AGENDA ITEM 11

**POTENTIAL RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD**

**Summary:** To outline a potential research partnership with the University.

**Recommendation: That progress be noted and supported by Board members with links to the University where appropriate.**

**Office Ref:** Martin Lane, Director

**General Update**

1. For some time the Board has outlined a research agenda in its business plan. Whilst this research agenda has been shared direct with colleges and universities in and around the AONB and has been promoted by some Board members employed within these educational establishments it has had limited impact.
2. Over the last nine months the Friends of the West Oxfordshire Cotswolds have brokered and contributed to a series of meetings with departments, staff and students at the University of Oxford. Discussions have been held with the Environmental Change Institute (ECI), the School of Geography and the Environment, the Department of Zoology and the Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division (MPLS).
3. The meetings and discussions have led to the development of a Living Laboratory Research Partnership proposal for further discussion with the University, appendix 1. The proposal has been well received to date and is subject to ongoing discussion.
4. Last autumn the Board submitted 6 AONB based MSc dissertation topic proposals:

* What evidence can be advanced to make the case for the Cotswolds being designated as a National Park?
* What is the quantum of the extensive water aquifer underlying the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty?
* What is the potential role the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty landscape could play in flood management both within itself and downstream?
* What is the natural capital of the unimproved and semi-improved flower rich grasslands of the Cotswolds, what are the reasons for its decline and how might this decline be reversed?
* National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty have the same landscape status in planning policy but is that applied equally in both and what implications does this have for the Glover review?
* What has been the impact of the South Downs National Park status in terms of meeting local housing needs, strategic planning provision, supporting agriculture, tourism and leisure provision and conserving biodiversity?

1. Two proposals were explored further by students. The proposal on flood management is progressing over summer 2019 and may progress to a more substantive DPhil research proposal. The proposal on limestone grasslands has not been progressed further. If the MSc dissertation model is a success then it would form a strong foundation for the wider proposal and ongoing working relationship with the University.
2. The Board was also invited to contribute to a research seminar hosted by the University in partnership with Defra / Forestry Commission and attended a seminar on Natural Capital.
3. Whilst the AONB is on the doorstep of the University much of the departmental research takes place overseas or elsewhere in the UK as a result of funding opportunities, contacts held by University staff or the home location of individual students. Consequently the Cotswolds are a largely untapped resource for research.
4. University research is increasingly required to provide evidence of the social and economic impact of their studies in order to successfully secure funding. The opportunity for them to use the AONB, in the context of emerging new local (UK) environment and economic policy and commitments, is therefore potentially attractive, especially for those departments working on more applied modelling and other research.
5. Ideally the Board would wish to:

* Focus the research agenda section of its business plan on the potential Research Partnership with the University of Oxford
* Seek an increasing level of interest and commitment from departments at the University of Oxford
* Identify and secure programme sponsor(s)
* Secure a phased launch of a joint programme in late 2019/20.

1. Areas of particular research interest appear to be:

* Implementation of the Government’s 25 Year Environment Plan
* Natural Capital and ecosystem service mapping; this could also develop on the Board’s initial research commissioned from Cumulus consultants
* High value nature conservation assets.

1. Research grants and other funding may be able to be secured through partnership working. The success of this appears to be increasingly dependent however on not just having letters of support, but actual programme sponsors who invest in the projects themselves, with personnel, time and/or financially. The University and Board might therefore jointly seek programme sponsors e.g. water companies, agri-chemicals business and environmental or general charities or foundations, local authorities and strategic planning committees. This approach could also support any joint applications for research funding made to Defra, the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) or similar.
2. As part of its role the Board might develop an evolving set of research ideas,

maintain public information on the programme and publicise its findings and assist the University and its students with access to the Cotswolds landscape, a network of organisations, data and previous research.

1. Board members will note from the draft Cultural Capital Position Statement agenda item that Board members / staff are also in contact with the Humanities departments within the University to investigate the potential for funding for a related seminar from their TORCH scheme.
2. The investment of time with the University of Oxford has proved the most successful of the approaches to colleges and universities in or on the doorstep of the AONB to date. The Board has insufficient resource to develop the same level of engagement with additional colleges or universities at this stage. However if the approach with the University of Oxford proves successful it is hoped that other colleges and universities will want to develop a similar approach/ join a research partnership over time. This may be particularly relevant to universities with a more applied rather than “pure” research tradition.
3. Staff at the University are similarly limited in their capacity and therefore development of the programme requires a genuine collaborative approach, playing to the strengths of each partner in the programme.

**Supporting paper(s):**

**Appendix ‘A’ - A Living Laboratory for Research Partnerships**