

HIGH WEALD JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE – Management Board
Minutes – 1 July 2020 at 10.30 am, Zoom Meeting



Samantha Nicholas
Clerk to the High Weald AONB
Joint Advisory Committee

Present: Members:

Cllr Mrs Sylvia Tidy	East Sussex County Council (Chairman)
Cllr Peter Bradbury	West Sussex County Council/Mid Sussex District Council
Mrs J Davison	Community Co-optee
Cllr J Vine-Hall	Rother District Council

Also Present:

Sally Marsh	AONB Director (job share)
Jason Lavender	AONB Director (job share)
Claire Tester	AONB Planning Advisor
Gerry Sherwin	AONB Business Manager
David Scully	Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

Apologies

1. Cllr Balfour, Cllr Dixon and Jennifer Hollingum.

Members' Interests

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

Minutes of the Management Board meeting held on 4 March 2020

1. The minutes of the last meeting, held on 4 March 2020, were agreed as a correct record.

Matters arising from the minutes

2. There were no matters arising.

Sussex Lund grant applications

3. Gerry Sherwin took members through the Landscape Enhancement Programme Grants Award report covering Sussex Lund and National Grid Programmes.

4. The Partnership is in its fourth year of administering Sussex Lund and third year of National Grid's Visual Impact Provisions Funds. Since 2017, 114 Sussex Lund grants of over £350,000 has been awarded.
5. The Unit received 69 applications 10 more than last year with a total grant request of £371,000, year, and given the resources of the AONB Unit, 70 or so applications are the most the team can manage and process adequately. Forty-nine applications were approved with a total grant award of £210,730. Most of the unsuccessful applications were submitted by applicants that had chosen not to consult with and benefit from a site visit by the High Weald land management advisors.
6. The Sussex Lund panel have changed the project funding eligibility criteria for Sussex Lund for 2021 and this will be reflected on the Sussex Lund section of the High Weald website.
7. On the behalf of two groups of landowners and farmers, the AONB Unit secured two Sussex Lund grants to support two collaborative landscape-scale projects. One grant is for a set of new barn owl nest boxes for the farms in the Upper Rother and Dudwell farm cluster and the other is to plant new and restore existing hedges on a group of farms in the eastern High Weald. The Sussex Lund panel is keen to receive more collaborative projects.
8. The AONB Unit has also secured funds for three applications submitted to the National Grid totalling £466,243. These projects are part of the High Weald Beautiful Boundaries project and Wonderful Woodlands.
9. Gerry Sherwin reminded Members that the AONB Unit has an excellent track record managing large and complex grant programmes and allocating funds to and should any of the constituent local authorities be looking to work on collaborative projects, the AONB Unit would be ideal partners to support local authorities with any future grant programmes.
10. Cllr Bradbury said he was in favour of collaborative projects and that he's supportive of more collaboration across the AONB. The AONB Unit recognises the general appetite among organisations and individuals to work together but often there is a need for someone to take the lead and to co-ordinate joint efforts, which the AONB Unit is very well placed to do particularly when it comes to landscape-scale projects.
11. Cllr Bradbury also asked whether any of the current Sussex Lund projects will suffer as a result of Covid 19. Gerry Sherwin responded that Sussex Lund is fairly flexible in terms of completion deadlines and although none of the current projects have reported any concerns as a consequence of Covid 19, there might be issues for those projects being run by volunteers. Should there be any problems, the AONB Unit will work with the affected projects and look to assist them where it can.
12. **Members agreed to ratify the Sussex Lund Panel's grant award decisions and to authorise the AONB Director to agree the minor changes to the National Grid's Landscape Enhancement Initiative awards.**

Effect of Covid 19 on the organisation

13. Sally Marsh took the Members through the key issues currently affecting the AONB Unit staff and work and the wider AONB Partnership owing to Covid-19.
14. The AONB Unit closed the office in March 2020 and all staff are working primarily from home. Land management advisory visits with the proper controls have recently started and with those landowners and farmers that are happy to meet outdoors and in person. The interview for the Landscape Research Officer post has been postponed until September, and the AONB Unit's initial focus has been on maintaining the current service rather than initiating new work.
15. Sally Marsh thanked Gerry Sherwin for all her hard work to ensure the current situation didn't adversely affect our grants programme, the support we provide to others, and meeting financial and project reporting deadlines. The AONB Unit staff have held regular internal and external team meetings using video.
16. The AONB Unit will continue to work on its broader work programme focusing on ways to ensure the High Weald meets its potential to be resilient environmentally, economically, and socially – Covid -19 has underlined the importance of this work.
17. Defra has asked the country's AONB Partnerships to support the government's Green Recovery Plan and a collaborative proposal focused on nature recovery is being developed.
18. Cllr Bradbury asked whether we may need to continue to look at different ways of working not only for the immediate future but perhaps also for the longer term. Sally Marsh agreed and mentioned that the AONB Unit will do this and that she expects to blend the use of videos with in-person socially distanced meetings by the autumn.

AONB Business Planning up to 2024

19. There was a discussion on the AONB Unit's Business Plan direction and how to accommodate the uncertainties presented by Covid-19 and the longer-term objectives to 2024. The AONB Unit staff have already met to discuss the main aims of the business plan and how they can each contribute to it in light of Covid-19 and how the approaches we advocate (e.g. regenerative agriculture, 'natural health service', carbon neutral landscapes, importance of land-based rural employment) may play a role addressing some of the problems the country faces and that Covid-19 has amplified – business as usual is not an option.
20. In terms of the government's response to the Glover report's recommendations, there is little to report at this stage. At the moment, it appears that anything fundamentally meaningful, including decisions on a funding increase, additional planning powers or parity with National Parks, is likely to be pushed back until after the next election. There may be opportunities to secure funds and support to realise the Business Plan's focus on regenerative landscapes and regenerative land-use.

21. A discussion followed recognising the huge economic burden that will be placed on local authorities because of Covid 19 and the need for the AONB Unit to continue to work to its strengths supporting of the 15 local authorities at this difficult time. It was recognised that the AONB Unit has developed a strong and established partnership with the local authorities and other organisations. Claire Tester mentioned she is working increasingly with local communities to help them to build their knowledge and awareness of the High Weald and the issues it faces and the opportunities it presents.
22. Cllr Vine-Hall reminded the Members that the Glover report encouraged AONB partnerships to increase the awareness of the value and importance of AONBs to those living in urban areas. Sally Marsh informed the Members that the High Weald AONB partnership is part of the London City Region Project (led by the Kent Downs AONB partnership) to specifically address this and other issues. In addition, the AONB Unit has played a key role with others to win funding from Natural England for a Nature Recovery Coordinator to coordinate and support Nature Recovery Projects within the English AONBs. Cllr Tidy informed the Members that the Ashdown Forest Conservators were keen to develop more education projects focused on climate change and that they wanted to work collaboratively with the AONB partnership's High Weald Heroes primary school education programme.
23. Gerry Sherwin informed the Members that the High Weald Walking Festival in its usual form had been cancelled owing to the government's Covid-19 restrictions. Instead, and to maintain the general enthusiasm for the festival, the AONB Unit working with their partners The Ramblers, will publish a range of self-guided walks on the website to ensure walkers can still take part but in a safe and responsible way. Among other things, this will allow the AONB Unit to design a walking festival that will attract new people and from a greater variety of backgrounds. In addition, the AONB Unit will put together information to tackle general lack of understanding that many urban and rural visitors have of farming and forestry and how to respect their interests while exploring the countryside. This approach will be tested as a pilot project in association with Burwash Parish Council.

High Weald Officer Steering Group - update

24. David Scully (Tunbridge Wells Borough Council) took the Members through the work of the local authorities' officers in support of their obligations to the AONB designation. David has been appointed the Chairman of the High Weald Biodiversity Net Gain sub-group, which met by video link on 13th May. 17 local authority officers attended this initial meeting to discuss Defra's biodiversity offsetting metric, offsetting Strategy, and council local plan policies and guidance. The next meeting will be held on 16 September 2020.
25. David Scully explained that while the biodiversity net gain metric is not yet compulsory it's likely it will be by the autumn. The sub-group doesn't think the metric adequately recognizes the significance of semi-improved and unimproved grasslands and, given its importance in the High Weald, this is a major failing. An OSG sub-group will write guidance in respect of biodiversity net gain and offsetting and aim to present this guidance to the Joint Advisory Committee in March 2021.

26. To gauge the effectiveness of the biodiversity offsetting metric, Sally Marsh informed the Members that the AONB Unit has engaged the University of Kent to look at how the metric performs using real development examples and the results to date are not encouraging – the habitat at most risk in the High Weald AONB (grassland) has the weakest attention and the metric has failed to consider below ground biodiversity.
27. It was emphasised that this metric is being tested and that the AONB Unit will use the University of Kent’s findings to lobby Defra to revise the metric to ensure it addresses these issues adequately.

Planning and major development within the AONB

28. Cllr Vine-Hall led a discussion outlining his concerns associated with the increasing pressure for more housing and larger developments within the AONB and the tremendous government pressure being exerted on local authorities to accept significant increases in housing numbers. Cllr Vine-Hall informed the Members that 82% of Rother District Council is in the AONB and yet they are expecting to have to increase the numbers of new houses from 335 units to 772 per year.
29. Cllr Vine-Hall would like to discuss these issues with other local authorities to lobby the Government with one voice.
30. David Scully said that Tunbridge Wells Borough Council is experiencing the same pressure for new housing development resulting in a number of major development proposals within the AONB and a market town in the Low Weald, both of which are meeting high levels of resistance from local residents.
31. Cllr Tidy and Cllr Bradbury both agreed that the significant increase in housing number targets should be part of a concerted and combined effort involving all the High Weald’s local authorities acting together to lobby government. Claire Tester informed the Members of an inconsistency between National Parks and AONBs - National Park authorities are not required to use the government’s new method of calculating housing numbers but those local authorities with AONBs are required to do so despite the parity in planning terms of the two designations.
32. **It was agreed that Cllr Tidy would introduce Cllr Vine-Hall to the other AONB Chairman within the south-east of England to decide a way forward given that they are also experiencing the same pressure to accommodate more housing. The AONB Unit can offer help supporting this.**

JAC agenda for March 2019

33. The next date for the JAC is on 18 or 25 November 2020. It was agreed to hold a virtual meeting focussing on business planning.