

MALVERN HILLS AONB JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

8 APRIL 2022

COUNTRYSIDE STEWARDSHIP FACILITATION FUND

Recommendation

The Committee is recommended to:

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

Background

1. The Malvern Hills AONB Partnership participated in a three-year Countryside Stewardship agreement between March 2018 and March 2021 to set up and manage a Facilitation Fund Group, The Malvern Hills Group. The purpose of the group was to raise awareness, advise and assist farmers and landowners in the Southern and Central part of the AONB to enhance their land for the benefit of nature and the special landscape features notable in the area. David Armitage was the facilitator for the Group during this period.
2. Subsequently, a one-year extension agreement was offered in Spring 2021 to build on the work carried out in the initial 3 year term. A local adviser, Charlotte Vincent, was contracted to assist Paul Esrich with managing the group and the agreement administration during this extension period. The extension year ends on 31st March 2022.
3. Information on the Countryside Stewardship Scheme can be found at: [Facilitation fund: Countryside Stewardship - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

The extension year

4. **Funding** – a budget of up to £16,652 was made available to the AONB Partnership to maintain the group, organise and run training events and meetings, and to manage the Agreement itself. This funding came through the Rural Payments Agency.
5. **Staffing** – Charlotte Vincent was contracted to manage the Agreement, having significant previous experience managing another Facilitation Group Agreement in the Wyre Forest and also having worked for Natural England.
6. **Membership** – Membership at the end of the initial 3-year agreement (end of March 2021) was counted at 15. However not all of these transferred to the

new extension agreement due to changes in the eligibility criteria set out by Rural Payments Agency (RPA). Membership of the group is now 22.

- The total members' holding area, which began at 3062ha and reached 3600ha at the end of the first 3-year Agreement, has now swelled to 4723ha today.

Events

- Each event needs to be based on one of the Objectives/Outcomes which were identified at the start of the Agreement. Those for our group link to the AONB Priority Habitats of Traditional Orchard, Woodpasture and Parkland, Ancient and Native Woodland and Lowland Meadow, and also to the Landscape Priority of Hedgerows, and to an overarching Water Quality brief.
- Nine meetings and training events were held during 2021-2022. The first three were over Zoom due to Covid-19 restrictions/concerns. Later meetings have been variously indoors and outdoors, although the indoor events have been with jumpers due to needing all windows and doors open to maintain good air circulation. Risk assessments are always undertaken prior to any event. However the current Covid climate has added a new risk threat which has been carefully considered and mitigated each time.

Event Title	Date	Participants
New agreement: Introduction and FiPL announcement – by Zoom	27 th May 2021	6
Meadow Enhancement with Rory Johnson - by Zoom	8 th June 2021	7
Soil Health with Niels Corfield – by Zoom	29 th June 2021	7
Regenerative Agriculture at Risbury Court, Leominster by kind permission of Richard Thomas	11 th August 2021	6
Nature Recovery Planning at Colwall Hotel	9 th September 2021	8
Meadow Enhancement in practice by kind invitation of Roland Trafford-Roberts at Old Colwall	24 th September 2021	9 plus COG volunteers
Woodland Pests with Ed Brown (Wyre Forest), Dave Sykes (FC) and John Evans (FC). Visit to Frith Wood.	15 th Nov 2021	11

Hedgerow Management courtesy of Malvern Hills Trust and Razorback.	15 th February 2022	12
Orchard Tree Management	8 th March 2022	7
Total		73

10. There has been a good variety of events, all building on the 6 events held during the first Agreement. In total over the 4 years of CSFF there have been 15 events.

11. During the extension year notes compiled at each event have been circulated to all group members to benefit those who might have wanted to attend but were unable to do so.

Costs Claimed in extension period

12. OVERALL COSTS

	Running (Salary)	Direct (e.g. room hire, catering)	
Q1	£1,245.00	£400.00	
Q2	£1,420.00	£250.00	
Q3	£1,256.70	£866.57	
Q4	£1,800.00	£280.00	not yet finalised
	£5,721.70	£1,796.57	£7,518.27

13. The allocated budget from RPA included allowance for Paul Esrich's time. However it was deemed unwieldy to extract his costs and associated evidence of time sheets and separate defrayal from the Finance Team, when his time is legitimately allocated to other core spend budgets.

Future of the group

14. From the AONB Unit's perspective, the success of the group, its growing membership and the confidence gained by those attending events, is without question. Whilst it is not always/often possible to draw a straight line between a particular training session or conversation and a change in behaviour, it is hoped that the FF events will have informed landowners and managers and contributed to their current and future decision making. We are starting to see evidence of more collaborative discussion and working between land holders, e.g. management planning across woodlands and parklands in shared ownership – another aspiration of the group. We hope that landowners and managers feel they have gained from opportunities to meet with their

neighbours, discuss land management challenges and explore opportunities for doing things differently. Evaluation forms completed by participants suggest that this has indeed been the case.

15. Another round of Facilitation Group funding was announced by Government at the end of 2021. However, after discussion, it was decided not to make an application to Defra/RPA for financial support to maintain the group and arrange future events. An estimate of 30% of facilitator time is spent on administering the Facilitation Fund Agreement; claims, queries, change-logs, new member registration, and frequent and repeated liaison with RPA, rather than actually getting on with the job. We are also conscious that the administrative requirements imposed by the RPA can be an annoyance for members, e.g. needing to complete evaluation forms and approve quarterly claims. However, the principle of better supporting landowners and managers in the AONB is felt to be imperative, especially in light of growing challenges and changes affecting the area, including the advent of the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELM). Therefore, it is hoped that landowner liaison and support work will be maintained in the period after 31/03/22 through the core AONB budget.
16. In addition to the Facilitation Fund Group, work has been carried out over the last 18 months to assemble an informal group of landowners in the north of the AONB, again with the idea of facilitating discussion, opportunities for learning and collaborative working. This group currently comprises 14 members with a combined land holding of approximately 1000 ha. Consideration is currently being given to the possibility of establishing a single landowner group for the AONB.

Summary

17. The extension year to the Facilitation Fund Group agreement is felt to have been successful, building on the start made with the initial 3-year agreement. Staff dedicated to managing the group, supported by the wider AONB Team, have enabled the group and the AONB to benefit from varied sources of funding and advice, including most recently the Farming in Protected Landscapes Programme.
 - New orchards have been/ will be created and well managed;
 - Hay meadows have been enhanced with increased floral diversity, supporting pollinators, birds and mammals.
 - The hedgerow network in the AONB will be consolidated by new and restored hedgerows, and better managed by more sensitive cutting regimes.
 - Woodlands have been assessed for damage by pests, and plans established to manage them, thus protecting these ancient habitats.
 - A better understanding of soil health and the part this, and more controlled stock grazing, plays in relation to water quality, has had far reaching benefits.
18. These benefits and enhancements have been applied in varying degrees over many of the holdings in the group, sometimes including holdings that link

together. This has started to create the landscape scale change so needed to secure our nature and special landscape in the future.

Charlotte Vincent
Malvern Hills Facilitation Group
Facilitator
March 2022