

22nd Full Meeting – 10th December 2024, via Teams Video Conference

Attendance

Zoe Anthony, Miskin	Dave Grimes, Longtown OLC	Steve Rayner, SWOAPG Coordinator
Mark Davies, Ancient Boar	Joanne Maurice, BBNPA	Mike Smith, Parkwood Outdoors (Chair)
Steffan Davies, Hawk Associates	Ant Morgan, Ant Morgan Coaching	Mark Soanes, Call of the Wild
Lee Garbett, Quest Adventure	Cath Parker, Parc Bryn Bach	

1. Welcome and Apologies

Mike opened the meeting and welcomed attendees.

Apologies had been received from:

Richard Hill, Independent
James Martin, Call of the Wild

2. Matters Arising from 2023 AGM

There were no matters arising from the 2023 AGM which were not already included on the agenda.

3. Overview of SWOAPG's recent & planned activity

Steve Rayner reminded attendees of SWOAPG's aim "to promote & develop sustainable outdoor activity provision in South Wales" then described the following activities and outcomes from the last year and intentions for the next:

- Access in Waterfall Country:
 - We continue to have a positive relationship with Natural Resources Wales (NRW) & Bannau Brycheiniog National Park Authority (BBNPA). The Concordat with NRW has been revised, with a new legal agreement and requirement to report incidents and exchange risk assessments annually.
 - A working party had removed timber debris from Porth yr Ogof in November – thanks to all the volunteers who helped with this; more is planned for next year.
 - SWOAPG remains a key member of the Waterfall Area Safety Advisory Group (WASAG) and has been assisting with actions arising from NRW's Visitor Safety Review.
 - The BBNPA wardens at Cwm Porth would like to have a list of providers who could offer public sessions at short notice; the SWOAPG Coordinator will set this up in due course.
 - Access from Loonies' Leap is still restricted to the hilltop route for gorge-walking groups; with no easy solution to re-opening alternative access. The weir / dam remains out-of-bounds until further notice due to structural instability and safety concerns.
 - The number of gorge users has continued to decrease, to 33 in 2023/4 (from 47 in 2022/3 and 69 in 2018/19, pre-covid). There will be no new training update this year; just a requirement for an annual Member 'confirmation'.
 - There have been occasional complaints about group behaviour in the Sychryd gorge.
 - The Cwm Porth toilet and changing facilities upgrade has been delayed, but Neath Port Talbot Council is on track to upgrade the parking and toilet facilities at Pontneddfechan (opposite the Angel).
 - Steve explained a proposal to introduce an 'incident monitoring scheme', primarily to monitor provider interaction with public; but also incidents involving providers or causing environmental harm. This would not be an alternative to 'formal' reporting and would relate to the gorges initially but could be extended to other venues. Attendees indicated that they would be willing to complete an 'annual data form' to record their number of interactions with the public and an 'incident monitoring form' as incidents occur or at regular intervals – so Steve will issue these forms in due course.

- Paddlesport Access on the River Wye Glasbury-Hay:
 - The proposed Concordat arrangement is currently ‘on hold’. It was almost ‘ready to go’, supported by Canoe Wales, but fishery representatives had demanded additional restrictions (on water level, numbers, etc.) – and compliance with their ‘existing Voluntary Access Arrangement’. Although both Powys County Council and NRW were satisfied with the environmental protection in the Concordat, the restrictive covenant applying to Glas-y-Both Common – requiring the Council to “not interfere with the enjoyment of fishing rights” – posed a risk of legal challenge which meant the fisheries in effect had a form of ‘veto’ over the Council’s ability to re-open the launch site.
 - The Council was, however, proposing to open access for paddling ‘at’ the Bont (i.e. not progressing downstream).
 - SWOAPG has had no further contact with Hay Town Council or the Wye & Usk Foundation on this issue.
 - Steve proposed that SWOAPG should issue a public ‘position statement’ via an open letter to the Council Chair (supported by Canoe Wales) with the aim of re-invigorating this issue; attendees agreed unanimously that he should go ahead with this.
- Bannau Brycheiniog Reservoir Passport Scheme
 - Steve has initiated discussions with BBNPA and Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water (DCWW) regarding transferring management of this scheme to SWOAPG.
- Member Services:

Category	2024	2023	2020	2019
Full Member	61	70	55	75
Associate Member	10	14	14	15
Additional Staff of Corporate Members	98	76	75	78
Supporters	29	31	30	30
Subscribers	218	218	72	66

 - Membership numbers are declining gradually, perhaps reflecting the reduction in numbers using the gorges.
 - We have continued regular communication with Members, including ‘routine’ activity alerts and messages; as well as advertisements for events and jobs; using a website blog and e-mail newsletters (although no longer through Facebook and Twitter, as they have ceased offering mechanisms providing automatic linkage to our blog).
 - We have continued to manage routine membership administration, enquiries, payments and issue of ID cards – and have moved to a different online system this year to simplify administration.
 - We continued a programme of CPD (Continuing Professional & Development) workshops this year, having provided the following:
 - Mar 2024: Learn about Porth yr Ogof
 - Mar 2024: Learn about Clydach Gorge
and are hoping in the coming year to offer:
 - Dec 2024: Learn about the Black Mountains
 - Jan 2025: Learn about the Llangattock escarpment & Eglwys Faen cave
 - Feb 2025: Learn about Bannau Brycheiniog reservoirs
 - Feb 2025: Learn about the Black Mountain
 - TBC: Mountain Rescue in the Gorges (on-site)
- Representing Members’ Interests: the Coordinator and Steering Group members continue to represent SWOAPG at various national and local forums to ensure that the interests of Outdoor Activity Providers are properly represented, including:
 - Wales Adventure Tourism Organisation
 - Outdoor Alliance & UK Outdoors – feeding into the Senedd Cross-Party Group for the Outdoor Activity Sector
 - National Access Forum Wales
 - Regional Tourism Forums – feeding sector views to Visit Wales
 - Wales Council for Outdoor Learning – representing the ‘adventure’ sector
 - Bannau Brycheiniog National Park Authority & Geopark Management Group
 - Brecon Beacons, Swansea Bay & Southwest Wales Tourism groups, feeding sector views to Visit Wales

4. Annual Report & Accounts

Steve Rayner explained that he didn't intend to go through the Annual Report or Accounts in detail since copies had been published on the SWOAPG website.

He then presented the accounts to 31 July 2024, explaining that we had a slight surplus this year, with some project funds still recorded as 'deferred income' for 2024/25.

While we do have growing confidence in future membership income, future funding remains a risk that the Directors will continue to monitor closely.

5. Election of Steering Group, Directors and Chairperson

Steve Rayner explained that the Terms of Reference required one-third of the Steering Group and Board of Directors (those who've served longest) to 'retire' each year. Lee Garbett, Dave Grimes and Mike Smith were all retiring from the Steering Group; and Dave Grimes as a Director; but were all standing for re-election. Cath Parker needed to be elected formally to the Steering Group, following her co-option last year. They were all elected unanimously by the meeting.

Mike Smith had agreed to continue as Chair.

6. 2025 Membership Fees

Steve Rayner announced that the inflationary increase that was agreed at 2018 EGM (linked to Consumer Prices Index) would result in fees for 2025 of £98 for Full members and £33 for Associate Members.

The fee structure discussed last year (for a 'core' fee with 'venue users top-up') had not progressed because Glasbury-Hay access is on hold, but could re-emerge in future e.g. with SWOAPG adoption of the reservoir scheme.

7. Bannau Brycheiniog National Park Sustainable Tourism Strategy

Jo Maurice gave a presentation on BBNPA's emerging sustainable tourism strategy. She explained that this was a new strategy – which would include an event management policy – with the first draft due in January 2025. Overall visitor numbers were slightly lower than in 2018 (pre-pandemic), bringing c. £4m per year to the local economy (similar to Eryri but less than Pembrokeshire Coast); although accommodation numbers had increased, 88% were still day visitors, creating pressure on roads etc. A survey of 629 groups during summer 2024 had confirmed that most visitors had a very positive experience; although toilets, bins and the weather were consistently reported as negatives. TripAdvisor reviews, however, treated the area as if it were an 'attraction' rather than an area of countryside. A new 'destination website' was under development; and some accommodation providers had been offered 'activity familiarisation trips' in conjunction with one activity provider. Jo asked attendees for an indication of their priorities in relation to tourism in Bannau Brycheiniog and the following points arose during the ensuing discussion:

- A growing need to educate the public about how to keep themselves safe and look after the countryside;
- Establishing communication with visitors is very difficult – although the 'meet and greet' scheme was very effective (although now severely limited by funding, compared with the post-covid scheme that was supported by Welsh Government);
- Bookings within our sector were down this year and many more people were 'doing it themselves' rather than using activity providers – often with little awareness of safety and environmental issues;
- One opportunity therefore might be to promote the benefits of using professional providers to help embed positive behaviours; there could be a role here for The Outdoor Partnership;
- Another might be to generate digital resources to engage visitors - perhaps targeting children in particular – with embedded safety and environmental messages;
- There could also be opportunities to promote activities at visitor centre 'front desks' – although past experience showed that a 'late booking system' didn't generate sufficient volume to warrant providers committing resources to it;
- To encourage visitors to engage with – rather than 'bypass' – National Park messaging would require effective use of appropriate online influencers.

	2023-4	2022-3	2021-2
Income & Revenue	£12,861	£10,447	£ 6,158
Membership Fees	£6,411	£6,670	£ 6,158
Workshop / Project Fees	£6,391	£3,760	
Bank Interest	£59	£16	
Expenditure	£12,810	£10,494	£6, 803
Co-ordinator fees	£4,912	£4,659	£ 4,826
Membership costs	£107	£124	£ 88
Workshop / Project costs	£5,863	£3,837	
Payment Processing Fees	£170	£222	£ 201
IT	£622	£505	£ 494
Insurance	£1,127	£1,121	£ 1,105
Administration / Miscellaneous	£37	£26	£ 89
Income less Expenditure	£51	£-47	£ -645

8. Q&A Session

A brief discussion regarding staffing within our sector suggested that this was still proving difficult and had not fully received to pre-Covid levels; and that what was particularly lacking was experienced (rather than qualified) instructors; perhaps this was another area where The Outdoor Partnership might be able to help with an increased focus on 'pathways to employment'.

There were no further questions raised by Members. Mike thanked everyone for taking the time to attend; and Steering Group members for their support throughout the year.