



<u>Committee and Date</u> Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership 11 th June 2019	<u>Item</u> 3
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BRIEF UPDATES

Responsible Officer Phil Holden, AONB Partnership Manager
e-mail: phil.holden@shropshire.gov.uk Tel: 01743 254741

Summary

This paper provides brief updates Partnership members on some current matters of relevance to the AONB Partnership.

Recommendation

The Partnership is recommended to note the information provided and comment.

Background

National

Defra 25 Year Environment Plan – first progress report published, and outcome indicator framework published. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan>. Discussion paper on Nature Recovery Network circulated in AONB Network for comments.

Glover Review – some visits and meetings are continuing around England. The Review is due to report in the autumn of 2019. A government response will follow.

The Agriculture Bill and Environment Bill continue to work through parliamentary processes, and NAAONB are providing input.

The national AONB Conference is from 9th -11th July – a ‘Colchester Declaration’ on biodiversity in AONBs is being prepared for launch at the event.

NAAONB ‘Taking the Lead’ programme continues – a development and collaboration programme for around 40 AONB staff. Topic Working Groups are looking at priority topics - communications, advocacy, funding, technology & data, AONB priorities and staff development.

Attended Europarc Atlantic Isles annual member meeting (National Parks & AONBs throughout UK) – focus on youth involvement and participation.

Local

Paper going to Shropshire Council Cabinet 12th June for formal approval of the AONB Management Plan and revised Terms of Reference (see Appendix 1 and link at background papers). Also scheduled for Telford & Wrekin Council Cabinet in July.

The biennial membership review of the AONB Partnership will be conducted later in the summer. Individual and Parish/Town Council seats will be advertised and reappointed, and organisations with lower attendance will be asked to reapply. The number of appointments will be slightly reduced in line with revised Terms of Reference.

The Equalities Assessment for the Management Plan and the Partnership Terms of Reference highlighted the desirability of further youth engagement – ideally through the structure of the AONB Partnership as well as project work. Ways of trying to do this will be scoped out.

The Marches Nature Partnership is launching a Strategy and continuing to work closely with the LEP.

Shropshire Council - Peter Nutting (Leader), Clive Wright (CEO) and Mark Barrow (Director of Place) are visiting the AONB team on 6th June.

Ironbridge Power Station redevelopment Masterplan released (see agenda item 9).

AONB team activity

Development phase activity on 'Our Common Cause' project continues, towards Stage 2 bid submission in the autumn.

Next phase of Unmuddying the Waters project has started in the Clun catchment (agenda item 6).

Staff recruitment in progress for Water Environment Grant project (agenda item 7).

Shropshire Hills Tourism Expo held on 3rd April with Shropshire Hills Tourism was well attended and very successful.

Shuttle bus season is under way.

A farmer meeting has been organised locally for the Uplands Alliance.

Lucie Zak a post-graduate on placement is undertaking a study of soil erosion vulnerability in the Upper Clun catchment.

Landscape Guidance contract – ongoing, with some draft documents recently received.

Grants for 2019-20 Conservation Fund projects have been issued, and claims processed for 2018-19 projects.

New Shropshire Council IT system for finance and HR is in place.

We are helping to undertake a tourism and visitor economy study for the Stepping Stones project.

New AONB website for accessibility from mobile devices is in preparation.

Meeting scheduled to discuss motocross at Picklescott.

Talks given at annual parish meetings of Church Stretton and Llanfair Waterdine.

Attending CLA 'Making Space for Nature' event at Plowden Hall.

List of Background Papers

Shropshire Council Cabinet paper on AONB Management Plan and AONB Partnership Terms of Reference, available at <https://shropshire.gov.uk/committee-services/ieListDocuments.aspx?Cid=130&Mid=3932&Ver=4>

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

Appendix 1 Main sections of Shropshire Council Cabinet report 12th June 2019

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1. Summary

1.1 The Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan 2019-2024 sets out the priorities for conserving and enhancing the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty for the next five years. The AONB is a statutory designation to conserve and enhance natural beauty covering 23% of Shropshire and has been in place since 1958.

1.2 The Management Plan is a statutory requirement and is produced jointly with Telford & Wrekin Council through the AONB Partnership – a Joint Advisory Committee. The Plan has been developed in partnership with a range of stakeholders and was made available for public consultation from November 2018 to January 2019. Formal approval is by the two local authorities.

1.3 The Vision of the Management Plan is:

The natural beauty of the Shropshire Hills landscape is conserved, enhanced and helped to adapt - by sympathetic land management, by co-ordinated action and by sustainable communities; and is valued for its richness of geology, wildlife and heritage, and its contribution to prosperity and wellbeing.

1.4 At the same time, but not directly connected to the Management Plan, the Terms of Reference of the AONB Partnership (Joint Advisory Committee) have been updated and slightly revised, and these also require formal approval by the two Councils.

1.5 A formal request to Defra to create an independent Conservation Board for the AONB (supported by the Council Cabinet on 19th October 2016) has been shelved by Defra while a national review of designated landscapes is conducted. The Review Panel, led by Julian Glover, is due to report in the autumn of 2019, and its recommendations may affect whether the Conservation Board proposal for the Shropshire Hills is likely to progress. In the meantime, the current structure continues, of a Joint Advisory Committee (the AONB Partnership) and the AONB Partnership staff team hosted by Shropshire Council.

1.6 Appendix 2 details the proposed revised Terms of Reference for the AONB Partnership (Joint Advisory Committee). These have been developed by the Partnership in consultation with the two Councils' Legal teams.

2. Recommendations

2.1 It is recommended that Cabinet approve the Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan 2019-24, and the revised Terms of Reference for the AONB Partnership.

3. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

3.1 AONB Management Plan. Preparation of the Management Plan by the large and inclusive AONB Partnership group is the established national methodology, and national guidance has been followed. The team members leading the work have been responsible for previous Management Plan reviews.

3.2 The statutory timescale for completion of the review of the Plan is by 31st March 2019. Defra have been sent the completed Plan as endorsed by the AONB Partnership and informed that final approval by the Councils is imminent, and have congratulated us on the new Plan.

3.3 Natural England have given support to the draft Plan in their 'formal observations':

"Natural England considers that the plan meets the statutory requirement that the constituent local authorities for the Shropshire Hills AONB and wider project area have, acting jointly, produced a plan that formulates their policy for their AONB and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it.

We consider that the Plan has broadly followed the guidance contained in CA23 and CA221 and the updated advice from the National Association for AONBs (prepared by Steve Preston Associates, 2017) and therefore presents a comprehensive strategy for the management of the AONB.

In conclusion, Natural England recognises that the production of this final draft represents the culmination of many months of intensive work on the part of Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership and particularly the Shropshire Hills AONB staff unit. We congratulate you on this huge effort."

Emma Johnson, Area Manager West Midlands Natural England

3.4 In the Plan preparation, three workshops were held with the AONB Partnership, and Management Plan topics were also discussed at working groups such as the Clun Catchment Partnership, Wrekin Forest Partnership and Shropshire Hills Destination Partnership. Partnership members felt that:

- Protection of the landscape and biodiversity needs to be better in practice.
- The planning system needs to take more account of the AONB.
- We must help people to see the AONB as an asset rather than a barrier to economic growth.
- Sustainability should influence all areas – land management, tourism, communities.

3.5 A public on-line survey was carried out during April and May 2018. With over 200 responses, the survey revealed a high degree of support for the primary purpose to 'conserve and enhance' the AONB. The most valued characteristics of the Shropshire Hills were dramatic views and wide panoramas, opportunities to walk and explore, wildlife and relatively natural areas, peace and quiet and a chance to unwind. Top concerns were the loss/neglect of habitats and wildlife, inappropriate new built

development, losing the Shropshire Hills' distinctive character, the quality of water and condition of rivers.

- 3.6 The Sustainability Appraisal of the Management Plan conducted in parallel with the Plan review meets the legal requirements for Strategic Environmental Assessment. A conclusion of the Sustainability Appraisal is that the high quality of the AONB's environment is a huge economic asset which, if sensitively used and not damaged by inappropriate development, can deliver great long-term economic benefits. In the need however to take a long-term view and protect this asset, there is a risk of the designation being perceived as hampering economic progress. This may be overcome by demonstrating the positive economic effects of the environment and of looking after it.
- 3.7 In the public consultation relatively few responses were received, partly since all key delivery partners are involved in the Plan preparation through the AONB Partnership. A specific meeting was held with representatives of the National Farmers Union to discuss their comments.
- 3.8 As well as underpinning the area's economy, the high-quality landscape of the AONB is vitally important to the health and wellbeing of both Shropshire residents and visitors. The AONB designation and activity linked to it brings huge benefits to the people of Shropshire.
- 3.9 There is a perception among a good number of partners that Shropshire Council does not take the AONB seriously enough or regard it as positively as an asset to the county as it should. The AONB Partnership seeks a process of awareness raising and greater engagement with various parts of the Council over the delivery period of this Management Plan to help address this. The national Glover Review is likely to recommend changes to strengthen the status of AONBs and their organisations, which should help to reinforce a higher profile locally.
- 3.10 AONB Partnership Terms of Reference. The process of updating the AONB Partnership Terms of Reference was led by the Partnership's Chair and its sub-group the Management Board (now Strategy & Performance Committee). Several consultations were held with the Legal teams of both Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council, and drafts were seen and endorsed by the whole Partnership.
- 3.13 The Terms of Reference were last approved by the two Councils in 2010, when the Partnership also acted as the LEADER Local Action Group. Updates to the Terms of Reference endorsed by the AONB Partnership in October 2014 and November 2015 did not reach the stage of formal approval by the Councils.
- 3.14 The changes made this time are mainly minor amendments to wording. Small substantive changes include:
- The maximum number of seats on the Partnership is proposed to be reduced from 45 to 36. Reductions would be made by means of currently vacant seats and through the membership review due in the autumn of 2019. An inclusive group is valuable, but this has to be balanced with manageability, and the current size is believed to be the largest of any AONB Joint Advisory Committee in the country.

- The Management Board has been re-named the Strategy & Performance Committee and now has separate Terms of Reference. As a sub-committee of the Partnership, its Terms of Reference are approved by the Partnership itself.

3.15 The Equality and Social Inclusion Impact Assessment (ESIIA) initial screening and assessment follow up is shown in appendix 1.

4. Financial Implications

4.1 The Management Plan is a plan for the Shropshire Hills area and not for any one organisation. It sets out aspirations for projects and delivery activities but does not make any binding financial commitments.

4.2 Section 85 of the Countryside & Rights of Way Act places a legal duty on all public bodies to 'have regard to the purposes of AONB designation' in carrying out their functions. The Management Plan is therefore relevant to a wide variety of Council services including planning, countryside and environment, highways, economic development, public protection, education and community. National policy is that AONBs should be distinguished from other areas and higher standards should be applied in relation to maintaining landscape quality. This may sometimes result in higher costs, but it is not possible to quantify these.

4.3 One of Shropshire Council's main direct commitments to implementing the Management Plan is through providing match funding for Defra core funding for the AONB Partnership team. Continuity of local authority funding is vital to the team's activities, and the gearing of Council funds with other sources is exceptional. Shropshire Council's contribution is among the lowest local authority contributions in the country for the size of the AONB.

4.4 The Council provides administrative support for the AONB Partnership Joint Advisory Committee meetings through the Democratic Services team, but there are no financial implications through this from the changes to the Terms of Reference.

5. Background

5.1 This is the fourth statutory Management Plan for the AONB since the requirement to produce a plan was enacted by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

5.2 The character and quality of the Shropshire Hills landscape are of high importance but under increasing pressure. The condition of some of the special qualities of the AONB is declining. Conservation activity through many schemes and projects is not enough to prevent some declines in wildlife. Not enough progress is being made with some water quality and catchment management targets. Farming, especially in the uplands, is at an important crossroads as we head towards new UK policy and funding regimes. Economic forces are increasing development pressure and reducing resources for positive management of the landscape, leading to more deterioration of valuable features by neglect.

- 5.3 The Plan sets out policies of the local authorities, and proposed actions for a wider variety of partners, under three main aims:
- Land management supporting natural beauty and landscape
 - Planning for a sustainable economy and communities
 - People enjoying and caring about the landscape
- 5.4 The Plan will help deliver many of the priorities of Defra's 25 Environment Plan - clean air and water, thriving plants and wildlife, reduced risk from flooding and drought, using natural resources more sustainably and efficiently, enhanced beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment.

6. Additional Information

- 6.1 Some of the Management Plan's top priority actions include:
- Working with Defra and other partners to ensure new Environmental Land Management Systems deliver AONB priorities.
 - Establishing a large programme of planting of trees outside woodlands, partly to offset losses from Ash dieback disease.
 - Developing the 'Stepping Stones' project into a long-term delivery initiative for the Long Mynd – Stiperstones area.
 - Developing Landscape Guidance and Design Guidance for planning.
 - Developing a youth engagement project incorporating the John Muir Award, Young Rangers and traineeships.
 - Supporting activities which will contribute to a low-carbon Shropshire Hills area, compatible with the AONB's special qualities.
- 6.2 The Management Plan Actions will be monitored and reviewed by the AONB Partnership and progress reported publicly. The condition of the AONB landscape will be monitored through a set of headline indicators, and a new set of performance indicators for activity of the AONB Partnership team are currently being developed nationally.