

Item 5 - Chairman's Annual Report 2015-16

Report to	The Annual General Meeting of the National Association for AONBs
Subject	Chairman's Annual Report 2015-16
Date	24 th November 2016
Purpose	For information

Chairman's Annual Report 2015-2016

A "...vital part of the fabric of the Nation". The words of Rory Stewart the then DEFRA Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in his letter to the Chairs of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnerships, Conservation Boards, and National Park Authorities setting out the protection of budgets for four years.

This remarkable acknowledgement of the significance of outstanding landscape and the accompanying financial security from Central Government are a profound recognition of your work, of the significance of that work, the quality of that work and, above all, the potential of that work. Your Board exists to support and celebrate your work and encourage the fulfilment of your potential.

In giving protected landscapes medium term funding security against the trend of public sector funding, Government believes it is investing in organisations capable of beneficial innovation, be it in terms of future funding or the engagement of widening sections of society in the appreciations and benefits of landscape. Your Board will continue to take every reasonable opportunity to identify and support appropriate and intelligent innovation.

Of course, a key element of that innovation will now be to make Brexit mean better protection and investment in the environment and landscape. It will most probably begin with the initial transposition of European Union regulation into United Kingdom legislation. Any review processed thereafter, while it may pose risks, equally poses real opportunities to make law and regulation tailored to more specific outcomes and aspirations.

The AONB Family has not only coped with austerity and challenge, it has proved resilient and adaptable and exhibited commendable capability and openness to cooperation. Brexit, welcome or unwelcome, can be risen to in the remarkably resourceful and focused way displayed by the AONB Family from the beginning of our active implementation of the designation.

The National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

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Our work in Wales, leading on the Future Landscape Wales programme has been an important milestone in improving our understanding of the barriers to collaboration, and demonstrating methods to remove them; lessons that are equally applicable to England and Northern Ireland. This work built on the Future Landscapes programme run across England and Wales but included the National Park Authorities and other stakeholders. It resulted in the design and agreement of a shared vision across the AONBs and National Parks in Wales, recommendations on governance, and a programme of work to raise resources and generate local economic growth. In addition, it has fostered extremely productive working relationships across many of the organisations involved.

In all it does your Board places you, its members, at the centre; be it at its meetings, conferences or development events. To this end, your Board has resolved to realign its direction with the rapidly changing context, most notably continued public sector reform, enhanced devolution, increasing development pressure on the AONBs, and the need for a wider funding base. This has involved a refresh of the Charity's strategic plan which will set the stage for the next business plan.

It is a privilege to chair the NAAONB Charity and advocate and celebrate your work. I am most fortunate to have the support of an enthusiastic and knowledgeable Board and Staff. Indeed both Board and Staff work well beyond their job descriptions.

I am proud of the work of the National Association for AONBs and the whole AONB Family.

You well deserve the recognition that you are a "...vital part of the fabric of the Nation."

Philip Hygate FRS

Item 7 - Chief Executives Report of work completed for NAAONB Business Plan October 2015 - October 2016

Report to The Annual General Meeting of the National Association for AONBs
Subject CE's Report of work completed for NAAONB Business Plan Oct 2015 - Oct 2016
Date 24th November 2016
Author Howard Davies - Chief Executive
Purpose For information

Work carried out between the last AGM and this one has been driven by the delivery of the latest Business Plan and set out under four main headings - raising profile, demonstrating value and relevance, driving better delivery through collaboration, raising resources, and managing organisational change. We continue to remain flexible though, often seizing additional opportunities for action that sit outside the Business Plan but will enable us to deliver on our objects and support our membership. What follows is a brief summary of the work we have carried out; a more comprehensive account of which is set out in the RAG reports that accompany each set of Board papers and can be found on our website.

One of the areas of work that has fallen outside of planned activity is support for new member organisations that are not AONB partnerships or conservation boards, but have an interest in areas for which such designation might be pursued, for instance the South Pennines, the Churnet Valley in Staffordshire, and the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. Whilst this doesn't represent a great deal of work in itself, the development of these organisations reflects a significant groundswell of support for the AONB designation beyond the existing Family. Likewise, our engagement in the Britain is Great campaign wasn't planned, but the opportunity to ensure the AONB Family is represented in a UK wide promotion of Britain's countryside, food, and heritage was one that couldn't be missed. Our unexpected engagement with the National Trust over their publication 'AONBs and development' ensured that we ended up with a publication that matched the often sensitive needs of the AONB Family as well as those of the National Trust.

Additional work over this period falling outside of the business plan included strengthening our relationship with academia through work on tranquillity with the University of Winchester, continued work with the IUCN to ensure governments are fully aware of the role the AONB Family can play in delivering on international biodiversity targets, contribution to a book on European Nature Parks and the second 'Outstanding Week', a week long programme of events designed to highlight the value and relevance of the AONB Family to a wide audience of stakeholders and partners. It is clear from the support this week has attracted we now have a far greater level of support from many more organisations that have a stake in the future of AONBs.

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Raising profile

This area of work is about telling others what we do and why we do it – or more correctly what you do and why you do it. The foundations of this work are set out in our communications action plan which was created collaboratively with communications staff and lead officers from across the AONB Family. This isn't a static document and is kept alive, and adapted as necessary, through the continued input of AONB Family staff via drop-in sessions organised by the Charity. Activity in this area has included the production of two infographics, one for England and one for Wales, depicting key facts and data about the AONB Family, the national Landscapes for Life conference that made the link between AONBs and health and wellbeing, and formed a platform for the Bowland and Landscape for Life Awards, a complete review and revamp of our website, blog microsite, and the knowledge platform, and a new brand strategy that better reflects our status as a charity. In addition the Charity convened a face to face meeting with communication staff from across the Family, resulting in three working groups focused on campaigns, themes and statistics, a review of our websites and the collection of important case studies, and collaboration with the National Park Authorities.

Demonstrating value and relevance

This area of work is essentially designed to encourage others to speak out on your behalf. It includes all of our advocacy work including our meetings with Defra and other areas of UK government, Welsh Government, Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, and other organisations that have a stake in, or influence the condition of, the AONB Family. It is based on building high quality relationships, and the provision of evidence and data to decision makers. It takes the form of evidence to committees, written consultation responses, or one to one discussions. Success in this area is linked to the use of consistent messages, reinforced across the AONB Family, underpinned by compelling evidence. It is therefore ultimately linked to our communications work.

Activity in this area has included our involvement in discussions around Defra's 25 year plan, consultation input on the Environment Bill (Wales) and surrounding legislative changes, one to one meetings with UK parliamentarians and members of the Welsh Assembly, chair level bilaterals with Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, and National Parks England, tripartite meetings with Defra and Natural England, and regular liaison meetings with partner organisations such as CPRE, CPRW, the Alliance for National Parks Cymru, and CNP. We are also supporting a more member led approach to evidence provision through the provision and maintenance of Basecamp and the promotion of collaborative behaviour. This has resulted in AONB staff taking the lead in responses such as the EAC enquiry into the future of biodiversity post Brexit.

Demonstrating your value and relevance continues to be a priority for the Charity. The favourable settlement for AONB partnerships in England resulting from this year's spending review is clear evidence of its importance and the efficacy of our approach.

Driving better delivery through collaboration

This area of work is focused on working together across the AONB Family and with others to achieve better outcomes. There is a clear link between building relationships with key stakeholders as part of our demonstrating value and relevance work, and the evolution of this into collaboration.

The decision to leave the EU has impacted on our work in this area and immediately resulted in a strengthening of our relationship with organisations we have, until now, only worked alongside. Wildlife and Countryside Link, Green Alliance, and the Climate Change Coalition have teamed up to create a 'Brexit Unit'. This is supported by funding and secondments from a number of member organisations and is focusing on three work streams, each designed to send a clear message to

government on one of three subjects – legislation, climate change, and food and farming. The Charity is currently working with Wildlife and Countryside Link in order to engage with this group. All of the main environmental NGOs are members (NT, TWT, RSPB, WT etc.) and will use their combined membership numbers to influence change. We have also started working with CPRE in order to present an illustrated case to government around the 5 year housing supply issue, such that we can weave this into discussions to counter any weakening of EIA regulations that could take place.

Additionally, we have had a request from NFU Cymru to collaborate with them in developing a model for sustainable farming support post Brexit, building on some work we have already done with them. We will obviously continue with these discussions. We are also clearly working very closely with the statutory agencies to ensure maintaining landscape quality remains relevant.

With regards collaboration within the AONB Family, this has been touched on earlier in this report. Collaboration isn't an end in itself but a way of working to improve delivery. Our work in Wales, leading on the Future Landscape Wales programme has been an important milestone in improving our understanding of the barriers to collaboration, and demonstrating methods to remove them; lessons that are equally applicable to England and Northern Ireland. This work built on the Future Landscapes programme run across England and Wales but included the National Park Authorities and other stakeholders. It resulted in the design and agreement of a shared vision across the AONBs and National Parks in Wales, recommendations on governance, and a programme of work to raise resources and generate local economic growth. In addition, it has fostered extremely productive working relationships across many of the organisations involved.

Work is also starting with external consultants, on a pro-bono basis, to further test how collaboration can be better fostered within the AONB Family. This existing partnership has already led to some very positive casework at an AONB team level.

Raising resources

This work is focused on ensuring the AONB Family and the Charity can do what we want to do. The Charity has been closely involved in the development of the Making Local Woodlands Work programme with the Plunkett Foundation and Big Lottery. This programme is now underway with the selection of pilot projects. The Charity is registered a delivery partner. We have a representative on the steering group working to ensure that AONB partnerships have access to the funding and learning associated with this programme. No funding for pilot projects has been awarded to groups operating in collaboration with AONB units to date. The Charity will continue to maintain a light touch approach to our engagement in this programme and support projects where the cost of engagement of the Charity is covered.

The Charity explored in depth this year the establishment of a national consultancy arm. At the time of the last AGM the business model was being tested. The principle behind the consultancy was to create added value from the skillset within the AONB Family such that small teams of AONB staff could be brought together and applied to specific, fee earning projects. Income would be directed back onto the ground within the participating AONBs, with the co-ordination and administrative costs incurred by the Charity covered in the form of a management charge. Trial projects were delivered successfully in four AONBs. There was, however, a clear indication from members of the AONB Family that there was inadequate resource within the AONB Family to direct towards consultancy work. This and other evidence gathered as the output of the exploratory work was assessed and a report on the efficacy of the consultancy model produced and presented to trustees. It was decided not to progress the idea, but the exploratory work was recognised as valuable.

We are also currently working with a number of AONB partnerships in the south, HLF, and Activate Performing Arts in order to develop a multi AONB project, coordinated by the Charity through an AONB unit. This approach is intended to add weight to grant applications through the involvement, endorsement, and support of the Charity, and lever in greater resources for the AONB partnerships involved. We believe this more joined up way of working will lead to increased resources for the AONB Family.

The Charity is moving towards a full cost recovery approach to working with partners and stakeholders. Our methodology has been endorsed by Natural Resources Wales and was used to cost the Future Landscapes Wales programme. We have also started to use this approach successfully to cost specific services we provide to others. This was tested in part during the trial of the consultancy service.

Managing organisational change

This area of work covers, but is not limited to, the organisational change required within the Charity and extends to the AONB Family and its wider membership. Recognising the significant contextual changes within which the Charity and AONB Family operate, including increasing development pressure, rapidly advancing devolution, new legislation, the impact of austerity measures, the continued investment by UK and Welsh governments in the Charity and the changes we are leading, and the confidence afforded by positive outcomes clearly resulting from early change, Trustees agreed to the need for an organisational realignment. This has involved a refresh of the Charity strategic plan which will then set the stage for the next business plan. Realignment of the business with operational needs, coupled with a strong and supported strategic direction, will give the Charity the energy and focus to move the organisation forwards and better position itself and its members for the next comprehensive spending review. It will also highlight gaps in capacity and capability that will provide a focus for organisational and staff development. In addition, the Charity has continued to support the AONB Family and wider membership during this period of change. Our work in promoting the efficiency and effectiveness of those member organisations engaged in conserving and enhancing natural beauty has been focused on developing collaboration, collective action and co-operation through individual and team development.

This time last year we waited with concern for the outcome of the spending review. If I am honest, it was far more favourable than we had even dreamed. We have Defra officials and politicians to thank for this. It isn't however a signal to sit back. It is clearly an investment in change, so continue to change we must. The NAAONB remains your association and is better positioned than ever to support you over the coming months and years. We have a strong and dedicated Board of Trustees, thoroughly committed staff, and a clearly exciting agenda ahead. We are here to work with you to look after the special places we all value so highly.

As I said last year, collectively we can do it.

Howard Davies
Chief Executive
November 2016