

**HOWARDIAN HILLS
AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY
JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE
14 APRIL 2016**

BUSINESS PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To receive details of the recent re-structure of the Howardian Hills AONB Team and potential future mechanisms for project delivery.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 At the meeting of the JAC in April 2015, the Joint Advisory Committee considered a Report outlining possible alternative locations for the AONB Unit office. The JAC resolved to support the move of the AONB Team to the offices of the North York Moors National Park Authority in Helmsley.
- 2.2 One of the factors outlined in the April 2015 Report was the potential to share staff resources with a co-location host organisation. The possible options weren't quantified, but the factor was felt to be important in the choice of co-location organisation.
- 2.3 A comprehensive re-structure of the County Council's Waste & Countryside Service, within whose Heritage Services team the AONB Unit is located, was delivered in April 2015. This was as a result of the budget-saving measures put in place by the County Council to meet its NY2020 budget plans.
- 2.4 The Howardian Hills AONB Team was excluded from the re-structure, due to its nature as an 'externally funded partnership'. Budget savings to such partnerships were agreed as a separate line in the County Council's budget-saving strategy. This has subsequently resulted in a reduction of £6,800 in the County Council's cash contribution to the Howardian Hills AONB Joint Advisory Committee budget from 1st April 2016 onwards, as well as reductions to other partnerships in North Yorkshire.
- 2.5 The operational changes stemming from the move to Helmsley and changes in NYCC future processes, as well as the need to adapt the team to engage in collaborative partnership working, increase business resilience and have flexibility to respond quickly to changes in circumstances, were felt to be significant enough to trigger a service review of the AONB team.

3.0 AONB TEAM RE-STRUCTURE

- 3.1 Recent national public spending cut backs have threatened the level of funding for the AONB Team. Whilst the latest four-year DEFRA settlement was recently confirmed on 22nd January 2016, the on-going impact of public cuts continues to create an uncertain funding and operational environment, emphasising the need for continuous review to achieve efficiencies and flexibility.
- 3.2 With this in mind, the Team reduced its overheads costs by moving to Helmsley in December 2015 and sub-letting office premises from the North York Moors National Park Authority (NYMNP). In addition to reducing rent, the property services tasks are now solely the responsibility of NYMNP, meaning that the Team have fewer office administration and overheads to manage, thereby freeing up time and resources for the delivery of AONB enhancement projects. NYCC additionally has been updating its office processes to allow managers and staff to undertake direct, 'self-serve' tasks previously done by business support staff.

- 3.3 To maximise the outcomes of the AONB Team, it was felt necessary to optimise the work at project officer level (Band 11). At this level or above, officers can create and develop, as well as project manage and deliver, improvement projects and strategies independently to conserve and enhance the AONB. The move to the NYMNPA offices has assisted this 'working in partnership' approach.
- 3.4 The trend in external funding, which delivers significant benefits to the AONB, is towards working on larger highly complex, collaborative projects with partners and this requires skilled, knowledgeable staff who have a remit to, and can work independently, to engage at this level and respond to opportunities appropriately.
- 3.5 At the same time, there has been a reduction in the general support and assistance needed as the office administration is less complex due to the move, NYCC processes are more streamlined needing less office assistance, office reception is covered by the NYMNPA and the trend for project delivery is away from smaller projects to the larger complex projects requiring different skills.
- 3.6 The proposed change in the AONB Team was therefore to delete the 0.5fte Howardian Hills AONB Assistant's post. The move towards NYCC staff undertaking their own administration removed the need for continuous business support, although there will be times when there is a need for additional pieces of discrete support such as handling bookings for AONB events or minute-taking for the four Core Partners Group meetings each year. After consultations with the NYCC Business Support Service and NYMNPA, it appeared feasible that this temporary support could be bought in, when needed, from the existing NYMNPA office service. The NYCC Business Support Service has also indicated that it can give assistance with discrete pieces of work.
- 3.7 The savings generated from the deletion of the 0.5fte AONB Assistant's post were proposed to contribute to funding increased project officer time at a Band 11 level on a part-time and/or relief basis. This supplementary officer resource would mean that the team would have additional capacity to optimise and deliver partner and external funding work. It would also provide more organisational resilience at this level, which was identified as a risk in such a small team. There had been a loss of capacity in the team when the existing project officer post-holder dropped hours from full time to 0.8fte and it was therefore suggested that this capacity be re-instated on a flexible basis. The back-filling of this post in the past for a specific project development purpose had been useful and had benefited the output of the AONB Team. It was proposed that relief posts could be recruited based on the Band 11 Job Description and Person Specification so that the team could respond to business opportunities quickly with suitable staff, or more resiliently cope with challenges such as work pressures or long term sickness.
- 3.8 It was proposed that the existing Howardian Hills AONB Manager and Howardian Hills AONB Officer posts remained and that these staff would be slotted-in to the new structure. The Job Descriptions and Person Specifications for these posts would be refreshed with minor changes to reflect current circumstances and duties.
- 3.9 A 30 days period of staff consultation was held between 16th February and 17th March 2016, with a view to implementation starting on 1st May 2016. All necessary consultations with bodies such as Unison were also carried out.
- 3.10 Responses received during the consultation period were considered and minor adjustments made to the structure. These principally related to the need to retain the AONB Officer post at 1.0fte, even though it is only occupied currently by Liz Bassindale at 0.8fte. This was so that any future recruitment exercise would not be unduly hampered, as the post would normally be offered as 1.0fte.
- 3.11 The AONB Team structure from 1st May will therefore be as shown in the diagram in Appendix 1.

4.0 FUTURE PROJECT DELIVERY/SUPPORT MECHANISMS 2016/17

- 4.1 As indicated above, the implementation of a new staff structure on 1st May will bring some significant changes for the AONB Team staff in terms of how tasks and projects are delivered.
- 4.2 In terms of 'administrative' tasks, many things are already carried out by the AONB Manager and AONB Officer themselves rather than passing them to the AONB Assistant. Some tasks, for example minute-taking at certain meetings, will still require a third person and it is intended to begin discussions with the NYMNPA as to how an 'administrative' staff resource can be provided to the AONB Team and at what cost.
- 4.3 It is also intended to use the new AONB Officer (Relief) facility to increase the AONB Officer staff resource by at least 0.2fte. Current thinking is that this will be an arrangement covering the period May 2015 to 31st March 2016 (i.e. the currently vacant 1 day per week, for the rest of the financial year).
- 4.4 There has however also been a significant underspend on projects in 2015/16 which, when coupled with the favourable Government settlement and our healthy 'Reserves' position, gives the potential to address some long-running project ideas and also re-think the way that projects are delivered. Instead of relying on only delivering projects via the AONB Manager and AONB Officer, which can sometimes result in significant delays when we try to juggle multiple projects, we may be able to contract-in NYMNPA specialist staff to work a certain number of days to deliver a specific and tightly-defined project. Examples of such projects might be multi-owner programmes of drystone wall restoration, tradition direction sign and village name sign restoration or programmes of individual & in-field tree planting.
- 4.5 The changing nature of project delivery means that AONB Team staff are also likely to need to concentrate on larger programmes of work, and commissioning other organisations or specialists to deliver things on our behalf. Increasingly we are likely to be doing fewer small projects that take up disproportionately large amounts of staff time, and replacing these either with bigger projects or by out-sourcing where this offers best value. The roles of the AONB Manager and AONB Officer as 'facilitators' rather than 'doers' is likely to increase, because the demands of the core work of the Unit (e.g. planning consultations, development of partner projects/grant bids) are likely to make that a more efficient way of working. Examples of projects where delivery could potentially be out-sourced in some way include the Junior Ranger Club, leaflet writing and preparation (e.g. Geodiversity, Easy Access routes), Monument Management Scheme practical site management tasks (to utilise unspent Historic England funding), assessment of opportunities for using the National Grid Visual Impact Provision funding and commercial leaflet distribution mechanisms.
- 4.6 Members will appreciate that the ideas outlined above represent somewhat of a sea-change for the way the AONB Team delivers projects. Up until now external costs have been minimised and as much work as possible has been done in-house. This has sometimes resulted in projects not being delivered in a timely manner, because of the competing demands on AONB Staff Team time. With an overall decrease in permanent AONB Staff Team resources then things will need to be done differently, and fortunately the Committee's financial prudence over the years has put it in a good position to do this. In 2016/17 therefore, and in consultation with the NYCC Heritage Services Manager, new ways of partnership working and out-sourcing will be trialled and the results will be reported to the JAC in April 2017.

5.0 RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that:

- a) The Report be noted.
- b) An evaluation of the types and efficiency of new project delivery/support mechanisms be reported to the Joint Advisory Committee in April 2017.

New Staff Structure Howardian Hills AONB 1st May 2016

