



Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership proposal for transferring out of Shropshire Council into a 'Conservation Board'

BUSINESS CASE

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1. Introduction and background

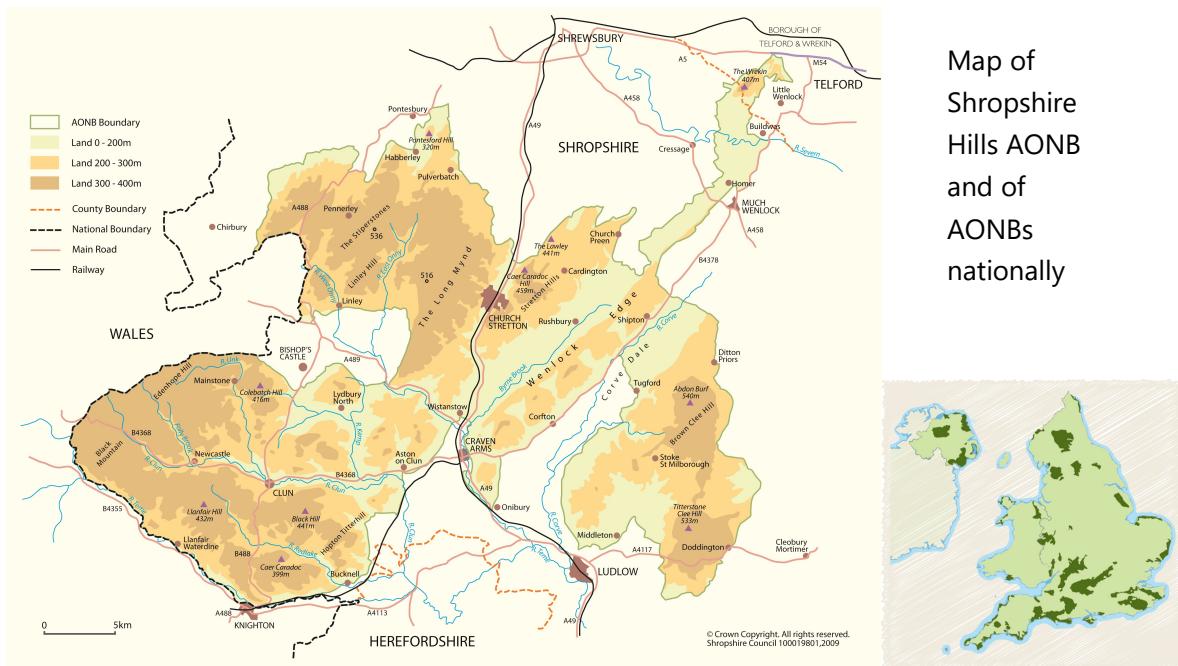
This document sets out a business case for the future structure of the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) organisation as a Conservation Board.

Financial pressures led Shropshire Council in spring 2016 to seek a substantial reduction in its net annual cash contribution to the AONB Partnership on the back of proposals to manage the AONB team within a new integrated Landscape, Health and Economy team within the wider Outdoor Partnerships service. Following a formal consultation with potentially affected staff and significant representations from the AONB Partnership and its members, agreement in principle was reached in April 2016 on an alternative proposal:

- to develop new independent delivery arrangements for the AONB team outside the Council within a new external organisational structure,
- to confirm a savings plan to Shropshire Council within the context of a review of the AONB budget both before and after externalisation.

2. Executive Summary

In 2018 the Shropshire Hills AONB designation will be 60 years old. The primary purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty is as important now as it was in 1958, and delivers a wide range of environmental, economic and social benefits. The Shropshire Hills is a relatively large AONB, governed by a strong Partnership and supported by an active staff team with a good track record. There is a strong foundation on which to build future development. However, the context of continued structural change in local government and the broader working environment has led partners to agree that the long term interests of the AONB are now best served by creation of an independent AONB body. A modern, lean application of the 'Conservation Board' model enabled by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 will provide the strongest organisation possible for the long term future of the AONB. The modest additional costs of this structure will be offset by the advantages of **unequivocal focus on the needs of the AONB, ability to harness volunteer effort** from Board level to on the ground practical work, and **enhanced ability to fund-raise**, working with a newly established AONB charity.



3. Legal basis and functions of the AONB organisation

AONBs legal framework: Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is a legal designation enabled originally by the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 for the principal purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the designated area. This Act also gives local authorities, Shropshire Council and Telford Wrekin Council in this case, a permissive power to take action to conserve and enhance the natural beauty in the AONB. AONBs are from the same legislative fold as National Parks and share some similarities, as well as differences in organisation and levels of funding.

The Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000 places in addition a statutory duty with regard to the AONB Management Plan on local authorities. S89(2) 2 of the Act states that "the relevant local authority in respect of an area of outstanding natural beauty shall... prepare and publish a plan which formulates their policy for the management of the area of outstanding natural beauty and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it." There is also a requirement to 'act jointly' in preparing the Management Plan, and the two local authorities for the Shropshire Hills AONB have formally agreed that the AONB Partnership would lead the preparation of the Plan on their behalf with the involvement of a range of local authority members and officers. On completion, the formal approval of the Management Plan is currently made by the local authorities themselves.

S85 of the Act also places on relevant authorities a general duty to have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB when exercising or performing any functions affecting land in the AONB. "Relevant authorities" are any public bodies including local and statutory authorities, parish councils and statutory regulators.

There are 46 AONBs in the UK, operating in a strong national network through the National Association for AONBs, a charitable company which lobbies on behalf of AONBs and promotes good practice. AONBs in Wales come under the same legislation but a different management through the Welsh Government, while those in Northern Ireland have a different (less strong) legal basis.

Current governance: The current governance arrangement for the AONB is a 'Joint Advisory Committee' to Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin Councils, known as the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership, which is supported by the AONB Partnership team, hosted by Shropshire Council as the accountable body. Funding for the Partnership team and operation is received from Defra and the two local authorities, along with project funding and earned income from many sources. This is the most common governance structure among English AONBs.

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership has defined its main roles as to:

- Take and co-ordinate action to conserve and enhance natural beauty; promote enjoyment and understanding, and further sustainable development.
- Develop policy and strategy for the area through the AONB Management Plan, and influence the policies and strategies of others.
- Develop the AONB Partnership as an inclusive and effective organisation.
- Support the involvement of the community in the management of the AONB.

The Partnership has an independent Chair and representation of many organisations with remits relevant to the AONB, as well as Parish & Town Council representatives, and individual members. This broad engagement is key to successful delivery. The AONB Team seek to concentrate their work in areas which complement or add value to the work of others, and avoid duplication. The AONB Partnership does not own or directly manage any land. A diagram of the current AONB structure is shown at **Appendix 1**.

In July 2016 following several years of research and development work, a new Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) for the AONB, the Shropshire Hills AONB Trust, was registered with the Charity Commission. This has a majority of trustees appointed from outside the AONB Partnership and is independent of the Partnership in governance terms. Its charitable objects however relate entirely to AONB purposes, and is intended to provide a complementary structure to the main AONB governance organisation, as an effective mechanism for fundraising to benefit the AONB. It is expected to give grants directly to projects in the community, and will work collaboratively with the AONB Partnership (or Conservation Board in due course), which it may also benefit or support financially, according to the trustees' discretion and its charitable objects.

4. The Operating Environment

AONBs are a statutory designation with a long history, and the organisations associated with them have developed as effective delivery mechanisms over about 25 years. The continued importance of AONBs has been underlined by the relative protection of their funding by Defra in recent years, along with exceptional levels of ministerial support. The typical model of local authority hosting has come increasingly under strain in a number of AONBs as Councils have had to adopt more radical budget savings and restructuring. This is especially so in Shropshire now, where such a high proportion of a relatively large AONB sits within the area of one unitary authority, making the AONB structure more vulnerable to decisions taken by one body.

Shropshire Council has pursued radical change in service delivery in recent years along with significant budget cuts, including outsourcing to a private sector controlled company and commissioning of services to various external bodies and 'spin out' structures. The details of hosting arrangement of the AONB Partnership has varied with several different departments, each of which has its own priorities. While there are very valuable synergies for the AONB team with other parts of the Council, these are broad across many departments, and a close fit with one particular department is often difficult. While Shropshire Council (and the County Council before it) has provided an effective and valuable hosting role for many years, the scale and speed of its continued organisational changes have become a significant source of instability for the AONB organisation. Some changes have been initiated without proper recourse to the AONB governance structures, resulting in much additional work and wasted energy.

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership is acknowledged nationally as a successful AONB organisation, among the top league in terms of gearing up of Council and Defra funding, with turnover now reaching around £1million. The team's work also has a good reputation locally, e.g. in river habitat and catchment work, local conservation projects, tourism, heritage projects, input into planning etc. A high priority on partnership working has achieved a broad engagement of people willing to give their time in governance and practical delivery, though there is undoubtedly a great deal further to go in terms of raising awareness and involving the local population. Successful earning of income and financial management has enabled the securing of a significant financial reserve for the AONB Partnership, 'ring-fenced' within the Council finances. All of these factors help to create a platform and critical mass for the AONB organisation to contemplate becoming independent, where previously this may not have been possible.

The wider context for the AONB also includes factors such as:

- continued pressure on central and local government funding
- the likelihood of farming subsidies diminishing and being more focused on greening
- future lack of access to EU funding programmes such as LEADER
- growing appreciation of the health value of recreation
- increasing local tourism opportunities and pressures
- greater national appreciation of the need to better manage ecosystems, soil and water
- more interest among businesses in staff development and supporting local causes
- more need to work with other AONBs and National Parks, etc.

AONBs are recognised internationally by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as 'Category V' protected areas. Some level of international and European links will remain important even after the UK leaves the EU. Wider political change and economic pressure creates an increasingly uncertain environment in which AONBs must operate. The ability to continue to diversify income streams while remaining true to the central AONB purposes is important, while not undermining the important principle of core public funding for the many public benefits provided by AONBs and the work of their teams.

The 'need' for services delivered by the AONB team is defined in the statutory AONB Management Plan, which identifies priorities for the area. These are long term issues, and

the need to provide continued proactive conservation and management of the AONB landscape is well evidenced. Many other organisations contribute to delivery of the AONB Management Plan, but the team play an important co-ordinating role.

In certain areas of project delivery, e.g. conservation and landscape scale projects, there could be competition from organisations such as local conservation charities who have good track records in securing external funding. Some project bids will be up against projects from all over the country, including potentially other AONBs.

5. Outcome requirements for the AONB organisation

The following was agreed by the AONB Partnership Management Board on 11th May 2016 as the key requirements of a new organisation:

- The structure should provide a secure, long term vehicle for delivery of AONB functions, including employment of the staff team.
- The new structure needs to be efficient and cost effective operationally, and have a good ability to fund-raise from a wide variety of sources. Ideally the new structure needs to be capable of borrowing to meet short term cash flow shortfalls.
- The structure must be capable of receiving the AONB funding from Defra (or its successor if Government departments change) and to be directly accountable to Defra for it.
- A relatively simple to understand structure, alongside strong branding, will aid the organisation in public understanding, which is quite a significant issue, and also enhances fundraising ability.
- The structure should be able to attract and involve a high calibre of board members/trustees with relevant skills as well as time and willingness to take on responsibility. These people need to be appointed through robust processes which provide the skills needed but provide checks and balances against possible personal interests or dominance of a small number of individuals.
- The structure must provide links to the two local authorities, but also be seen to be independent from them. The relationship between the organisation and the local authorities' legal duty for the AONB Management Plan needs to be clear, and to not expose the independent organisation to undue risk.
- The structure needs to be able to champion the interests of the AONB, including in planning consultations (both policy and applications).
- The structure needs to support engagement, collaboration, learning, sharing knowledge etc. with the national AONB family.

6. The Vision

The following vision for creation of a Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Board was developed in a workshop between the Transition Board and the AONB team, and endorsed by the AONB Partnership on 8th September 2016:

Wording to be added arising from visioning workshop 2 Sept and Partnership discussion on 8 Sept.

7. Options Appraisal and Confirmation of Approach

An options appraisal was first carried out in 2012, following earlier work by the AONB Partnership in 2010. These formed the basis of detailed options papers taken to the AONB Partnership and its Management Board in the spring of 2016 (see <http://shropshire.gov.uk/committee-services/documents/s11548/3.%20Structure%20alternatives%20with%20appendices.pdf>).

The options considered were:

1. Work much more closely as an in-house part of the Council
2. Re-form the Partnership's 'Joint Advisory Committee' as a local authority 'Joint Committee'
3. Retain current arrangement hosted by the Council as a semi-independent partnership
4. Retain hosting arrangement but develop linked structures to optimise broader sources of income including charitable, other grants, and trading
5. An independent body for the AONB using a 'generic' model in the form of a Trust, charity or company
6. AONB Conservation Board
7. Transfer hosting to a different organisation

A simplified appraisal in table format of the main options for the structure of the AONB is provided within **Appendix 2** (includes options 3-7 from the above list).

This work concluded that **Conservation Board** was the preferred model.

Subsequently the AONB Partnership Board at its meeting on the 14th June 2016 endorsed Conservation Board as the preferred model for an independent structure, and supported a formal request to Defra by the two Councils and Partnership to initiate the process of creating a Conservation Board for the Shropshire Hills AONB.

Conservation Boards are a structure specifically created for AONBs by sections of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. There are only two AONB Conservation Boards, in the Cotswolds and the Chilterns, both established in 2004.

An independent charity may be another possible structure but is more difficult in relation to arrangements for the statutory duty of the local authorities for the AONB Management Plan. The option of an alternative host body is not ruled out altogether, but is not preferred at this stage.

AONB Conservation Boards are established by a Statutory Instrument. They are legally incorporated bodies and employ staff and hold finances and assets directly. They also take on the statutory role of the AONB Management Plan from the local authorities, and can take on other local authority functions by agreement.

8. The case for a Conservation Board

New governance arrangements independent of Shropshire Council in the form of a Conservation Board for the Shropshire Hills AONB would:

- Be a **relevant, progressive and locally determined model**, supported by both Councils, as well as partner organisations and stakeholders within the AONB, and offering much **better long term stability**.
- Provide a **strong, independent structure with an unequivocal focus on the AONB**. A Conservation Board exists solely to support AONB purposes and is not vulnerable to other priorities of a larger organisation.
- **Build on the existing strong engagement** of partner organisations and individuals, and indeed energise this through providing greater responsibility and autonomy, and therefore **more reason for people to get involved** on a voluntary basis.
- Be a **simple, streamlined and efficient structure** with a relatively small executive Board of 10-14 members. The appointments and administrative processes for this would be simple, while providing strong involvement of the two local authorities and an optimum size for decision making.
- Allow **more secure business planning** in terms of fund-raising, project bids, trading and development of strategic work strands, due to undistracted organisational focus solely on the needs of the AONB.
- Considerably **raise the profile of the AONB** and public perception of its importance, also with the benefits of being easier to understand, **enhancing the ability to raise funds** for the AONB and providing a **stronger voice** for its interests in decision making, especially planning.
- Provide a **long term, secure and appropriate governance solution** for an AONB which is the landscape 'jewel in the crown' for Shropshire and the region, and enable the team to continue to perform at a high level in terms of funding, innovation, co-operation and delivery.
- **Work effectively alongside the recently established charity** for the Shropshire Hills AONB charitable structure, which has the main purpose of fundraising for the benefit of the AONB.
- Be better able to **collaborate across the AONB Family**, due to lack of competing demands from a host organisation with its main priorities outside the AONB area and remit.

The Conservation Board model is designed specifically for AONBs, and is a proven model for the application of Defra AONB funding. A Conservation Board brings together the statutory AONB Management Plan duty, the AONB team and the overall governance structure in a single legal entity, in a way that no other available option does. The structure provides for a balance of representation of national importance of the AONB as well as local authorities and other local interests. Though still not a statutory consultee in planning, a Conservation Board ensures avoidance of conflicted positions in relation to the Council especially regarding involvement in planning consultations.

The structure does result in some modest additional costs. As with any independent structure, support functions historically provided by the Council would have to be bought in, though increasingly the Council is looking to charge for these anyway. Conservation Boards

also have to pay VAT on relevant expenditure, though this is a small proportion of the overall budget. The overall lead in time for establishment of a Conservation Board is considerable, and is likely to be longer given the additional current work for government following the referendum vote to leave the EU. In relation to the long term benefits however, this should not be a deciding factor.

The relative strengths and weaknesses of the Conservation Board model are summarised within the SWOT analysis below:

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statutory status of AONB designation and Conservation Board • Part of a strong national AONB family through the National Association for AONBs • Strong local support for an independent body solely focussed on the needs of the AONB 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservation Boards pay VAT on some expenditure • Inability to reclaim 'full cost recovery' from some project funders (as with local authorities)
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tapping into capacity and skills of Board members • Working alongside the new 'Shropshire Hills AONB Trust' charity (CIO) • Potential for enhanced commercial activity • Ability to survive at a range of scales of operation, depending on levels of funding • Possibility of holding property as an asset, e.g. offices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process to create Conservation Board is dependent on Defra agreement and capacity • Need to manage cash flow and reserves effectively

Potential risks associated with the Conservation Board model, and actions to mitigate these, are described in more detail in **Appendix 3**.

9. Summary of projected budget position

a) Financial Position Statement (Income/Expenditure)

A detailed draft budget for the AONB organisation for 2016-17 through to 2019-20 is included within **Appendix 4**, and is accompanied by the notes below.

i) Current Income & Expenditure

2016-17 income and expenditure is currently projected as £1,141,887.

The budgets break down into sections comprising:

- Main AONB staff team and core operations
- River Clun Recovery Project (WREN funded – a Landfill Tax distributor)
- Stiperstones and Corndon Landscape Partnership Scheme (HLF)

and other minor projects:

Shuttle buses
Sustainable Business Network

In more detail there are three main funding contracts in place:

- Annual contract with Defra for AONB funding, currently £186,416 pa. Defra have made a four year grant offer, to 2019-20.
- Five year £2.1m contract 2013-18 with Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for the Stiperstones and Corndon Hill Landscape Partnership Scheme
- Four year £216k contract with WREN (a Landfill Tax fund) for the River Clun Recovery Project, ending March 2019.

Each of these sections is more or less a stand-alone budget, with its own funders and timescale. Some require cash match from the overall AONB budget and some generate income for it, while some have both.

There are no significant long term expenditure contracts.

ii) Current Staff Numbers & Costs

The current costs of staff are:

Main AONB team (6.4 FTE) £205,550
Stiperstones and Corndon LPS (4.2 FTE) £124,290

iii) Savings Targets

The budgets are currently held within Shropshire Council's SAMIS accounting system as 'net nil' budgets with no base budget. Shropshire Council's annual contribution of £40,830 is paid into the cost centre as a transaction every year. A reduced annual contribution of £25,000 has been agreed for 2018-19 and 2019-20 as the expected first two years of operation of an independent body.

iv) 4 Year Income and Expenditure

The projected budget assumes that Conservation Board status will be achieved at April 2018. Any changes to this will result in some profiling of the budget.

Projected levels of income and expenditure are similar in 2017-18 to those in 2016-17. In March 2018, the Stiperstones and Corndon LPS will close, and projected turnover for 2018-19 and 2019-20 is around £300k - £400k pa. This will increase if new projects come on stream as expected.

Forward budgets allow for annual 1% inflation increases on salaries. Known possibilities for reducing staff hours in two cases are included. Budgets are allowing for the new independent body to cover costs of support services procured from April 2018 costed at £17,500 pa, and the payment of VAT by the Conservation Board on relevant items.

There are sums of AONB cash match required into certain projects, and various sources of 'unattached' income with which to meet these. This creates the final net addition to, or draw on, reserves which balances the financial year's accounts overall. The strategy as in recent years will be to aim to earn income where possible through e.g. projects, fee earning activity and trading, alongside any savings which can be identified. Opportunities to restructure and make savings will be taken in the event of staff vacancies.

For 2018-19 and 2019-20 allowing for an expected level of income (which is not all currently secured), the annual budgets are projected to reach within around £10k of break even. A modest one-off draw on reserves may be made to fund feasibility work and start-up costs, but if a longer term deficit continues which cannot be met by earned income and other savings, then cuts to staffing will be necessary.

v) Cash Flow and use of reserves

A cash flow modelling exercise has been carried out based on actual spend within 2015-16, and this has informed a projection for 2018-19. Assuming similar patterns of spend but with the Stiperstones and Corndon Landscape Partnership Scheme finished, the Conservation Fund transferred to the new AONB Trust charity and the Defra contribution paid quarterly up front to a Conservation Board, a maximum temporary cash flow deficit of around £25k is predicted, which would need to be covered by working capital from the AONB reserves.

The full transfer of reserves earned over recent years by the AONB Partnership and currently held by Shropshire Council is required. The reserve is needed:

- To bankroll cash flow as above
- To cover potential redundancy and pension strain liabilities, which total £116k for the core staff
- As a source of match funding for new project bids, which will remain a crucial part of the business model.

vi) Commercial Opportunities

There are a number of commercial opportunities which have been used to varying degrees to date, and have potential to be developed further:

- Fee-earning project delivery – this may be within the AONB (preferably), or potentially outside the AONB (at opportunity cost of activity for the AONB). Many projects are developed in partnership with other organisations – activity can be fee earning either when bankrolled by the team itself or sometimes when led by other organisations.
- Consultancy – the team have considerable technical skills and some history of paid work, hitherto on a largely reactive basis rather than promoted.
- Trading – Some income is derived from sale of books, branded merchandise, etc and hire of meeting room facilities.
- Fee earning services – there is a possibility of charging for pre-application planning advice, but this has not been done so far due to capacity issues.

10. Legal considerations

The legal framework for AONBs and the related local authority obligations are described in section 3 above.

a) Legal implications of new structure

The main legal implication of the proposed structure change is that a Conservation Board, under detailed provisions in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, takes on fully the statutory responsibility of the two Councils to prepare and review an AONB Management Plan. This is perceived to be a strength of the model, providing both additional status and influence for the Conservation Board, and relieving the Councils of this responsibility. The two Councils would however still be closely involved in the preparation of the Plan, and may choose formally to endorse it, as this will add to its strength.

Within the Conservation Board model, the Councils would still retain the legal duty applicable to all public bodies to 'have regard to the purposes of AONBs in carrying out their functions' (Section 85, Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000). This is not a duty which necessarily results in expenditure or allocation of resources, but it does for example apply to the consideration of the AONB in planning decisions by the Councils. A Conservation Board is not a statutory consultee with regard to planning matters, but would expect to be consulted on policy and significant applications in the AONB similar to the arrangement currently in place with the AONB Partnership. Good practice would include renewing and updating the Planning Protocol which is in place with the AONB Partnership.

There is provision in the legislation for Conservation Boards to take on additional powers or responsibilities from the local authorities (e.g. countryside management functions). There is no proposal in this case for a Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Board to take on additional responsibilities.

b) Statutory processes, including consultation

The creation of a Conservation Board is achieved through a Statutory Instrument laid before both Houses of Parliament. This process is led by Defra, who also provide the main AONB funding. Following agreement of both Councils to the Business Case, the two Councils must write formally to Defra to request them to initiate the creation of a Conservation Board.

The process for creating a Conservation Board is set out in Defra guidance of 2008 requires formal consultation, and this is mainly carried out at a national level. The scoping work on options carried out so far by the AONB Partnership has included the broad membership of the Partnership and has significant support. Some further local consultation on implementation of the preferred option would be carried out.

c) Equalities considerations

The proposals set out here are not believed to have any implications with respect to the Councils' statutory duties under the Equality Act 2010 and section 149 of the Public Sector Equality Duty. An Equalities and Social Inclusion Impact Assessment has not been prepared but will be should circumstances change.

d) Legal obligations with contracts

The HLF Landscape Partnership Scheme contract is due to end before the Conservation Board would come into existence. In relation to the Defra AONB funding contract, Defra are clearly a crucial player in relation to creation of the Conservation Board, and informal discussions have been opened on this. The possibility of transition and novation of contract has not yet been discussed with WREN, but no major difficulties are expected with this.

11. Staff and other contractual implications

a) Staff

A current staff structure is included at **Appendix 5**. In summary the team currently comprises 13 staff (10.6FTE), with 7 (6.4 FTE) based at Craven Arms, and 6 (4.2 FTE) based at Chirbury in a semi-independent team for the Stiperstones and Corndon Hill Country Landscape Partnership Scheme (HLF funded to March 2018).

The proposed transition would transfer the employees of the AONB team and its services to the new Conservation Board structure. The Stiperstones and Corndon LPS will terminate at or before the new body comes into operation, so there will be no requirement to novate this contract or transfer these staff. (It is conceivable that extensions to contracts on some of the LPS staff may be achievable through new funding or projects).

Staff are fully aware of the proposal to create a Conservation Board and have been involved in discussion of options and developing the proposal. No formal consultations have taken place in relation to HR matters, following the lifting of earlier restructuring proposals for the AONB team.

Pensions: An AONB Conservation Board is a 'Scheduled Body' in relation to the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS), meaning that its staff are entitled to join the LGPS. A 'grouping' with Shropshire Council within the scheme is sought, in relation to sharing the burden of pension scheme shortfalls which may not otherwise be sustainable for the small independent body of the Conservation Board.

b) Assets

i) Summary of Assets & IT systems

The main office at Craven Arms and the LPS office at Chirbury are both rented, and equipped with hard-wired network connected to the Shropshire Council IT system via broadband. All staff now have laptops, and a rented printer/copier is in place at each office.

The offices are furnished and equipped, and there are small amounts of display equipment and tools held, along with a considerable quantity of archive files. A detailed inventory will be prepared.

ii) Potential Asset Transfer

The main AONB Partnership office at Craven Arms comprises four units in the Shropshire Council owned property Drovers House, which includes a small number of other rented

offices and retail units. The possibility has been discussed with the Council about a possible asset transfer involving Drovers House to an independent AONB organisation, as a means of providing it with some ongoing income as well as an asset and security of tenure. The Council does not wish to do this at present, but has not ruled it out as a possibility in the future.

12. Partners

The main stakeholders are:

- The two Councils – Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin.
- Funders – especially Defra, and to a lesser extent WREN.
- AONB Partnership members – The Partnership is the formal governance structure for the AONB and will remain so until a new structure replaces it.
- Delivery partner organisations – e.g. Natural England, National Trust, Shropshire Wildlife Trust. Most of these organisations would not be represented directly on the Conservation Board, so future relationships will be important. Natural England also have a national advisory role to government in relation to AONBs.
- The National Association for AONBs and the AONB family – the transition of structure is of interest to other AONBs as a potential model or example, and there is much that we can continue to learn from them, including the two existing Conservation Boards and two AONB trusts/charitable companies in Northern Ireland.
- AONB membership schemes – including the Friends of the Shropshire Hills AONB and the Shropshire Hills Sustainable Business Network.
- Local partnerships including at the Wrekin, Clun Catchment, Clee Hill and Stiperstones – Corndon.
- Local businesses that depend on the qualities of the AONB.
- Community organisations – including Parish and Town Councils and voluntary organisations.

Engagement Plan and public consultation:

The existing AONB Partnership structures for both meetings (of various groups) and communications (publications, websites, e-newsletter and social media) will provide effective mechanisms to continue to engage with the relevant stakeholders. For more details of the work of the AONB Partnership visit <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/>.

The AONB Partnership processes are very broad in terms of membership and most information is made fully publicly available, so requirements for local public consultation are largely covered. There is considerable support for the proposal.

13. Timescales and resources

The expected timescale for the creation of a Conservation Board is 12-24 months from the formal request. Key milestones and indicative timescales are:

- 9 Aug 2016 First meeting of Transition Board
- 2 Sept 2016 Visioning workshop with Transition Board and team
- 8 Sept 2016 AONB Partnership meeting to support draft Business Case
- 13 Oct 2016 Business Case to Telford & Wrekin Council Cabinet
- 19 Oct 2016 Business Case to Shropshire Council Cabinet
- Nov 2016 Formal request to Defra to initiate creation of Conservation Board
- 2017 Consultations and decision (by Defra)
- 2017-18 Drafting of legal orders (Defra)
- 2017-18 Agreement regarding premises and funding
- 2018-19 Confirmation of legal orders and appointments to Board (Defra)
- 2018-19 Establishment of banking and finance arrangements
- 2018-19 Transfer of staff and formal launch of Conservation Board

A Transition Board has been established including representatives of both Councils, as well as other members elected from the AONB Partnership, and the possibility of additional co-opted members.