



HIGH WEALD MANAGEMENT BOARD

11 October 2010 at a meeting of the Management Board held at the Woodland Enterprise Centre, Flimwell

Present: Members

Cllr Mrs S Tidy	Chairman
Cllr B Kentfield	Rother District Council
Cllr C Hersey	Mid Sussex District Council
Cllr Mrs J Fox	Wealden District Council
Ms J Whitman	Natural England

Also present:

Sally Marsh	AONB Director (job share)
Jason Lavender	AONB Director (job share)
Sandra Brierley	AONB Deputy Treasurer
Gerry Sherwin	AONB Business Manager
Paul Newdick	OSG Chairman

Apologies

1. The following Members of the Management Board had offered their apologies for absence:

Cllr Mrs Kitchen and Cllr Mrs J Davison.

Members' Interests

2. The Members of the Management Board declared an interest in item 4 on the agenda in that they were all Members of local authorities that contributed to the finances of the High Weald AONB.

Minutes

3. The minutes of the last meeting, held on 28 June 2010, were agreed as a correct record.

Budget overview and issues

4. The AONB Director outlined the position of the Unit: they had been asked to consider the impact of 30% cuts in the core contribution from Natural England over three years but had not yet (for good reason) had a definitive steer on the future funding contributions from the partner authorities. She remarked that any loss of funds will inevitably lead to a reduction in service as this level of saving could not be found in efficiency savings. She pointed out that the Unit was already very cost-effective and efficient and had over the last 10 years shown an average gearing on the local authority contributions of 1:8.

5. The Board members wished to stress the several statutory duties in respect of the High Weald AONB placed on local authorities and that these duties are principally discharged through the High Weald AONB Unit, acting jointly on behalf of the local authorities. It was the Board members' view that these duties could not be discharged as cost effectively by the individual local authorities. Cllr Fox asked the AONB Unit staff to ensure the gearing on the local authority contributions the AONB Unit achieves (1:8) is promoted more.

6. Board members queried whether the setting up of the South Downs National Park and future its reliance on central government funding could result in the current local authority contributions to the South Downs being diverted to the High Weald AONB JAC.

7. Janet Whitman of Natural England set out the position that nothing was certain until after the Comprehensive Spending Review had been announced in mid-October. Further clarity would be achieved between then and Christmas as to the exact impacts.

8. Gerry Sherwin asked the Management Board for their views on the assumptions to be used in setting the AONB budget for the following year. She suggested using the NE steer of a 30% reduction over three years at 10% a year, and requested clarification of the contributions from the partner authorities.

9. The Board members were adamant that the Unit should assume no reduction in the current local authority contributions at this stage in view of the uncertainty surrounding the Comprehensive Spending Review as the percentage rates each local authority may wish to contribute will be variable. However the Board members suggested that the local authority contributions should be presented with no inflationary increase on the current level.

10. The Board also suggested that it would be useful to outline options for making savings at this stage to give an indication of the likely impact to the JAC core budget if local authority contributions mirrored the level of cuts proposed by NE contribution i.e. 10% each year for three years.

11. Contributions to the Project Enabling Fund were discussed. The AONB Director stressed that the ethos of the JAC was that it is run as a partnership between the local authorities and NE and that the PEF contributions have been instrumental in securing further and greater contributions from elsewhere. However, the Director recognized that the local authorities are facing severe budget reductions and it was concluded that the contribution to PEF should be requested, and that it would be for each local authority partner to decide whether to make the further contribution.

12. External funding sources, such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, were discussed. The Board reported their experience that it is large scale, high profile schemes that are likely to succeed.

13. Gerry Sherwin reported that the likely shortfall would be £90-122, 000 over three years. This would necessitate a consideration of what services the Unit could offer, such as to stop publishing the Anvil and not re-filling temporary posts when they come to an end.

14. The Board debated the importance of maintaining key skills, and the presentation of the importance of the Unit's work to the partner authorities.

Partnership agreement

15. Janet Whitman, NE reported to the Board that the Partnership Agreement was being circulated to the partner authorities for their signature/sealing.

16. The AONB Director explained that the Agreement was a nationally applied one drafted by Natural England, and that some of the authorities had raised issues with the drafting which had delayed the signing of the Agreement.

17. Paul Newdick reported that the Officer Steering Group had raised concerns about NE's lack of understanding of local authority processes, and that he had sent a letter on behalf of the OSG to NE. He said that the response from NE indicated that the new draft of the Agreement, to cover 2011-2014, was unlikely to have any major changes.

Officer Steering Group update

18. Paul Newdick, Chairman of the Officer Steering Group, updated the Board with progress on the proposed planning protocol between Natural England and the partner authorities. He reported that the Group had met with Mr Nelson of NE to express their view that the protocol was unnecessary as it reflected current working practices. Mr Nelson was receptive to working together in producing a practical protocol.

19. Janet Whitman, NE remarked that they were working with a wide number of AONBs with a range of skills, and that the protocol had been produced partly with an eye to changes to come.

20. Paul Newdick reported on the consultation on the guidance on designations of AONBs a National Parks, and that the AONB Director was preparing a response.

Environment Minister, Richard Benyon, visit to the High Weald

21. The AONB Director informed the Board that the Environment Minister requested a meeting with the AONB Unit and that he visited Flimwell at the end of August. This was a follow up visit to one paid when Mr Benyon was a shadow minister. The Minister seemed supportive of the AONB Unit's view of the landscape being a life-support system. A letter summarizing the visit and offering further support from the AONB Unit has been sent from the Directors to the Minister.

Flimwell office arrangements

22. The AONB Director reported that the Woodland Centre was under new management by Plumpton Agricultural College. He went on to report that the College seemed willing to establish a fibre-optic cable link to a BT exchange near the crossroads, which should alleviate the majority of the IT problems that affect the Centre. The College also seemed

keen to develop links with the Unit and build on the Director's current role on the college's curriculum advisory panel. This development was warmly welcomed by the Board.

Project and staffing update

23. Staff – The AONB Director explained that the Ancient Woodland officer had left to take up another post. Before he left he had arranged an event on woodland management which had been well attended.

24. The AONB Director set out that the Education Officer post had been extended, but that most the posts supported by external funding would end within the year, and subject to funds may not be renewed.

25. Projects – The AONB Director set out that the Rother District woodland inventory had been launched, and that the East Sussex Ancient Woodland inventory had been completed, the culmination of four years' work.

26. The AONB Director mentioned the largest charcoal burn in the UK in recent times happened on Ashdown Forest, which had been funded by the Weald Forest Ridge and HLF.

27. The AONB Director remarked that there were a lot of policies being issued by Natural England, which needed consideration by the Unit.

Risk management

28. Gerry Sherwin circulated the Risk Log to the Management Board. The AONB Director highlighted the major risk continues to be the risk of loss of core funding.

AOB

29. The AONB Director updated the Board on the success of the Annual Conference of the National Association of AONBs which was held in Hythe and jointly hosted by the High Weald AONB, Surrey Hills AONB and Kent Downs AONB Units. The Director reported on the positive feedback from the delegates to the field trip to the High Weald. The guided walk led by the Director had had 18 delegates.

30. Gerry Sherwin raised the issue of the National Association of AONBs and the creation of a universal branding. She stated that this exercise had been put on hold for the time being.

31. The possibility of Plumpton College having a representative on the Joint Advisory Committee was raised.

Items for the JAC

32. The following items were proposed for inclusion on the JAC agenda:
Budget overview
Project updates
Potential projects – farming in the High Weald

Next meeting

25 January 2011 at 2.00pm at County Hall, Lewes.