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| Committee and Date Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership | Item |
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| 17 March 2015 | 5 |
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AREA-BASED WORKING IN THE AONB

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Summary

This paper updates members on the various area-based partnerships operated or supported by the AONB Partnership.

Recommendation

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

Background

For some years, the AONB Partnership has supported a number of local area partnerships focused on landscape and conservation issues. These have each emerged and evolved in slightly different ways reflecting the local situation of priorities. This level of working proves always to engage people in the community who are very connected to and motivated by their own local area, with the wider picture of the whole AONB usually being secondary. There is not capacity within the staff team to support such groups across all areas of the AONB, and even supporting the existing ones is a significant commitment of staff time. Some are focused around particular delivery projects, others aspire to this or nevertheless operate usefully at a simpler level as forums for exchange of information. Meetings have included workshop sessions and field visits, and all the groups have Terms of Reference and their minutes are published on the AONB website <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/looking-after/area-initiatives/>. Bringing people from different interests together face to face and discussing issues, as well as operating in a very transparent way, helps to reduce potential conflicts and increase understanding.

Collectively, the groups involve a lot of people in AONB-related topics and contribute significantly to both awareness and action on the ground. All the groups have mailing lists of people who choose to keep informed of the group's activities and perhaps attend occasionally, with typically a more active core of 10-15 people regularly attending.

The current groups are:

- Wrekin Forest Partnership
- Clun Catchment Partnership
- Clee Hill Partnership
- Stiperstones and Corndon Hill Country Landscape Partnership Scheme

The current situation with each of these groups, and possibilities for their future development are outlined below.

Wrekin Forest Partnership People on mailing list: 43

The Wrekin Forest Partnership first met in February 2008, and has met 22 times in those eight years. This corner of the AONB is the part which spans both Telford & Wrekin Council and Shropshire Council areas, and in an urban-fringe location, has different issues to the very rural majority of the Shropshire Hills.

The Partnership is currently developing a second Wrekin Forest Plan, with support of some contracted staff time from Shropshire Wildlife Trust. A key issue is protecting the area from potential significant scale development associated with the westwards growth of Telford. The 'Wrekin Forest' area as defined by the group is broader than the AONB itself. Mechanisms for protecting the area through Telford & Wrekin's 'Shaping Places' Local Plan are currently being investigated, and policies which protect the 'setting' of the AONB (as used in other parts of the country) appear likely to be a key tool.

Another particular issue is supporting conservation and visitor management on the Wrekin itself, which is a significant 'honeypot'. Such a popular visitor location being privately owned and managed does create some limitations, as there is little public funding supporting management of the public use, nor currently any means of raising money from visitors to go back into managing the area. Recent years have seen some improvements to car parking and information/interpretation, but the hill still experiences a good deal of visitor pressure. Aside from measures to conserve the hill itself and improve the visitor experience, there is recognised to be value in promoting walks, cycling etc in the area surrounding the Wrekin, to reduce some pressure by dispersing visitors. The Partnership also supports conservation activity in the wider landscape area, but in reality this is mainly carried out through existing activity such as on Shropshire Wildlife Trust or Council-owned sites, and through agri-environment schemes on private land.

An opinion survey carried out in late 2014 to support the new Plan highlighted the willingness of many people to contribute to a potential Trust to support conserving the area. The Partnership will be considering possibilities to take this forward.

Clun Catchment Partnership People on mailing list: 47

The Clun Catchment Partnership first met in February 2012, and has met 11 times in those three years. This group focuses on river catchment and associated land management issues, and consequently has a greater proportion of staff from organisations, though representation of farmers and the local community is also very important. The group complements other steering groups for the River Clun which have a more specific focus (e.g. the Freshwater Pearl Mussel Steering Group), and it aims to take a broad approach to catchment issues. This fits with the government-supported 'Catchment-based Approach' through which some funding is available towards partnership structures. This is targeted at whole river catchments, in this case the Teme is the larger catchment within which the Clun sits, and the Severn Rivers Trust operate the Teme Partnership, in which we are active members. These different layers of working groups are usefully complementary, and the established links between them are very good.

The Clun catchment, due especially to presence of Freshwater Pearl Mussel, is a target area which continues to benefit from significant capital funding and advice for farmers. The Partnership has a role in influencing and delivering this. The catchment extends beyond the AONB boundary and the part of the River Clun designated as Special Area of Conservation (SAC) where the Freshwater Pearl Mussels are actually found lies in Herefordshire.

The Clun Catchment Partnership has recently been discussing the possibility of adopting the self-determined label of 'Nature Improvement Area' (NIA) to build recognition of its work and support potential funding bids. This follows recommendations in the Lawton report 'Making Space for Nature' on ecological networks, and the Natural Environment White Paper of 2011. Defra ran a competitive process and awarded funding for 12 NIAs nationally, but have since published guidance for area groups who wish to adopt this status without funding. It is not a restrictive designation in any sense, but may help to provide greater structure and clarity about communicating environmental priorities, and potentially help support future funding bids.

Clee Hill Partnership People on mailing list: 44

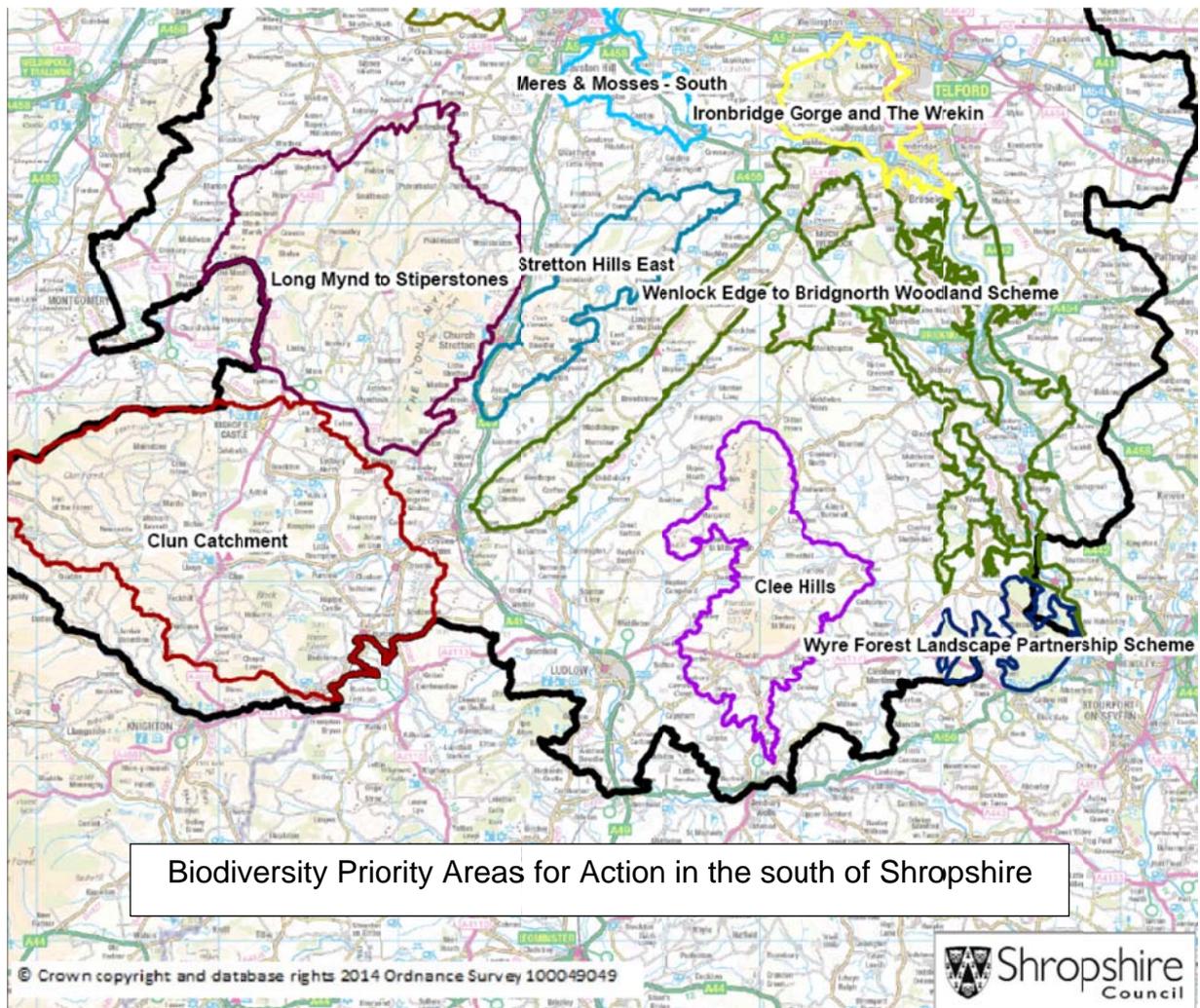
The Clee Hill Partnership first met in March 2011, and has met 8 times in those four years. Around that time, Shropshire Wildlife Trust took on ownership of Catherton Common, which adjoins Clee Hill Common. The Partnership came out of a well attended seminar in February 2011 organised by the Wildlife Trust, at which agreement was reached that better communication between relevant parties would help address some of the issues facing the area. The Partnership has aspired to have a project to implement priority activity, and over 2013 and 2014, members of the Partnership did considerable work to develop a project application to the Heritage Lottery Fund. Unfortunately for practical reasons the application has not been able to be submitted. The Partnership will need to reconsider whether these aspirations can be taken forward by some different type of project. Even if not, the Partnership is felt still to have value as a forum for exchange of information etc but it is unlikely to develop much further without some additional activity of its own.

Stiperstones and Corndon Hill Country Landscape Partnership Scheme

The Landscape Partnership Scheme is the most developed of all these area partnerships, with a full staff team and structure of its own, including LPS Board, Management Group and a number of specialist Programme Advisory Groups. Information on the Scheme is provided in other agenda items and is not reproduced here in full. As the scheme progresses into its second half, thought will need to be given to the 'exit strategy', and connections back to AONB Partnership structures will become more important once again.

Biodiversity Priority Areas for Action

These area groups led by the AONB Partnership are an important means of taking forward one of the key approaches for biodiversity in Shropshire, which are the 'Priority Areas for Action' (see map below) which have been defined to target 'landscape-scale' conservation. These would provide a good guide for the development of any future groups, although capacity remains a limitation. The areas of the existing groups do not in all cases align exactly with PAA areas, since biodiversity is one among a number of factors.



List of Background Papers

Terms of Reference and minutes of meetings at <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/looking-after/area-initiatives/>

See also <http://www.stiperstonesandcondon.co.uk/>

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