



Committee and Date Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership	Item
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WALKING WITH OFFA

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Summary

This paper provides members with a summary of the recently completed phase of the Walking with Offa project in the Shropshire Hills, and will be supplemented at the meeting by a brief presentation.

Recommendation

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

Background

The project was funded principally from a 'Natural Assets' grant (Advantage West Midlands funding linked to the environmental economy, administered by Natural England). This was a joint project with the Wye Valley AONB, but only Shropshire Hills activity and outputs are described here. The staffing elements of the bid were not accepted, and due to the winding up of AWM the timescale for implementation was brought forward. This meant that the whole project outputs had to be delivered in 18 months rather than the 30 months planned with no additional staff resource, and this has been very challenging. However the project has been very successful, with some high profile new activity, and there is some continuity with the Walking with Offa LEADER co-operation project described elsewhere. The Project had four distinct elements, and the report below is structured around these:

1. Improving the Walking Offer
2. Offa's Country Information and Interpretation
3. Business and community engagement and training
4. Walking promotion

1. Improving the Walking Offer

Circular walks development

12 routes have been completed - from north to south:

- WWO1: Quarries and woodland around Pontesbury
- WWO2: Dormice and archangels in Hope Valley
- WWO3: Tranquility and tree tops at Bromlow Callow
- WWO4: Red kites and curlew on Prolley Moor
- WWO5: Myths and mines on Stapeley Common
- WWO6: Brown hares and buzzards on Oakeley Mynd
- WWO7: Ancient hill forts and woodland of Bury Ditches
- WWO8: Border country and a taste of Offa's Dyke

- WWO9: Meadows and woods to Darky Dale
- WWO10: Ravens and skylarks around Bucknell and Stowe Hill
- WWO11: Offa's Dyke and the top of the world to Bucknell
- WWO12: Riverbank and otters along the Redlake and Teme

The routes range from 4 to 9.5 miles in length, with most not taking more than 2 or 3 hours to complete. As they all include pubs and/or cafes, walkers are encouraged to eat and drink at the often isolated hospitality business found en route. All upgrades and waymarking have now been completed and stile counters have been fitted to enable monitoring of use in the future. The routes have been tested with help from the Friends of the Shropshire Hills members.

Leaflets for each of these walks are available to download from the Shropshire Walking website <http://www.shropshirewalking.co.uk/walking-with-offa/>, with links from the Shropshire Hills AONB website <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/things-to-do/walking/>. Steve Levers helped complete these. There are also podcasts to accompany three of the walks and as an introduction. Each of the routes are available to download as apps from the Viewranger website onto GPS enabled smart phones, search for <http://my.viewranger.com/route/search#!52.49537402202563|-2.99778199999999156|10>. An i-pad 2 has been bought to enable these routes to be demonstrated.

Long Distance Paths development

The upgrade of the section of the Shropshire Way from Church Stretton to the LEADER boundary and a new circular route around the Stiperstones have been completed including a suggested detour to Blakemoorgate Cottages. Work on the rest of the Shropshire Way to Shrewsbury and in the north of the county is ongoing and will be completed by next year. The Shropshire Way is one of the main long distance routes connecting to Offa's Dyke Path National Trail (ODPNT) in Shropshire and the completion of the route will ensure this connection can be made from any part of the county.

A new section leaflet for the Shropshire Way has been designed, along with the new circular walk. A new Harvey map of the Shropshire Way has also been completed and is now available to purchase from www.harveymaps.co.uk and local suppliers for £12.95.

2. Offa's Country Information and Interpretation

Offa's Country Artwork

Alan Duncan was commissioned to design six pictures that would introduce King Offa as a cartoon character, which would be recognizable to visitors walking throughout the Welsh English border. These have been done and circulated to other partners in the Walking with Offa LEADER co-operation project. Alan has also created a design for some mugs, which will be sold locally to raise funds for future Walking with Offa activity.

Shropshire Hills Events Guide

Walking with Offa made a contribution to the Shropshire Hills events guide in 2011 and will again in 2012. This is to promote the routes and associated merchandise and to highlight the guided walks programmes.

Programme of Guided Walks

A guided walks programme has been delivered for 2011, eight walks in total, using the circular routes and Days Out routes. These were:

10 April 10.30-2.00. Bury Ditches led by Steve Levers

7 May 10.30-2.00.	Sallow Coppice led by Keith Pybus
19 June 10.00-4.00.	Pontesbury quarries and mines led by Alan Garner
2 July 10.00-2.00.	Bucknell led by Mike Starr
7 Aug 10.00-2.00	Offa's Dyke and Newcastle on Clun led by Cath Murphy & Ian Bapty (replacing Ian Dormor)
10 Sept 10.30-2.00	The Stables led by Dave Croker
1 Oct 10.00-2.00	Mitchell's Fold and the Miners Arms led by Mike Watkins
13 Nov 10.00-2.00	Bishop's Castle led by Cath Murphy

A promotional postcard was printed and circulated widely, including to the pubs and other businesses included on the routes.

Feedback from the walks and attendance have been excellent and there is enthusiasm from participants to continue these next year without extra funding. 119 people have attended the walks and 80% of these would be more likely to use the pubs associated with the walks in the future.

Saxon Shropshire

Dr Ian Dormor has been researching the Saxon history of the area and a page about King Offa and what it might have been like to live in Saxon Shropshire has been prepared. This is downloadable on the website and will be used within other interpretation.

Walks Leader Familiarisation Trips

Elizabeth Ronan has organized a Walks Leader short break over 13-15th March in Bishop's Castle. This involved 10 walks leaders from around the country experiencing the delights of the SW corner of the Shropshire Hills, with a view to encouraging them to return with their groups at a later date. Cath Murphy has run another one from 30th March based in Little Stretton, with another 10 walks leaders attending. Both were very successful and two group bookings have been taken so far for 2012 as a result. Reports on both short breaks are available.

Walking with Offa Merchandise

Beer mats, window stickers, flyers, posters and leaflet racks will be made available to all businesses on or near the Walking with Offa routes and to VICs. Bone china 'Walking with Offa' mugs are now available, retailing at £6.50 each. The screen printed transfers are applied by hand to the mugs in Buttercup China in Stoke on Trent. Only 72 mugs have been produced to date but there are 500 transfers, so more mugs can be ordered as demand allows. Proceeds from selling the mugs will go towards future events and publications.

PR Contract

Ian Weightman has been contracted to deliver a PR contract for £3,000, promoting walking in the Shropshire Hills to the national press and on social media on the web. So far this has resulted in an articles in the Independent on Sunday, the Daily Express, The People and the Daily Mirror. There was a visit in October from an American journalist of the magazine "British Heritage" and a resultant mention in the magazine and from the "Walks around Britain" website editor. Web articles have appeared on Virtual Shropshire, Green Traveller, Go UK, Midlands Business News and Shropshire Live. There has been interest from the Times, Independent on Sunday, Walks Around Britain and The People, to sample one of the walks and feature it later in the year. Prize Magazine, About.com, Walk Magazine, British Heritage magazine and PA Travel are all expected to do more features in 2012.

Professional Photography

Four photographers have supplied 23 professional photographs of the Shropshire Hills AONB, including shots of Offa's Dyke and of walkers. These will be used in the 2012 Events Guide, on the website and other publications to promote walking in the area.

Days Out

Four Days Out have been developed by Steve Levers and Christina Anderson, one each from Ludlow, Craven Arms, Church Stretton and Bishop's Castle. These include self guided itineraries using public transport to go walking and shorter walks to an attraction, hospitality and tourism businesses. Printed leaflets are available but they are also available to download from <http://www.shropshirewalking.co.uk/walking-with-offa/>.

Bishop's Castle Town Hall improvements

Castlewood Joinery has designed and manufactured a series of bespoke furniture for the refurbishment of the Bishop's Castle Town Hall. This is being made from local woods with the motif of each leaf in the doors of the furniture. The furniture was exhibited at the Bishop's Castle Michaelmas Fair on 17/18th September 2011, before going into storage until the Town Hall restoration is complete. Other IT equipment for the Town Hall has been ordered through Enterprise SW and is being stored in their offices.

3. Business and community engagement and training

Training/ familiarisation for local businesses and guided walks leaders in the Shropshire Hills

Alison Caffyn has delivered a series of six 'Sense of Place' training sessions for tourism businesses around the area. Two of these complemented walks leader training being delivered by Pam Powis and will form two 2 day sessions. Topics included information about the natural and cultural assets of the Shropshire Hills AONB and Offa's Country including wildlife, archaeology, history, folklore, land management and information that visitors will appreciate about regular local events, food and drink, attractions, places to visit and little known localities. Presenting and organising guided walks, health and safety and Duty of Care were also be covered.

Walks Leader Training in the Shropshire Hills

2 sessions were organised in May & June 2011, with mixed feedback. May (Bishops Castle) – 9 participants, June (Ludlow) – 13 participants.

Day 1 (practical walks leader advice with Pam Powis) – it was felt that this session was aimed more at town guiding and not walks leading, as the participants required. Following feedback from the first session in May, the focus was changed to represent the needs of rural walks leaders, rather than town guides. Overall the feedback suggested that the content was not entirely relevant or appropriate to the type of walks the participants were leading. However, there was a lot of useful content about group management and risk assessment.

Day 2 (exploring themed walks and sense of place with Alison Caffyn) – this session was more focused on Shropshire Hills stories and themes, which the participants felt was more useful as it expanded their knowledge and generated ideas of how to theme walks. The walks leaders all felt that the session had provided them with more knowledge about theming and devising walks.

These were followed up by a practical session with Alan Garner leading a walk on the 25th August, which was attended by 10 people. This was very well received by all involved.

Business Sense of Place workshops

Four sessions were held in the Shropshire Hills to help businesses reinforce the sense of place to visitors and 31 businesses attended. The feedback was very positive, and the participants felt more able to suggest and devise themed walks to their guests. There was a great variety of information provided on local walks, walking groups, walks literature and idea for theming walks.

Economic Benefit Research with Businesses

Alison Caffyn completed a survey of 99 businesses. Key conclusions from the survey include:

- There is considerable interest amongst businesses in the subject of walking generating good response rates for the survey.
- The Shropshire Hills is a popular area for walkers and its profile appears to be becoming better known.
- The majority of businesses replying see walking as an important element of their business.
- A wide range of business types value the economic impacts of walking including some not directly part of visitor economy who see how important it is to their customers or the local economy generally.
- While keen walkers may be less numerous than casual walkers they are still important and given they do more walking they must be part of the focus for walking provision and marketing.
- Walkers include both local people and visitors to the area. Visitors may spend more and want accommodation but day visitors are able to come more regularly and their economic impact could be little and often for food and drink, retail etc.
- There is a clear consensus that business from walkers is either holding up in current climate or has in fact increased in recent years.
- A high proportion of businesses make some special provisions for walkers but there is considerable scope for many to do more.
- Walkers do spend money – around a third of them spend less than average but most spend as much as other visitors – at least on accommodation and food and drink.
- Walking is a low cost activity which may be gaining appeal in difficult economic times (in comparison to other keeping fit options such as joining a gym).
- Income from walkers is important to most of businesses surveyed – whatever their size.
- There is a clear opinion that walking numbers will continue to increase and therefore become increasingly important to the local economy.
- Employment and business turnover figures demonstrate that the businesses responding are relatively small, mainly micro businesses with less than 5 employees.
- Walking generates useful extra income – for many modest amounts of less than £5,000 but for others significant sums between £10-50,000 and for a few significantly more than this.
- There is significant support for stronger promotion of walking as an important part of the offer for the Shropshire Hills and surrounding areas.

The survey was designed to be repeatable so as to enable trends and the potential impact of Walking With Offa activities to be monitored. It was also hoped that the results would inform future Walking with Offa activities.

4. Walking promotion

New walking web pages/websites

£2,000 has been spent on upgrading the Shropshire walking website to include map based searching. A new page has been dedicated to Walking with Offa and pdfs of the new route leaflets and podcasts are included on there, as are lists of walks leaders and walking groups.

A web marketing contract for £3,000 was awarded to Shropshire Tourism to help assess and better market walking in the Shropshire Hills to visitors and local people. Reports have been received from them and improvements to the Shropshire Hills AONB website have been made to increase the walking content and promote the Shropshire Walking website. Work has been completed on Search Engine Optimisation, tagging images and better links, along with improvements to content. More work is being done on social media marketing through Facebook and Twitter.

Walking in the Shropshire Hills Steering Group membership

The Steering Group represents two walking projects - Walking with Offa and Walking for Wellbeing:

- Chair: Geoff Grimes, Bishop's Castle Tourism Association
- Lee Chapman, Chair of Shropshire Hills Tourism
- Keith Pybus, Shropshire Way Assoc.
- Steve Levers, Bishop's Castle and Clun walking groups and Festival
- Alan Garner, Church Stretton Sustainable Tourism Group and Festival
- Tom Hunt, Ludlow Food Centre
- Mike Watkins, Priest Weston P3 Group
- Val Simpson, Cleobury Mortimer Walkers are Welcome
- Barbara Martin, Pontesbury Walking for Health
- Ian Pearmain, Church Stretton Walking for Health
- Jim Stabler, Countryside Access Team, Shropshire Council and Shropshire Way Association
- Tim King, Economic Development, Shropshire Council
- Phil Betts, P3 groups Shropshire Council
- Mick Dunn, Walking for Health Co-ordinator, Shropshire Council
- Jodie Griffith, Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership
- Clare Fildes, Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership

Target Audiences

The target audiences for this work are based on those identified through the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow Sustainable Tourism Strategy (<http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/looking-after/projects/sustainable-tourism-strategy/>), all of whom are thought to be relevant to walking.

The following primary targets have been identified for each product:

Product	Target market	Media choice
Circular walks and Shropshire Way improvements	Couples post family, couples pre family, day visitors	Specialist national press, local and regional press, radio, tv, website

Product	Target market	Media choice
Days Out	Families, couples post family, day visitors	Facebook, Twitter, website, press
Geocaching	Families, Geocache enthusiasts	Web based
Guided walks	Couples post family, couples pre family, day visitors	Local press and radio. Web.
Walks leader training	Dedicated walkers, singles and couples looking for active learning experiences	Specialist national press, web
Business trained in walking promotion	Couples post family, couples pre family, dedicated walkers, families	Local press and web
Walkers are Welcome	Couples post family, couples pre family, dedicated walkers, families	All

Although the above markets have been identified as the main targets with long term potential, this does not mean that other potential visitor markets should be ignored. In particular, the area should take advantage of the upcoming opportunity to seek exposure in overseas marketing linked to the promotion running into 2012 of Much Wenlock as the birthplace of the modern Olympics.

List of Background Papers Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan
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 topics raised in this paper have been the subject of earlier consultations with Partnership members.
Appendices None