

Unit might initiate a programme, but it was pointed out we have no direct labour to commit to a countryside management function within the Unit. This would require a separate contract, which it was felt would not be a realistic use of our limited resources.

A suggestion was made for the AONB Unit to produce a guidance note for landowners and farmers on how to manage elm on their holdings, covering issues such as cutting back new growth and layering hedge heights, together with the use of mixed rather than single species hedgerows.

3) AONB Unit

A copy of the latest Financial Report was circulated to the meeting, and the current situation is that we are still on track with a 68% spend 67% through the year. Information on SDF will be provided at the next meeting, when we will have figures available for the interim claim. We are on target for the £80K, although the charcoal project has been withdrawn due to planning problems. It has been possible to divert these monies to the project for the rubber crumb surface on the car park at Compton.

A question was asked about the high spend in the partnership running costs budget, and the reason for this is that two Annual Reviews were published this year. This will be balanced at year-end, as there will be underspend in other areas.

There has been a lot of interest in the Character Building Fund, and it is anticipated we will be able to utilise all the £25K funds available for this project. FH has talked to project contacts, and is confident they will meet the relevant criteria for completion by the end of March.

4) Draft Core and Project Bids 2007/2008

The format of the bid is the same as last year, although it is now for Natural England. Work programmes are based around core functions and actions in the Management Plan. An inflation figure of 3% has been built in, giving a total budget for 2006/2007 of £148,435, with £106,873 being the amount bid for from Natural England.

A question was asked regarding Landscape Character Assessment, which appears in the Core Bid. The AONB Unit will endeavour to undertake Landscape Character Assessments using the new guidance for those parts of the AONB not yet covered, and such assessments would include the results from the Historic Landscape Characterisation.

The Core Bid also shows the commencement of a review of the current AONB Management Plan. This was the subject of a debate, and the AONB Unit confirmed that during the last three months of this financial year, a Project Plan setting out the steps to the Review will be formulated. The State of the AONB Report will provide us with information that will help in the update and review of the Management Plan.

ND asked about the non-inclusion of accords as compared with last year, and it was advised that due to the continuing changes in the structures within the Isle of Wight Council and other bodies such as Natural England, it was felt the accord process should be given less of a priority at this stage, with the proviso they could be included again at some future date.

A point was raised about marking the boundary of the AONB, and highlighting awareness of its exact area. It was advised that the Management Plan does not have an action for general signage in the AONB, although there is an action regarding gateway signage at specific locations.

This is a difficult concept due to the fact that there are five separate parcels of AONB, and many of its boundaries run alongside roads.

A question was asked about the possibility of the AONB Unit employing staff directly on countryside projects. It was advised the work currently undertaken by the AONB Unit and the Partnership to facilitate work by other organisations, is a better use of resources to raise our profile i.e. the Character Building Project at Winkle Street. In addition, as we only have one Local Authority which provides a large amount of funding compared to others, it would be difficult to justify the need for additional funding to provide a service already existing within the Authority. There was concern such an approach might alienate the AONB Partnership from the Local Authority and, in particular, its involvement in discussions on Local Authority works. It is important we do not lose sight of our successes, as our AONB is a good example of partnership working.

It was also pointed out the Island has an extensive network of conservation and wildlife organisations, together with volunteer groups such as the Green Gym, which are funded through grant aid or their own resources. Although such organisations carry out work within the AONB, the designation may not be mentioned unless we provide direct funding for the projects, although the works themselves will further our aims.

With regard to raising levels of awareness, the AONB Unit intends to re-launch the Partnership Update, and also issue an AONB leaflet for circulation to the general public. We have also included a new paragraph in our Finest Landscapes Newsletter further explaining our role. It is also intended to review the bedroom browser scheme, currently available in accommodation outlets on the Island. The audio walks project requires more groundwork, and may be a possibility for next year.

The meeting ratified the Core and Project Bids for 2007/2008, and agreed they be sent to Natural England.

5) Any Other Business

A letter has been received from the MP requesting that the Medina Valley and Asheys areas be included within the AONB, which was brought to the Steering Committee for consideration. There was strong discussion on the merits or otherwise of changes to the designated area. The main points raised were:-

- The Medina Valley already has protection under other conservation designations.
- We believe that both areas were considered for designation when the AONB was originally formed, but were rejected at that time as they did not meet the required criteria.
- Any requests for proposed boundary changes would have to be referred by the Local Authority to Natural England. The Local Authority would have to provide a Landscape Character Assessment, firm evidence as to why these areas should now be included, and provide the necessary funding for such a proposal. The IW Council gave their view that the resources required for this were unlikely to be seen as a priority.
- Concerns were raised that commencing a review of the boundaries would be likely to open up the whole of the AONB designated area for discussion, which could be very onerous and time consuming.

- In addition to the AONB, proposals for the Geopark together with other designations, reflect the quality of our environment with 70% of the Island's landscape already having protection.

It was agreed a reply should be sent to Andrew Turner, pointing out that these areas were not included in the original designation as they did not meet the criteria, and there have been no changes to the criteria since that time. The opinion of the Steering Committee is that accordingly there is little merit in following up the MP's request to alter their designation.

Action: JB to draft reply to Andrew Turner

ND distributed copies of the Team Structure of Natural England (South East), which includes updated information on office addresses.

Councillor Churchman asked if the AONB Unit had any contact with the Island Life in terms of publishing information. It was advised that we were not involved in partnerships with other Island publications, but were happy to work with other areas of the media in terms of press releases.

FH confirmed that the next conference of the National Association of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty will be held at Winchester in July 2007. The Isle of Wight will be one of the hosting AONBs, and it is intended to organise workshops, presentations at the event and field trips on the Island. The event will receive national coverage, and the AONB Unit will commence planning for this event in January 2007.

It is hoped to officially launch our re-vamped website towards the end of January, and we will be making contact with members of the Steering Committee early in the New Year, to obtain general background information for inclusion.

RG advised that the Wildlife Trust intend to purchase Ashey Down, and more information will be available at the next Steering Committee meeting.

DR welcomed the return of John Brownscombe on behalf of the Steering Committee.

6) Dates of future meetings

Dates of future meetings were detailed on the agenda, but the meeting scheduled for 15 February may not be convenient for some members as it is half term. **This date has now been changed to Thursday 22 February 2007**

There being no further business, the meeting closed at 12.47 p.m.