

Minutes of the Malvern Hills AONB Joint Advisory

Committee by Zoom

Friday, 5 November 2021, 10.00 am

Present:

Prof John Raine (Chairman), Jerry Fryman (Vice Chairman), Cllr Bronwen Behan, Sven Bosley, Prof Richard Bryant, Emma Hamer, Mr J Hervey-Bathurst, Mrs G Rees, Cllr Jack Satterthwaite

Also attended:

David Armitage, AONB Partnership Assistant Manager
James Bisset, Herefordshire Parks and Countryside Service
Duncan Bridges, Malvern Hills Trust
Rachel Datlen, Worcestershire Countryside Service
Robert Deane, Rural Focus (For item 6)
Paul Esrich, AONB Partnership Manager
Karen Humphries, AONB Partnership Assistant Manager
Sarah Warden, Farming in Protected Landscapes Officer

712 Apologies and Substitutes

Apologies for absence were received from Sarah Faulkner, Frank Hill, Hazel McDowell, Scott Richardson-Brown and Roger Yeates.

Emma Hamer attended for Sarah Faulkner.

713 Declaration of Interests

James Hervey-Bathurst declared an interest as he lived, worked and owned land within the AONB.

714 To elect a Chairman

Cllr. John Raine was nominated and seconded for the position of Chairman of the Malvern Hills AONB Joint Advisory Committee. There were no other nominations so Cllr. John Raine became Chairman of the JAC for the next year.

Cllr Raine thanked the Committee for their support of him and thanked the outgoing Chairman, Gwyneth Rees for her superb work as Chairman and for

her strong and clear leadership of the Malvern Hills AONB Joint Advisory Committee.

715 To appoint a Vice-Chairman

Jerry Fryman was nominated and seconded for the position of Vice-Chairman of the Malvern Hills AONB Joint Advisory Committee. There were no other nominations so Jerry Fryman was appointed to the position for the following year.

716 Confirmation of the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 23 April 2021 were agreed to be a correct record of the meeting and would be signed by the Chairman.

717 A (draft) nature recovery plan for the Malvern Hills AONB

Robert Deane of Rural Focus Ltd. explained that a Nature Recovery Plan was being developed following one of the pledges made in the Colchester Declaration 'to work towards the creation of Nature Recovery Plans (NRP) for each AONB.' The context for this work was explained, including the findings of the National Landscapes review and the 25 Year Environment Plan which encouraged the development of a Nature Recovery Network. The Environment Bill would introduce statutory Nature Recovery Strategies at a County level and the new Environmental Land Management Schemes looked likely to include Local Nature and Landscape recovery schemes.

The aims of Malvern Hills AONB NRP were to inform and advise, to help to support work at scale, to harness collective effort and to direct resources. The area covered was the AONB plus 3km around the boundary.

The work which had been carried out to date on the NRP included an online survey, one to one discussions and a workshop with partners. As a separate but related process, the AONB Unit had also worked with others to map the provision of ecosystem services (the way nature provides benefits for people) as well as ecological opportunities in the study area.

The consultation work carried out thus far had revealed that most people felt the plan should be about nature in its broadest sense and that it should work with and support farmers and landowners. Also, that it should look at habitat networks rather than going to a detailed field by field approach. This steer had been used to inform a first draft of the plan.

The next steps were to take account of all the comments that might be received, carry out more one to one sessions, review the mapping data for accuracy, to draft a table of actions and to consider what the future monitoring requirements would be.

Committee members discussed the draft plan and made various comments:

- A member was pleased to see that there was mention of geology in the plan. In the AONB there were three SSSIs for geology and it was

queried whether quarries should be considered as a habitat in their own right as the areas were unique.

- Questions were asked about why sustainably produced food should be described as 'secure' and was the reference to clean and 'plentiful' water showing that there was an ambition to store more water? In response it was explained that secure food resources referred to food being from our own resources, and 'plentiful' water was a government term which was not about storage of more water in reservoirs but rather enabling constant supplies and considering the effects of climate change.
- There was concern around the term 'encouraging activism' because for farmers activism often meant illegal activity. It was explained that the plan sought to recognise activism in terms of generating community involvement in helping to solve the nature and climate crisis but it was acknowledged that the term could cause concern so a change of term would be considered.
- It was felt that it was difficult to define the character of nature in a particular area as nature was dynamic. Various species were invasive and could easily spread to new areas. It was queried whether there should be an effort to manage the spread of such species to maintain the particular character of an area. The view was that within the plan there could be a focus on the health of habitats rather than species but also that we need to accept that nature was dynamic.
- It was agreed that the report could be shared with other landowners but there was a caution that the plan was still an early (and incomplete) draft and was therefore subject to change. Once a final draft was available this would be widely distributed for consultation.
- It was asked what was meant by "managing game birds for sustainable woodland and hedgerow management". The response was that the phrase was taken from the Landscape Management guidelines and it was agreed that some of the management guidelines in the plan needed to be made more specific.
- Following a query about monitoring, it was explained that this would be at a high level. There was an awareness that there was a shortage of data and some of the data that was available contained inaccuracies. It was also acknowledged that there was a lack of resources available for this work.
- It was suggested that more consideration should be given to re-wilding. This could have a place, however, it was reported that the consultation exercise had shown that people favoured nature friendly farming rather than splitting land into areas with separate objectives. A reminder was given that the AONB was a cultural designation which was shaped by people, it was not a pristine wilderness.
- It was not anticipated that this plan would have a great influence on planning issues as planning guidance and policy was already in place, from national to local levels. However, it could have a role in discharging duties related to Biodiversity net Gain, for example.

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- a) Noted the draft plan; and**
- b) Raised and discussed any issues arising.**

718 **A meadow restoration project at Old Colwall**

Paul Esrich described a practical conservation project which had recently taken place in the AONB, led by the AONB Unit, and showed photographs of the process.

A conversation had initially taken place with the landowner who wished to improve the biodiversity on his holding and one particular field had been selected to improve for biodiversity. The Herefordshire Meadows group produced a restoration timetable and advised that the first action should be dealing with the nettles and docks.

The wild flower seed to be sown was harvested from Malvern Common which was owned by the Malvern Hills Trust; the Herefordshire Wildlife Trust carried out the harvesting after assessments had taken place to check that it would be a suitable donor source. Permission was gained from Natural England as the donor site was a Site of Special Scientific Interest and also from the Rural Payments Agency as Malvern Common was in a current Countryside Stewardship scheme. Approval was then gained from the Rural Payments Agency for the re-seeding of the field in Old Colwall.

As the field to be restored in Old Colwall was on the site of a former medieval village, Hereford Archaeology service were consulted and agreed that provided various conditions were met the seed could be distributed. A botanist had carried out a baseline survey to document the plant species currently in the field so that a comparison could be made with what grows after the restoration. On 24 September volunteers from the Colwall Orchard Group distributed the harvested seed in the field.

The project showed the AONB and its partners working at its best. The groups who contributed were:

- Herefordshire Meadows Group
- The Landowner
- Natural England
- Rural Payments agency
- Herefordshire Wildlife Trust
- Malvern Hills Trust
- Herefordshire Council
- Colwall Orchard Group

RESOLVED that the Committee noted the update and looked forward to seeing the results next year.

719 **Farming in Protected Landscapes**

Sarah Warden, Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) Officer, explained that the FiPL programme was part of the Agricultural Transition Plan and started in July 2021 with four main themes; climate, nature, people and place. A budget of £216,309 was available to the AONB for 2021/22 (including the officer salary

and administration costs), with a provisional budget of £153,728 for 2022/23 and the same amount for 2023/4. The programme would finish at the end of March 2024.

A Local Grant Assessment Panel had been established to consider applications and was made up of representatives from Natural England, the AONB Unit, local farmers, the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust, NFU and Historic England. The Panel had met twice and approved 6 applications: two projects from the Colwall Orchard Group, one from the Malvern Hills Trust, two from private individuals and one from the Malvern Hills AONB Unit.

The AONB Unit had finished accepting applications for 2021/22 and was now looking to the following year. Networking with landowners had been building up over the last year so details of the project had been passed on directly to many and communication about the programme was also happening via social media and the AONB website etc. Once the AONB Nature Recovery Plan was complete it would be shared with potential applicants and was expected to provide a steer for future projects.

RESOLVED that the Committee noted the report.

720 Planning matters and the Malvern Hills AONB

Karen Humphries gave an overview of the planning activity which was considered by the AONB Unit in 2020-21. Generally, two days a week in the AONB Unit were spent on planning issues which could potentially come from five different local planning authorities. Policy came from national plans, all the way down to local plans, neighbourhood development plans and with guidance also produced by the AONB Unit. There was now better dialogue with planning officers and other interested parties such as tree officers or archaeologists who gave support over planning issues.

The AONB was not a statutory consultee which meant it did not have to respond to all applications but unfortunately that also meant that details of applications were not automatically sent through. It was noted that the National Landscapes review had considered whether AONB Partnerships should become a statutory consultee in future.

Various trends had been seen in the use of materials and colours, with lots of wood cladding being used. It was hoped that a checklist could be commissioned to help planning officers to advise applicants on matters such as colour and layout. This was seen as particularly important for agricultural buildings which with modern farming practices were now generally larger than in the past.

The number of equine developments continued to increase, which could have a significant impact on the appearance of the AONB and the quality of pasture etc. The Unit had been talking to planners to encourage equine management plans to be submitted when applications were made.

Light was becoming an increasing issue within the setting of the AONB, especially on the east side of the hills where sports fields and new buildings in the industrial parks were creating more artificial light.

During the ensuing discussion various points were made:

- Those members who were District Councillors commented that they welcomed comments by the AONB Unit as they were knowledgeable and influential additions to the discussion.
- It was noted that some decisions made by Planning Authorities were appealed but that sometimes these appeals were dismissed by the planning inspectorate, in favour of AONB considerations.
- The AONB continued to work with planning enforcement officers to try to deal with issues such as closeboard fencing and dealing with roof lights in agricultural buildings, but such issues were difficult to address due to resource problems. It was pointed out that concerns about crime on private land was often dealt with by increasing lighting; although it was noted that motion sensors could be used.
- The AONB Unit was working with planners to try to track the change of use of fields next to houses. More education was needed to alert homeowners to what planning rules applied in the area. Leaflets had previously been distributed to Estate Agents with regard to legislation and guidance around planning issues but now with more being done online it was necessary to re-think how such information could be disseminated.

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- a) Noted the report; and**
- b) Raised and discussed any issues arising.**

721 Information Items

- David Armitage informed the Committee that BBCs Countryfile should be showing a report of various projects on 12 December; including GPS collars to contain cattle and the re-introduction of the Pearl Bordered Fritillary.
- Paul Esrich gave brief details of the Forestry Commission's Tree Health Scheme. The Malvern Hills AONB had been selected as one area for the pilot of this new scheme and expressions of interest were being sought from woodland owners and managers who had diseased trees, with the aim of support being given to help with removing and re-planting trees.
- Defra had released a £6million trees call to action fund. They were looking for new regional partnerships to come together to make use of the funding. Paul Esrich explained that the AONB Unit was looking to join public and private partners in an Expression of Interest.
- It was believed that there would soon be a government response and consultation around the recommendations which came from the National Landscapes Review which had been published two years

before. It was expected that the consultation would include looking at the duties and responsibilities of AONBs and National Parks.

722 Verbal Reports from Partners

- Jerry Fryaman announced that Castlemorten Parish Hall had been opened after its extension and re-vamp. Various new participants had been attracted to make use of the venue.
- Dick Bryant explained that the 2021 geo-maintenance scheme was well underway. Work had taken place at two quarries which were difficult to manage as they are unstable, with the ongoing dilemma of should vegetation be removed to expose the geological features.
- Duncan Bridges gave an update from the Malvern Hills Trust:
 - Ash Dieback felling work in high priority areas was underway and the work would continue for the next five years. It was pointed out that some members of the public were concerned that trees were being felled but it was important that the message was spread as to why such action was necessary.
 - A new land management plan had been put in place in April 2021 and a new five-year business plan was being finalised.
 - The Malvern Hills Trust had been informed by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport that a private bill would be required to enact the Governance changes which they had previously consulted on, therefore the Board of the Trust would be considering how they should proceed.
 - Various tree and hedge planting projects were being undertaken but getting hold of supplies was proving to be a challenge.
- Jack Satterthwaite reported that Worcestershire County Council's Economy and Environment Scrutiny Committee were undertaking a street light review and a discussion would be had about light pollution.
- James Bissett gave an update from Herefordshire Council:
 - He reported that there had been organisational changes at Herefordshire Council, which would hopefully be completed in early 2022. It had been proving difficult to recruit to posts in the natural environment teams.
 - As supplies of trees was a recognised problem, Defra were looking to provide some grants to tree producers.
 - The Herefordshire Biological Records Centre had started a Hidden Herefordshire Project with Lottery Funding to encourage people to enjoy nature and record what species were around.
- James Hervey-Bathurst mentioned the Queen's Green Canopy project with different organisations and schools being encouraged to plant trees. The Eastnor Estate had a new café at the Woodshed at the south end of the hills; it was hoped that a new gateway to the hills could be encouraged and take some pressure from the north end of the hills.

723 Dates of Future Meetings

Next year meetings would take place on:

- 8 April 2022, and

- 4 November 2022.

The meeting ended at 11.55am

Chairman