

Agenda Item No.7

Committee: High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee
Date: 1 November 2010
Title of Report: Government Ministers' visits to High Weald AONB Unit
By: High Weald AONB Director

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Joint Advisory Committee is recommended to note the report.

1. MINISTERS' MEETINGS

1.1 Richard Benyon MP, Minister for the Natural Environment and Fisheries and Gregory Barker MP, Minister for Climate Change and Energy and a High Weald AONB Patron met on the 31st August and the 15th October respectively with the High Weald AONB Unit at Flimwell to learn more of the JAC partnership's work and its distinctive approach to landscape.

1.2 The Ministers' visits represent another tangible success for the High Weald AONB Unit and builds on a number of earlier meetings with the AONB Unit. Part of our role is to examine a wide range of contemporary rural matters relevant to the AONB, to highlight areas that may become important in the coming years and to suggest small-scale and innovative ideas and actions to improve public policy.

1.3 During both these recent meetings the Unit discussed with the Ministers the idea of 'landscape' as our life support system that has the potential, if fully realized, to provide the majority of the basic human needs - shelter, energy, food, trade and community – for society.

1.4 The AONB Unit stressed, among other things:

- the strong emphasis of the Unit's work rebuilding peoples' economic relationships with the land around them recognising that it is these relationships that produced our most iconic cultural landscapes;
- the crucial role of the statutory AONB Management Plans as locally prepared and agreed policy statements for managing national assets that better inform our future relationships with the land and so improving policy judgements about the relative harm or benefit resulting from the different demands placed on the landscape;
- the need to ensure the High Weald AONB JAC's resources are used to develop practical solutions through effective and integrated partnerships across local authorities and national organizations, administrative areas, academic disciplines and the local rural and urban community;

- that High Weald AONB JAC provides mutual benefits by pooling together knowledge and resources to meet the need for a positive, relevant, and integrated approach for the management of the AONB and the JAC remains a vivid expression of the value of a cost-effective partnership.

1.5 The work, views and opinions of the AONB Unit and the JAC partnership outlined at these meetings appear to have been well received by both Ministers.

1.6 Mr Benyon MP has recently written (a copy is attached to this report) expressing both his interest in the AONB Unit's thoughts on the idea of 'landscape services', his assurance that the best interests of AONBs are at the centre of his thoughts, and that he was impressed with the work undertaken by the High Weald AONB JAC.

1.7 Mr Barker MP has asked the AONB Unit to write formally to the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) identifying how the AONB Unit can advise the department on the role of landscapes and how responsible land-use can help meet the challenges presented by climate change and the country's reliance on imported fossil fuels.

2. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 Members are asked to note the report and the appended copies of the letters to and from the Minister for Natural Environment and Fisheries and to welcome the Minister for Climate Change and Energy request for the High Weald AONB Unit to advise his department on the role of landscape and 'landscape services.'

Contact: Sally Marsh & Jason Lavender, Director (job share)
director@highweald.org

High Weald AONB Unit

Woodland Enterprise Centre
Hastings Road
Flimwell
East Sussex TN5 7PR

Tel: 01580 879500 Email: info@highweald.org
Fax: 01580 879499 Web: www.highweald.org



Advising on the management of one of England's finest landscapes

Mr Richard Benyon, MP
Minister for the Natural Environment and Fisheries,
House of Commons,
London,
SW1A 0AA

Dear Minister,

6th September 2010

Thank you so much for giving up so much of your time late on Tuesday last week after what must have been a busy day, to learn more of the work of the High Weald AONB Unit and of our approach to landscape – your wish to hear what we had to say was genuinely appreciated.

As you'll know all too well, the term landscape can be surprisingly difficult to define. For us, we see a key distinction between 'scenery', to which we can all react aesthetically, and 'landscape' which is a collection of natural, semi-natural and wholly artificial features closely linked to all aspects of human life. Our landscapes are a group of distinct and recognizable areas arising from a long history of human collaboration with the natural environment. It was (and still is) the basic human needs – shelter, fuel, food, trade and community – that were (and are) the driving force behind this collaboration.

During our meeting we touched on the idea of a 'landscape services' approach. Curious language perhaps but here the word landscape should not be taken to mean the application of conventional policy and behaviour at a larger scale - landscape is not just a big site. Instead, we see landscape as a system where the skills and assets of people and the social and economic processes that drive them are fundamentally and intrinsically interconnected with nature and the physical environment. We put a strong emphasis on rebuilding peoples' economic relationships with the land around them recognising that it is these relationships that produced our most iconic cultural landscapes and importantly must continue to ensure the landscape evolves.

We also outlined that 'landscape services' offers a more useful framework for land use policy than 'ecosystem services' because it connects socio-economic systems with the natural environment and uses a language understood by all sections of the community. We use the term 'landscape services' recognising that landscapes provide a viable and long-term framework to ensure people and communities are better able to find responsible ways of sustaining a range of benefits and services (food, energy, education, water management, bio-diversity, 'well-being' etc.) from a given area. Landscapes, quite rightly, are expected to fulfil many functions at the same time.

Cont/

We discussed the role of AONB Management plans as locally prepared and agreed policy statements for managing national assets. AONB Management Plans show how the State and the citizen can collaborate in a reciprocal way to produce the things we need – they genuinely support and empower local people. The plans are objective led and evidence based for large landscapes or bio-geographical areas (in the UK - National Character Areas) which share a common inherited landscape character. Understanding this character provides a decision making framework and practical, integrated solutions on a whole range of policy areas from managing and planning residential and business growth to improving bio-diversity, food security and encouraging low carbon land use.

We would value a stronger relationship with DEFRA in the development of AONB management plans as this, among other things, would help determine our future relationships with the land to better inform policy judgements about the relative harm or benefit resulting from the different demands placed on any landscape.

Enhancing land management and conserving the special qualities of England's most beautiful landscapes is not dependent on more money or more resources but rather on ensuring these existing resources are used to develop practical solutions through effective and integrated partnerships across local and national organizations, administrative areas, academic disciplines and the local rural and urban community. AONB partnerships are perfectly placed to achieve all this given they are supported by a local and long standing voluntary collaboration between local authorities, national agencies and the resident community.

Should you have any further queries or wish to discuss matters more we'd be delighted to meet again either here at Flimwell or at London.

With best wishes,

Jason Lavender.

Sally Marsh

Sally Marsh & Jason Lavender
Co-Directors (job share)
High Weald AONB Unit
Advising on the management of a nationally important landscape
01580 879500 www.highweald.org

Nobel House
17 Smith Square
London SW1P 3JR

Telephone 08459 335577

Email helpline@defra.gsi.gov.uk

Website www.defra.gov.uk



Sally Marsh and Jason Lavender
Co-Directors, High Weald AONB Unit
Woodland Enterprise Centre
Hastings Road
Flimwell
East Sussex
TN5 7PR

Our ref: PO 200346

14 October 2010

From Richard Benyon MP

Minister for Natural Environment and Fisheries

Dear Sally & Jason

Thank you for your letter of 6 September following my visit to the High Weald AONB at the end of August. I thoroughly enjoyed my visit, and thank you for the various reports on Woodlands and Carbon Storage, Wind Energy, Socio-Economic Characteristics on Farms, Food Supply and Housing needs of rural workers in the High Weald, as well as your Annual Review document.

I was interested to hear your thoughts on the term 'landscape' and the idea of a 'landscape services' approach, and I was impressed with the High Weald AONB's work using a small amount of public money to support what are now thriving rural businesses. One of the most valuable characteristics of AONBs is the close, co-ordinated relationship they can achieve with community groups, farmers and land managers. Co-ordination at a local level is vital in addressing the huge challenges facing our natural environment, such as climate change, while at the same time allowing local economies to thrive.

With regards to having a stronger relationship with Defra in the development of AONB management plans, I am undertaking a review of the funding and management of AONBs. I am particularly interested in looking at how I can help AONBs deliver their objectives and whether the present system is the best way to fund and manage AONBs. Officials have taken informal soundings with key parties, and I am considering future sponsorship arrangements.

Whatever is eventually decided, I can assure you that the best interests of the AONBs will be at the centre of my thoughts, and that I am committed to ensuring that these valuable areas are protected and enhanced.

*Yours sincerely
Richard*

RICHARD BENYON