



<u>Committee and Date</u> Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership 29 July 2009	<u>Item</u> 4
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SHROPSHIRE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY CONSULTATION

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Summary

This paper outlines the consultation on Shropshire's new Sustainable Community Strategy, and presents an outline for an AONB Partnership response.

Recommendation

The Partnership is recommended to consider the directions of an AONB Partnership response to this consultation.

Background

1. The 2007 Local Government White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' outlined the need for new Sustainable Community Strategies to establish a long-term vision (10-20 years) for an area, based firmly on local needs, underpinned by a shared evidence base and informed by community aspirations. It also emphasised that the Strategy should identify key priorities for the local area that could realistically be achieved in the medium term and which would inform the Local Area Agreement. (The LAA is a three year formal funding agreement between central Government and the local area on priorities to improve the quality of life for local people).
2. Preparation of the Sustainable Community Strategy is being led by the Shropshire Partnership (a 'local strategic partnership'), made up of local authorities working together with other public service providers and representatives of the private and voluntary sectors. With the former two-tier local government in Shropshire, there were also County and District levels of local strategic partnership and Community Strategy. With the shift to unitary, the District level of both Partnership and Strategy has gone, though there are now three 'Area Partnerships' for North, Central and Southern Shropshire. These three link to the Shropshire Partnership, and will work to the single new Shropshire Sustainable Community Strategy.
3. Members should note that this consultation is not on a full draft of the Sustainable Community Strategy, but on the proposed vision, themes and cross-cutting issues. It is however the main stage of public consultation, and the full draft Strategy is expected to be taken to the Shropshire Partnership's Leadership Board in October 2009 for final comments. The current consultation runs until 30th September 2009, and members may wish to consider making their own responses as well as contributing to the AONB Partnership's response.

List of Background Papers

Consultation document on the vision, themes and cross-cutting issues for Shropshire's new Sustainable Community Strategy 2009-2020, available at <http://www.2shrop.net/2shropnet/AToZOfMini-sites/S/ShropshirePartnership/CommunityStrategy>

Human Rights Act Appraisal

The information in this report is compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998.

Environmental Appraisal

The recommendation in this paper will contribute to the conservation of protected landscapes.

Risk Management Appraisal

Risk management has been appraised as part of the considerations of this report.

Community / Consultations Appraisal

The consultation document has been circulated where possible electronically to members of the Partnership in advance of this paper.

Appendices**Appendix 1 Outline of draft Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership response**

Appendix 1 Shropshire Sustainable Community Strategy consultation July 2009 Outline of draft Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership response

Introduction - role and perspective of the AONB Partnership

The Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is a national designation dating from 1958, with the following purposes:

- *The primary purpose of designation is to conserve and enhance natural beauty.*
- *In pursuing the primary purpose of designation, account should be taken of the needs of agriculture, forestry, and other rural industries and of the economic and social needs of local communities. Particular regard should be paid to promoting sustainable forms of social and economic development that in themselves conserve and enhance the environment.*
- *Recreation is not an objective of designation, but the demand for recreation should be met so far as this is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and the needs of agriculture, forestry and other uses. Countryside Agency (2001)*

This response is largely based on the analysis of the Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan 2009-14, a statutory document formally approved by Shropshire Council earlier in 2009. The AONB Partnership itself has a significant level of engagement, with 36 Partnership members, a variety of theme and area Working Groups, plus around 70 members of Friends of the Shropshire Hills and 55 businesses belonging to the Shropshire Hills Sustainable Business Scheme. The Partnership receives significant external funding, especially from Natural England, and has a staff team currently of ten with a focus on co-ordination and partnership approaches. The Partnership has in addition to its environmental focus, a proven record in economic delivery (and project funding from Shropshire Council specifically for this purpose), and is also the delivery body for the

Sustainable Development Fund, and for LEADER in the Shropshire Hills, which is focused on wellbeing and social and community benefits.

The AONB Partnership has had close involvement with the local strategic partnerships for some years. We are now particularly involved with the Southern Shropshire Partnership, with a strong representation in the current Action Plans for the Environment Delivery Group, Economic and Learning Delivery Group and Health & Wellbeing Delivery Group.

Vision

Sustainable development, the balancing of economic, environmental and social factors, is a robust and readily understandable framework. It has a strong grounding in government policy and is highly relevant to the broad scope of the Sustainable Community Strategy and the related Local Development Framework. **The Strategy should more explicitly adopt a sustainable development framework**, and make clearer that the three elements of the Vision represent the three pillars of sustainable development.

The paragraphs supporting the Vision make reference to economic recession, but in the timescale of the Strategy, **climate change needs also to be referenced as a driver of overwhelming importance**. This is not just an environmental issue, to be pigeon-holed to Issue 3, but the greatest threat to economic prosperity and wellbeing in human history. Despite our responsibility for the quarter of the county nationally designated as 'beautiful', we would for this reason urge that the term 'beautiful' in the Vision be replaced with a term with more depth, such as 'sustainable'. With some experience of dealing with concept of 'beauty', we are aware that this can tend towards a rather narrow approach focussed on appearance rather than the functional health of environmental systems under the surface. 'Sustainable' is sometimes felt to be a problematic term, but in our experience with simple supporting text on the balance of economic, environmental and social factors as described above, it can work well.

We would also recommend that '**Transition to Low Carbon**' be included as the first of the cross-cutting themes, and that some reference be made to this under each of the five main themes (see further below). The reinforcement of this theme is necessary because the challenges of Low Carbon are great, and its exclusion from sections such as Economic Vitality risk giving the impression of 'business as usual'. This approach would be better in line with both current national government direction, and with regional policy such as the recent West Midlands Economic Strategy.

The other concept which should be included, recognising the widely accepted scale and pace of change likely over the strategy period, is '**resilience**'. This includes the other important area of action in relation to climate change – that of adaptation. Good practice on this is clear that the sooner this starts the more effective it will be.

Five themes

The themes are for the most part appropriate, but we would recommend a re-ordering to tie in better with the Vision:

1. Economic vitality
2. The Environment
3. Health, Culture & Leisure
4. Our communities
5. Younger and Older People

Specific points for each theme and comments on priorities identified are as follows:

Economic vitality

In the aspiration, replace 'dynamic and modern' with 'dynamic, modern and well advanced with Low Carbon transition'. The section 'accessible to people from all parts of Shropshire' relates more to community aspects of towns as service centres than the economy and should be removed. It should be replaced by 'and rural areas will have thriving land management and other appropriate industries'.

The second priority highlighting local procurement and supply chains is supported. More specific mention should be made of the economic opportunities of the shift to a greener economy – not just through resource efficiency but in the environment sector, in which Shropshire is already strong and which has new possibilities emerging.

Rural areas need further attention beyond the brief reference to tourism – in particular the importance of farming and land management. Though smaller than some other sectors, this is of fundamental importance to maintaining the environment and to food security, especially in the scenario of greater local procurement and shortening supply chains.

The Environment

The aspiration needs to take greater account of the intrinsic health of the environment, not just its ability to attract people to live, work and visit. Reference should be made to 'ecosystem services' (perhaps alternatively worded as 'life support functions') including clean air and water, production of food and natural raw materials, nutrient cycling, catchment management and cultural benefits such as recreation and aesthetic/ amenity value. Where the aspiration says 'resources... will be managed more efficiently', energy should be added as first on the list.

Reference to a smaller carbon footprint should be stronger, quantifying for Shropshire a 2020 milestone towards the UK's legally binding 2050 targets on this. New development is only one of many ways of achieving this, and other means should be mentioned to give a more balanced picture (change in behaviour patterns, energy saving in existing building stock, etc). The Environment section should however point towards this more detailed material in a new 'Low Carbon' cross-cutting theme as suggested above.

The priorities should repeat reference to ecosystem services, and highlight in particular the need to support improved land management to alleviate flooding. Resilience of environmental systems could also be mentioned.

Health, Culture & Leisure

The final priority referring to countryside recreation is strongly supported, and could perhaps be placed earlier in the list.

Our communities

The first sentence of the aspiration uses 'sustainable' twice in a context closely linked to planning, where the validity of previous definitions of 'sustainable communities' and 'sustainable patterns of development' are increasingly being challenged. As a result the sentence conveys relatively little. If the term 'sustainable communities' is used, reference should be made to community cohesion and patterns of behaviour – all communities should have the ability to be sustainable.

The priorities under this theme are well defined and are supported.

Younger and Older People

As well as moving the position of this priority, we recommend amending it to include older people. The document acknowledges the older profile of Shropshire's population, but as it stands then proposes very little to reflect this. The value of community activity, and contact and connection with the landscape should be highlighted in priorities for older people.

Under the priorities, provision for greater contact with the natural environment should be highlighted for young people, as the current trend is very much towards reduced contact, with resulting loss of health, wellbeing and environmental awareness.

Support the AONB Partnership can offer, suggested actions

The AONB Management Plan contains around 120 actions, which link to all of the five priorities. Direct delivery by the AONB Partnership is focussed on the environment, but also includes the economy and through LEADER especially, social and community benefits. *Further consideration will be given to particularly important overlaps of interest.*

Cross-cutting issues

Low Carbon should be added specifically as the first cross cutting theme Reference should be made in this section to transport, which has a very low profile in the document.

Issue 7 'The geography and characteristics of Shropshire' does not work well as an 'issue'. It is a relevant factor for consideration, but it is hard to see what actions might address (or by implication change) the geography. It could be subsumed within a combination of current Issues 1 and 2 'Planning together for the future' and 'A Sustainable Future', which are quite vaguely defined. This would allow a reduction to six cross-cutting themes after the addition of Low Carbon.

Support the AONB Partnership can offer, suggested actions

As above.

Other comments

Page 6 of the document incorrectly refers to the 'South Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding National Beauty'. The name of the AONB should be used together in full and correctly, i.e. "almost 81,000 hectares is designated as the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and contain..."

On page 16, the document refers to the Shropshire Hills AONB again. Our latest figures give a population in the AONB of around 19,000.