

MALVERN HILLS AONB JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

23 APRIL 2021

ADVISING AND SUPPORTING LANDOWNERS AND MANAGERS IN PROTECTED LANDSCAPES

Recommendation

1. The Committee is recommended to:

- a) **Note the report;**
- b) **Raise and discuss any issues arising.**

Background

2. AONBs are closely involved in discussions and work around the development of the new Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme which will replace existing funding schemes which reward landowners and managers for environmental land management. ELM is due to be fully rolled out for farmers in England by the end of 2024. More information can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-land-management-schemes-overview>

3. The National Association for AONBs has through input to the Glover Review and directly to Defra pitched for a strong role for AONB organisations in the new Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme.

Summary – ELM Advocacy Work

4. In October 2020 Defra made a sum of money (£7,202) available to every National Park Authority and every AONB Partnership in England to spend on 'ELM Advocacy Work' by the end of the financial year. These funds were to be used to:

- increase the understanding of the CS/ELM schemes to farmers and land managers,
- promote and develop networks
- work in collaboration with other National Landscape Organisations and the NAAONB.

5. It was also stipulated that feedback from farmers and land managers during this work should be reported to the NAAONB who were charged with compiling a final report to Defra.

6. In the Malvern Hills the AONB Unit decided to focus this spend on the northern part of the AONB. We made contact with 10 landowners in the area around the Suckley Hills, some of whom we had had no previous contact with. The advocacy funding was then used to engage the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) South West to liaise with these owners and to produce habitat-based land

management plans for each, with a focus on the potential of land to deliver Ecosystem Services¹ in the future. Specifically, FWAG:

- Obtained a data file for each land holding which allowed consideration of local targeting, key species and contextualisation of each farm holding in the wider landscape.
- Used field parcel information (available from the Rural Payments Agency and/or MHAONB habitat base map) to generate a single UKHab Map for holding (<https://ukhab.org/>).
- Held two virtual meetings with each landowner/manager, exploring findings, ground-truthing habitat data and discussing future direction of the farm business. Discussions around future funding streams was also encouraged.
- Produced a Natural Capital report for each holding, showing what habitats/ Natural Capital assets the current holding has, how they are managed (current condition where possible) and providing guidance on how the holding could be managed in the future in terms of natural capital/ecosystem services, to deliver public goods.

7. In addition, key species information from the Worcestershire Biological Records Centre and maps showing water flow pathways and areas at risk of soil erosion obtained from the Natural England Catchment Sensitive Farming project were included in the reports. This made the information provided to the landowners/managers comprehensive in scope, providing more information for future decision making.

8. The farms that were engaged in this work varied from 18ha to 330ha in size with farm types ranging from predominantly horticulture, to purely pasture based livestock and then predominantly arable units. The holdings covered a total of 790ha and are well connected to one another geographically.

9. Landowners and managers showed a great interest in this work and a desire to talk about current practices and future opportunities for their holdings in this transitional period between different types of agri-environment support. It was particularly pleasing to hear that many participants were keen to share their practices and experiences with others (some site visits with neighbours were suggested, when Covid allows) and it is hoped that this group of owners and managers may form a local network or cluster. Such groupings are particularly significant in helping to address issues like nature decline at the larger, landscape scale and the AONB Unit has undertaken to try and support this cluster moving forward, if that is the will of the owners and managers. Clusters like these could be very well placed to make use of the Local Nature Recovery level of funding which is expected to be available under ELM.

¹ Natural Capital is the stock of natural assets which include geology, soil, air, water and all living things. The benefits people obtain from this Natural Capital stock such as food and timber, recreational opportunities, aesthetic values, health benefits, flood risk regulation, air and water quality regulation, and many more, are called ecosystem services.

Summary – Farming in Protected Landscapes - new Defra programme 2021-24

10. In the Agricultural Transition Plan published on 30 November 2020 (see extract at Appendix 1) Defra announced a new three year programme for National Parks and AONBs. The funding allocation is understood to be £22M in 2021-22, followed by £15M in 2022-23 and 2023-24 across the 44 protected landscapes.

11. In the information provided so far, the money is expected to meet protected landscape aims, 25 Year Environment Plan goals and recommendations from the Glover Review, and is also expected to support farmers. It is to be delivered across two elements:

(A) Farm level projects to diversify incomes, prepare for our Environmental Land Management offer and create more green jobs.

- Support for farmers for delivering environment/landscape outcomes. Examples might include peat restoration, planting woodland, hay meadow restoration, creation of heathland and scrub, moorland management, enhancement of wetlands, and dry-stone wall repairs
- Support to farmers on areas such as carbon capture, business planning, and skills development including apprenticeships

(B) Wider infrastructure investment and projects supporting farmers and rural economies

- Infrastructure, such as better access, clearer and simpler signage, dedicated cycling/electric bike access – to attract more diverse groups of visitors (to farm businesses, camping barns, etc.) as well as creating jobs (e.g. expansion of landscape rangers supporting farmers and visitors)
- Strengthened public engagement with landscapes to attract more, and more diverse, visitors, improving mental health outcomes and better disabled access; walking routes to better connect landscapes.

12. We had no knowledge of this programme before it was published in the Agriculture Transition Plan and details are still not clear. Staff working in the AONB network and for the National Association for AONBs are still in discussions with Defra about this work. All AONB teams are in agreement that additional staff capacity will be needed to implement the programme, and it appears clear that this will be legitimate spend from within the programme budget.

13. Important factors/decisions:

- Budget allocation to Malvern Hills AONB (will be decided by Defra).
- Budget split between elements A and B of the programme (may be decided by Defra or for us to decide?).
- Budget profile across the three years – any frontloading with higher budget in year 1 is likely to create real challenges.
- Delivery methods:

14. For element A, it appears that a new AONB Partnership grant scheme for farmers is likely to be the backbone of this. The procedures of the former Sustainable Development Fund could form a good basis for this. Decisions would be needed on:

- Eligibility
- Priorities and guidance
- Grant duration and conditions
- Timing of application cycles/windows
- Decision making on grant awards
- Dovetailing with agri-environment schemes
- Monitoring

15. The best outcomes for AONB objectives are likely to be met by including within the programme staff capacity for advice to guide potential grant applicants, i.e. over and above administration of processes.

16. Establishment of an effective grant programme would need input from relevant partners, and the AONB Partnership is well placed to draw on this.

17. For the second heading of 'support to farmers' it is likely that training programmes of some sort will be appropriate. Again these will probably be best developed in conjunction with partners.

18. Element B – there could be more different choices about how to deliver this. Infrastructure could include some larger strategic projects, e.g. off-road cycle routes, or capital works to address localised car parking and visitor pressure points.

19. Attracting more diverse groups of visitors is mentioned twice in Defra's guidance, and Rangers are mentioned. The need for on the ground visitor management may be increasing in the AONB, especially following the last 12 months during Covid, and there may be some potential to establish a new Ranger type post/service (outwith those that exist on Malvern Hills Trust land) to support activities such :

- Improved visitor management at locations in private ownership which have no real provision for visitor management. This would include liaison with landowners and community representatives, engaging with visitors to influence behaviour and address issues at peak times, as well as identifying longer term strategic improvements such as improvements to access infrastructure, information and interpretation.
- Outreach work with under-represented sections of the population, and leading or supporting new programmes of visits and activities with these groups.
- Establishing a programme of practical AONB volunteering tasks to undertake tasks not being done in other ways, and to provide new opportunities for active involvement by the public.
- All of these would be carried out in close collaboration with team members working on tourism, promotion, conservation and work with farmers, and of course with other partner organisations.

20. This kind of service would be a significant addition to the capacity of the team, and could be quite transformative for our overall delivery, especially in very visible activities. Such a service would of course be best as a long-term commitment and this funding is only a 3 year package. The exit/continuation options and implications of having to wind up the service after three years would need to be considered.

Supporting Documents

Appendix 1 – extract from the Agricultural Transition Plan published on 30 November 2020 – See following document.

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