

Review of AONB Management Plan

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Summary: The project plan has been prepared for reviewing the AONB management plan. It is proposed to engage the services of a consultant to assist the staff team in order to complete the review by May 2008 - the estimated cost is up to £15,000 in 2007-08. Natural England has declined to provide grant aid of £12,000 towards the cost of the review, which will now have to be met from savings on core costs.

Purpose of Report: To advise members of the proposed process of reviewing the management plan and to seek approval to engage the services of a consultant at an approximate total cost of £15,000 (£12,000 in 2007-08).

Background

1. The Board has the statutory duty for preparation and review of the AONB Management Plan. The CROW Act 2000 prescribes a process which requires the Chilterns AONB plan to be reviewed by May 2008. EU regulations require the Management Plan to be subject to a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) to identify how implementation of the plan could potentially affect the significant environmental characteristics of the Chilterns. In addition an Appropriate Assessment has to be carried out on how the reviewed plan could affect the Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). In the Chilterns there are five SACs all of which are beech woodlands.
2. As previously reported the Countryside Agency published guidance on how the plans should be reviewed. The process will be more complex than the task of preparing the plan in the first place, largely due to the SEA. Natural England intends to publish further guidance to help simplify the process and reduce the significant workload involved.
3. The Executive Committee had previously resolved to seek additional grant aid from Natural England to help meet the additional costs. The core budget was increased by £15,000 to help meet the costs, split £12,000 from NE and £3,000 from the local authorities. No local authority objected to contributing their share but NE has declined to provide an additional £12,000.
4. The additional workload is significant and there is insufficient capacity within the Board's staff to cope with this task. The workload will fall principally on the Chief Officer, Planning Officer, Countryside Officer and Information and Interpretation Officer. These staff do not possess experience of producing a Strategic Environmental Assessment or Appropriate Assessments. It is therefore proposed to engage the services of an expert in this field.

5. Alan Wheeler has been approached. He has considerable experience of management planning and SEAs and was a primary author of both the 1994 and 2002 Chilterns AONB Management Plans. He is available to do the work. Subject to agreement of the Executive Committee it is not proposed to put this work out to tender for the following reasons.
 1. It is not possible to be precise about the tasks added work load involved as this is an iterative process.
 2. The timetable is tight and the time taken to put this work out to tender will delay the start and will almost certainly mean missing the deadline of May 2008.
 3. Alan Wheeler has a unique combination of knowledge of the Chilterns and experience of preparing a management plan for the Chilterns. He is very familiar with the process and well known to staff and partners which will enable him to make progress with limited supervision. He has also confirmed his availability over the next 12 months.
 4. The day rate and willingness to limit his fees (based on current knowledge of what is involved) to £15,000, represents good value for money. His involvement would also reduce the need for the Chief Officer to provide supervision.
6. It is difficult to be precise about costs because the workload for each stage will only be known as that stage is reached. However the cost of his services is estimated to be up to £15,000. This would be spread over the current and next financial year.
7. It is not yet known to what extent the Board will need to pay to secure the necessary information. To a great extent the plan and SEA will need to be based on the best available information and any additional information that the local authorities and agencies such as Natural England, Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency can provide at no cost. However there will be some costs and with the additional costs involved of arranging workshops, printing and consultation it is suggested that a budget of £5,000 will be needed.
8. The budget requirement overall will be in the order of £20,000 with £15,000 needed in 2007-08 and £5,000 in 2008-09. The local authorities have agreed to provide £3,000. It is proposed to find most of the balance from savings in the core budget, possibly up to £7,000 (See Item 11). The final balance would have to be found from reserves – a further £5,000.

Recommendations

1. **To note the proposed process for reviewing the AONB Management Plan.**

- 2. To secure the services of Alan Wheeler, an environmental consultant, to support the review process and in particular to prepare the Strategic Environmental Assessment.**
- 3. To allocate a budget of up to £20,000 for the review (£15,000 in 2007-08 and £5,000 in 2008-09).**
- 4. To request that Natural England provide datasets for the review and SEA.**