



<u>Committee and Date</u> Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership  21 June 2011	<u>Item</u>  <b>4</b>
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## LEADER IN THE SHROPSHIRE HILLS UPDATE

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### Summary

This paper presents an update on the progress of the Shropshire Hills LEADER programme.

### Recommendation

The Partnership is recommended to note progress and offer comments.

### Background

1. The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership as the LEADER Local Action Group (LAG) has so far approved £649,335 of LEADER funding. A detailed financial breakdown of this is given at Appendix 1. This LEADER funding has attracted through the projects an additional £486,116 of match funding. If all current projects perform as per contract the total investment to date for delivering the Shropshire Hills LEADER Local Development Strategy will be £1,128,764.
2. **Approved projects October 2009 to June 2011:**
  - Ludlow 21 – ‘Grow, Cook and Share’ £42,000
  - Shropshire Wildlife Trust – ‘Once upon a hill’ £50,000
  - Homestart £36,250
  - Bishop’s Castle Tourism CIC - Festivals Officer £38,878
  - Hopton Castle Preservation Trust £30,000
  - Caring for God’s Acre – Sacred Spaces £70,000
  - Soil Association – School Farmers Markets £40,000
  - Shropshire Council - Developing Much Wenlock as hub for discovering East Shropshire £30,000
  - Light Foot Enterprises – Farm Carbon £50,000
  - Shropshire AONB Partnership - Discover Local - £39,031
  - Craven Arms CIC – Into the Hills - £35,000
  - Small Woods Association – Forest School - £23, 746
  - Shropshire AONB Partnership - Shropshire Hills Farming Project - £59,208

Members have previously been given information on the projects above. A brief outline of the following projects approved more recently is included below:

- **Shropshire Wildlife Trust - Reserved for Nature - £29,472**

A project to enhance the infrastructure of Shropshire Wildlife Trust's suite of Shropshire Hills nature reserves for wildlife and visitors. The Trust holds a number of reserves to conserve and enhance a series of important habitats within the Shropshire Hills. Some have fallen into disuse and some require a small capital investment. This work will also conserve the special character of the landscape and help make it more accessible to locals and visitors. The work (such as vehicle management) will help prevent further deterioration of the landscape while ensuring sites remain a valuable community recreational resource. Site interpretation will help communities understand the assets on their doorstep.

- **Shropshire AONB Partnership - Walking for Wellbeing - £26,748**

Walking for Wellbeing will improve the health, wellbeing and sustainability of local communities in the Shropshire Hills. The project will focus on Cleobury Mortimer, Bishop's Castle and Church Stretton, building on the success of Walking For Health and Walkers Are Welcome initiatives, increasing the number of people walking, and improving the sense of place for walkers in the Shropshire Hills. This project is an integral part of the Offa's Country Sustainable Tourism Programme and will be working with other LAGs along the Welsh - English border to deliver the activity.

- **Shropshire Wildlife Trust - Explore more of the Wrekin Forest - £42,000**

The high level of use of the Wrekin creates pressure, and for many years there has not been an adequate framework or resources to manage this, resulting in harm to the quality of the landscape and visitors' experience. On the ground staffing capacity to take practical action and engage with visitors is key to maintaining the quality of a well used countryside site. After being unable to secure purchase of part of the hill which was for sale, the Shropshire Wildlife Trust from 2005 to the present has led the Wrekin Forest Project, with a dedicated Project Officer, which has made significant progress with improving management of the area. The project developed a Wrekin Forest Landscape Conservation Management Plan, and this led in 2007 to the formation of a 'Wrekin Forest Partnership' formally linked to the AONB structure. This project seeks to empower the local community and visitors alike to celebrate and participate in their iconic local landscape.

- **Cooperation Actions research, preparatory and initial implementation costs - £7,000**

It is proposed to spend an element of the Cooperation Measure 421 budget on initial discussions and meetings with prospective partners. This will lead to recommendations to the LAG, on which partners can work further during the rest of programme.

### 3. **Projects under appraisal**

There are currently eight projects at appraisal stage. It is envisaged that these projects will go before the Approvals Panel in July 2011. The total amount of LEADER funding that these projects represent equates to £183,098. The Applicants are as follows:

- Land, Life and Livelihoods – Caring for Land, Life and Livelihoods in the Clun Forest
- Care Farming West Midlands – Shropshire Hills Care Farm Development
- Small Woods Association – Shropshire Hills AONB Woodland restoration project

- Ditton Priors Parish Council – Street lighting project
- Church Stretton Town Council – Connecting Church Stretton to Shropshire Hills Tourism Strategy
- Shropshire Council Outdoor Recreation Service – Viewranger promoting walks in the AONB
- Shropshire Wildlife Trust – Community Wildlife Groups in the Shropshire Hills AONB
- Shropshire Council – Shropshire / Romania traditional skills training project

#### 4. Co-operation projects, RDPE Measure 421

In order to strengthen the Shropshire Hills Local Development Strategy, it is important that rural areas facing similar challenges can learn from each other. Therefore, co-operation projects between Local Action Groups of different territories need to be explored and are eligible for funding under Measure 421 of the Rural Development Programme for England. The aim of LEADER Co-operation is to work in partnership or to share best practice with LAGs from territories within the same Member State or between territories belonging to other Member States. Cooperation activity concerns the pooling of human and financial resources in a manner consistent with the LAGs Local Development Strategy.

##### Co-operation Projects Under Development

- **Offa's Country Sustainable Tourism Programme - Walking with Offa Cooperation Project**

This ambitious project brings together 7 LAGs in England and Wales to deliver a co-ordinated programme of sustainable tourism activity across and along the Welsh - English border. Activity will include joint marketing and promotion of walking, a public transport study and literature, a research project, exchange visits, networking and good practice training courses. The activity will be managed by Adventa LAG in Monmouthshire on behalf of all the LAGs.

- **Loir Valley LAG (France), Saaremaa LAG (Estonia) and Central Warwickshire (England) Cooperation Project**

The initial stages of this potential cooperation project have taken place. Shropshire Hills LAG hosted a visit from the Loir Valley LAG in January 2011 and had a return visit in March 2011. The 4 LAGs have agreed to explore a cooperation project based on the concept of shortening the supply chain through introducing local food into the primary schools. If adopted the project would be filmed for use as a legacy/case study for further action.

#### 5. Claims

The last quarter of the 2010 – 2011 Financial Year concentrated on project claims. A total of £387,254 has been claimed up to March 2011, this figure includes the management and administration costs of the programme.

Project claims have been slow to process due to the bureaucratic nature of the programme, and the risk of claw back if information is missing. The claims take a considerable amount of time to process but by working with the applicants, and with the support of Shropshire Council's Corporate Finance Team the Shropshire Hills LAG has maximised claim levels.

## 6. LEADER Budget update

In April 2011 the Shropshire Hills Local Action Group was advised that the budget for 2011 – 2012 would receive a 20% cut. A revised Programme budget has been submitted to Advantage West Midlands for approval.

The revised programme budget is shown below:

### Projected Total LEADER Expenditure by Measure – Submitted April 2011

RDPE Measures	2009 - 2010	2010 - 2011	2011 - 2012	2012 - 2013	2013	Programme total
321	£10,132	£105,789	£154,277	£90,926		£361,125
322		£84,840	£92,062	£58,420	£8,857	£244,180
323	£30,000	£51,114	£43,470	£109,638		£234,223
421		£2,435	£18,080	£30,005	£11,979	£62,500
431	£51,807	£51,135	£40,000	£42,565	£40,000	£225,507
<b>Total</b>	<b>£91,939</b>	<b>£295,314</b>	<b>£347,890</b>	<b>£331,556</b>	<b>£60,836</b>	<b>£1,127,537</b>

Subsequently a letter has been issued to all English LAGs from Robin Mortimer DEFRA Director, Wildlife and Countryside. The letter provides a review of LEADER budgets under the Rural Development Programme for England.

Ministers want to see additional funding allocated to Local Action Groups where the available evidence suggests the capacity exists to maximise its use. DEFRA have reviewed budget allocations taking account of spending to date and the level of commitments for 2011/12. Advantage West Midlands have provided local data which has been validated against national records. LAGs have been grouped into three categories:

- those with above average levels of spend to date to receive reinstatement to 100% of planned budget for 2011/12 (as previously agreed with their RDA);
- those with a high level of commitments in 2011/12 to receive partial reinstatement of planned budget for 2011/12 (as previously agreed with their RDA);
- those meeting neither of these criteria to receive no additional funding beyond their budget allocation for 2011/12 (as agreed with their RDA).

At the time of writing this report the Shropshire Hills LAG falls into the first of the above categories. It is envisaged that all or part of the 20% budget reduction for the current Financial Year will be reinstated. DEFRA intend to build on the approach taken for 2011/12 of reviewing spending performance, commitments and plans with regards to future budget allocation. Ministers also want to give priority to well-performing LAGs that are in upland areas, in line with the recent Uplands Policy Statement.

In the short term DEFRA have confirmed that LAGs can commit up to 65% of their original planned budget as agreed in their Local Development Strategy for 2012/13, and 50% of their planned budget for 2013/14. DEFRA believe this gives most LAGs sufficient flexibility to continue making commitments whilst a further review is completed.

## 7. Advantage West Midlands transfer to DEFRA of RDPE delivery

From 1 July 2011 responsibility for the delivery of support for farming and forestry competitiveness, diversification of the rural economy and rural quality of life under Axis 1 and 3 of the RDPE and community led LEADER programme, will transfer from the eight existing Regional Development Agencies to DEFRA.

### List of Background Papers

LEADER in the Shropshire Hills Local Development Strategy and Business Plan, available at <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/looking-after/leader/>.

### 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 LEADER Appraisals and Approvals Panels have been involved with the projects.

### Appendices

Appendix 1 LEADER in the Shropshire Hills – allocation by measure at June 2011

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Project	Connect 321	Be Active 322	Take notice 323	421	Total
<b>Live approved projects</b>					
Grow, Cook and Share	£42,000				
Once Upon a Hill			£50,000		
Homestart	£36,250				
Bishop's Castle Festivals Officer	£38,878				
Hopton Castle			£30,000		
Sacred Spaces through the ages		£70,000			
School Farmers' Markets	£40,000				
Developing Much Wenlock as hub for discovering east Shropshire	£30,000				
Farm Carbon	£50,000				
Discover Local	£39,031				
Into the Hills		£35,000			
Forest School		£23,746			
Shropshire Hills Farming project		£59,208			
Reserved for Nature		£29,472			
Walking for Wellbeing		£26,748			
Explore more of the Wrekin Forest			£42,000		
Co-operation Actions research, preparatory and initial implementation costs				£7,000	
<b>Total</b>	<b>£276,159</b>	<b>£244,175</b>	<b>£122,000</b>	<b>£7,000</b>	<b>£649,334</b>