



Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership

17 November 2015

9.30 am

Item

2

Public

MINUTES OF THE SHROPSHIRE HILLS AONB PARTNERSHIP MEETING HELD ON 25 JUNE 2015 9.30 - 11.15 AM AT SNAILBEACH VILLAGE HALL

Responsible Officer: Tim Ward
Email: tim.ward@shropshire.gov.uk Tel: 01743 252739

Present

Local Authorities

Shropshire Council

Cllr Tim Barker (Vice Chair)

Cllr Cecilia Motley

Cllr David Turner

Telford & Wrekin Council

Cllr Chris Turley

Statutory/Voluntary Agencies & Individual members

Individual Member

Alison Caffyn

Individual Member

George Chancellor (Chair)

Individual member

James Williamson (Vice-Chair)

Town & Parish Council representative

Keith Bartlett

British Horse Society

Ronald Repath

Butterfly Conservation

Rhona Goddard

Caring for God's Acre

Gill Binks

DEFRA/RPA

Jo Jury

Forestry Commission

Donna Tavernor

Land Life & Livelihoods

Joy Greenall

Longmynd & District Bridleways Association

Sue Lee

Natural England

Hazel McDowall

Ramblers Association

Sue Jones

Shropshire Geological Society

David C Smith

Strettons Civic Society

Ian Dormor

Shropshire Wildlife Trust

Veronica Cossons

Observers/Officers

Shropshire Council

Andy Evans (Head of Economic Growth & Prosperity)

Tim Ward (Committee Officer)

Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership Staff
Team

Phil Holden (AONB Partnership Manager)

Alison Jones (Clun Catchment Officer)

1 Welcome and Apologies for Absence

1.1 The Chair welcomed Jo Jury (DEFRA), Rhona Goddard (Butterfly Conservation), Donna Tavernor (Forestry Commission), Andy Evans (Head of Economic Growth & Prosperity, Shropshire Council) and Alison Jones (Clun Catchment Officer AONB Partnership) to the meeting.

1.2 Apologies for absence were received from:

Caroline Bedell (CLA), Pete Carty (National Trust), Sarah Bury (CPRE), Harriet Carty (Individual Member), Lee Chapman (South Shropshire Tourism), Hilary Claytonsmith (Town/Parish Council Representative), Carol Griffiths (NFU), Geoff Grimes (Shropshire Tourism), Gill Hamer (Marches LEP), Deb Hughes (Shropshire Council), Cllr. Heather Kidd (Shropshire Council), Bill Klemperer (English Heritage), Marc Liebrecht (ICF), Fiona Pidduck (Individual Member), Leo Smith (Upper Onny Wildlife Group / Shropshire Ornithological Society), Elizabeth Thomas (Individual Member).

2 Note of the last meeting

2.1 The note of the last meeting held on 17 March 2015 had been circulated.

2.2 **RESOLVED:-**

That the note of the last meeting be confirmed as a correct record.

3 AONB Partnership Update

3.1 Members received the report of the AONB Partnership Manager which provided an update of recent activity.

3.2 The AONB Partnership Manager advised members that 14 grants totalling £25,300 had been awarded from the Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund, and drew their attention to the appendix to the report which listed the projects. He reminded the meeting that funding for the scheme was made up from the subscriptions to the Friends of the Shropshire Hills AONB, together with contributions from the Jean Jackson Charitable Trust and the Millichope Foundation.

3.3 The AONB Partnership Manager advised members that a consultation was in progress regarding changes to streamline the administration of the Sustainable Business Scheme, to include a two year membership and pledge rather than annual renewal.

3.4 The AONB Partnership Manager informed members that the Partnership Team were currently working with partners to develop potential new projects including:

- Involvement in feasibility work for a landscape-scale conservation project focused on the Long Mynd and Stiperstones area.
- Input into proposals by the Foundation for Common Land for a possible national project on upland commons, with activity in the Shropshire Hills AONB and four other areas.
- Discussions with Woodland Trust and other partners about the possible development of new woodland project work, e.g. supporting woodland social enterprises, and encouraging management of PAWS (Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites).

3.5 The AONB Partnership Manager advised the meeting that further discussions had taken place regarding the possible relocation of the office to Church Stretton. Shropshire Council was continuing with proposals for relocating the library, though this was now subject to a legal challenge. In the event of the AONB Partnership team being able to relocate to the library premises, the team were also developing a proposal for the AONB Partnership to manage the Visitor Information Centre (VIC) in the same building, on a commissioned basis with financial support from Shropshire Council, and using volunteers to assist in staffing the facility. Dr Dormor enquired whether the VIC would occupy the same area as currently. The AONB Partnership Manager said that the current space would be used, and commented that an advantage of this proposal was that the VIC would be able to operate in situ with minimal set-up costs, rather than alternatives of relocating the VIC.

4 LEADER 2015-20

- 4.1 Members received a report which outlined the proposed changes in governance arrangements for the 2015-20 Natural Growth LEADER programme.
- 4.2 The Chair commented that the proposals comprised a fundamental change in the governance of the LEADER programme, and asked the AONB Partnership Manager to give a little more background.
- 4.3 The AONB Partnership Manager briefly outlined discussions held during the transition year in 2014, which after much deliberation, had led to the bid submitted in September 2014 based on the benefits of integrating AONB and LEADER functions, and with the Partnership again acting as the LEADER Local Action Group (LAG). This bid had received formal support from Shropshire Council as accountable body and from the Marches Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). In November 2014 a letter had been received from Defra indicating that the bid had been successful, subject to confirmation by contract. A competing bid for the area based on the AONB Partnership not being the LAG had been rejected.
- 4.4 The AONB Partnership Manager went on to say that at the end of April 2015, local Defra officers had first raised issues regarding proposed governance arrangements for the southern Shropshire programme, and indicating that key aspects of the proposals as set out in the bid would no longer be acceptable. For example, the AONB Partnership was now considered to be an 'interest group', and since the grant decision making panel could not comprise of more than 49% from any single interest group, that the proposed structure where members of the Approvals Panel would become members of the AONB Partnership would not now conform to this rule. While Defra would allow an option where the Partnership remained as the LAG, the Panel must be independent of it. Partnership representatives felt that in this scenario the Partnership would not be truly acting as a LAG in the manner intended, and would lay itself open to risk from decisions made in its name over which it had little control. Further, Defra's guidance that the AONB Partnership's conservation remit could now be considered a 'conflict of interest' made the Partnership's role potentially much more difficult, especially since clear written guidance on this topic was not forthcoming. The second option, to separate the governance of the LEADER and AONB functions and make the new Panel into the LAG was therefore, with reluctance, favoured. The subsequent decision of Shropshire Council to take the LEADER Programme Manager in-house had not been expected.
- 4.5 Ms Jury advised the meeting that the LDS submission had been robust and good, but a recent interpretation around conflicts of interest had required changes. There was an issue of perception and a need for consistency over the whole of the country. She added that other Local Action Groups were having to address the same issues.
- 4.6 The Chair then asked the Head of Economic Growth and Prosperity to inform the Partnership about the Council's proposed change to the staffing arrangements. The Head of Economic Growth and Prosperity said that the AONB's Partnership work and role in securing the LEADER programme was recognised, but since the recent guidance from Defra, the Council felt that the LEADER programme sat better within Shropshire Council than with the AONB Partnership team. This would strengthen the accountable body role and enable better links with the LEP and other funding programmes.
- 4.7 The Chair commented that there was need to make a decision swiftly, since a Delivery Plan had to be submitted to Defra by the end of July. He added that during discussions with Shropshire Council he had received assurances that the Council would find ways for the AONB Partnership to replace the loss of earned income from hosting the LEADER programme, such that the Partnership would not be financially disadvantaged by the Council's decision.
- 4.8 A number of comments and queries from members were discussed in considerable depth, including: -

- How could the AONB Partnership be considered as an 'interest group' when it is made up of a large number of different organisations?
- How could the aims of the AONB Partnership be protected when LEADER grant decisions were made under the new arrangement?
- The ground had shifted under our feet and it wasn't clear in this case why Defra had supported the Partnership's bid to deliver the programme.
- How would the new Panel be made up and how would members be recruited to it?
- How would the new LAG avoid conflicts of interest itself?
- Would there not be some negative perceptions about the location of the Programme Manager at Shirehall, outside the LEADER area?

4.9 The AONB Partnership Manager said that the two elements of the Partnership being the LAG and the team hosting the Programme Manger were the essence of the lead organisation role, and the loss of these was very disappointing, as well as leaving implications for loss of earned income to the Partnership. He advised the meeting that there would need to be dialogue between the Partnership and Shropshire Council over the recruitment of the Panel as the new LAG.

4.10 The Chair commented that it was important that the Partnership maintained as much influence as possible and that members of the Partnership may wish to apply to be members of the LAG to ensure this.

4.11 The Chair proposed the resolution that *The Approvals Panel should be reconstituted as the LAG for the Natural Growth LEADER Programme under the direct organisation of Shropshire Council with the proviso that the AONB Partnership will not lose out financially through these changes.*

4.12 Ms Caffyn proposed that the following amendment be made *'that the AONB should retain involvement and influence in the programme'*. This was agreed.

4.13 Following a vote, and with great regret and disappointment on the part of all concerned, it was Resolved that: -

The Approvals Panel should be reconstituted as the LAG for the Natural Growth LEADER Programme under the direct organisation of Shropshire Council with the proviso that the AONB Partnership will not lose out financially through these changes and retains involvement and influence in the programme.

5 AONB Partnership Biennial Membership review

5.1 Members received the report of the AONB Partnership Manager which provided them with information about the biennial membership review.

5.2 The AONB Partnership Manager advised members that the Partnership's Terms of Reference provided for a biennial review of membership, which included appointments to the Individual Member seats and a review of the organisational seats. He reminded members that it had been agreed that the current review would also include direct applications for the Town & Parish Council seats rather than SALC appointing the representatives.

5.3 It was agreed that the number of seats in the various categories should remain the same, and that the three non-statutory organisations with the lowest attendance should be invited to reapply for their seats on the Partnership.

6 Proposed Charitable Organisation

- 6.1 Members received the report of the AONB Partnership Manager which provided an update on progress to establish the Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund as a charity.
- 6.2 The AONB Partnership Manager advised the meeting that a draft Constitution had been prepared and that it was proposed that the initial charity trustees be recruited to enable them to be involved in developing the final version of the Constitution. He added that it was proposed that four or five trustees would be initially recruited with the additional seats filled once the charity was established and registered with the Charity Commission. He then outlined the required skills and aptitudes for trustees and asked that if anyone was interested in volunteering to be a Trustee to let him know by email by 10 July 2015.

7 River Clun Recovery Project

- 7.1 It was agreed that due to lack of time the presentation would be deferred to a future meeting.

8 Dates of Next Meetings

- 8.1 The AONB Partnership Manager reminded members that the next meeting of the Partnership would be held on Tuesday 17 November 2015.

Signed (Chairman)

Date: