

**Cannock Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty  
Joint Committee**

**Wednesday 25th March 2009, 10:00am**

**Treetops Classroom, Birches Valley Forest Centre, Rugeley, Staffordshire  
WS15 2UQ**

**M I N U T E S**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Representing</b>
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**Members**

Cllr Neil Roberts	Lichfield District Council, Chairman
Cllr Tony Williams	Cannock Chase Council, Vice Chairman
Cllr Doug Davis	Stafford Borough Council

**Officers**

Andy Goode	Staffordshire County Council
Antony Lancaster	Cannock Chase Council
John Smith	Lichfield District Council
Geoff Unwin	Stafford Borough Council
Anne Walker	Cannock Chase AONB Unit, Clerk to the Joint Committee

**Advisors**

Juliet Hands	Staffordshire County Council, Treasurer to the Joint Committee
Ian Hickman	Forestry Commission
Ruth Hýtch	Cannock Chase AONB Unit
Jean Evans	Staffordshire County Council, acting for the Honorary Secretary
Andrew Hearle	Natural England

**Observer**

Cllr Val Richards	Lichfield District Council
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Cllr Roberts welcomed Andrew Hearle to the meeting and introduced Cllr Val Richards who will be representing Lichfield District Council in future. Changes in portfolios now mean that he will now be concentrating on the built environment, whilst Cllr Richards will be responsible for green spaces, including the AONB. He also welcomed Jean Evans, Assistant Director of Law & Governance.

**Apologies**

Apologies were received from Cllr Wakefield (Staffordshire County Council), Cllr Billson (South Staffordshire Council), Cllr Pat Ansell (Chairman, Advisory Partnership) and Hayden Jones (South Staffordshire Council).

Cllr Davis expressed concern that the elected member representing Staffordshire County Council was not in attendance and highlighted the issue of the meeting being quorate. Andy Goode commented that Cllr Wakefield had a diary clash with a Cabinet meeting, but would have attended if needed to ensure that the meeting was quorate. Cllr Roberts noted that he understood that Cabinet members have additional pressures on their time, however alternative arrangements with nominated substitutes should be made. The Joint Committee does not meet often and it is important to be able to conduct the business of the day. Jean Evans noted that the Partnership Agreement is a stand alone document for the Joint Committee, it may be possible to amend this without formal procedure to include substitutes, however, Ruth Hýtch noted that there was already provision in the Agreement for nominated substitutes, but that these should also be of Cabinet/Executive level. Cllr Roberts requested that nominated substitutes are made known to the AONB Unit team. He also noted that there will be changes to the Joint Committee following the County elections on June 4<sup>th</sup>.

### **Minutes of the meeting held on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2008**

**173 Resolved** That the minutes of the meeting held on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2008 be confirmed, proposed by Cllr Davis and seconded by Cllr Williams.

### **Matters Arising**

**174 Natural England Three Year Funding Agreements** - Ruth noted that there had been a hiatus with the progress of the legal agreement due to absences in the legal team. Jean Evans is now trying to set up a meeting with other heads of legal to pursue this.

### **Declaration of Interests**

**175** There were no declarations of interest.

### **Management Plan Review Progress**

Report of the AONB Officer/Chairman of the Officers Working Group

**176** Cllr Roberts noted that he was aware that creating the draft Plan had taken some time and that the Officers Working Group had been instrumental in carrying through this body of work with Ruth and other officers. The initial intention of a 'light touch' review had since raised a number of issues, some of which had caused difficulties, particularly the late comments made by Natural England, although these had now been dealt with.

Ruth informed the meeting that the covering note to the 201 page report set out how many processes had been undertaken to get to this stage. Members were reminded that the Management Plan is for this Partnership, what is required locally to meet the statutory duties of the local authorities. It does not represent

one organisation's issues. The draft Management Plan had been widely consulted upon, including relevant experts from various organisations. The process had also taken account of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, guidance from Natural England and staff had benefited from training from the National Association of AONBs. Three assessments were also undertaken to ensure that the new Management Plan would be viable. The late remarks on the Appropriate Assessment (AA) are addressed in Appendix 4 of the report. A few typographical errors had been spotted in this final draft which will be rectified before going to print. Considerable effort had gone into this document from members of the Officers Working Group and other technical advisors. It should be emphasised that this is a partnership production.

Geoff Unwin, as Chairman, wished to record his thanks to all on the Officers Working Group and the Management Plan sub-group for their hard work on this task.

Cllr Roberts noted that as there is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) within the AONB the habitats regulation assessments were required. The level of consultation outlined in Appendix 2 demonstrated the interest, awareness and dedication of various commentators from the Forestry Commission, local authorities, countryside teams, Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, et al. He felt that those who wanted to make comments on the draft had been enabled to do so. It is appropriate that consultation is undertaken and although some respondents made diverse comments, diplomacy in handling these was observed.

Andrew Hearle stated that it was clear from the reporting mechanisms that the Officers Working Group and the AONB Unit team had performed well and effectively. On an informal note, he was very confident that the process had been undertaken properly and was fit for purpose. He was aware that the AA had caused problems with issues related to the SAC. Attention was focused on Cannock Chase AONB since a large proportion of the area is designated as a SAC. He was also aware that Natural England seemed to be placing undue attention on Cannock Chase, however, this was not the case. He apologised on behalf of Natural England for the late timing of the comments. AONBs had responded appropriately to the guidance given, but there is a need for Natural England to review this guidance in light of internal discussions. He was confident that Cannock Chase AONB had taken on the process effectively.

Cllr Roberts commented that the late comments had not been helpful, we are one of the smaller AONB teams and it appears that others did not receive this amount of attention. The Joint Committee takes this matter very seriously and as previously stated, the Officers Working Group undertook the bulk of the work on the review and re-write, which has been a considerable task. Although comments are part and parcel of the process, they are not always well informed.

Comments:

<b>Comment</b>	<b>Made by</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>Made By</b>
Next stage in the process is to submit the final draft to Natural England then Secretary of State for approval.	Ruth Hýtch		
When will the Plan be finalised to be effective?	Cllr Davis	One of the Executive Directors should be able to sign off the Plan by the end of next week.	Andrew Hearle
Any revenue implications for the next few years?	Cllr Davis	Almost certainly, the business plan is to be discussed later in the meeting. A pragmatic approach to annual action plans will be taken, although they also need to be aspirational. Delivery of future projects within the Plan period may be difficult.	Ruth Hýtch
The financial position for all was never foreseen, it will be difficult for local authorities to increase funding. All the indicators are that looking long-term we may be in the situation that aspirations may be reduced.	Cllr Davis	LAs contribute to core costs, but Natural England provide 75% of the funding. They are under the same pressures being part of central government. The Management Plan has to balance the aspirations of those who commented with the available funding. This will require the AONB team to be innovative and seek alternative sources of funding. We are well supported by in-kind and volunteer contributions and it may be necessary to widen this activity. Other potential issues that may affect what is done include climate change and its impact on the heathland as well as the visitor economy with people more aware of green space and countryside.	Cllr Roberts

Comment	Made by	Response	Made By
		As a strategic group, there has been concern about future spend. The Plan is reviewable, the balance between aspiration and what can be achieved can be reviewed annually.	Jean Evans
<p>As one of the land managers, core costs for staff are increasing and there is a need to be able to generate income to undertake projects.</p> <p>Staffordshire County Council has statutory obligations on highways and heathlands, which need to be meaningful in the Management Plan.</p>	<p>Ian Hickman</p> <p>Andy Goode</p>	<p>Comments are appropriate, we need to be realistic in what can be achieved.</p> <p>Thanks to the Chairman of the Officers Working Group and all who had assisted with the preparation of the Management Plan, fitting this work in with their 'day job'. Other AONBs have more staff available to do planning, communication, etc. Thanks to the Print Commissioning team for the final draft prints. Request that whoever prints the final version is acknowledged.</p>	Cllr Roberts
<p>Pleased to see how many individual members of the public took part in the consultation. Images in the document are very good, especially the front page. Cllr Davis is right to sound a note of caution, however he is keen that we put on a high point of aspiration. Congratulated the effort of the AONB team in pulling this together.</p>	Cllr Williams		

**Resolved:** The Committee approved the draft Management Plan for the period 2009-14 for submission to Natural England and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

## **Financial Update including Business Plan 2009-14**

Report of the Treasurer to the Joint Committee

**177** Juliet Hands outlined the content of the report including income generation and underspend on the core budget that has been reallocated to implementing the signs programme.

The 2009-10 budget had been presented to the Joint Committee at the last meeting in December. Since then, Natural England had advised that there will be an additional one-off grant of £5,000. The Sustainable Development Fund application is £61,666. The offer letter from Natural England had not yet been received.

Appendix 4 is the draft business plan.

Comments:

Cllr Davis asked why the local authority partners' contribution was less than last financial year. Anne Walker explained that the contributions for 2008-09 were agreed before it was known that there was a reduction in grant award from Natural England. This year's figures returned to the percentage figure. Ruth noted that other AONBs in the West Midlands had applied for contributions from their local authorities with an inflation increase. After discussion it was agreed that the same contribution for 2009-10 as for 2008-09 would be put forward to Stafford Borough Council and a similar request made to the other members.

Cllr Roberts observed that funding from SDF was not guaranteed to continue. A lot of activity from partners in support of actions in the Management Plan would need to be funded from other sources.

**Business Plan:** Ruth noted that this mirrors the 5 years of the Management Plan. Various scenarios for funding were illustrated, including an estimation of 2% inflationary rise. Members discussed the proposals and agreed to scenario 2.

**Resolved:** 1. The Joint Committee noted the provisional financial outturn for 2008/09 and approved the proposed budget for 2009/10 for the Core and Project Costs. 2. The Joint Committee noted the content of the draft Business Plan 2009-14 and agreed to scenario 2. The Joint Committee also agreed that the local authority funding partners to provide the same contributions as 2008-09.

### **Partners News**

Item for Members to update all from their own part of the AONB

**178** The Joint Committee received oral reports on the following:

### **Cannock Chase Council:**

Local Development Framework preferred options on core strategy are circulated for consultation. Cllr Roberts asked if there was likely to be any impact with the proposed wind farm at Bleak House and also is there is any information about a date for the application to be heard. Antony Lancaster replied that there is no further information at present.

### **Staffordshire County Council:**

Update on Phytophthora outbreak

- Since Christmas Phytophthora ramorum had been identified in the rhododendron at Shugborough and had been removed and treated. Grant aid from Natural England of £70,000 had been received for this work. Thanks to Natural England for this. Management costs for the next 6 months are being considered.
- Bilberry in Brocton Coppice is dying rapidly, possibly caused by the movement of the disease from Shugborough. Infection points had been identified along deer tracks. The bilberry is being treated on that assumption. The results from testing had indicated that it is different species of Phytophthora (citricola) that is more of a danger to the bilberry. This species is not notifiable but has shown to rapidly infect the bilberry.
- Central science lab had congratulated the County Council on the control measures being taken.
- Contractors are working in Brocton Coppice to cut back the bilberry and reduce the rate of infection, although there continue to be some isolated outbreaks.
- Spot treatment is being undertaken to control outbreaks on the heathland.
- Along with citricola, a further 72 fungal species had been identified in the samples sent for testing. Cannock Chase Council colleagues had tested signs of infection on Hednesford Hills, the fungal species are not the same as the 72 identified on County land.
- Students and volunteers will be employed over the summer to continue surveying and sample collection.
- It is thought that climatic conditions, wet warm summers and mild winters, are causing the spread of disease.
- Control measures, including keeping to paths and dogs on leads, are still in place.
- Technical briefing note is being produced and can be circulated by email if requested.

Cllr Roberts asked if climatic conditions gave potential understanding of the disease in other AONB areas. Andrew replied that some of these questions are being answered with the treatment and methods of control being undertaken on the Chase. He is not aware of any other AONB areas being similarly affected. The fungi remain dormant until the right conditions are evident. Cllr Roberts requested that the Joint Committee is informed of the review that Natural England will be undertaking on this outbreak. He also noted that Cllr Richards'

new portfolio includes Chasewater and that Countryside Services had also tested the heathland plants on the site.

### **Forestry Commission:**

- Red Band Needle Blight has affected 10,000 trees leading to premature felling. The disease is prevalent throughout the country and will affect the species of trees planted in future. The disease mainly affects Corsican pine. The timber is still viable to sell, but not as valuable. As this is not a notifiable disease, no funding is available from Defra for management.
- A new specialist mountain bike track is being constructed which should be open by June/July. Cllr Roberts asked if there was an income stream from this. Ian replied that this is the case, the site is now a year-round venue, particularly for cyclists. Andy also noted that the increase in cyclists at Marquis Drive has led to more demand for parking and there may be a need to increase provision. This increase in visitors needs to be managed.
- Forestry Commission will be responding to the open habitats consultation, which is a European directive, in June. The response will be brought to the July Joint Committee meeting.

Cllr Roberts reported on concerns raised by a local resident at a recent Longford Parish Council meeting. A clear fell area around Longdon/Wandon had also affected the understory, which has a spectacular floral display in late spring. Although members of the Parish Council sought to allay his fears and explained about the nature of commercial forestry, extraction of timber and recovery of the site in future years, he was not convinced. Ian noted that one of his staff had attended the subsequent public meeting, attended by around 50 people. The area had already been thinned twice prior to the final clear fell. He was also able to show similar areas where flowers were coming back. Most people were happy with the explanation, however there will always be some who disagree. The irony is that the view is now stunning. Unfortunately, the Forestry Commission only has a limited budget to communicate why felling and other management work is undertaken and it is sometimes a lack of understanding of the commercial aspect of the woodland.

### **Stafford Borough Council**

Also out to consultation on issues and options, including growth points. Public meetings held in the Haywoods attracted 6-700 people to the drop-in sessions. The consultation ends on 3<sup>rd</sup> April, comments from Ruth on behalf of the Partnership are awaited.

The meeting discussed public consultation processes, many people do not want any more housing in any area, however, this can not be ignored. Cllr Roberts noted that there is a similar situation in Lichfield. The RSS/LDF process relating to housing allocations is causing most concern.

Cllr Davis expressed concern that some of the comments being made related to 40% of the properties required to be affordable housing. Comments included misguided belief that these would be filled with people with social challenges and this was leading to emotive reactions within the community. Cllr Roberts reported that the eco towns submission had now been withdrawn, however the housing proposal is still going ahead. It too, is receiving similar voluble comments about enclaves of people. There is also concern about housing proposals in Hammerwich.

**Lichfield District Council:**

- Management of Gentleshaw Common has continued. Scrub clearance had now finished and management including bracken removal had transformed the site. Less negative comments had been made as the local community saw the benefits of the work carried out.
- In discussion with Natural England to move from the existing stewardship scheme the Higher Level Stewardship.
- Phytophthora – bilberry at Chasewater and Gentleshaw Common had been tested after showing signs of dieback. The test results showed that it was not Phytophthora, however the plant material may be sent away for further analysis.

**Natural England:**

Regional Spatial Strategy – Appropriate Assessment in relation to Cannock Chase SAC, increase in visitor use resulting from the proposed housing allocation. Negotiations are on-going with the Regional Development Agency regard number, etc. Cllr Roberts noted that during the 3 phases of the RSS, he had been pressing the point about the SAC and housing allocation. Welsh Water is objecting to the impact on the River Severn which feeds the Birmingham area and the uptake of water.

(Cllr Davis noted that this had been an excellent venue to hold the Joint Committee meeting and requested that it is used again in future. Ian offered to check the dates and accommodate this request if possible.).

Cllr Davis left the meeting at this point.

**Any Planning Items that may require consideration**

Relevant papers will be tabled

**179** Ruth reported that 3 development control items were commented upon since the last meeting. She thanked officers at South Staffordshire Council who let us know the outcome of applications where comments are submitted on behalf of the Partnership. The radio mast application at Cannock Wood was reviewed under the terms of the Planning Protocol, however, it did not appear to be an area of concern.

Local Development Frameworks – 3 documents received, nothing particularly contentious. A number of local authorities are holding meeting to discuss core structure plans. The first at Lichfield, was held last week and opened the debate again regarding core strategy. Cannock Chase Council had included the AONB as eligible for Section 106 monies and this is to be pursued with other local authority partners to be included in their LDFs. Ruth noted that she is working on the response to Stafford Borough Council with other planning colleagues. There is concern regarding pressure on the AONB boundary from increased housing.

Ruth noted that other statutory bodies are also being pursued to ensure that they realise their statutory responsibility towards the AONB. South Staffs Water had recently consulted upon the installation of a new mains water pipeline. This is a positive step forward.

Cllr Roberts observed that it should follow that comments submitted to planning applications should be acknowledged and responded to.

### **Any Other Business**

**180** Ruth informed the meeting that the new Six Visitor Centre booklet was now on sale at 50p along with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary photography book on sale at £2. Both will be available at Visitor Centres, libraries and other outlets around the area in due course. The funds raised from sales will be used for further re-prints or projects around the AONB.

Cllr Roberts informed the meeting that a group had been set up in the north east of Staffordshire, around Weaver Hills to campaign for the area to become an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This is being driven by a tourist group keen to protect the area adjacent to the National Park. Both Ruth and Andy Goode had replied to the group with comments. Natural England and the National Association of AONBs had made the observation that funding for such an undertaking was not easy to come by. This is a welcome development, illustrating the stature of AONBs. Andy noted that the group are aware of the length of time this process will take.

Cllr Roberts reported back about a recent 'buddy' visit to the Lincolnshire Wolds. Meetings were held with local groups, including a farmer with a herd of longhorn cattle. The visit also included a tour of the area and was a very useful visit. A folder of information gathered during the visit is available from the AONB Unit.

Cllr Roberts wished to express his thanks to colleagues from Staffordshire County Council who will not be standing in the June elections. He wished both Cllr O'Leary and Cllr Wakefield well in the future. He also noted that Cllr Billson and Cllr Ansell will be standing for election to the County Council. He wished them well also.

## **Date, Time and Venue of Next Meeting**

The next meeting was due to be held on 14th July 2009. It has now been rearranged for **Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> July 2009**, 10.00am at Cannock Chase Council offices.

Cllr Roberts thanked all for their attendance.

## **Part Two**

### **Exclusion of the Public and Press**

The Chairman to move:

"That the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business which involve the likely disclosure of information as defined in the paragraphs of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the local Government Act 1972 (as amended) indicated below"

One item discussed.