

## UPDATE ON VARIOUS MATTERS

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### Summary

This paper provides an update on significant matters, including the Glover Review and recent team activity. Further updates will be given verbally at the meeting.

### Recommendation

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

### Background

#### Glover Review

The final report of the Glover Review was published on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2019 and some key aspects highlighted in the Partnership paper of 8<sup>th</sup> October. Discussion at the recent NAAONB Lead Officers meeting in February was about the initial assessment of which of the recommendations can be picked up in the short term, which require policy change (therefore medium term) and which require legislative change (and are therefore more long term). The government's response to the report is currently expected in the autumn.

#### AONB Team activity

The update of 26<sup>th</sup> February for the Strategy & Performance Committee on recent work of the AONB Partnership team is included at Appendix 1 for the information of members.

#### **List of Background Papers**

Glover Review final report at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-landscapes-national-parks-and-aonbs-2018-review>.

#### **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 26<sup>th</sup> February 2020 update on team activity for the Strategy & Performance Committee

#### **Item 4. AONB Team Work Programme update**

##### **1. Summary**

This paper presents an update on recent activity in the 2019-20 work programme.

##### **2. Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership Team Work Programme – updates on recent work**

**TAKING ACTION - on the ground and in our communities - to conserve and enhance natural beauty and to promote enjoyment and understanding.**

##### 'Unmuddying the Waters' project work

This is funded by the Environment Agency, and a two-year collaborative agreement for 2019-2021 is in place for Alison Jones' post as Clun Catchment Officer.

Capital expenditure for 2019-20 is £55,000, for major projects, plus a number of smaller ones, dependant on funds being available.

##### **1. Bridge construction**

The bridge is the major element in the restoration of a 300m degraded stretch of a tributary watercourse which flows into the Clun just upstream of Recovery Site 1. The bridge construction is now completed, apart from some minor additions.

- Tree coppicing and pollarding of bankside trees. Completed.
- Fencing and gates. Scheduled for completion in February.
- New tree and shrub planting once fencing is complete.
- Second crossing upstream to be replaced by a new culvert once conditions are more favourable.

##### **2. Broadward Bridge Highway Drain Diversion**

We are working in partnership with Environment Agency and officers of the Shropshire Highways team and WSP engineers, in full consultation with farm manager and tenant.

- SC funded the design drawn up by WSP, to divert a drain through a new culvert under a road to discharge into a low-lying meadow.
- Three contractors invited to quote, and two responded. The selected contractor has scheduled the work to start on 16<sup>th</sup> March.

##### **3. Smaller projects. Fencing to enable woodland creation with Woodland Trust funds.**

##### **4. An additional £5,000 has been secured from the EA, to fund the installation and upgrading of a number of solar powered water supplies for livestock.**

##### Water Environment Grant (WEG) Teme-Onny-Clun (TOC) project

Due to delayed start, a number of project variations were required to be submitted to Natural England, these were approved which allowed our first claim to be submitted and approved.

Due to the recent departure of one of the Advisors to new employment, the Project is having to recruit a new Advisor for the Upper Teme Catchment - interviews took place on 10<sup>th</sup> Feb.

The recent excessively wet weather has prevented delivery of the soil aeration element of the project and this will need to be rescheduled.

Farm visits and Management Plans continued to be undertaken/produced, but the targets are challenging, and plan delivery is at different rates dependent on the Advisor experience (the need for improved Severn Rivers Trust (SRT) support has been raised with SRT project manager - especially GIS). Advisors feel under pressure and are finding it difficult to meet these targets.

The soil testing element of the project is proving to be physically demanding for the Advisors, and furthermore the recommendations issued by the soil testing laboratory may not be compatible with the project objectives (i.e. they are based on agronomy and focused on maximising production). This element of the project should be reconsidered.

External GIS Training had been approved by variation, but this itself will require a further variation due to providers need to provide separate training sessions for ArcMap and ArcPro. A new quote is pending from another provider.

Taken together, the project is behind target, catching up will be difficult and dependent on the qualities of the replacement advisor and also improved advisor support by SRT. The risks this presents to the AONB Partnership and SRT will need to be managed carefully (especially the need to ensure that management costs do not exceed 15% of the delivery costs). Further project variations will be necessary.

#### Woodland creation - Woodland Trust funded work

As part of our ongoing partnership with Woodland Trust, we now have more funding coming into the AONB for woodland creation. The Trust are providing some funding to support Alison Jones' post and an allocation of £15,000 to be spent on new woodland creation in the Clun catchment. Two projects have now been completed, with two further projects scheduled for February and March.

Climate and ecological emergency have raised the profile of trees in the AONB, and there is increased demand for landowner advice/visits. Woodland Trust have confirmed that their funding through MOREwoods, MOREhedges and "special projects" is eligible across the AONB (rather than just the Clun catchment) as part of the "Shropshire Hills Treescapes" area. This area of work raises the profile of the AONB, but there are capacity issues to be addressed as demand for advice/visit is likely to increase.

#### White-clawed Crayfish surveys

Mike continues to represent AONB on the Marches Crayfish Partnership. Last year's survey work identified a number of possible ark sites. One of these has now been confirmed as suitable and agreement with the landowner gained. We are still considering the best options for moving crayfish to the ark, but it is likely to be translocation of adult crayfish from a nearby river or juveniles raised in hatchery – both will be undertaken under a Natural England and/or NRW licence.

#### Other Clun/Teme catchment delivery work

We are involved in the Teme Catchment Partnership Steering Group, Freshwater Pearl Mussel Steering Group, Clun Field Officers Group meetings and run the Clun Catchment Partnership.

Lucie Zak, a post graduate student from ENGEEES (National School for Water and Environmental Engineering of Strasbourg, France) has now completed her internship with the AONB Partnership. Her report, "*Study of the Dynamics of Runoff, Erosion and Pesticides Transfer in the Clun Catchment*" can be viewed on the AONB website. We hope this study will be useful to inform future conservation priorities in the Clun Catchment.

### 'Our Common Cause' Upland Commons project

The Stage 2 Delivery bid was successfully submitted as planned by 19<sup>th</sup> November deadline.

We held our last Area Group meeting on Nov 22<sup>nd</sup>. This included a visit to Clee Liberty common and lunch. If the bid is successful and the delivery phase goes ahead, members agreed to re-join the Area Group in 2020. The National Lottery Heritage Fund Northern Committee visited Cumbria as part of their deliberations on 4<sup>th</sup> February and the Committee will meet formally to make the decision on approval mid-March 2020. Joy's contract on the project has ended, but she is attending through her role with us, a 'Lessons Learnt' session for the development phase as part of the Foundation for Common Land's AGM in London on 26<sup>th</sup> February, which will help to inform set-up for the delivery Phase. If the funding is approved in March, delivery of the project will start late April/early May 2020. We have met with a PhD student who is carrying out research on natural capital and commons, linked to the project.

### Stepping Stones project

We support this major landscape scale initiative at a number of levels -

- Phil participates in the Project Partners group with regular progress meetings.
- Cath is contracted to support farmer engagement. The Upper Onny Farmers group has been set up and is running well, with 12 of the largest landowners/farms in the project area involved. The Defra Environmental Land Management (ELM) Test/Trial on Whole Farm Plans has been approved and is under way and going well. 3 events have been held (2 indoor meetings and 1 on-farm workshop at Partridge Farm) to introduce the consultants, launch the whole farm plan test, and share initial thoughts. The next meeting was held in December to finalise the farm plan framework/process and select the five farms to test the process on. Agricultural consultants Promar International were appointed to work on the test but a decision was taken to terminate their contract at the end of January as they were struggling to deliver all the required work within budget and timescale. National Trust (NT) have commissioned their internal consultancy staff to do the remaining work with the five Upper Onny farmers on the Test & Trial. Richard Wheeldon and Carolyn Jones are carrying out this work and their areas of expertise match what is needed. Richard is NT Food & Farming consultant and a beef & sheep farmer in the Peak District and Carolyn Jones is NT Environment & Wildlife Adviser. Richard and Carolyn met our 5 selected farmers during the first two weeks of February to carry out the Farm Business Audits and Environmental Assessments. Then they will meet the 5 farmers again on March 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> to present their findings and finalise the Whole Farm Plans. The whole group will meet again on 11<sup>th</sup> March to provide feedback on the whole process and have a discussion, before reporting to DEFRA.
- The National Trust have secured a year's funding from the Peoples Postcode Lottery for community activity related to Stepping Stones. A project officer Charlie Bell has been appointed, but Cath is contracted to deliver the initial community engagement during January – April. This includes three introductory evening meetings, three field visits, a community consultation and a feedback/next steps event in April. The first two events went well, with lots of interest and a willingness to get involved. 50 people attended the first event at Norbury on 30<sup>th</sup> January and 42 attended the second event at Pontesbury on February 10<sup>th</sup>. Mike is also delivering a number of Woodland Advisory visits in the Stepping Stones area supported by the PPL funding.
- Visitor Economy Research Project - Nigel is continuing to work with tourism consultant Alison Caffyn to conduct a study of farm-based tourism in the Stepping Stones area. This has involved interviews with businesses and drawing up case studies. The project will reach conclusion in March.

## **Sustainable Tourism delivery:**

### **Destination Partnership**

A Destination Partnership meeting was held in December. Unfortunately, attendance at these meetings has declined and we are considering other approaches to engaging with stakeholders. Nigel continues to represent the AONB Partnership at Visit Shropshire Hills and Ludlow Destination Partnership. He has also recently been accepted as a member of the new Visit Shropshire Board. In this role he will support networking and destination management across the county and have opportunities to influence strategy and outreach through the Marches. Nigel has contributed to the new Marches Visitor Economy Strategy and is working on the Council's Cultural Heritage Strategy. He also continues to work at a community level, keeping contact with town councils and local businesses through other aspects of his work.

Nigel is helping to arrange the 2020 Tourism Expo which will be held at Ludlow Castle on 30<sup>th</sup> March during English Tourism Week. AONB Partnership members are very welcome to attend.

### **Shuttle Buses 2020**

A review of the Shuttle Bus income and use has led to changes to the 2020 service. This will run on an hourly timetable but turn around at Plox Green, rather than continue in a circuit to Pontesbury and Pulverbatch. This has provided some savings. The proposed service for next year will run for 45 days, from May to September. It is projected that the cost of this to the Partnership budget will be less than £5,000, after the remaining allocated reserve is used. The option of removing concessionary fares for this year was considered. However advice from the Council Transport Team suggested that changing the route and removing the concessions in the same year would be unwise. The financial risk of this not working was considerably more than potentially phasing it in once the new route is established.

### **'Fix the Fort'**

This appeal for Caer Caradoc has been publicised and £2,380 has now been raised. A number of people have offered to assist as volunteers with practical repairs. We are seeking support from the charitable fund of HF Holidays (who operate the Long Mynd Hotel). Discussions are being held with Historic England, Shropshire Council rights of way team and the landowner about what works will be carried out. It is anticipated that practical work on the northern slope of the hillfort will commence this April/May. Detailed specifications for all the works and a coordination plan for volunteers is being drawn up. We have had offers of help from Shropshire Council, National Trust and Shropshire Wildlife Trust. The potential as a partnership project is very attractive.

### **Shropshire Hills Cream Tea Trail**

Visit Shropshire Hills will launch the new trail this March at the 2020 Tourism Expo.

European Charter for Sustainable Tourism – Phil presented the new Charter business awards in December as a member of the judging panel.

'Learning the Landscape through Language' – this is a children's education project on place names run through the University of Nottingham. Cath is supporting the project with some paid work, and three training courses have been held for teachers and education providers. School resources are also being developed, with input from the participating teachers. The Nottingham University team have also agreed to run an event in the Shropshire Hills AONB for the general public, which Cath will arrange.

Duke of Edinburgh's Award – Cath attended the regional D of E providers conference with Tom Blackwell from National Trust to raise awareness of the AONB and promote the Countryside Code and good behaviour by groups. 150 participants attended the conference, mainly from the West Midlands, Derbyshire and Staffordshire. This provided us with a good opportunity to reach new audiences from urban areas. It was very evident that many of the D of E leaders Cath met were unaware of the Shropshire Hills AONB, and AONBs in general, and the special features of the places their groups visit (e.g. Long Mynd – farming, working landscape, commoners, SSSIs, biodiversity, Scheduled Monuments, etc).

### **Project development:**

Young Rangers project - The bid was submitted to the National Lottery Heritage Fund by the 19<sup>th</sup> November deadline. A decision on funding will be made at Midlands & East Committee meeting on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2020. If approved, the project would need to start with recruitment of a Project Officer from April 2020.

Linking Landscapes (Trees Outside Woods) – Joy has been reviewing and updating costs for the earlier Trees Outside Woods proposal and has drafted an Expression of Interest to go to National Lottery Heritage Fund for approval to start a two-stage bid process, to be submitted in early February. If given the go ahead, Joy plans to submit a Stage 1 development bid for the 1<sup>st</sup> June 2020 deadline.

Shallow Peatlands – A bid was submitted in January at short notice for potential Environment Agency funding, following research and discussions around the AONB's resource of shallow peatlands, which are under-recognised and have not previously been a focus for attention.

Unmuddying the Waters 2020/21 - Mike has submitted to Environment Agency revised proposals for the Unmuddying the Waters project in 2020/21 – the project remit has been widened to deliver greater biodiversity gain and can now include projects such as meadows, woodlands etc. However, the freshwater environment will still be a key factor.

Water Improvement Fund - Mike submitted to Environment Agency a number of "pipeline" project proposals (allied to above) to bid for internal EA funding. More development will be required, but should it be successful it will secure an ongoing partnership agreement 2021-27.

<b>INFLUENCING OTHERS - lead and champion the delivery of public benefits from the AONB, working strategically and collaboratively from policy to grassroots level.</b>
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### AONB Management Plan

Meetings with Shropshire Council have been adapted into an Officer Group for the AONB, which will meet regularly with different staff involved. A meeting was held with Sue Lloyd from Public Health, who is interested in working with us further.

### Environment & Climate Emergency

The Community Networking event we are facilitating is scheduled for 27<sup>th</sup> February and booking numbers are looking good. The first part of the evening is for community groups to share what they are doing, followed by some informal networking and then selected short talks and workshops.

The AONB Manager continues to attend meetings of Shropshire Council's Climate Emergency Officer Group and input to discussions, e.g. commenting on a new Local Plan draft policy.

A presentation was made to the Marches Woodlands and Trees event on 28<sup>th</sup> January, with good feedback.

Research is being undertaken for the Nature Recovery Plan and principles are being developed, including on peatlands, woodlands and trees, and on emblematic species which help to communicate the changes needed. We have contracted Fiona Gomersall to provide some expert knowledge and input on this. We submitted a detailed response to the NAAONB's questionnaire survey on Nature Recovery in December and have inputted to the national sub-group working on this.

#### AONB Trust, Conservation Fund and Friends of the Shropshire Hills AONB

Conservation Fund projects funded by the AONB Trust for 2019-20 are mostly nearing completion and claims are being processed. Steph has been talking through projects ideas with potential applicants for 2020-21. Changes have been made to simplify the administration process and the grant range is now £500-£2,000. The Expressions of Interest deadline was 7<sup>th</sup> Feb and deadline for full applications is 6<sup>th</sup> March. Over 20 enquiries have been received about the Fund, with 15 EOIs submitted, totalling over £21,000. Not all of these will necessarily go forward to full application. We have £15,000 to award, and the Conservation Fund Panel meets on 18<sup>th</sup> March.

Friends membership is 117. We are working with the AONB Trust to improve display material for attending local shows. We have set up Mailchimp for sending out news, events and activities to Friends.

The Trust is looking at how to implement its Business Plan and the intention to raise larger sums of money from other trusts, businesses, etc. A sub-group of the trustees has met to look at fund-raising from other charities and trusts, which Joy is going to assist with, and a small external contract for specialist advice and support has been let, with Resilient Heritage funding.

Volunteers to assist with fund-raising are being sought, and an advert is out on the national Reach Volunteering website, but there has been no uptake so far. There are now three vacancies for Trustees, one to be appointed from the AONB Partnership.

#### Planning

We are preparing a detailed response to the proposed Ironbridge Power Station site redevelopment application, with the support of specialist landscape advice.

The AONB Manager is to deliver a briefing session on the AONB in March to members and officers as part of a training programme on planning. A session is also to be held with the South Planning team.

#### Other influencing

We have commented on a number of Ordinary Watercourse consultations and Countryside Stewardship woodland plans in the AONB.

Mike attended a Buglife B-lines workshop - defining nature recovery networks in the Marches.

We continue to provide input into Shropshire Council's Cultural Strategy Steering Group.

We are supporting Church Stretton's Community Led Plan process and are discussing how to help them involve farmers.



### Landscape guidance

Countryside have provided further draft material for the Landscape Guidance on which we have commented.

### Local partnership working

The Wrekin Forest Partnership met on 14<sup>th</sup> January. Telford & Wrekin Council's Ecology team propose to co-ordinate the production of a new Wrekin Forest Plan.

The Clun Catchment Partnership is due to meet 4<sup>th</sup> March.

### Communications & public awareness

The new mobile-device-friendly AONB website has gone live, and much of the content has now been added, with some further additions and fine tuning still in progress.

2020 public events are being collated for the Great Days publication.

Phil is doing a talk to Cardington Parish Council on 25<sup>th</sup> February.

We are active partners in the Hay Meadow Festival for 2020, which is being held at the Discovery Centre on 11<sup>th</sup> July. As previously, this a partnership effort involving ourselves, Discovery Centre, Natural England, National Trust, Caring for God's Acre and Shropshire Wildlife Trust.

<b>MANAGING OUR BUSINESS - develop a robust, effective and financially sustainable AONB organisation.</b>
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### Glover Review

The Glover Review was discussed at the NAAONB Chairs' Conference in November. The government's response is expected during 2020. The Defra funding settlement for 2020-21 is expected imminently.

We have had contact with colleagues in Telford & Wrekin and the National Trust to look at potential for research and project development work around diversity including BAME audiences.

### Resilient Heritage

We held a team development day jointly with the Wye Valley AONB team and the NAAONB on 29<sup>th</sup> January, using the Lumina Spark profiling tool, which people found interesting and helpful.

We are setting up a youth engagement event with South Shropshire Youth Forum, to link young people with Partnership and team members to discuss environmental issues and action. This is scheduled for the evening of 2<sup>nd</sup> April.

We are approaching the end of the project and need to complete the evaluation phase, probably with a joint workshop with the AONB Trust.

### AONB Team and office

The team undertook joint IT training with a trainer from Shirehall on 10<sup>th</sup> February.

Subject to WEG approval there is an opportunity for AONB staff to benefit from GIS foundation training to be delivered by the Rivers Trust.

Joy's contract as Funding & Programmes Officer has been extended to March 2021.

Agreement was reached about funding to resolve lack of kitchen facilities at Drovers House, but the quotes have expired and are having to be renewed, which is causing further delays.

We have made progress with trying to secure a green energy supplier for the offices.

We have recently been informed by the Council's Asset Management team that we are very likely to be moved out of Drovers House as the Council needs the space for other staff, and we are in discussion about other possibilities, including the lodge building at Acton Scott Historic Working Farm.

#### National Association for AONBs

Phil and James attended the NAAONB Chairs' Conference in London on 28<sup>th</sup> November.

The 'Taking the Lead' programme of development and collaboration which Phil took part in has now finished, with a final event on 19<sup>th</sup> November. The Staff Development Topic Working Group is likely to continue, and its national induction pack has recently been launched, with positive feedback.

Phil attended the Lead Officers meeting in February on 10-11<sup>th</sup> February (see item 5).

### **3. RECOMMENDATION:**

**The Committee is recommended to comment on the work programme updates.**

This paper has been prepared by Phil Holden, AONB Partnership Manager and the AONB Team. For further details contact 01743 254741/ [phil.holden@shropshire.gov.uk](mailto:phil.holden@shropshire.gov.uk).