

Report of the
EAI Charter Network Meeting

Birmingham and Midland Institute
Birmingham

Thursday 11th October 2012



EUROPARC
Atlantic Isles

Conservation Without Frontiers

- Introduction of participants
- Julie Barker, Yorkshire Dales National Park
 - Richard Blackman, EUROPARC Atlantic Isles
 - Richard Denman, Charter Evaluation Committee
 - Clare Fildes, Shropshire Hills AONB
 - Nicola Greaves, Cotswold Conservation Board
 - Richard Hammond, greentraveller.co.uk
 - Bruce Hanson, Broads Authority
 - Shane Harris, North Pennines AONB
 - Samantha Isaac, Northumberland Coast AONB
 - Dan James, Exmoor National Park
 - Mike Pugh, Forest of Bowland AONB
 - Iain Robson, Northumberland Coast AONB
 - Rosie Simpson, Charter verifier
 - Maxime Sizaret, Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust
 - Howard Sutcliffe, Clwydian Range and Dee Valley AONB
 - Richard Tyler, Brecon Beacons National Park
 - Vanessa Warrington, Clwydian Range and Dee Valley AONB

Nigel Brooks, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, was due to attend but was hindered by train delays.

Aim of meeting

The meeting was called to enable the sharing of experience and expertise in relation to sustainable tourism and the European Charter, as part of EAI's commitment to facilitate networking in this field. Specific themes were identified during the Forest of Bowland symposium in May.

Particular subjects for this meeting were EAI's methodology on "Charter Part II", which relates to working with tourism businesses, and the identification of where changes might be needed. The context of the EUROPARC Federation's working group on sustainable tourism and possible changes being proposed would also need to be taken into account.

The evaluation process had also been identified as an area for discussion, and if required, to provide feedback to the Federation.

Implementation of
EAI's Charter Part II
Methodology,
Certifying
Businesses

Examples of the
Forest of Bowland
AONB and the
Brecon Beacons
National Park

Mike Pugh (Forest of Bowland) outlined the process and the history through which the second part of the Charter and the EAI methodology came into being.

He also reported that there were now 107 Charter Parks in 13 countries, with 387 Charter Partners in 13 Charter Parks implementing the second part of the Charter.

The Forest of Bowland was awarded the Charter for the second time 2010, with the re-evaluation process proving to be a valuable experience. The AONB team felt that the verification process had not adequately covered the second part of the Charter. It also felt that some revisions are needed to cover climate change, recycling and energy use; knowledge of climate change having increased enormously since the Charter was first developed. In addition there appeared to be little recognition given to the interpretation of the area's cultural and natural assets.

The number of Charter partners certified under Part II reached a high of 37 in 2010, but has fallen to 30 as of October 2012.

Problems identified relate to a) the eco-label and b) quality accreditation.

Eco-label

In terms of the eco-label, the Green Tourism Business Scheme in their experience demonstrates a contradiction between an excellent system and its poor delivery arising from the lack of capacity. There are also inconsistencies in the evaluation process and the cost / benefit ratio for businesses was doubtful.

The advantages of green marketing could be a topic for further discussion.

The question of saying that "you've got to have an eco-label" was now problematic. A wide variety of businesses have dropped out. Participants reported a number of points:

- That the GTBS provides benefits, but there is no correlation with visitor numbers as it's not used for marketing;
- Much of the work for GTBS is about demonstrating progress, but there is a feeling of those that get to Gold standard that it is more and more difficult to find more things to do year after year to satisfy the auditor and retain Gold;
- The aim of GTBS is product development;
- Protected areas are also clients (indirectly) of GTBS and there is a need for GTBS to understand the need for change.

The businesses that have dropped out are still acting sustainably, but this is now a bureaucratic obstacle standing in the way of the partnership (and Charter implementation).

The Shropshire Hills AONB has developed its own scheme for sustainable tourism business certification (although it's not yet an official scheme under the Charter).

Quality accreditation

Visit England no longer maintains a database of accredited accommodation. There are significant concerns regarding costs, particularly for small businesses where money is tight and many are leaving QIT, Visit England's assessment scheme. The scheme only relates to accommodation; it doesn't include for example cycle hire or food service companies.

Should the EAI group accept other schemes?

Forest of Bowland proposal for Charter Part II

Current thinking is as follows:

1. If get 2 consecutive GTBS GOLD awards, will be retained as partner (unless change of ownership/management)
2. Agree to mentor other businesses – host at least 2 visits p.a.
3. Every 2 years, self-certify maintaining performance, including participation in Forum, etc.

The following points were raised by participants:

- What is in the spirit of the Charter and what is laid down in the text?
- It's a question of volume versus quality. Are we looking to engage as many businesses as possible or are we setting a level?
- People are generally not that knowledgeable, but want to see a certificate.
- We should look at green issues / sustainability separately from Part II.
- The Shropshire Hills AONB scheme includes 100 businesses, an annual award, and builds personal links. The continual need to find new resources remains problematic – costs are a concern because it's labour intensive. The importance of networking and the social element was emphasised.
- In Brecon Beacons NP businesses are required to have gone through a set of processes to get the BBNP logo. In the Shropshire Hills AONB there is self-accreditation, but the logo is separate from that of the AONB. It's an agreement to do things better.

Richard Tyler outlined the Brecon Beacons development of its

Sustainable Tourism Partnership and in particular its work in promoting businesses under Part II, “**Sustainable Tourism Champions**” scheme.

Training takes place under the auspices of the Sustainable Tourism Partnership.

The idea of the group preparing a joint bid to the Rural Development programme was proposed.

Nicola Greaves (Cotswolds Conservation Board) outlined the **Our Land** scheme which works with the protected landscapes of the South East of England, the company responsibletravel.com, and places landscape at the heart of sustainability. It targets businesses to join in the scheme, with the business committing to a promise relating to the landscape, environment and community. The focus of the project development is now on the sustainability of the scheme. Businesses are not accredited but are reviewed by customers; there is further work to be carried out on this. Participation in the scheme had helped with the Cotswolds’ Charter application and helped to build up links with businesses. It could be a stepping stone for Part II.

The question of self certification or external verification was again raised. In this context the rhetorical question of whether Part II makes any sense was also voiced.

The re-evaluation process

Experiences from the Charter Parks and recommendations

Forest of Bowland AONB

Mike Pugh explained that the Forest of Bowland underwent reevaluation two years ago. It was daunting at the beginning but turned out to be very useful. Management plan and sustainable tourism strategy had not been aligned, but were now aligning, with sustainable tourism now more obviously in the management plan.

It was felt that the evaluation questionnaire needed further work and that there was not enough consideration of cultural and natural assets. The task now for the Forest of Bowland is to improve its ongoing monitoring.

In discussion:

- it was acknowledged that a global weakness of the Charter is that it does not consider climate change.
- The perspective of the Evaluation Committee was noted. It requires a distinct sustainable tourism plan.

Clwydian Range and Dee Valley AONB

Vanessa Warrington explained that the AONB wanted to go through the re-evaluation process, but that given the extension of the AONB feared they would have to reapply. They would prefer it to be a continuation.

It was recommended that the AONB approach the Evaluation Committee and that a solution would in all likelihood be feasible.

Broads Authority

Bruce Hanson explained that he had been sceptical, but was glad they went through the process. It makes you think about what you are doing and was also more onerous than expected. It also helped change the Broads' view on having a tourism remit. The strategy is now a bible for the business community! All in all verification had been very helpful, particularly with the perspective from elsewhere in Europe and that with the same verifier there had been an element of continuity.

Yorkshire Dales

Julie Barker reported that they had just submitted their reevaluation forms, and stated that it was worth doing despite the workload. She wasn't sure about whether they would undertake it a third time, and that perhaps a different model was worth thinking about for a lighter touch approach in the future.

In the ensuing discussion, the following points were made:

- Any possible reviews would look at the dependence on the need for a verification visit, but the great added value of the verifier was emphasised;
- Future economic realities would need to be reflected; given that the Charter process results in improvements it may be that the benefits of going through the reevaluation process diminish relatively each time;
- There are many opportunities for mentoring, and potentially opportunities for EU funding for sharing of ideas and expertise.
- The revisiting of the parks' strategies does not necessarily involve a total rewriting. Points to consider are whether it is still fit for purpose, whether there is evidence of having considered all the issues, and whether verifier recommendations from the previous visit have been addressed.
- The possibility of a variable funding model was raised. Some might prefer to pay €1,000 a year for five years rather €5,000 in one go.
- Some of the details could be made simpler.

EUROPARC
Federation
Sustainable
Tourism Working
Group

This issue was considered because a draft paper prepared by the Federation's working group reviewing Part II of the Charter had been circulated in advance of the meeting.

Working group member Mike Pugh reported on its work. He noted that there had been a lack of resources / commitment, which was reflected in dwindling attendance. This was of some concern. There is also no dedicated contact person at the Federation directorate at present nor no clear management by the Federation of the Charter process.

The Federation was being urged to establish a 'business plan' for the revenue from and costs of the Charter process to ensure sustainability, build in funding for support safeguard retention of members and competitiveness against other sustainable tourism brands. In addition, there was now a proposal (although not from the Sustainable Tourism Working Group) to change the management of the verification process from EUROPARC Consulting to the Federation directorate.

In terms of the review of Charter Part II it was particularly important to look at the protected area responsibilities (Para 6), partner responsibilities (Para 7), the mutual action plans (Para 8), the removal of Sections from Part II and placing the onus on the sustainable tourism forum (Paras 9/10).

In the following discussion the following points were made:

- There was no need to be too worried about competition; the Charter has more than proved its value over the years and both on its own and in comparison with other schemes;
- The Charter is about engagement with partners; it's not a marketing tool and it never has been;
- Which way should it (Part II) develop? A graded, inspected route or something different?;
- Concern was expressed at how the Federation values the Charter and that it should be mindful of these concerns.
- The need for a business plan was reiterated – the core needs to be sustainable, and that financial and human resources need to be considered;
- Europe makes it special. It's very rare that a group of professionals in the UK would be sitting together considering how a European endeavour can be implemented and made to work;
- Political support from MPs and MEPs would be useful;
- External funding for networking / mentoring would be invaluable;
- Part II contains lots of words and needs to have the definitions up front;

- No hasty decisions should be taken about switching responsibility for the evaluation process from EUROPARC Consulting to the Federation directorate;

News and short presentations

Greentraveller

Richard Hammond outlined the work, recent activities and experience of greentraveller.co.uk. Greentraveller works primarily in marketing and publishing as well as a listing site, and has worked with several protected landscapes. It's not a certifier or booking service.

He illustrated recent work in the Brecon Beacons at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1rXefjBQ6U&feature=plcp> with the park's sustainable tourism champions, and on the New Forest bus tour.

A further link to the Slow Holiday people was also planned <http://www.inntravel.co.uk/>

Close of meeting and next Steps

The final points made in the discussion were as follows:

- Recognition of businesses by EUROPARC requires a consistent national basis;
- Further high level work needs to be done;
- Fundamental questions for EAI to consider are the role of this network and the work of protected areas in green tourism.
- The integrity of Charter Part I should not be threatened by the existence of Part II.

Feedback should be sent to Richard Blackman richard.blackman@europarc-ai.org regarding the Federation working group's proposed changes to Charter Part II, for him to then forward on.

A further meeting of the network would be valuable and this should take place early in 2013, with a focus on the key questions of how to engage with business and on green tourism.

RB, 29.11.12