



<u>Committee and Date</u> Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership 31 st March 2021	<u>Item</u> 8
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AONB PARTNERSHIP TEAM WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE 2020-21

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Summary

This paper updates members on work of the team in 2020-21 as the Financial Year draws to a close.

Recommendation

The Partnership is recommended to note and comment on the update.

Background

TAKING ACTION - on the ground and in our communities - to conserve and enhance natural beauty and to promote enjoyment and understanding.
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'Unmuddying the Waters' project work (Environment Agency funded, Year 2 of 2 year agreement)

- Broadward Highway Drain Diversion. Working very effectively in capturing runoff.
- Clunton Brook – complete. Riparian tree planting completed in February.
- Wetland restoration in the Redlake Valley – de-culverting complete. Tree planting carried out by landowners and volunteers from Severn Tree Trust.
- Sustainable drainage schemes at The Down. Fencing of ditch and wetland now completed.
- Folly Brook crossing – upgraded with new fencing and river gates.
- Fencing of Cabin Gutter, to protect watercourse and dingle woodland.
- Fencing at Brynmawr to protect dingle woodlands and wetland in progress, plus installation of new water supply for stock.
- The project will end March 2021 but further funds are pledged (see Project development).

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

The adviser for the Clun project left in December and after a two rounds of recruitment by Severn Rivers Trust, Farzana Azad has been appointed as Clun advisor and started work with the Trust 15th Feb. Claims and variations have been submitted. Due to Covid impacting on farm visits (staff furloughed), the project has been extended until September 2021. The advisors have continued to work through the winter lockdown, but face to face visits have not

really be possible and this has set the project back further. Severn Rivers Trust and ourselves are negotiating with the Natural England WEG team to explore options.

Brook Vessons Hydrological/Headwater Restoration project

This site is contiguous with Stiperstones and Hollies SSSI/SAC (Brook Vessons SWT reserve) and extends wildlife habitats further down the hill. The zone of influence for these works is estimated at c.28 ha. Land-drain fracturing has been undertaken across 15.6ha of formerly drained land, ditch blocking/leaky dams installed along 646m of ditch and 2 scrapes and 2 ponds completed and fenced to exclude livestock. Surface flow is increasing as planned, areas of wet flush have already appeared and reduced runoff within the channel is apparent. The landowner is in discussions with Natural England re Countryside Stewardship.

Woodland creation (Woodland Trust funded) - MOREwoods, MOREhedges + special projects

Main river Clun. Tree planting to restore riparian woodland and create new wet woodland. Advisory work on potential schemes continues. MOREwoods sites can take a couple of years to come to realisation – some sites from 2019 are being planted this season.

Crayfish Ark - surveys identified a White-clawed crayfish ark site in the Clun Catchment.

Environment Agency staff have now translocated crayfish from River Redlake to the ark site.

'Our Common Cause' Upland Commons project (national project)

The national Programme Manager Sam Caraway started in the autumn and recruitment for the Area Project Officers was completed with Sylvia Edwards being appointed to the Shropshire Hills post (employed by National Trust and hosted with our team). Phil now sits along with representatives of the other protected landscape boides on the national Project Board. A press release was issued on 19th February 2021, an update has been sent to the Area Group and a well attended online meeting was held on 24th February.

Young Rangers project

Joe Penfold the Project Officer started at the beginning of December and has been working up procedures for health and safety and safeguarding within current guidelines and undertook a first session at Poles Coppice before Christmas. South Shropshire Youth Forum have delivered four sessions so far, two with each of their groups in Craven Arms and Clee Hill. Rich Morley from SSYF is also scoping out and liaising with partner organisations on possible project sites.

We are letting a facilitation contract for the 'Youth Voice for Nature' strand of the project, working to support an older cohort of young people to highlight their environmental concerns and link with the AONB Partnership structure and other organisations. This will give the young people personal development opportunities and improve youth representation in our work.

Stepping Stones project

Cath and Phil have been working closely with the National Trust on development of further stages of the project. Cath has continued contracted work on the Upper Onny Farmers Group Whole Farm Plan Defra ELM Test & Trial, working on Phase 2 of the project and a farmer attitude survey. A further Test & Trial proposal is being developed to integrate the historic environment into Whole Farm Plans (WFP). Opportunities to implement some of the recommendations from the WFPs, across several farm holdings, are also being explored, including a possible application to Severn Trent's Boost for Biodiversity Fund for creating and enhancing hay meadows. The National Trust awaits confirmation on a second bid to the

Green Recovery Challenge Fund, including payment for more of Cath's time to continue her work with the Upper Onny Farmers Group, including delivery of a programme of knowledge transfer events and farm visits.

Sustainable Tourism delivery:

Destination Partnership – Discussions with tourism organisations, land and heritage management partners and attractions at a local and county level have reinforced the value of a coordinated approach to managing the destination. The joint response to visitor pressure as a result of the pandemic has heightened the priority for all partners. We hope to continue this new working practice to address future concerns regulating climate change, sustainable economies, nature recovery and place management.

The pandemic has created challenges for many of our closest partners and we are continuing to work widely, providing advice and support to Visit Shropshire, and for Visit Shropshire Hills, Destination Ludlow and the Clun Business & Economic Working Group. The inclusion of the AONB Partnership in the work of the Shropshire Tourism Action & Recovery (STAR) Group, set up between Telford and Wrekin Council, Shropshire Council and Visit Shropshire has been important to ensure that our work for sustainable management is at the core of countywide plans. The next stage is to coordinate an audit of the facilities and parking capacity at our key countryside sites and beauty spots. Many partners have already signed up to help collate this. The potential to use volunteers to gather further information will also be explored.

The results of the visitor survey in Church Stretton and Carding Mill Valley conducted by us in August have been analysed and findings shared with partners. An approach to helping keep visitors informed of congestion at key sites, using social media hashtags, involving all of the managing organisations and where appropriate, local volunteers, is being piloted this Easter. Evaluation after the Easter holidays will help establish how the system could be improved. This work has put the AONB Partnership in the centre of a new collaborative network, helping to manage visitor pressure at the most popular outdoor locations. The enthusiasm for this piece of work is very evident.

Discussions have started with partners about revisiting/improving the Much Wenlock to Craven Arms cycle route, and also developing networks of craft and local producers.

Shuttle Buses – We intend to run the service in 2021, using the proposed changes for the 2020 service involving a revised route with the bus turning at Stiperstones village on an hourly timetable. Details and budgeting is being finalised with key partners. It is proposed that the new service will no longer include the concessionary fare scheme, but instead offer a discounted season ticket for regular users. We will evaluate the response to this but it is hoped that this will enable us to run a break-even service on reduced grant funding. We would like to thank Church Stretton and Shropshire Council for their continued support.

'Fix the Fort' – Covid restrictions allowing, we hope to make a start on practical work using the funds raised so far as well as seeking further funds. Work to arrange and coordinate this will start in spring, with practical work planned for late summer.

'Learning the Landscape through Language' (children's education project on place names) Cath continues to support this project. New resources are being developed for schools. The project was suspended, due to closure of schools during the current Covid lockdown but is due to restart again in April 2021 and schools have reopened.

Undergrounding of electricity cables – we are liaising with Western Power and intend to contact Parish Councils for further suggestions for schemes.

Project development:

Peatlands – Unfortunately our bid to the Green Recovery Challenge Fund was not successful. Funding offered by Environment Agency for 2020-21 was allocated too late in the year (September) to allow the work to be progressed and cannot be carried over to next Financial Year. Our proposals have been shared with a new Regional Peatlands Officer at Natural England. The new Defra Peatland Fund looks a more appropriate option and will be explored.

Upper Habberley Brook mini-catchment – The REAction catchment project (WEG) is going to invite landowners in this sub-catchment to get together to discuss co-ordinated action for improvements to habitats and water quality and natural flood management.

Linking Landscapes (Trees Outside Woods) – NLHF is reopening applications for relevant programmes in February so work will be picked up on this, although NLHF criteria have been reviewed and amended. The context continues to change rapidly, with Shropshire Council now having some Defra funding for a 2.5 year Trees Outside Woods project focused on agro-forestry and orchards.

Environment Agency – We are in continued discussion with EA over current and potential funding streams. EA have pledged £40,000 for 2021/2022 to continue partnership working in the Clun Catchment.

Woodland Trust – Partnership arrangement confirmed c.£20,000 for 2021/2022 in the Clun Catchment.

A49 corridor - We are in discussion with Kier over a potential application to one of the Highways Agency environmental funds and supplied them with a comprehensive report of suggested activity.

INFLUENCING OTHERS - lead and champion the delivery of public benefits from the AONB, working strategically and collaboratively from policy to grassroots level.

AONB Management Plan

A progress report on actions was taken to the November AONB Partnership meeting and published. The 2019-2020 Annual Review was published.

Climate partnerships

We have maintained strong input in meetings and draft documents to both South Shropshire Climate Action and the Shropshire Climate Action Partnership (SCAP), including through their Land & Biodiversity sub-groups. These have been valuable groups for debating issues and raising understanding. SCAP published the Zero Carbon Shropshire Plan on 31st December. Phil also attends Shropshire Council's Climate Emergency Officer Group.

Nature Recovery Plan

Mike Kelly has been liaising with local partners on opportunity mapping and we have been linking with NAAONB who have employed a Nature Recovery Officer. We have taken the opportunity of talks and meetings to disseminate key principles and ideas and gain feedback on these. Phil has led the plan writing and discussions with key partners and the draft has been released for consultation on 22nd March (see agenda item 3).

Environmental Land Management (ELM) Advocacy

We were allocated c£7,500 of funding from Defra in November to undertake a small programme of advocacy for the ELM scheme by the end of March. We opted to do this work in house, and most team members attended three briefing sessions run by NAAONB during December. We contacted farmers during January and February to encourage participation in some national on-line seminars and to discuss with them the transition to ELM. We used existing networks as much as possible and are grateful to partners who have helped publicise the webinars. (see agenda item 4).

Farming in Protected Landscapes programme

Defra announced this three year programme of funding in December, due to start in April. To date no further information has been received, so the start seems inevitably delayed (see agenda item 4).

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

AONB Conservation Fund – the 2020-21 projects have been progressing as far as possible. Project ideas are being received for applications for 2021-22. 8 projects are going forward to the grant award panel on 23rd March.

Friends – newsletters were sent out in February & March. Renewal letters were sent to members who pay by cheque.

AONB Trust and fund-raising – Successful bids to *the Garfield Weston Foundation and the Martin Wills Wildlife Maintenance Trust* has brought in an extra £6,000 to the Conservation Fund. The AONB Trust has appointed Neil Willcox as a new trustee. Data Sharing Agreement drafted. List of local shows and events to attend this year is being put together.

Planning

We submitted a detailed response on the Shropshire Draft Local Plan Regulation 18 consultation in October. Around half of our comments and suggested improvements were taken on board in the Regulation 19 draft. We submitted a Reg 19 response in February which has been circulated to members. We have made substantive comments on three planning applications.

Other influencing

We have commented on or provided input to:

- a number of Ordinary Watercourse consultations
- ICCAN consultation on aircraft noise
- Forestry Commission/Countryside Stewardship woodland creation plans
- FC Felling Licence proposals
- APPG on Covid-19 impacts on leisure & hospitality - NAAONB & LEP
- Shropshire and T&W Visitor Economy Strategy
- Buglife B-lines nature recovery corridors
- Defra Rural Tourism roundtable
- Shropshire Visitor Economy Covid recovery plan
- England Peat Strategy Consultation
- Europarc Federation Strategy consultation

Local partnership working

An online meeting was held of the Shropshire Council officer group for the AONB in November. We are planning briefings and discussion with some relatively new senior SC

managers. We have participated in SC Culture, Leisure & Tourism meetings for managers and staff. Alison Kay participates in the SC Employee Reference Group. Mike has been working with SC Highways and Drainage and Flooding Teams to share knowledge of Clun highways drainage network. We work closely with SC Natural Environment, Tree and Climate Change teams, the Visitor Economy Officer Andrea Fox, and with Telford & Wrekin's Tourism and Natural Environment teams.

Phil has taken part in meetings of the Marches Nature Partnership.

A Clun Catchment Partnership meeting was held on 18th March with 18 attendees. The Clun Freshwater Pearl Mussel Steering Group is to be reinstated (still pending).

Mike sits on the Teme Partnership Steering Group and the Shropshire Invasive Non-Native Species Initiative Steering Group. Alison and Mike attend the Clun Field Officers meetings.

Joy attended the West Midlands Environment Funding Advisory Group meeting in November.

Cath is supporting CPRE's new Shropshire Hedgerow project, specifically, Sarah Jameson with the educational/John Muir Award element and Rob Rowe with farmer engagement and identifying potential sites.

Communications & public awareness

Website and social media – we continue to update and improve the website and maintain output on various social media platforms now also including Instagram, which is linking us with younger audiences. Guidance on tree planting and establishment is being prepared.

E-newsletter sent out in December through Council Gov Delivery system – mailing list is over 2,500.

We participate in the NAAONB Comms meeting and remain involved in the NAAONB arts project – Joy attended four NAAONB organised training sessions during November and a follow-up session with the Arts Council.

Phil gave a talk to the University Centre Shrewsbury MSc course in Sustainable Heritage, to a group from Worthen with Shelve Parish Council in March, and has a talk to the Pontesbury environment group in April.

MANAGING OUR BUSINESS - develop a robust, effective and financially sustainable AONB organisation.

AONB Partnership

A second online meeting of the Partnership was held on 24th November, attended by 15 members plus most of the staff team. Team members have been contacting Partnership members one to one for catch-up discussions. The Strategy & Performance Committee has met online on 2nd September and 14th January.

Glover Review

We attended a Defra online meeting for AONB and National Park Lead Officers and a Europarc Atlantic Isles seminar on implementation of the Glover Review, with several Defra speakers. The full government response to the Review is still awaited, but it is clear that Defra wish to progress many of the recommendations. Proposals for a National Landscapes Service are being pursued but there has been no formal consultation so far.

Defra funding

The Defra funding settlement for 2021-22 was received in March and is a flat settlement at the same level as 2020-21, with no inflation rise.

AONB Team and office

Joy's contract as Funding & Programmes Officer has been extended to the end of September and Alison Jones' contract as Clun Catchment Officer extended to June 2021 and both will be extended further. We are hosting a month's placement for a 2nd year Geography student from Chester University in April-May 2021.

We have vacating Unit 13 at Drovers House to go to a shared meeting room, and are reconfiguring the office for more of a mix of home and office working.

We continue to make more use of online tools such as SharePoint and build the skills of team members on IT.

National Association for AONBs and Europarc Federation

We continue to contribute actively to on-line discussions in the national AONB forums and have taken part in a number of Europarc online events.

Phil has been part of a small national collaboration group through NAAONB on climate change (see agenda item 6), and took part in the Lead Officers meeting in March.

We have had quite a lot of links with other protected areas through the ELM Advocacy programme.

List of Background Papers None
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