



<b>Committee and Date</b> Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership  19 March 2013	<b>Item</b>  <b>3</b>
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## AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN REVIEW

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### Summary

This paper provides members with some drafted material for the new Management Plan for comment.

### Background

Since the last meeting some progress has been made with drafting for the new Management Plan. A set of key delivery priorities are proposed for consideration, and the intention currently is to use these as the chapter headings to structure the Plan. Further work is necessary with particular partners before launching the period of public consultation on the draft Plan.

### Recommendation

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

<b>List of Background Papers</b> Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan 2009-14 and papers relating to Plan review at <a href="http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/looking-after/management-plan/">http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/looking-after/management-plan/</a>
<b>Human Rights Act Appraisal</b> The information in this report is compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998.
<b>Environmental Appraisal</b> The recommendation in this paper will contribute to the conservation of protected landscapes.
<b>Risk Management Appraisal</b> Risk management has been appraised as part of the considerations of this report.
<b>Community / Consultations Appraisal</b> The topics raised in this paper have been the subject of earlier consultations with Partnership members.
<b>Appendices</b> Appendix 1 Draft material for Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan 2014-19

## Appendix 1 Draft material for Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan 2014-19

### Summary of condition of the AONB and key issues

In a national context, the character and quality of the Shropshire Hills landscape are **relatively stable**, and continue to be of high importance. However, the **overall condition and trends** of the special features and qualities of the Shropshire Hills AONB **are mixed**. **Improvements** in some areas linked to a significant scale of conservation activity are accompanied by **declines** in other aspects. **Land management** practices remain a crucial determining factor, alongside **wider economic and social factors**.

- The area's very high level of geological diversity underpins all other aspects of landscape. Key **geological sites are in good condition**, but there is potential to raise awareness of geology further and to incorporate it into other areas of work.
- Protection of the most important features of the AONB is now generally good. The ecological integrity of the area has suffered significantly in the past and **high quality habitats are very fragmented**. **Direct loss of biodiversity and heritage features has slowed but continues**.
- Many of the special features and qualities of the AONB are only maintained by **sympathetic land management**. This dependence makes some features (e.g. unimproved grasslands) very sensitive to adverse land management practices.
- **Structural change in agriculture** will continue to have a significant impact on the special qualities of the AONB. **The future of the livestock sector**, especially beef cattle and sheep, is especially important to the AONB, and good quality advice and support to upland farmers will make a big difference to achieving the AONB's purposes.
- Levels of participation in farm conservation (**agri-environment**) **schemes** remain very high, but with the end of the Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme, some farms are reducing conservation activity. There is concern that the value of Higher Level Stewardship agreements may be limited by uptake of options not meeting the most important strategic issues.
- A wide variety of **conservation projects** are having a significant impact within the AONB.
- The main **heathlands** are improving in condition, and arrangements for management of a number of **commons** are improving.
- The rising demand for woodfuel and provision of advice have resulted in improvement in management of many **woodlands**. Sites remaining undermanaged are largely those with the most difficulties in terms of often owing to lack of resources and practical difficulties.
- **Rivers and river catchments** have become a significant focus for activity, but **face significant challenges**, including water quality and flow regimes, nutrient and sediment input, riparian habitat quality.
- Key upland and farmland **bird species** such as lapwing, curlew and snipe have declined to **critically low levels**.
- Levels of maintenance of traditional **field boundaries** (mostly hedges) are high.
- Good land management and increasing awareness is conserving many **historic features**. Maintenance of traditional buildings requires considerable ongoing funding. A number of historic settlements are using Design Statements to help retain their character.
- Business activity within the AONB itself is strongly focused on **land management** and associated industries, plus tourism and services. The **environmental resources** of the AONB are increasingly recognised as important to businesses in the surrounding market towns.
- **Levels of transport are increasing**. This is the major source of intrusive noise, resulting in a **gradual erosion of tranquillity**. Air quality is however good.
- A peripheral location coupled with sparse population and strong protective policies continue to mean that **development pressure is generally low**. There is however an ongoing need to ensure that farm developments, housing, tourism and renewable energy are achieved sensitively within the high quality landscape.
- The **economic downturn** is putting pressure on a range of rural businesses and communities, and this may threaten the adoption of more environmentally friendly practices as margins get

tighter. **Rising costs of energy and fuel** are influencing business choices.

- The population has a generally high age profile but with widely varying levels of income. Access to services is often poor, and many initiatives are operating to address this. Many residents, both longstanding and incomers, nevertheless **value the relative remoteness of the area**.
- **Tourism** activity and promotion is giving greater recognition to the AONB, but levels of **investment in countryside access** such as rights of way are declining, and maintaining standards in the light of local authority cuts is a real concern.
- **Community support** for conservation is high, and **awareness of and involvement with the AONB continues to increase**. There remains however much scope and need for raising awareness of the value of the environment to people (ecosystem services), and of the action needed to meet environmental goals.
- Trends in society are tending to **reduce engagement by young people** with the countryside and the outdoors. The insecurity of countryside jobs is an issue for retention of young people in the area, and may lead in future to skills shortages in areas crucial to maintaining the landscape.
- The **Low Carbon agenda has fallen in public and political prominence**. Progress has been made in some areas of lowering emissions, but the difficulties and conflicts associated with significant changes have become more apparent.
- **Climate change will continue to intensify pressures on the landscape**, through indirect social and economic effects, e.g. pressure of land use, as well as through direct effects on wildlife and habitats.

The following **key issues** facing the Shropshire Hills have been identified as the most significant:

**The future of farming** Livestock farming in particular is vital to maintaining the character of the Shropshire Hills, and needs help to adapt to changing subsidy regimes. Developing local supply chains and emphasising environmental quality will be crucial.

**Maintaining wildlife habitats and heritage features** Birds such as lapwing and curlew are still declining, and high quality grassland habitats are still at risk. Some features are neglected, others damaged through lack of understanding of their importance. Good quality advice and funding is needed for both established and new landowners, and ways of passing on skills.

**Transport** Increasing travel on roads and in the air uses more and more resources and erodes tranquillity. Further incentives are needed to influence patterns of employment and leisure and provide alternatives including reduced travel and use of public transport.

**Development & economy** There is a need to balance short term needs for economic gain with longer term sustainability of the area. Housing appropriate to local need, tourism and business development are needed to allow rural communities to survive, but these need to be of a scale, design and quality which complements the special qualities of the area.

**Climate change** Wildlife and farming will need to adapt to changes, and the economic and political consequences are very uncertain. We need to play our part in shifting to a low carbon economy and way of life, conserving energy and developing appropriate small-scale renewables.

**Awareness and involvement** Local people and visitors have a great love of the Shropshire Hills, and a willingness to understand more and contribute to the area's wellbeing. Opportunities through volunteering, community activity, business engagement and public events need to be continued, along with renewed efforts to connect young people with the countryside and outdoors.

**Connecting and joining up** There is a need to continue integrating more. Within the AONB, this means working locally in the different areas of the Shropshire Hills, and linking the environment with the local community and economy. In terms of connecting the AONB with the area around it, this means working with the nearby towns, along river catchments and across administrative boundaries.

## STRATEGIC THEMES AND DELIVERY PRIORITIES FOR 2009 TO 2014

The following **strategic themes** have been agreed to guide action over the life of this Management Plan: (the first of these relates to the statutory purpose of AONBs and is the over-riding priority)

### **Conserving and enhancing our outstanding landscape**

Wildlife, heritage, tranquillity, appropriate development

### **Helping our local communities thrive in a more sustainable way**

Farming and land management, prosperity and wellbeing, low carbon

### **Promoting personal enjoyment, understanding and participation**

For local people and visitors, sense of place and belonging, doing and taking part

### **Maintaining and enriching the natural services on which we all depend**

Ecosystem services (air, water, food, climate, etc) and wider benefits to society

These **themes** are deliberately cross-cutting, to support an integrated approach to implementation of the Management Plan.

To complement these themes, a number of **Key Delivery Priorities** have also been defined:

### **Joining up the conservation effort**

Agri-environment, conservation ownership, projects, regulatory mechanisms

### **Valuing the AONB in planning and decisions**

### **Encouraging a sustainable land management economy**

### **Supporting enjoyment and a visitor economy in harmony with the AONB**

### **Raising awareness and participation, especially among young people**

### **Local working with communities**

Management Plan Policies & Positions, organised under these priorities.

### **Joining up the conservation effort**

Existing areas of high quality **habitat** must be retained, and **networks** developed of higher quality habitat through targeted improvements on privately owned land.

Pro-active **adaptation to climate change**, focusing on wildlife and natural processes, is essential to retaining the natural beauty of the AONB and must be given a high priority.

Organisations which **regulate** designated sites and features, environmental quality and amenity should make full use of available measures to ensure the highest standards appropriate to a nationally protected landscape are achieved in the AONB. A supportive and awareness-raising approach should be used with landowners where possible, but mechanisms for legal enforcement should also be used where necessary in more serious cases. Known 'blackspots' and problems should be addressed and tackled, but consideration given to the secondary purposes of AONBs to have regard for the needs of rural industries and local communities, and to promote sustainable development.

The Shropshire Hills should remain a priority area for **agri-environment funding**, and farmers should be actively encouraged to utilise the options that best contribute to the AONB Management Plan's aims. Environmental Stewardship priorities should support a shift back towards more mixed systems of farming especially in the uplands (e.g. by allowing a proportion of arable cropping and hay meadows).

### **Woodlands**

Broadleaved woodland comprising native species should be expanded, and especially restored on Plantation on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) and Plantation on Wood Pasture (PWP). Where woodland and forestry felling is taking place, opportunities should be sought to improve design and landscape sensitivity of plantations. Reversion to open habitat should be targeted to locations where landscape benefits and potential for high value habitat (e.g. heathland) are greatest.

Any new or replacement coniferous planting should follow the highest standards of design guidelines in relation to landscape and amenity, nature and heritage conservation and resource protection.

## **Valuing the AONB in planning and decisions**

### **Protection of the AONB**

Consideration of the purposes of designation in all decisions affecting the AONB should reflect sustainability and the **full range of special qualities** defined in the Management Plan as well as landscape character and visual amenity.

Exceptionally where a significant adverse impact associated with development cannot be avoided, appropriate **mitigation** measures including habitat creation or community benefits, should be sought.

**Tranquillity** should be taken fully into account in both strategic and specific decisions. Proposals having a significant impact on tranquillity in the AONB should be prevented where possible.

Expansion of airports or alterations to flight path corridors which increase the volume or impacts of **air traffic** over the AONB should not be allowed.

Where **affordable local needs housing** is allowed when other forms of development would not be, in order to meet social need, the standards of sensitivity to the AONB should not be compromised, and are expected to be higher than outside the AONB.

Small scale **quarrying** to supply local materials for restoring traditional buildings and structures is supported, subject to careful consideration of environmental factors, including the conservation value of former quarries where these may be reopened.

Opportunities created by technological advance should be sought to remove or reduce the prominence of **hilltop telecommunications structures**.

New overhead **cables** should be avoided where possible, with emphasis given to undergrounding or off-grid options.

Even with small structures not requiring planning permission, care should be taken to avoid loss of **wildness**. On many hills and in more secluded valleys, especially where there are few man-made objects, this will mean a preference for no structures at all. In cases where

structures are essential, their location and design may need to be modified to reduce the impact on wildness.

~~AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 1~~ **The AONB boundary** In the foreseeable future, the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership does not believe that the benefits of formally amending the boundary are **would not be** justified against the considerable costs and resources this would entail. The AONB Partnership and local authorities will work, and encourage its partners and others also to work, in ways which will strengthen the integrity and identity of the Shropshire Hills as an area of exceptional landscape value. The Partnership will focus its work strongly on the designated AONB area, but will work in a flexible and pragmatic way in relation to the AONB boundary, to secure the maximum benefit for the Shropshire Hills. (see [www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk](http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk) for full statement approved Feb 2008).

~~AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 5~~ The model for the economy of the Shropshire Hills should be of environment led regeneration, in which a pattern of relatively small scale dispersed enterprise will be key to maintaining the right balance.

~~AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 6~~ Where market priced housing is used to generate finance for affordable housing within the AONB, it is preferable that the market priced housing is outside the AONB.

### **Carbon emissions and renewable energy**

Lowering carbon emissions from the area is an over-riding priority, and should influence all areas of decision making. **Energy conservation** should be given the highest priority, and should always accompany renewable energy generation. Low carbon community initiatives are supported. In addition to carbon from energy use, the ability of land management to reduce carbon emissions should be optimised. Integration of energy efficiency and renewable energy will be encouraged in all development – new or refurbishment, and of any scale.

**Renewable energy developments** in the AONB should generally be of a small scale appropriate to local use. Larger scale energy developments will be more suitable outside the AONB, e.g. linked to market towns where transport links are better, closer to larger scale demand, etc.

Small scale domestic renewable installations (e.g. solar panels) are encouraged and AONB designation should not be used as a reason against these. The design and installation of these should take account of visual amenity. Greater sensitivity may be required in Conservation Areas and on Listed Buildings, but even in these circumstances, effort should be made to enable energy benefits to be achieved.

**Biomass** energy based on existing resources in the area, such as woodfuel and agricultural by-products, is particularly compatible with the AONB and is strongly supported. Establishment of energy crops should avoid harm to biodiversity, water quality and availability, and where larger and longer-lived than normal agricultural crops, should take account of visual amenity (e.g. following forestry design guidelines regarding scale and shape of compartments including in relation to landform, structural diversity and edge treatments).

**Wind turbines** There should be no development of wind turbines (other than in accordance with permitted development rights) within the 'High Open Moorland' and High Volcanic Hills and Slopes' Landscape Types in the AONB.

Proposals for wind turbines and associated infrastructure within the AONB should take account of factors including landscape character, visual amenity, biodiversity, heritage and recreation, and the following guidelines:

- Within 100m of buildings (excluding Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas), one or two wind turbines of up to 12m to blade tip are likely to be acceptable within the AONB.

- Turbines of over 25m to blade tip, or groups of more than two turbines, are not likely to be acceptable within the AONB.
- Wind turbine proposals should be linked to local energy needs and energy conservation measures. Community benefits should relate to energy in preference to amenity or other measures.

Decisions on proposals for wind turbines and associated infrastructure outside the AONB should take account of the potential impacts within the AONB, especially the extent of visibility and significance of viewpoints affected, and potential cumulative effects with existing structures.

AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 8 The Partnership supports community low carbon initiatives and will take a view of ~~wind turbine~~ **renewable energy** proposals based on a range of sustainability criteria as well as visual aspects.

AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 9 Land within 5km of the AONB boundary is unsuitable for large scale windfarm development, and should be excluded from any Search Areas. (The definition of 'large' used in this Position is that used by TAN 8, i.e. developments of 25MW and over).

~~AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 10 The Partnership supports permitted development rights for appropriate microgeneration, but believes the current moves to extend permitted development rights could allow some wind turbine developments which would have an unacceptable impact on the landscape of the AONB. The Partnership does not support permitted development rights in the AONB for multiple micro wind turbines and for those sited away from existing development (e.g. further than 100m from buildings), and if these are introduced, will work with the planning authorities to explore the case for an Article 4 Direction.~~

### **Highways & road management**

**Road improvement schemes** within and outside the AONB should not increase noise pollution or emissions from traffic. Approaches such as speed management schemes may, for example, be more appropriate than road widening. Potential impacts within the AONB of proposed road improvement schemes beyond the boundary should be considered.

Road management and improvement schemes in the AONB should minimise landscape impact and avoid urbanisation of rural roads, e.g. through **sensitive and appropriate design** and use of materials, and avoiding unnecessary signage clutter.

The provision of any new public car **parking** should be in scale with the setting and capacity of roads used to reach the location. Larger car parks should generally be situated nearer to settlements or larger roads. Where informal roadside parking is improved to alleviate traffic problems on smaller roads, care should be taken to avoid adding to traffic levels. Design should be appropriate to a rural setting, e.g. stone surfacing, use of timber for edging and signs.

AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 11 **Strategies for transport** affecting the AONB should not be solely informed by a 'predict and provide' model of increasing capacity to deal with increased traffic flow. The need for road upgrades and improvements which could have detrimental effects on the AONB may be avoided by use of other measures.

## Encouraging a sustainable land management economy

Farmers and land managers should be supported as the main stewards of natural beauty, and for their vital role in maintaining the Shropshire Hills landscape. Policies and public funding relating to farming and forestry should recognise this and help to **support ways of farming which generate these public environmental benefits**.

AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION 4 Because the vitality of the local agricultural economy is so integrally linked with the natural beauty of the Shropshire Hills, the AONB Partnership will actively support appropriate and sustainable forms of farming and diversification enterprises where these are compatible with the AONB designation.

**Agricultural development** Farm ~~diversification~~ enterprises need to be in harmony with the environment and not degrade this resource, which also provides an important economic asset for the future. The impact of business-related traffic to and from the property will be an important consideration, including cumulative effects.

Design of new **agricultural buildings** including location, structure and materials should be of a high standard appropriate to the AONB, [taking account of the published AONB design guidance](#). Efforts should be made to improve existing buildings where these are of a poor standard.

**Advisory services** should make better links with business approaches such as selling direct into local markets, which are also of benefit to the AONB.

## Fostering enjoyment and a visitor economy in harmony with the AONB

### Tourism and recreation development and infrastructure

The siting, design and specification of new developments for tourism and recreation should be to high standards of environmental sensitivity and sustainability. The following guidelines are recommended:

- Single developments of more than around ten accommodation units are less likely to be supported in small settlements and open countryside.
- Large parks of static caravans, cabins or chalets are likely to be intrusive. Smaller sites with good landscaping are preferable, and facilities for touring caravans and camping generally have a low impact as there are fewer permanent structures.
- Built facilities for recreation should only be allowed where their location and the activities they support are compatible with the special qualities of the AONB.

An approach of smaller, low-key tourism developments designed in sympathy with local character will blend better into the area and spread economic benefits more widely than larger facilities. Tourism businesses will be supported to take a sustainable approach and encourage their visitors to do likewise.

Infrastructure associated with countryside access should be sensitively designed, and appropriate materials should be used, e.g. stone for surfacing of a type appropriate to the location, preference for wooden signposts and gates on rights of way, rural character in the specification and signage of cycle routes.

### Recreation activities

A principle of 'quiet enjoyment' should apply, and activities which are in keeping with this encouraged. Recreation activities which are inherently noisy or intrusive should be discouraged, and where possible prevented, e.g. facilities for such activities not allowed through the planning system.



Recreational off-road use of motor vehicles should not be encouraged or promoted within the AONB. Voluntary measures and pro-active work with users are recommended to minimise the impact of legal off-road use of motor vehicles on the landscape and on people's quiet enjoyment of the countryside. Where the impact on the AONB is significant however, measures including traffic regulation orders restricting legal use should be used. Illegal motorised activities should as far as possible be prevented, and pro-active support given to the Police.

Events in the AONB such as concerts, festivals, and challenge walks should be planned (e.g. in location, timing and scale) to minimise environmental impact, and regular events should not be allowed or encouraged to grow to a scale where problems arise. Event organisers should seek advice at the planning stages to enable this.

Tourism activities which draw on the special qualities of the area without harming them should be especially encouraged. This may include development of access infrastructure (e.g. off road cycle routes, rights of way), use of public transport, historic and natural sites, interpretation to help aid understanding, enterprises based specifically on the special qualities of the AONB (e.g. wildlife watching, landscape painting, walking festivals) and cultural events.

### **Tourism promotion**

Countryside attractions and walks should be linked where possible to settlements where services and public transport facilities exist and can be promoted, helping to maximise economic benefits, especially from day visitors.

Promotion of the area for tourism should aim to minimise car travel. Towns and locations best served by public transport should receive the main promotion as 'gateways' to the Shropshire Hills, in preference to locations where access is only possible by car.

Opportunities should be should be taken to strengthen the integrity and identity of the Shropshire Hills as an area of exceptional landscape value. Consistent use of the 'Shropshire Hills' identity should be given greater prominence in tourism and other forms of promotion, along with the special qualities of the AONB and opportunities for visitors to adopt a sustainable approach.

Opportunities and promotion aimed at both visitors and the local community should encourage people to experience the AONB's countryside more fully in ways which are not damaging (e.g. through walks and activities away from cars and roads, through appreciating wildlife and heritage).

## **Local working with communities**

### **Wrekin Forest**

The management of the wider Wrekin Forest area is crucial to the integrity of the Wrekin itself within the AONB **and should be designated as the Wrekin Forest Park**. The landscape quality of the wider Wrekin Forest area should be protected as far as possible, and the management of the Wrekin integrated with this surrounding area. ~~The Wrekin Forest Landscape Conservation Management Plan is a locally relevant and detailed framework for the area and is formally endorsed by the AONB Management Plan.~~

The Wrekin Forest Partnership provides a vital local forum for this important area, and should be supported and its links to the AONB Partnership maintained. The Wrekin Forest Partnership needs to develop as a long-term structure linked to permanent funding for a dedicated staff resource to take and co-ordinate action on the ground.