



HIGH WEALD AONB JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

8 November 2013 Meeting of the Joint Advisory Committee held at Acorn Tourism, Woodland Enterprise Centre, Flimwell, East Sussex

Present:

Cllr Mrs J Davison	Sevenoaks District Council, Acting Chair
Cllr M Balfour	Kent County Council
Cllr S Murray	Tonbridge & Malling District Council
Cllr Mrs E Kitchen	Horsham District Council
Cllr Mrs J Soyke	Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
Cllr R Street	Hastings Borough Council
Cllr M Sydney	Surrey County/Tandridge District Council
Cllr K Blake	Crawley District Council
Cllr Mrs S Tidy	East Sussex County Council
Mrs Alison Field	Forestry Commission
Mr J Seymour	Natural England

Officers:

Mr M Davidson	Hastings Borough Council
Mr A Fowler	Finance Manager, East Sussex County Council
Mr Thomas Alty	CIPFA Trainee, East Sussex County Council
Mr D Greenwood	Surrey County Council
Mrs R Hotchin	Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council
Mr D Scully	Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
Mr J Lavender	AONB Director (job share)
Ms S Marsh	AONB Director (job share)
Mr G Mee	Assistant Director CET, East Sussex County Council
Ms G Sherwin	AONB Unit

PRESENTATION

Our Land

A. Gerry Sherwin, Business Manager for the High Weald AONB Unit, gave a presentation to the JAC, on behalf of Responsible Travel (RT), about the progress to date of the Our Land project. Our Land is the south east's protected landscapes sustainable tourism project run in conjunction with Responsible Travel. A copy of the presentation is included in the Minute Book:-

A.1 Points of note:

- All tourism businesses that have joined the Our Land website have received support developing their website pages and marketing of their websites.
- Strong interest in the Our Land website, which has received 300,000 web-hits, gained 3,200 facebook followers and generated 5000 customer contacts.
- 92 High Weald AONB tourism businesses are currently using the Our Land website, exceeding the target of 90. More businesses are expected to join by the end of March 2014.
- The majority of tourism businesses promoted by Our Land provide accommodation but Our Land is also keen to attract and recruit businesses that offer a range of activities e.g. bushcraft and falconry. In the High Weald AONB, 17 such businesses are currently promoted on the Our Land website.
- The profile of Our Land has increased as a consequence of working collaboratively with a range of organizations (e.g. the RSPB and Kent Wildlife Trust) and new partners, such as the Forestry Commission, are being sought.
- A High Weald AONB competition was supported by one business offering a prize of a weekend break in a well-appointed treehouse, generating 2000 entries and increasing the database by an additional 1000 contacts. Similar and future competitions are planned.
- Funding for Our Land ceases at the end of March 2014 but RT is required to continue to provide support for the project for a further two years. Representatives from the SE AONB partnerships will remain on the Our Land steering group and protected landscape partnerships elsewhere in the country have shown a strong interest in joining the programme.

A.2 The JAC warmly thanked Gerry Sherwin for covering this presentation on behalf of Responsible Travel . Cllr Mrs Kitchen said she was incredibly impressed with the progress of this project since she was involved with and supported the initial development phase. Cllr Mrs Kitchen requested that the AONB Unit might contact Horsham District Council's Economic and Tourism Officer to raise the awareness of Our Land as there were fewer businesses in this particular part of the AONB.

A.3 Cllr Mrs Tidy wished to know whether there were further funds available to continue the work now that the initial funding stream was due to end. Gerry Sherwin confirmed that the tourism businesses will not be charged to join the programme and that Responsible Travel are seeking further funds and may charge each AONB partnerships £2,500 in order to recruit new businesses. The businesses will also be able to 'buy into' other services that provide them with a higher level of service. Gerry Sherwin also confirmed that the AONB Unit would like to use JAC project funding to run a number of low cost training events for the businesses during 2014/2015.

A.4 David Scully, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council suggested the AONB Unit also meet with the TWBC Economic and Development Officer to discuss the Our Land project.

1. APOLOGIES

1.1 Apologies were received from the following Members and officers:

Councillor Kentfield, Councillor Hersey; Councillor Mrs Moore; Councillor Acraman; Mr P Newdick; Councillor Taylor.

2. MEMBERS INTERESTS

2.1 It was noted that there were no declarations of interest raised by the Members.

3. URGENT MATTERS

3.1 It was noted that no urgent matters were raised by the Members.

4. MINUTES OF THE JAC MEETING - 25 March 2013

4.1 RESOLVED to agree the Minutes of the meeting of 25 March 2013 as a correct record.

5. MINUTES OF THE MANAGEMENT BOARD - 8 October 2013

5.1 RESOLVED to note the Minutes of the Management Board held on 8 October 2013.

6. MINUTES OF THE OFFICER STEERING GROUP - 8 October 2013

6.1 RESOLVED to note the Minutes of the Officer Steering Group held on 8 October 2013.

7. MATTERS ARISING

7.1 In the light of further cuts by DEFRA to the core funds of AONB partnerships, Cllr Sydney wished to see greater consideration given by the Management Board and the AONB Unit to alternative models of funding e.g. Community Interest Companies and Community Trusts, as well as options to exploit the High Weald brand commercially. Cllr Sydney drew the Committee's attention to the Community Interest Company recently established to benefit the Surrey Hills AONB and he commended the draft report, commissioned by the Kent Downs AONB Unit, examining options to raise non-exchequer funding as he believed the report was a thorough study of alternative funding sources.

7.2 Cllr Mrs Tidy stated that the High Weald AONB is a very different area to the Surrey Hills AONB and may not necessarily benefit from the same funding model.

7.2 The Co-Directors again assured the JAC that options for future funding sources has been and continues to be the subject of long-running discussions, some of which have been already used in the High Weald and also that a number of seemingly straight-forward options had been trialled by different AONB partnerships without lasting success.

7.4 RESOLVED to note that Cllr Sydney is to be invited to attend the next Management Board meeting to discuss alternative funding models.

8. NOMINATION FOR CHAIR, VICE-CHAIR AND MANAGEMENT BOARD

8.1 The Acting Chair Cllr Mrs Davison took the JAC through the nominations for Chair, Vice- Chair and four additional Management Board members after which voting by the JAC Members took place.

8.2 RESOLVED to note that the following Members have been elected for Chair, Vice-Chair and Management Board:

Elected Chair: Cllr Kentfield;

Proposed by Cllr Mrs Davison; seconded by Cllr Balfour

Elected Vice-Chair: Cllr Mrs Davison

Proposed by Cllr Kentfield; seconded by Cllr Balfour

Elected Management Board Member: Cllr Balfour

Proposed by Cllr Mrs Davison; seconded by Cllr Kentfield

Elected Management Board Member: Cllr Mrs Tidy

Proposed by Cllr Mrs Davison; seconded by Cllr Kentfield

Elected Management Board Member: Cllr Hersey

Proposed by Cllr Kentfield; seconded by Cllr Mrs Davison

Elected Management Board Member: Cllr Acraman

Proposed by Cllr Mrs Tidy; seconded by Cllr Mrs Davison

8.3 Cllr Mrs Davison warmly thanked Cllr Mrs Kitchen for all her work with and support for the Management Board. While Cllr Mrs Kitchen is stepping down from the Management Board she will remain as a Joint Advisory Committee Member for Horsham District Council.

9. REVENUE BUDGET 2014/15

9.1 The Committee considered a report on the draft Revenue Budget for 2014/15 by the Deputy Treasurer.

Points to note:

- A balanced budget has been prepared, taking into account nett savings of £2,200. It was recommended that the budget shown in Appendix A and Appendix C be approved as a basis for consultation with the contributing local authorities.
- Nett savings of £2,200 have been identified and included in the core budget. The core budget has been balanced by allocating 83% of the reducing DEFRA contribution to the core budget.
- The local authority contributions, which are in the region of £103, 500 in 2014/15 are likely to generate external funding of at least £365,100 from DEFRA and other organisations.
- Decreasing DEFRA contributions equates to approximately £71,020 but this would not have an impact on 2014/15 core budget as the contributions to the core budget had been increased from 78% to 83%. The forecast reserves at 31 March 2014 are £89,200.
- There will be an increase in staff costs of 1% to accommodate the pay increases of some staff as a result of the Single Status process.
- There will be savings made on office accommodation and equipment provision and Plumpton College were thanked for agreeing to temporarily reducing the annual rent for office accommodation.
- From 2014/15 onwards, it was recommended that there is a need to have a minimum level of reserves of 5% (£16,000) of expenditure to meet costs of contingencies. Reserves will also be required to cover any future staff redundancies.

9.9 Cllr Mrs Tidy stressed that, in her view, the local authorities must to continue to support the AONB Unit or lose a valuable asset. Cllr Mrs Davison added that local authorities are required to have an AONB Management Plan and for each local authority to produce its own Plan would be prohibitively expensive. The AONB Unit was good value for money.

9.10 RESOLVED to note the report and:

- (1) approve the Revenue Budget for 2014/15;
- (2) thank local authorities and DEFRA for their contributions towards core costs and High Weald Heroes and;
- (3) thank Plumpton College for the temporary reduction in office accommodation costs.

10. MANAGEMENT PLAN REVIEW

10.1 The JAC considered a report by Sally Marsh, AONB Co-Director, who presented the revised text of the AONB Management Plan 2014-2019 for approval by the JAC. The JAC were reminded that the High Weald AONB was one of the first AONBs to adopt a Management Plan. During the public consultation phase, the Management Plan received approximately 200 responses, which have been considered by the AONB Unit.

10.2 Cllr Mrs Davison offered her services to proof read the Management Plan. It was noted that the images and maps and also the key facts section needs to be finalised.

10.3 Cllr Sydney voiced a concern of whether AONB Management Plans were robust enough to defend protected landscapes from adverse impacts arising from the changes to the Permitted Development Rights. The AONB Co-Director agreed that this was a significant issue and believed it was even more important than ever to have a consistent AONB Management Plan based on evidence and fully supported by the local authorities.

10.4 RESOLVED to note the report and:

(1) approve the revised Plan text as the agreed AONB Management Plan for the period 2014-2019;

(2) approve the supporting documents Performance Monitoring Report, Condition Monitoring Report, Consultation Report, Strategic Environmental Assessment and Appropriate Assessment and;

(3) authorise the Chairman to write to the partner local authorities recommending the Plan for adoption by April 2014.

11. PLANNING ISSUES

11.1 The JAC considered a report by David Marlow, Officer Steering Group (OSG) Chairman on behalf of the OSG. The report considered the current changes to the planning system, as the increasing pressure for housing and the consequent implications for the High Weald.

11.2 The OSG Chairman also wished it to be known that the OSG felt the review of the Management Plan had been a very positive and constructive process and recognised that this was due to Sally Marsh and the AONB Unit's management of the process.

11.3 The JAC discussed the potential impacts to the AONB as a result of the current reforms to the planning system and the considerable pressure being put on local authorities and their areas due to increases in housing demand.

11.4 Cllr Davison reported that in Sevenoaks District Council the Greenbelt policy was being upheld but this is supported by their adopted Plan.

11.5 Cllr Street stated that if housing targets cannot be met within a local authority area then the adjacent authority, which in his case is Rother District Council, would have to take on the burden of the additional targets, which is not possible due to its rural landscape.

11.6 The Co-Director mentioned that the South East and East Protected Landscapes Group will be meeting to discuss how they can influence the Government on this

matter and reflect the work on this already undertaken by the Surrey Hills AONB partnership.

11.7 RESOLVED:

(1) To note the issues arising for the conservation and enhancement of the High Weald AONB from both the recent and currently proposed changes to Permitted Development Rights and from the increasing pressure to accommodate significant new housing, and endorse the Directors' response to the recent consultation on the former;

(2) Authorise the Chairman to write to the Secretaries of State for Communities and Local Government and for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (also forwarded to other key interests) highlighting the JAC serious concerns over the above issues, drawing on the points highlighted at paragraph 3 & 13-15 of the report;

(3) Ask the OSG to advise further on:

i) the scale of planned and potential future housing development, relative to historic rates, and the likely implications for the main components of landscape character of the High Weald;

ii) the potentials, and priorities, for further cooperation between member local planning authorities on the development of both strategic policies and supporting guidance to ensure effective support for the conservation and enhancement of the High Weald AONB.

12. HIGH WEALD AONB JAC PROJECTS

12.1 The JAC considered a report by Jason Lavender, AONB Co-Director, which set out the projects currently underway within the context of the increasing difficulty generating additional funds.

12.2 In response to the item on the 'Re-stocking of the Weald' report, the JAC had a discussion on the role the Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs) could play in support of this work. Cllr Balfour informed the JAC that the South East LEP had been very supportive of this work. Cllr Mrs Kitchen however felt that the Coast to Capital LEP was not as fully engaged in supporting agriculture as they ought to be.

12.3 Cllr Sydney reported that Surrey Hills AONB partnership is looking to invest in venison as a more healthy meat alternative, and would welcome a meeting with the High Weald Unit to discuss these issues further.

12.6 RESOLVED to note the report.

13. ASH DIEBACK

13.1 Alison Field, Area Director of the Forestry Commission, was welcomed to the meeting and reported to the Committee on ash dieback and the work to manage the disease and its impacts.

Points of note:

- Research seems to indicate there is not a single or an easy process available to manage ash dieback. A key issue is how statutory organisations and private landowners can effectively manage diseased and dying trees, particularly in urban areas and along routeways.
- The extent of ash dieback is variable in the country. To the east of Ashford ash dieback is extensive but to the west, there are currently only small pockets of the disease found. The rate of growth of the disease in comparison to France is much slower, which may prove to be a positive factor.
- A tree health advisory group has been established and DEFRA and the Tree Council are considering the issue of diseased trees posing a danger to people and property in urban areas.
- More concerning perhaps is the extent of other tree diseases affecting English woodlands such as chestnut blight. Surveys have shown an increase in the number and extent of diseases year on year.

13. NEWS FROM THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR AONBS

13.1 The JAC considered a report by the Jason Lavender, AONB Co-Director, on the recent work of the National Association for AONBs.

13.2 The JAC was informed that Cllr Mrs Davison will be attending the National Association of AONBs AGM on 14 November 2013 on behalf of the JAC.

13.3 RESOLVED to note the report.

14. HIGH WEALD AONB UNIT STAFFING UPDATE

14.1 The JAC considered a report on staff by the Jason Lavender, AONB Co-Director.

14.2 RESOLVED to note the report and:

(1) send a letter of thanks from the Chairman on behalf of the JAC to be sent to Simon Aguss, the Weald Forest Ridge Landscape Partnership Scheme Manager, expressing their thanks for his work managing a very successful and well-received Scheme.

15. IUCN CATEGORY V COMPLIANCE

15.1 The Committee considered a report by the Jason Lavender, AONB Co-Director, that the High Weald AONB had received formal confirmation from the IUCN UK Committee that the area is considered to be of Category V status.

15.2 RESOLVED to note the report.

16. THE VALUE OF AONB PARTNERSHIPS

16.1 The JAC considered a report by Jason Lavender, AONB Co-Director, on the findings of Land Use Consultants on the value of AONB Partnerships.

16.2 RESOLVED to note the report.

17. RISK MANAGEMENT

17.1 The JAC considered a report by Jason Lavender, AONB Co-Director on risk management and the associated risk management matrix.

17.2 RESOLVED to note the report.

17.3 The next AONB Joint Advisory Committee meeting is set for 26 March 2014. A time and location will be confirmed in due course.