



Report of the Natural Environment Manager
Gower AONB Advisory Group - 15 February 2023
Gower AONB Work Programme Update

For Information

This report briefly summarises the work of the AONB team since the last Group meeting in March 2022. More detailed update reports will follow in due course as project work progresses. It is anticipated that subgroups of the Advisory Group will be established to work with the AONB team help progress these and other projects/AONB Management Plan Actions as appropriate.

1) New Terms of Reference for the AONB Advisory Group

New terms of reference were adopted by Swansea Council in January 2023 (see appendix A). The only significant change was in relation to the manner in which members of the group were appointed to represent a wider range of local interests, based on their ability to contribute to the work of the group through their local knowledge, skills and experience. New members of the Group were appointed on 31st January 2023 and the group comprises 6 councillors, including the chair of Planning Committee, two representatives from Natural Resources Wales and a full complement of 10 appointed local stakeholder members. The purpose of the Advisory Group is to provide advice to Swansea Council in regard to management of the AONB. The aim is that local communities, both as individuals and organisations, can be actively involved in the management of the AONB and can influence and contribute to its strategies and plans.

2) Gower AONB Management Plan

The current statutory 5 year management plan sets out a vision for the AONB - laying out aspirations for the future, and the work that will be needed. Review of the current Plan adopted in 2017 has been delayed by the Covid 19 pandemic when priority was given to delivery of capital projects from the available Welsh Government funding, as well as the hiatus in meetings of the Advisory Group. This review now needs to be progressed in earnest.

The identified actions to meet the Plan's objectives will be subject of a report to a future Group meeting along with an indicative programme for review to incorporate key current policy drivers including:

- State of Natural Resources Report (SoNaRR)
- Area Statement, Natural Resources Wales
- Climate Change and Nature Emergencies – declared by Swansea Council

3) Mapping a Local Ecosystem Resilience Baseline for Swansea

This project was produced last year by the South East Wales Biodiversity Records Centre (SEWBReC) and jointly commissioned by the AONB and Nature Conservation Teams. It seeks to provide a better understanding of the term ecosystem resilience. It provides a methodology for producing high-resolution maps for ecosystem resilience and to allow Swansea Council to demonstrate that they are taking account of not just biodiversity, but also the resilience of ecosystems, when making their decisions and thereby helping achieve their Section 6 duty under the Environment Act (Wales) 2016. Factors identified to act as useful proxies for measuring and mapping the key attributes of ecosystem resilience are Diversity, Extent, Condition and Connectivity.

The aim of this project was to deliver a comprehensive ecosystem resilience map for the whole of the Swansea Council area that could be used to inform a range of issues including:

- identifying opportunities to develop nature recovery networks and to increase ecosystem resilience through habitat restoration, re-creation and creation.
- helping promote a broader understanding of the meaning of ecosystem resilience on the ground at the local level.
- the location and ecosystem resilience impact of land proposed to be allocated in future Local Development Plans (Swansea LDP due for review 2025).
- the effectiveness of the suite of Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (and other designations) in protecting the land identified as making the greatest contribution to ecosystem resilience.

The mapping has been used to identify areas where Nature Recovery Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP) grant-funded projects would be most beneficial. For example, reviewing the light pollution layer to help determine where to focus retrofitting of Dark Skies appropriate lighting to have to biggest impact. It has also aided work to bring Gower Local Nature Reserves into favourable condition, this includes the projects for Port Eynon Dunes, a water supply for grazing at Pwll Du Cliffs and work on Fairwood Common to improve biodiversity.

4) Carbon Baseline Assessment of Gower (working towards Net Zero)

A greenhouse gas emissions assessment and target scenario for the Gower AONB has been published (November 2022). It is one of a series of methodologically compatible reports produced for each UK National Park and Welsh AONB, designed to provide a robust and consistent evidence basis for climate action, matched to the unique characteristics and circumstances of each protected landscape. The report

contains a consumption-based assessment of the greenhouse gas emissions attributable to residents and visitors, including travel to and from the landscape.

The challenge for each protected landscape is to find a way to cut emissions in line with current science and be leaders in land stewardship while simultaneously creating better places for people to live, work and visit. Key findings for Gower:

- Residents' consumption is roughly 19% above the UK average
- There is a disproportionately retired population, with health expenditure being particularly high.
- Residents' carbon footprint is estimated to be 32% higher than the UK average
- Residents' emissions from flying are estimated to be 2.5 times higher than for an average UK resident.
- Driving emissions and other transport emissions are around 34% and 41% above the UK average, respectively,
- Estimated household fuel emissions (excl. vehicle fuel) are around 19% above the UK average.

It concludes that a transition to a low-carbon future for the Gower AONB entails strong action in many areas: construction, home energy, food production and diets, travel and transport, business energy use, the nature of tourism and the visitor experience, the circularisation of the material economy (including repair, maintenance, renting and reselling of consumer goods), and significant changes in land management.

5) Dark Sky Gower

The AONB Team have submitted an application to the International Dark Skies Association (IDSA) for the Gower AONB to become a recognised International Dark Sky Community. This application has been compiled by a "Dark Sky Gower" working group over the period from October 2018 to August 2022, the process has been protracted for several reasons, including the Covid-19 pandemic as well as a requirement to adopt appropriate lighting guidance – which is now incorporated in the AONB Design Guide (2021). Initial drafts have also had to be rewritten following changes to IDSA criteria and guidance, plus evidence required of several years' worth of monitoring lighting levels at 40 set locations around Gower, various outreach events and demonstrations of community support as well as evidence of implementation in practice. For example, the majority of street lighting on Gower has also been changed over the past 5 years to fully shielded dimmable LED lights. A response from the IDSA is currently awaited.

Gower is also part of a half £million all-Wales SLSP collaboration project (2022-25) led by Clwydian Range and Dee Valley AONB. This includes the appointment of a Dark Sky Officer supporting all the Welsh designated landscapes. As part of Welsh Dark Skies week later this month a free day of space science for young astronomers is being held at the Oxwich Bay Hotel on 23rd February

6) Landscapes Wales Seminar at Down to Earth, Cilibion, Gower 9/10, March 2023

This seminar targeted at those responsible for the management of Welsh designated landscapes is expected to attract around 70 delegates with 5 places available for Gower Advisory Group representatives. The first day will include site visits to SLSP project work at Cefn Bryn and Fairwood Common followed on the second day by a Q&A with a panel of experts, keynote speech and series of workshops. Full details are yet to be finalised including, assistance with transport arrangements, welcome introduction from Swansea Council and Gower Advisory Group representatives.

7) Clyne Valley Country Park

Around half the Country Park lies within the Gower AONB and in 2020 the AONB Team successfully applied for short term grant funding to undertake priority management action in relation to some basic infrastructure restoration and improvements works. Around £300k has been spent to date. The AONB Team were also tasked on behalf of the Council with identifying key issues affecting the Country Park. Arising from this has been the development of a Draft Management Plan focusing on public access and enjoyment, biodiversity and built heritage, as well as re-establishing contact with Clyne Valley Community Project – who are now represented on the Advisory Group.

The Draft Management Plan comprising a Vision Statement, a Policy Summary, and Management Objectives is expected to be ready for consultation with key stakeholders this Spring. In the meantime, enhancement works are continuing on site with the establishment of a biodiversity and nature trail, improved signage, Japanese Knotweed treatment, a memorandum of understanding with mountain bikers, whilst clearance works are shortly to commence around the ruined and overgrown former New Mill Farm to establish the condition of the buildings and make the area safe. Natural Resources Wales are also investigating the feasibility of a natural flood management scheme.

8) Port Eynon Waterfront development

Following a Feasibility Study for Port Eynon and Horton in 2018, Swansea Council considered the issues raised within the report and the subsequent recommendations. As a key part of this work, the Council appointed architects, Rural Office for Architecture, to develop a Concept Design for a new beach/community centre building in Port Eynon. The commission was supported by a Sustainable Development Fund grant.

Initial options were consulted upon with the local community and notwithstanding any preferred approach the concept of replacing the existing toilet block with a multifunctional building was included as part of a Levelling Up Fund bid submitted last year. The £4.7m bid included a new play area, improvements to Borfa House, public realm and landscape improvements, upgraded broadband to the village, traffic and car parking improvements. The bid was not one of those agreed by Welsh

Government in Jan 2023. Further consideration needs to be given to which, if any, of these elements could be part of a future funding bid either alone or in combination with other proposals.

9) Port Eynon Sand Dunes - Geomorphological Assessment and Management Options Appraisal

Prof. Ken Pye has produced a short report on the stability/erosion of the dunes in Port Eynon Bay, with recommendations on management of partially buried fence lines. Dune management works in the late 1970s and 1980s included the erection of more than 5.3 km of sand fencing in an effort to stabilise the dunes. Most were stabilized and well-vegetated by the late 1990s. However, erosion of the frontal dunes in the southern half of the Bay began to expose some of the fencing, and a succession of severe storms in 2013-14 and 2019-2020 cut back the dunes along a wider frontage, exposing broken posts, wire and mesh on the upper foreshore. Boardwalks constructed in the early 2000s were undercut at their seaward end and elsewhere buried by drifting sand.

The available evidence suggests that the long-term trend for slow shoreline retreat and landward migration of dunes within Port Eynon Bay is likely to continue and may accelerate slightly with sea level rise. The undefended central section of the Bay, and particularly the area east of the main Port Eynon Beach access, is likely to experience a continuing fall in beach levels and a trend for net frontal dune erosion, resulting in continuing exposure of old dune fencing.

The report includes recommendations for various management measures including removal of all exposed fencing wire and redundant posts, regular inspection and removal of exposed hazardous material and redundant sections of boardwalk. Improved signage is needed to direct beach users together with realigned paths.

10) Archaeology and Scheduled Monuments Works (various)

Site improvement, consolidation and interpretation projects are currently ongoing at various historic sites around Gower, and update reports will be provided to the Group at key stages. Sites include: Pennard Castle (Pennard), Ivy Tower (Clyne Valley Country Park), St. Mary's/St Maurice's Church (Knelston), Pill House Pig Sty (Llanmadoc), Salthouse (Port Eynon).

11) Other Ongoing Project work

- *Gower Places of Worship*
Making provision within ten Gower churches and their grounds for wildlife and to help tackle any problem interactions. All churches have been surveyed, and a Biodiversity Improvement Plan is to be produced for each. Works will continue until 2025 to include new swift and barn owl boxes, improved bat access/features and bespoke mitigation solutions to protect valuable artworks.

- *Fairwood Common*
Fairwood Common is one of the largest areas of open common land in AONB at 524ha and is in a deteriorating condition. Owned by Swansea Council, it is used by a declining number of commoners for grazing and has a mosaic of bog, wet and dry heath, ponds, scrub and woodland habitats. The common surrounds Swansea Airport and there is extensive public open access. There are issues around a lack of graziers (and barriers to releasing livestock out on the common), wildfires, increasing scrub cover and loss of biodiversity and ecological resilience.

This project aims to tackle these problems, by equipping those involved to reverse some of the changes, improving public access facilities, and by raising awareness amongst visitors and locals of the important role that the commons play. Recent improvement works have seen a water supply installed for grazing animals, along with the creation of ponds and scrub/fire breaks, scrub & grassland management works, whilst Dormouse presence/absence surveys are due to start in March 2023.

- *Cefn Bryn*
Installation of an interpretation panel has been agreed with Commoners. Measures are being considered to address erosion of the Public Right of Way leading up from Reynoldston PO.
- *Gower Drystone Walling project*
An ongoing programme of walling repairs being carried out in conjunction with the National Trust and Gower Society mostly around the Rhossili area.

12) Grant Funding Update

The two primary sources of grant funding for project work carried out within the AONB are from Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales:

Welsh Government: Sustainable Landscapes Sustainable Places (SLSP)

This is a three-year Welsh Government programme of capital investment in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks which has expanded in recent years to include revenue funding to support project delivery. The allocation is to ensure that these Designated Landscapes can contribute to Welsh Government objectives and has four main themes:

- Decarbonisation
- Nature-based solutions and nature recovery
- Sustainable tourism
- Supporting communities to respond to COVID and promote a Green Recovery

Levels of 100% funding for Gower are:

2022/23 - £175k

2023/24 - £200k

2024/25 - £200k, plus an additional £50k revenue funding for each of these years

Current funded projects include:

- *Pennard Castle* – completion of a project to improve public access to and interpretation of the Castle and improve the condition of the Scheduled Monument. Two-year project to end of March 2024.
- *Gower Nature Recovery Programme* - to improve nature recovery and ecosystem resilience in Gower AONB, including work on Swansea Council Local Nature Reserves. Three-year programme to end of March 2025.
- *Gower Places of Worship* - This investment will enable the stakeholders on these sites to care for and improve their biodiversity value into the long-term. Target species include: bats; swifts; barn owls; pollinators; reptiles. Three-year programme to end of March 2025.
- *Clyne Valley Country Park* – Focussed on nature recovery, environmental remediation visitor facilities, safety and signage. Three-year programme to end of March 2025.

Welsh Government Sustainable Development Fund (SDF)

This grant-aid scheme supports innovative, sustainable projects in Wales's five Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). The SDF supports projects that work to enhance and conserve natural beauty, wildlife, culture, landscape, land use and community within the context of the goals and sustainable development principles in the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

Total funding for the SDF in Gower is approx £100k annually until end of March 2025. The SDF is managed by the AONB Team, with grant applications considered and determined by the Gower AONB Partnership.

Natural Resources Wales National Grant Partnership Programme:

Natural Resources Wales and Swansea Council share statutory duties to conserve and enhance natural beauty, and to promote access and recreation. The AONB Team have received £147k funding (75% contribution) over the period 2022-24 (approximately £73,500/year). This grant funding aims to support the implementation of the Gower AONB Management Plan, which underpins these duties. The work is split between the AONB, Rights of Way, Nature Conservation and Strategic Planning Teams.