

NET ZERO AND NATURE RECOVERY IN THE SHROPSHIRE HILLS

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Summary

This paper provides some background material which along with presentations, will inform discussion at the meeting.

Recommendation

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

Background

The AONB Partnership will continue to give net zero and nature recovery a top priority in our work, bringing together as we do many key players, and encouraging climate action to embrace wider ecological aspects.

The importance of this has been highlighted in our Defra funding offer letter for 2020-21, just received:

"More broadly, I also ask how you will use your grant funding to deliver nature recovery, work towards net zero carbon through nature-based solutions, and support the needs of communities in modern Britain. I would like to see how you intend to work in partnership strategically with other groups, including other National Park Authorities and AONBs. We will set out more detail of any specific actions we would like to you to take on this basis ahead of the start of the new financial year."

We would like to use the Partnership meeting to move on thinking and action around net zero and nature recovery, using the following summary ideas as a start:

Net zero

- Many of the issues for the Shropshire Hills about reaching net zero are the same as the UK overall – across sectors of energy, transport, domestic, agriculture and food, etc, and the linked changes needed by government, businesses, local authorities, communities and individuals.
- Some factors are particular (though not unique) to the Shropshire Hills – e.g.
 - Relatively low in industry and **high significance of agriculture and land management, with high proportion of pasture and livestock farming.**
 - rurality means a **high dependence on private cars**, but better access to woodfuel.

- lots of **older, larger rural properties** which are relatively energy inefficient.
- **high landscape value** – seen as areas less suitable for large scale renewable energy generation – likely to be pressure for more. Small scale renewables are compatible with AONB, and uptake has been less than expected over last 10 years
- We need a **balance of land use** – food from arable, pasture, woodland and forestry, more natural habitats, places for people, energy, etc.

Nature recovery

Proposed generalised actions for nature recovery in the Shropshire Hills:

- **Best possible management of existing high quality habitats as ‘core areas’** of a nature recovery network, e.g. SSSIs, Wildlife Sites, recorded areas of priority habitat, and ancient woodlands.
- **Improving margins and buffer areas to good habitat** especially heathland and rough grassland hills – to soften transitions, including mixed habitats, scrub and woodland.
- **Hydrological re-naturalisation of catchment headwater areas** – rewetting and roughening of improved and drained pastures, including restoration of locally extensive hilltop peatlands and small upland flushes. Peatlands can store more carbon than woodlands, but many are drained, modified for farming and forestry and a source of emissions - need to be wet and absorbing and storing carbon. Also flood alleviation benefits from slowing the flow.
- **Regenerating and expanding existing upland semi-natural woodlands** by excluding stock. Also restoration of Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) and sensitive management of commercial woodland – need timber in construction, but low impact.
- **Woodland creation and increasing tree cover - mimicing natural pattern, largely native species**, improve habitat networks. E.g. steep banks, upland gullies and streams, field corners, and trees outside woods including hedgerow trees and agroforestry. Also respond to tree disease, and more restoration of hedges.
- **Habitat improvement of river and stream corridors** including buffer strips with tree and shrub planting and control of stock access. Restoration of flood plain wetland habitats.
- **Managing and re-creating wildflower meadows and species-rich grasslands**, including roadside verges. Yes we probably need a rather wilder landscape overall, but some important habitats still need active management.
- **Management of invasive non-native species** such as Signal Crayfish, Himalayan Balsam.
- **More sustainable regenerative management of farmland** e.g. pasture regimes which increase soil organic content and reduce water run-off (e.g. reduced compaction, buffering and small wetlands), arable farming avoiding soil loss and harm to rivers by avoiding steep slopes and erosion-vulnerable land.
- **Involving people in nature recovery and appreciation in many different ways.** Many of the behavioural changes which would help lower carbon emissions also have huge health and wellbeing benefits e.g. more active travel (walking, cycling, etc).

List of Background Papers

Some additional material has been circulated by email.

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