmed that for the accounts for 2015/16 onwards an external auditor would not be statutory and the Unit may rely on assurances of the administrating body, East Sussex County Council. Appointing an external auditor currently costs the Unit £1000 per audit.
5. Thomas Alty will confirm how the future accounts process will work for the Joint Advisory Committee.
6. Thomas Alty reported on the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee Annual Return 2014/15 to the Members of the Management Board.

Statement of Accounts: Section 1

7. In this particular financial year funding was split: 58% Defra, 4% HLF, 28% Local Authorities and 10% other grants and contributions. Total funds for the statement of accounts 2014/15 was £444,815.
8. The gross expenditure was £438,150; 61% of the expenditure was on staff salaries with the remaining expenditure on through premises, supplies and services and transport.

9. Core activities show a net under spend of £6,664 compared to budget. This was due to: staffing costs being lower than the annual budget by £6,700; additional income as a result of core staff charging time to projects of £3,700, offset by non-staffing office running costs being approximately £3,700 over budget.
10. The final position for the year is a reserve of £104,382 at 31 March 2015, which includes the £6,664 surplus for 2014/15.
11. Thomas Alty confirmed that the balances & receipts have already been approved and signed off by the Treasurer.

The Annual Governance Statement – section 2

12. Thomas Alty reported that there was a robust financial control system in place and that the external audit report for 14/15 was still to be undertaken.
13. Cllr Bill Acraman enquired how the Unit might use the surplus reserves that may be available. Sally Marsh confirmed that due to staffing changes there was reduced pressure to have such high reserves set aside.
14. The Management Board Members discussed how these reserves may be used and the general support was given for a forward strategy for maintaining reserves to cover redundancies and reviewing allocation of project funds and any remaining reserves to pump prime new approaches.
15. It was noted that the level of cash in the short term investments was significant and an explanation would be required. It was agreed that a footnote may be included to reflect that the short term investments allocated to projects.
16. **Action:** The Annual Return 2013/14 was agreed and signed by Chairman, Cllr B Kentfield.

The Internal Audit

17. Thomas Alty reported that internal audit service had not identified any significant internal control issues in relation to the JAC. The key findings in the executive summary and audit opinion stated that the auditors were again able to give full assurance on the effectiveness of the internal controls at High Weald AONB.
18. The Chairman of the Management Board, on behalf of the Members of the Management Board, thanked Thomas Alty and Gerry Sherwin for their continued robust management of the finances and passed on their thanks to the East Sussex County Council finance team for their continued support.

Future budget and staffing update

19. Sally Marsh took the Management Board through the changes to the Unit's staffing structure and the future recruitment plan to meet work-plan pressures.
20. The planning and policy role, since Andrew's departure, has been managed by Jason Lavender covering planning consultations and Sally Marsh managing key policy issues. In consultation with the OSG, the Unit will look to recruit a Protected Landscape Planning Advisor. This position will be for 18 months, full or part-time, dependent on candidate, aimed at post-graduate level with the view to appoint in September/October 2015.

21. After discussions with David Marlow, OSG Chair and David Scully, OSG Vice-Chair, the successful applicant will require the skills to facilitate the development of a future design panel; have advanced spatial analysis and GIS skills; and the required analytical skills to develop data which the local authorities can more easily digest. The Unit has approached the Bartlett School of Planning and Brighton University to help with the recruitment process.
22. Alongside this the Unit will develop guidance/advice notes which can be utilised for the planning consultations process. The OSG are in full support of this transition and have provided a list of priorities for the Unit to undertake. This should release the Directors to become more involved with the forward planning processes within the local authorities and significant planning applications.
23. The Members also had a discussion on low cost housing and how the Design Panel may be help with these issues and the development of spatial and settlement pattern analysis.
24. Sally Marsh thanked the OSG, especially David Marlow and David Scully, for being particularly supportive during this difficult transition period.
25. Kerry Baldwin, AONB administrator, who had been with the Unit for 14 years, has resigned. Kerry has moved to a homeworking role with a local children's charity whilst starting up her own company, Sussex Genealogist. Kerry managed the website 2 days a week and this work has been distributed between Samantha Nicholas, Matt Pitts and Gerry Sherwin. The Members recognised that some areas of the public website may not be able to be managed and suggested that the Unit look at potential job-shares with other AONBs for website management.
26. The resignation of Andrew Shaw, Planning & Policy Officer in March 2015 and Kerry Baldwin, Website Officer, in May 2015 has reduced the need for a major staff restructure at this present time. However, it is recognised that further restructuring may be required in order to meet the changing demands on the Units workload.
27. Sally Marsh announced that the Unit had bid for three projects, two of which have been successful. The Unit had secured funds for:
 - i) Historic England's Field Systems in the Weald research project 'Fieldsapes'. This has been funded for a year and has generated income for three paid intern positions. Two GIS positions, one of whom started in June, digitising the historic Tithe maps and another who will be in post at the beginning of August. There will also been an opportunity for an historic environment intern to support survey work in the autumn period.
 - ii) Rother Catchment Partnership Action Fund has awarded funding to the High Weald and Kent Wildlife Trust to advise landowners and local communities on best practise.
28. The Unit was unsuccessful in securing funds from the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund although the AONB had considerable support from landowners for a project focused on joint working to manage deer and woodlands.
29. The Unit has also successfully bid for site-specific funding to the UK Power Network Undergrounding Scheme managed by Ofgem. The Brede Farm Habitat Fund has successfully delivered over £50,000 of support to landscape management and will require an officer to continue its work into its second year. The Brede Farm Habitat Fund, coupled with the two new projects will require a full-time Land Management Adviser to manage the schemes. Recruitment for the Adviser will begin in July, to be appointed in the autumn.

30. Charles Winchester, Research Officer, has returned back from unpaid leave in Australia, where he was carrying out soil carbon research. Charles will now be focusing his time on research for planning policies, management plan evidence and Fieldscapes.
31. It was also confirmed that Matthew Pitts, formerly Living Woods Advisor, would be remaining with the Unit on an extended contract supporting events, project work, and IT development.
32. General support was given by the Members for discussing forward strategy for staffing and recruitment including support for reviewing existing posts outside of restructuring process to reflect increased responsibilities.

SLA update

33. The Members were informed that this process had progressed smoothly with all Service Level Agreements returned except for Horsham District Council which is in the process of completion.

Community Landscape Fund

34. The Community Landscape Fund (CLF), formerly Sustainable Development Fund, has been running since its inception in 2005. Since then over 165 projects have been funded by the High Weald AONB Partnership. Projects totalling £1.2 million have had grants awarded up to £386,506. However, the cost of administrating the budget is greater than the grants that can be awarded coupled with the Unit's reduced staffing level has led to the decision that the Fund will not be run as a full programme in 2015. The Members thanked Sally Marsh and Samantha Nicholas for managing the Fund and agreed that this has been a very successful programme, achieving great impact on the High Weald with only a small amount of funding.
35. The Members agreed that CLF should be suspended rather than closed as there is potential to receive grants from other funding sources which could be combined and used for community projects.

Risk Management

36. The risk management areas were covered in future budget and staffing update. There has been no change to the remaining risk management areas.

JAC Election Process and Agenda

37. The Members discussed the election process for Chairman, Vice-Chairman and the Management Board Members which is to take place at the next JAC in November.
38. Samantha Nicholas explained that Cllr Brian Kentfield has been in position as Chairman for the maximum period allowed by November. The Unit thanked Cllr Brian Kentfield for his continuing support within this position. Jill Davison currently Vice-Chairman has retired as a councillor but has been asked to stand as a non-elected Member for Sevenoaks Borough Council on the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee. The Members agreed that a non-elective Management Board Member could stand for Chairman as the officers would have a casting vote if required. It was also agreed that a letter should be sent from the Chairman to all the JAC Members urging them to consider joining the Management Board as additional members would be welcome .
39. The Members discussed the agenda for the next JAC there was a general consensus that it would be good to have it in a different location and merge its agenda with the Units on-going

project work such as 'Fieldsapes'. The Unit are to investigate whether it is viable to hold the next meeting at Great Dixter.

AOB

40. Sally Marsh informed the Members that 'So much more than the view', a new publication from National Parks England and the National Association for AONBs is to be sent to the local Members of Parliament. This publication highlights how cost effective the AONBs and National Parks are and the economic value they generate.
41. The Members agreed that the Unit should send an email with links to this publication to the local councillors within the High Weald. It was also suggested that the JAC Members could also forward the High Weald AONB Partnership monthly Enews to the local council members as well.
42. The Unit is running two High Weald walks; one for the Sussex Walking Festival from 27 September to 4 October 2015 and one for the 1066 Walking Festival from 3 to 9 October 2015. The Wealden and Rother High Weald Hero Primary Schools are also being asked to participate in the Whooper Welly Walk and so far seven schools have signed up to participate.
43. The date for the next Officer Steering Group is set for 30 September 2015. The Management Board Meeting is set for Wednesday 14 October 2015. It was agreed that we would look to hold this in a more central location such as Crowborough. The JAC Meeting has been booked for Friday 6 November 2015.