

## **NORTH WESSEX DOWNS AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY**

### **ANNUAL FORUM 15 NOVEMBER 2019**

I attended the Forum as the parish's representative and this is a report of key relevant points. As context, the AONB extends from Cherhill in the west to Theale in the east and from close to Wantage in the north to Whitchurch in the south. One of 34 AONBs in England, it covers 173 parishes in whole or in part, 668 square miles, over 100,000 people, and the northern part of the UNESCO WHS. The National Parks and Access to Countryside Act (1949) is the statutory authority.

The Forum attracted over 90 registrations. The first part of the morning was taken up by formal presentations. One focused on the AONB's management plan 2019-24. This sets out objectives with detailed actions to achieve them. For us a key point is the legal obligation to "have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area" when taking any action that might otherwise have adverse impacts. The WHS management plan has similar language.

The second part of the morning was dedicated to so-called masterclasses. I attended two. The first was on sustainable tourism; the second was on neighbourhood plans. The tourism masterclass was led by the organiser of the Pewsey Vale Tourism Partnership. Run by volunteers, it brings together businesses of all kinds and encourages information and best practice-sharing to maximise engagement with visitors to the area and attract others to it. It has been successful in building a representative group of members, each paying £55/year. The Partnership has yet to work out how to measure its impact though the positive response of the membership is one indication.

The second masterclass was led by an architect and town planner specialising in helping local authorities create neighbourhood plans. These plans cannot prevent incoming development but can help to shape it. Planning authorities are obliged to take a neighbourhood plan into consideration when reaching decisions. However the cost and time necessary to create a plan puts it out of reach of a small parish like Avebury. In any case we have certain protections as a consequence of being in the WHS and having a conservation area.

It was worth attending the meeting. There may be ways in which the AONB can work with us to help us complete some of our projects.

*Stephen Stacey: 19 November 2019*