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STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN THE SHROPSHIRE HILLS AND LUDLOW

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Summary

This paper provides members with a short summary of the completed Strategy now out for public consultation and gives the opportunity for discussion of issues arising.

Recommendation

The Partnership is recommended to note the information provided, and offer comments.

Background

1. The AONB Partnership is managing a contract for the preparation of Sustainable Tourism Strategies for the Shropshire Hills and Wye Valley AONBs, financed principally by AWM Natural Assets funding, administered by Natural England. The final output from consultants engaged to prepare the Shropshire Hills Strategy has been received, and this is now out for a three month period of public consultation.
2. An important point to note about this is that this is a Strategy not just for the AONB, but for the wider Shropshire Hills and Ludlow Destination Development Partnership area. This Partnership is the structure established recently by Shropshire Council to co-ordinate strategic aspects of tourism at a sub-county level. Also significant is that a sustainable tourism approach has been adopted, not just as a niche market or activity, but as the mainstream strategy for tourism in the area. The process of preparing the Strategy has moved on significantly the shared agenda and co-ordination in relation to tourism between the AONB and tourism organisations, including in the market towns lying just outside the AONB boundary. The AONB Partnership's staff team have played an important role in support for the new Destination Development Partnership, including preparing Terms of Reference and input to meetings. The whole process has put both the AONB's purposes, and through our valued input the AONB Partnership as an organisation, in a very sound position in relation to tourism in the area.
3. It is hoped to follow the completion of the Strategy with an application in the autumn to the Europarc Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas, though a fee of €5,000 has to be found to support this.
4. Appendix 1 outlines the essence of the strategy and actions, and also provides further background information.

List of Background Papers

The full Strategy and Action Plan is available on the AONB website at www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/looking-after/projects/sustainable-tourism-strategy/.

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

There have been no previous consultations on this topic with Partnership members.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Summary extracts from the Strategy and Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism in the Shropshire Hills And Ludlow

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Introduction

In December 2010, the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership, together with Shropshire Council, commissioned The Tourism Company with Alison Caffyn to prepare a sustainable tourism strategy and action plan for the whole of the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow destination, as covered by the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow Destination Development Partnership (DDP). This area encompasses:

- the whole of the Shropshire Hills AONB, including the towns of Church Stretton and Clun
- the towns of Bishop's Castle, Cleobury Mortimer, Craven Arms, Ludlow, Minsterley, Much Wenlock and Pontesbury
- the countryside around these towns that relates to them.

A focal aspect of the strategy is the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), which relates to all parts of the destination. The strategy has been written to comply with the requirements of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas and will be a key document in the AONB Partnership's application for the Charter. The strategy equally recognises the key role in tourism played by the market towns, which play a large part in the visitor interest in the destination and contain many of the tourism facilities and services. It pays particular attention to their opportunities and needs. The linkage (in all senses) between the towns and the AONB is a key theme.

The strategy is driven by the principles of sustainable tourism, which address economic, social and environmental impacts now and in the future. This is a key requirement of the European Charter. It has been written as an integrated document for the destination, considering product, market and management issues and opportunities for the destination as a whole, leading to strategic objectives and a single action plan.

The future presents a number of challenges and opportunities for supporting tourism destinations in the UK. Cuts in public sector budgets have been affecting the delivery of some services, but have also engendered a sense of determination to find new ways of working together. There is an ongoing commitment to the visitor economy in Shropshire, based on destination development partnerships, and further opportunities will arise for tourism enterprises and local interests to engage in the enhancement, management and promotion of sustainable tourism in the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow.

The need for a partnership approach to tourism is more important now than ever before. The members of the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow Destination Development Partnership are well placed to take on responsibility for coordinating the implementation of this strategy and action plan, and to encourage others to work with them in doing so.

The strategy has been based on extensive consultation over four months, including desk research, an online survey of tourism enterprises, five local consultation meetings, one-to-one consultation with over 40 key stakeholders, site visits, a stakeholder workshop and comments received on an interim report.

Underlying aims

Aims

The World Tourism Organisation and United Nations Environment Programme define sustainable tourism as 'tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities'.¹ The following aims for the strategy are presented:

Primary aim:

- **To develop, manage and promote the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow as a high quality sustainable tourism destination, in keeping with its focus on a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.**

Associated aims:

- To provide all visitors with a fulfilling and enjoyable experience of the Shropshire Hills and neighbouring market towns.
- To foster a prosperous tourism and food industry, providing secure year round jobs.
- To enhance the quality of life within local communities and support for local services.
- To increase appreciation and understanding of the special landscape, biodiversity and cultural heritage of the area and support for their conservation.
- To minimise negative impacts of tourism on the environment.

Guiding principles

Consultation and analysis has shaped the following overall approach and priorities for the Strategy and Action Plan.

Building an integrated destination, linking the towns and the hills (AONB)

The area is currently quite fragmented but has great potential to pull together and match better known rural destinations elsewhere in England based on high quality, designated landscapes. A key is the unspoiled and accessible upland countryside *combined with* a number of small towns full of character and individuality. The approach should involve building awareness of the area as a whole while strengthening linkages between the constituent parts.

Ensuring effective partnership working between stakeholders at all levels

The thrust of tourism policy in England is towards partnership working at the destination level. This is also a requirement of the EUROPARC Charter. The new Destination Development Partnerships in Shropshire reflect this. Many of the towns have demonstrated good community involvement in tourism at the most local level. The

¹ World Tourism Organisation and United Nations Environment Programme, *Making Tourism More Sustainable* (2005)

opportunity now is to strengthen linkages between these more local groupings, within the context of a cohesive destination and alongside the AONB to which they all also relate. There is a need to build a strong DDP for the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow, with effective engagement of the private sector, public sector, conservation, heritage and community interests. Vertical linkages to marketing and business support services within Shropshire and to wider area partnerships should be maintained and strengthened.

Growing tourism spending year round and throughout the area

This should be a strategy for growth, addressing the need to underpin business viability and maximise opportunities to strengthen the local economy through tourism. Emphasis should be on increasing visitor spending, with growth in visitor trips, length of stay and spend per head. Consultation has emphasised the need to focus in particular on generating more spending at less busy times of the year. The strategy should also seek to spread tourism spending across the area, within all the market towns and the wider countryside, while reflecting the capacity and needs of each.

Bringing out opportunities to enjoy the area's special qualities and distinctiveness

Successful destinations are increasingly those that are able to offer distinctive experiences in line with the interests of their potential markets. The area already has a number of strengths, notably with respect to food, landscapes, the built environment, historic heritage, events, walking and other rural activities. It is well placed to appeal to a wide market seeking a richly rural experience, both active and passive. The approach should involve adding value to the attractions and experiences on offer and making them more appealing and accessible.

Being ambitious about the sustainable aspects of tourism

The strategy should adhere strongly to the principles of sustainable tourism, minimising negative impacts on the environment and local communities and where possible providing positive benefit to them. Shifting to low carbon is a strategic priority of the AONB Management Plan and there are excellent examples of tourism businesses and whole communities where this has been embraced. Highlighting opportunities for visitors wishing to minimise the carbon footprint of their holiday represents a chance to target a growing market, to champion best practice and to attract interest to the Shropshire Hills as a destination with an excellent reputation for innovation in energy reduction and renewable technologies. At the same time, making a strong contribution to the wellbeing of local communities and the conservation of the area's environment and heritage is in the long term interests of the tourism sector itself. This is a priority of the AONB Management Plan and a requirement of the EUROPARC Charter, but the principles are also directly relevant to the market towns and were widely supported during consultation.

Providing a quality experience for all visitors

Quality should be a watchword of the strategy. Ultimately, economic success depends on providing a level of quality that matches or exceeds visitor expectations and leads to repeat visits and recommendations. The area should also ensure that the needs of all visitors are met, without discrimination, which is a requirement of the Charter. In general, the quality of tourism enterprises in the area appears quite high, but there is still room for further improvement and more consistency. Maintenance of the quality of visitor infrastructure and the public realm remains an ongoing challenge.

The vision

This simple vision, backed up by the principles outlined above, sets out a direction for everyone involved in the strategy to work towards.

By 2016:

The Shropshire Hills and Ludlow will become established as a sought after rural destination, based on its special combination of outstanding landscapes and historic market towns. Businesses, communities and visitors will celebrate and care for the place, its heritage and the wider environment.

Strategic objectives

The analysis presented in the previous chapter, together with the context, principles and vision outlined above, has led to the identification of the follow seven strategic objectives to guide tourism delivery in the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow over the next five years.

1 RAISING AWARENESS

To strengthen the identity of the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow and raise awareness of it as a leading rural tourism destination

2 DELIVERING THE HILLS EXPERIENCE

To conserve the distinctive landscapes of the Shropshire Hills and provide and creatively promote a wide range of opportunities to experience and enjoy them

3 DELIVERING THE MARKET TOWNS EXPERIENCE

To ensure that each market town makes the most of its distinctive location and character, provides a quality experience and acts as a gateway to the Shropshire Hills

4 DELIVERING THE LOCAL FOOD EXPERIENCE

To capitalise on the established position of the area as a centre of excellence for its food, based on quality local produce

5 ORIENTATING AND INFORMING VISITORS

To ensure that all visitors are aware of the range of experiences and activities available across the area by providing readily accessible information and interpretation

6 PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE ACCESS AND MANAGEMENT

To encourage and promote actions by visitors and tourism providers which benefit the natural heritage and the wider environment

7 SUPPORTING LOCAL ENTERPRISE

To build the contribution of tourism enterprises to the local economy, increasing business success and ensuring consistency in the quality of the tourism offer

Implementing the action plan

The five year action plan is summarised in the table that follows. This indicates:

- The level of priority of the action – high priority shown by a star (*) and shading.
- The year or years in which it might fall – indicating when main concentration of effort should happen.
- An indication of the level of financial resources that may be required for each step as follows:
 - Low Under £15,000
 - Medium £15,000– £75,000
 - High Over £75,000
- Key agencies to implement the action, starting with the lead agency

Key to abbreviations used in the table

AONB	Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership	NT	National Trust
CBs	Conservation bodies	PS	Private sector
DDP	Shropshire Hills and Ludlow DDP	SC	Shropshire Council
FC	Forestry Commission	SHT	Shropshire Hills Tourism
HBs	Heritage bodies		
LEP	Marches LEP	ST	Shropshire Tourism Ltd
MTs	Market towns	VE	VisitEngland

	Action	Priority	Year	Financial Implication	Key Agencies
1	RAISING AWARENESS				
1.1	Agree core destination values and messages	*	1	Low	DDP, AONB, SHT
1.2	Agree and disseminate a visual identity and supporting text		1-2	Med	DDP, AONB, SHT
1.3	Assemble a good photo collection		2-3	Med	DDP, AONB, SC, ST
1.4	Improve the branding and performance of the existing website to operate as a high profile website for the destination	*	1-5	Med	DDP, AONB, SHT, ST
1.5	Develop and implement an online marketing strategy		1-5	Low	DDP, SHT, ST
1.6	Maintain a suite of key destination print		1-5	Med	DDP, AONB SHT, ST
1.7	Pursue an active PR campaign	*	1-5	Med	DDP, AONB, SHT, SC, ST, VE
1.8	Establish and maintain a presence in Shropshire promotions		1-5	Med	DDP, ST, SC
1.9	Pursue opportunities in selected target markets		2-5	Med	DDP, AONB, SHT, ST, VE
2	DELIVERING THE HILLS EXPERIENCE				
2.1	Give priority to maintaining a high quality landscape as a primary resource of sustainable tourism	*	1-5	Low	AONB, SC, CBs, NT, FC

	Action	Priority	Year	Financial Implication	Key Agencies
2.2	Provide and promote opportunities to experience the distinctive landscapes and heritage of different parts of the Hills	*	1-5	High	AONB, SC, CBs, NT, FC
2.2	Maintain and promote a range of high quality, varied walking experiences available all year	*	1-5	High	SC, AONB, CBs, NT, FC
2.4	Maintain and promote a range of cycling and mountain biking opportunities, for access and enjoyment		2-5	High	SC, AONB, NT, FC
2.5	Further develop and promote the potential of the area for horse riding		3-5	High	SC, AONB, NT, FC
2.6	Facilitate pre-booked and on-demand access to a range of outdoor experiences	*	2-5	Low	AONB, DDP, PS
2.7	Provide opportunities to experience and understand the area's geology and wildlife		3-5	Med	AONB, CBs, NT, HBs
2.8	Promote opportunities to engage creatively and practically in rural and cultural heritage themes and activities linked to the landscape		3-5	Low	PS, AONB, DDP, NY, HBs
3	DELIVERING THE MARKET TOWN EXPERIENCE				
3.1	Develop the unique identity of each town in relation to the destination brand	*	1-2	Med	MTs, DDP, SC
3.2	Provide effective information material for each town		1-5	Med	MTs, DDP, SC
3.3	Provide a high quality of visitor facilities, services and amenities	*	1-5	High	SC, MTs, PS
3.4	Deliver a creative experience of the town's heritage, through sites, trails and interpretation	*	2-5	High	MTs, SC, PS, HBs, NT
3.5	Coordinate and promote a programme of events between the towns		2-5	Med	MTs, DDP, AONB, SC, SHT
3.6	Encourage and support a distinctive retail experience		3-5	Med	MTs, SC, PS
3.7	Provide clear access links between the towns and the countryside		2-5	Low	AONB, MTs, SC
4	DELIVERING THE LOCAL FOOD EXPERIENCE				
4.1	Promote and develop the area's high profile food events, spreading their outreach across the area and the year		1-5	Med	DDP, SHT, ST, LL, PS, LEP
4.2	Maintain and seek to expand the presence of food outlets of national renown		3-5	Low	PS, DDP, SHT, LL LEP
4.3	Raise the quality and accessibility of catering available throughout the area for all budgets	*	2-5	High	PS, DDP, SHT, ST, LL, LEP
4.4	Promote a range of opportunities for visiting, experiencing and purchasing from local food and drink suppliers		2-5	Low	PS, DDP, AONB, SHT
4.5	Strengthen the availability and creative use of local produce in catering outlets	*	1-5	Med	PS, DDP, AONB, SHT, LL, LEP

	Action	Priority	Year	Financial Implicati	Key Agencies
5	ORIENTATING AND INFORMING VISITORS				
5.1	Maintain an effective network of VICs, visitor centres and information points across the area	*	1-5	High	SC, AONB, DDP, MTs
5.2	Maintain an effective system of information gathering and dissemination	*	1-5	Med	DDP, SC, ST, SHT, AONB, VE
5.3	Maximise opportunities for visitor orientation and interpretation presented by the Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre		2-3	Med	SC, AONB
5.4	Ensure that accommodation hosts are well placed to orientate and assist their visitors	*	1-5	Med	SHT, DDP, PS, AONB, SC
5.5	Strengthen the effectiveness of identity and directional signing		3-5	High	SC, AONB
5.6	Expand the use of creative i.t. based information and interpretation tools		3-5	Med	DDP, AONB, ST
5.7	Provide for visitors with special information needs		3-5	Low	AONB, MTs, DDP
6	PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE ACCESS AND MANAGEMENT				
6.1	Pursue visitor management actions that reflect the AONB Management Plan	*	1-5	Low	AONB, SC, NT, FC, CBs, SHT
6.2	Develop and promote creative day visit and holiday options based on public transport	*	2-5	Low	PS, AONB, DDP, SHT, SC
6.3	Encourage and assist tourism enterprises to promote public transport options to their guests		1-5	Low	DDP, SHT, SC, AONB, PS
6.4	Maintain, expand and promote the use of the Shropshire Hills Shuttle buses		2-5	High	SC, AONB, DDP, SHT
6.5	Pursue other innovative forms of alternative transport provision		3-5	Med	SC, AONB, PS
6.6	Expand and support the proportion of enterprises pursuing sustainable tourism management	*	1-5	Med	DDP, AONB, SHT, SC, CBs
6.7	Pursue options to generate support from visitors and enterprises for conservation		3-5	Med	AONB, CBs, DDP, SHT, PS
7	SUPPORTING LOCAL ENTERPRISE				
7.1	Raise the quality of service in tourism enterprises		1-5	High	DDP, SHT, ST, PS
7.2	Develop and deliver relevant business advice and skills training		2-5	Med	DDP, SHT, ST, LEP
7.3	Encourage creative business to business networking		1-5	Low	DDP, SHT, ST, LEP
7.4	Establish positive dialogue between investors and planners		3-5	Low	SC, AONB, DDP, SHT, LEP, PS
7.5	Encourage investment in innovative tourism products that relate well to the area's character and appeal	*	1-5	High	PS, SC, AONB, DDP, LEP