



<b>Committee and Date</b> Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership  12 <sup>th</sup> July 2022	<b>Item</b>  <b>6</b>
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## AONB TEAM WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

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### Summary

This paper provides members with an update of recent work by the AONB Team.

### Recommendation

The Partnership is recommended to note the update.

### Background

An update is included as appendix 1. This is largely based on the report of 17<sup>th</sup> May to the Strategy & Performance Committee and there is less detail on the most recent activity. Partnership members will have a further opportunity to talk to the team at the forthcoming Forum and Tour event on 26<sup>th</sup> July.

<b>List of Background Papers</b>
<b>Human Rights Act Appraisal</b> The information in this report is compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998.
<b>Environmental Appraisal</b> The recommendation in this paper will contribute to the conservation of protected landscapes.
<b>Risk Management Appraisal</b> Risk management has been appraised as part of the considerations of this report.
<b>Community / Consultations Appraisal</b> The topics raised in this paper have been the subject of earlier consultations with Partnership members.
<b>Appendices</b> Appendix 1 AONB Partnership team work programme update at 4 <sup>th</sup> July 2022

## Appendix 1 AONB Partnership team work programme update at 4<sup>th</sup> July 2022

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

### Farming in Protected Landscapes

Year 1 of the programme was completed. Budget monitoring and adjustments were carried out in the run-up to the year end. Site visits were carried out to sign off each project, claims and payments were processed and all reporting completed, including detailed financial and project breakdown plus lessons learned. An evaluation survey was completed. Defra training events were attended on subsidy control and on the application process.

A webinar was held on 13<sup>th</sup> April and a series of four local drop-in advice clinics are being held late April to mid May – at Stoke St. Milborough, Newcastle, Hope and Cardington. Improvements have been made to our FiPL web pages and summaries of the projects that have been awarded a grant have been included - [Projects that have received a grant from the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme \(shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk\)](https://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk). A new pop-up banner, posters and fliers have also been produced. An article was written and circulated for Parish newsletters. A Data Sharing request was made to the Rural Payments Agency to enable us to mailshot farmers directly about the programme. A farm walk at Cleedownton organised in partnership with NFU was held at the end of June.

We are working on updating the local priorities guidance and as part of this some artwork images were commissioned from Alan Duncan to illustrate project ideas. Two small contracts for strategic advice were let on the slightly under-represented programme themes of Climate and People, which have proved very useful.

Joy, Alison and Phil attended a Defra regional FiPL workshop at the Cotswolds on 5<sup>th</sup> May. The second Panel meeting within year 2 is on 5<sup>th</sup> July. A reasonable number of potential projects are in the pipeline, but overall despite considerable promotion activity, demand remains relatively modest relative to the allocation of funds we have. We have discussed with Defra the possibility of using some of the funds to increase our advice capacity but it looks likely that they will favour the reallocation of any underspend to other areas in the country where demand is high.

### Young Rangers project

Since the project started in December 2020, Joe has recruited 53 young people (aged 12-16) onto the scheme, and 40 are actively participating. South Shropshire Youth Forum as project partner deliver the programme in the eastern half of the AONB with two further Young Ranger groups.

A range of nature conservation, wildlife survey and outdoor adventure activities have been delivered in 'wild places' in the AONB. Recent sessions have included: scrub bashing at Nills Quarry, hedge planting with CPRE, enrichment sessions with Bishop's Castle Community College working with Lightfoot, hedge laying at Acton Scott estate, National Nestbox Week – nest box survey at Stiperstones, coppicing at Hope Valley, a pine marten session with Stuart Edmunds and Toni Pettit, willow weaving with Gary Cowell, Easter events, a 2 day Green Woodworking course at Poles Coppice, and Dawn Chorus day.

Further activities are being set up including adventure activities with Creative Outdoors. Evaluation has been carried out, and publicity has included a feature on Radio Shropshire.

So far, 7 young people have achieved the 'Explorer level' John Muir Award, with two achieving the higher 'Discoverer' award. The project is also registered with the awarding body AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance), to deliver the Unit Award Scheme and this offers participants the chance to gain recognition for their involvement. A number of young people have so far gained certificates in heritage training elements including hedgelaying, grassland management and green woodworking. Two Young Rangers are engaged with the Stepping Stones 'Listening to the Landscape' project.

Green Leaders (the leadership element of the project with young people aged 17-21). Participation on Green Leaders is proving a challenge. A number of sessions have been held with Ludlow College (6<sup>th</sup> Form), with 12 young people registered and 4 attending a recent session. The Green Leaders programme looks like it may not develop into what we had hoped but will hopefully still have some useful outcomes.

#### Our Upland Commons project (national project)

Local delivery of the project is led by the Shropshire Hills Project Officer Renee Wallace, who is attached to our team but managed by the Foundation for Common Land (and employed through National Trust as accountable body). The project is working on three commons – Long Mynd, Stiperstones and Clee Liberty. Key activities of the project locally have included bracken management, a shepherding trial on the Stiperstones, monitoring and conservation projects on wheatear, whinchat and butterflies, and a number of historic environment events.

AONB team members are also involved in supporting Renee. Phil co-Chairs the Area Group which met on 3<sup>rd</sup> February, and sits on the national project board. Cath is providing support to Renee on John Muir Award and Nigel attended the Hillforts event. Some valuable information has been shared on activity in other areas including farm carbon accounting and *Molinia* control.

#### Stepping Stones project

Cath is contracted to the National Trust for farmer engagement and facilitation work linked to the ELM Test & Trial and Green Recovery Challenge Fund project, and we support the project in other ways, including recent proposals developing for a National Lottery Heritage Fund bid.

- Defra ELM Test & Trial The third Test & Trial working with the Upper Onny Farmers Group is up and running, focusing on the Historic Environment and working with 10 farms. The first phase is going well and we are starting to line up the next five farmers to take part in phase two. The first phase is to retro-fit the historic environment into five existing Whole Farm Plans and phase two will integrate the historic environment into five new Whole Farm Plans. In contrast to existing agri-environment schemes, the Whole Farm Plan approach aims to identify measures and implement management which is good for the farm business as well as good for the environment. To achieve this, we bring together the knowledge and expertise of the farmer with a farm business adviser (Richard Wheeldon), an environment adviser (Carolyn Jones) and an archaeologist (Janine Young).

- Green Recovery Challenge Fund Upper Onny Farmers Group events - The next event for the group is a farm visit on May 18<sup>th</sup> to land owned by Matt Sankey to look at opportunities and ideal scenarios to capitalise on environmental benefits, e.g. woodland, wood pasture, hedgerows, wetland and hay meadows. This will include opportunities for funding from various sources. Other events being planned for this year include – a farm visit with a focus on water and a trip to visit upland livestock farms in other Protected Landscapes where regenerative agriculture is being implemented successfully.

- Listening to Landscape arts project – This is a consultation to listen and ensure people closely linked to the land are represented within the Stepping Stones project, and capturing different people’s connections and thoughts about the landscape of the area. The consultation will include landowners, commoners, farmers, small business owners, residents and visitors of all ages across the Stepping Stones area. Cath has approached and lined up the 20 core participants. Faye Claridge, the artist and photographer, is now meeting these individuals to carry out the interviews, photography and filming. A wider group of others will have the opportunity to participate through drop-in events and call-outs.

#### John Muir Award

Cath is running the John Muir Award for 20 Year 6 children and teachers from the Blue Hills Federation of Schools (Newcastle, Bucknell and Clunbury). The first two outdoor trips happened in 2021 to Bury Ditches and Clunton Coppice. With a focus on learning about where our food comes from and what farmers are doing to benefit the environment and landscape, the remaining trips include Cow Hall in May to explore and learn about an organic upland livestock farm in the Clun Forest. Staff from Buglife’s B-Lines project will also join us and carry out activities with the children focused on pollinators and insect conservation on farmland. The final visit is in June to Brow Farm, Norbury, an organic dairy farm. The children will share their experiences and learning at their final event on July 13<sup>th</sup>. Cath is also supporting Farlow Primary School with their Award and helping Renee with the John Muir Award element of Our Upland Commons project.

#### Defra Tree Health Pilot

Mike is our lead for this programme running in a number of protected landscapes. Discussions have been with Matthew Smith Forestry Commission and the SC Tree team – no applications to the scheme have been received. Promotion has been carried out via the AONB newsletter, parish newsletters, email to our farmer mailing list, a news item on the website and social media posts. FC are now looking to revamp the scheme.

[www.gov.uk/guidance/tree-health-pilot-scheme.](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/tree-health-pilot-scheme)

[Health of AONB woodlands continues to be of some concern \(news item on AONB website\).](#)

Support has been provided for initiatives led by others, including:

- CPRE Hedgerows project – providing children’s sessions, kitbag for schools
- John Muir Award activities by Blue Hills Federation schools - Cow Hall visit.
- Local farmer input into Middle Marches Community Land Trust Regenerative Farming conference 6<sup>th</sup> May
- WSP Clun Flood Alleviation project
- Clun Castle habitat management (English Heritage)
- Wrekin summit jubilee artwork project (TWC)
- Lower Coston riverbank flood damage
- Doddington Church lottery project
- Bishop’s Castle town square project
- Bishop’s Castle Walking Festival
- Conservation Fund project applicants
- Our Upland Commons promotional activity
- Shropshire ‘Love Nature’ Festival

### **Sustainable Tourism delivery:**

Shropshire Hills Tourism Expo & Leaflet Swap – this was held on 17<sup>th</sup> March at the Discovery Centre and was well attended. Nigel introduced the event and talked about the Shropshire Welcomes campaign, and a social media workshop was run by Louise Welsby from Buy From. <https://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/news/-visit-shropshire-hills-leaflet-swap-is-back>.

Shuttle Buses – The service started on 2<sup>nd</sup> June and runs to late September.

'Fix the Fort' – Additional funding is being sought from the charitable fund of HF Holidays (who run the Long Mynd Hotel) to augment the £3,900 donated through the appeal to date.

Shropshire Welcomes Campaign – Nigel has given lots of support throughout this project, helping to secure a strong focus on sustainable tourism in the resulting marketing. This has been much appreciated by the Council and partners.

### **Project development:**

Peatlands – The project is still in a scoping and development phase, with further potential funding sources to be identified. We looked into commissioning remote sensing spectral analysis, but the company chose not to go forward with this. We have had useful discussions with the CREST team at University Centre Shrewsbury. The Wildlife Trust are exploring a FiPL bid to develop feasibility study/restoration plan for Clun Peatlands. We have done some consultation with the Land, Life & Livelihoods group in the Upper Clun regarding landowner contact and potential wetland restoration. Mike wrote an article for the Clun Chronicle and on 16<sup>th</sup> March did a Peatlands talk for the Clun and Bishop's Castle branch of Shropshire Wildlife Trust. We attended a webinar on government funding through the Peatland Code, but it seems this is not possible for us as it is geared to the main deep peat areas. Mike held a meeting with contacts at Harper Adams University exploring links on how marginal areas of peatland may be restored. Mike made a site visit on 28<sup>th</sup> April to Obley Turbarry and Recreation Ground with Clunbury Parish Council, Trustees and Clunbury Climate and Environment Group. On 12<sup>th</sup> May the Clun Catchment Partnership event including field visits is focussing on peatlands, with about 25 people attending.

Ancient Woodlands project – A project proposal was submitted to Woodland Trust providing a rationale for Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland restoration in the Shropshire Hills, and there are ongoing discussions with Woodland Trust and Severn Trent Water. Discussions were also held with National Trust, but they are not likely to be a partner as they have carried out a lot of work on their land already. With the Woodland Trust we prepared a 'Woods into Management Forestry Innovation Fund' Regional Woodland Restoration bid for which the Woodland Trust were the lead applicant for a Shropshire Hills project delivered by ourselves. We have recently heard that this was successful. Funding applied for is for a Project Officer for 33-months between July 2022-March 2025. We are also costing up work to provide a basis for funding bid to Severn Trent Water's Boost for Biodiversity Strategic Partnership Funds which would fund the active restoration work.

**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

Phil provided input to a Natural England contract to update AONB Management Plan guidance.

Local climate partnerships

We have maintained input to both the South Shropshire Climate Action Group and the Shropshire Climate Action Partnership. There is an informal Shropshire group looking at carbon accounting for land (soils and vegetation) to which we are also contributing.

Shropshire Good Food Partnership

The AONB Partnership signed up to the Shropshire Good Food Charter and we are involved with the 'Wise Land Stewardship' strand of its activity, focused on regenerative farming.

Clun catchment

There are continuing discussions about how to influence land management to improve water quality and the condition of the River Clun SAC. Unblocking the limitations on built development is a major driver for Shropshire Council.

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

AONB Conservation Fund – Grant claims have been for completed projects and final reports added to the website [Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund project summaries](#). Support has been given to applicants for the new year of funding, including Llanfair Waterdine Community Trust. The AONB Trustees meeting on 13<sup>th</sup> April awarded grants to 5 projects. A second round of funding has been opened, with a deadline of 7<sup>th</sup> July 2022. There is a total of £15,000 to distribute this financial year.

Friends – Membership remains steady at around 120, mostly now paying by direct debit which reduces admin. Regular newsletters are sent out via Mailchimp.

AONB Trust and fund-raising – Two strands of fund-raising are being pursued – through businesses and through applications to larger charitable trusts. The charitable fund-raising is being supported by a few days' work by a professional fund-raiser, funded by the additional Defra money at the end of 2021-22. A new Business Supporters Scheme has been developed by a sub-group of trustees and is due to be launched imminently.

Planning

We made contact with the SC Planning Policy team to encourage inclusion of the 'setting' of the AONB in policy as part of the Local Plan Examination process. This has not been taken up.

Strategic tourism work

We had involvement in the [Shropshire Destination Management Plan](#) launch workshop in March, and along with others have in the last year been successful in ensuring a strong sustainability focus within the new plan. This is a real achievement and we need to build on this engagement, as well as maintaining our links with businesses and tourism structures within our area itself. We are in discussion with the Europarc Federation regarding renewal of

the Sustainable Tourism Charter. We provide ongoing support and input to the Visit Shropshire Hills and Visit Shropshire committees, as well as continued involvement with Ludlow Destination Partnership and renewed links with Much Wenlock tourism reps.

### Other influencing

We have commented on or provided input to:

- Felling licence applications – especially related to ash dieback
- Public complaint about inappropriate tree felling
- Woodland design plans and tree planting proposals
- Ordinary Watercourse Consents
- Agricultural EIAs – ploughing of permanent grassland
- Casework on Vic Brittain motocross event
- Airband new broadband provision proposals in SW part of AONB

The AONB Partnership position statement on ash dieback disease was agreed and has been published, in response to the high number of felling licence applications requesting clear-fell.

### Local partnership working

This has included:

SC Culture, Leisure & Tourism meetings  
Teme Partnership Steering Group  
Shropshire Invasive Non-Native Species Initiative Steering Group  
Transport planning  
Input to SC Employee Reference group  
Meeting with Tracy Darke Assistant Director Economy  
SC Climate Officer group  
Rea Brook working group  
Clun Technical Steering Group  
River Severn basin catchment partnership  
Shropshire Love Nature Festival (Shropshire Climate Partnership)  
EA and Severn Trent Teme catchment staff  
Helen Upson Offa's Dyke project – including a cluster of farmers at Llanfair Hill (FiPL)  
SCAP Land & Biodiversity group  
Carbon accounting on land work  
Strategic discussions re Clun catchment  
Shared Prosperity Fund workshop with CLT & Economic Development teams

### Communications & public awareness

The website has been regularly updated and improved and we make regular posts on Facebook, Twitter & Instagram. We have had contact with Google to resolve issues with the AONB pin on Google maps.

Press releases, articles & newsletters - The AONB E-newsletter was sent out in March to over 3,000 people on our Gov Delivery mailing list – the open rate was 35%. 5 articles were sent to parish newsletters, on: FiPL, Shuttles, Conservation Fund, Tree Health Pilot Scheme & the Landscapes (Glover) Review. These topics were also put out as news items on our website [Read news articles about the Shropshire Hills AONB.](#) We have provided articles into the monthly Shropshire Council Culture, Leisure & Tourism newsletter.

Discussion is happening about a possible further reprint of the Clun Valley walks book.

Events – 2022 events have been added to the website [See Events happening in the Shropshire Hills AONB.](#)

Mike did a talk on peatlands to Clun & Bishop's Castle branch of Shropshire Wildlife Trust and led a guided walk along the River Clun on 9<sup>th</sup> May, looking at Recovery Sites and the challenges of restoring a freshwater pearl mussel river. Phil did a talk to Pulverbatch WI in March.

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

AONB Partnership

The 22<sup>nd</sup> March in person meeting was well attended. Meetings are planned for 12<sup>th</sup> July and 8<sup>th</sup> November.

We are planning a new format for a summer Forum and Tour event in July. This will be a visible and high profile event to enable different stakeholders involved with the AONB to get together, get to know one another and learn more about the team's work and other areas of activity in the AONB.

Government response to Glover Review

We published an article on the consultation for parish newsletters.

Mike attended a webinar on the proposed National Landscapes Partnership.

Phil has attended Defra seminars on rural enterprise and climate change and has provided input to discussion on potential reform of the Conservation Board model.

National Association for AONBs

Climate Change collaboration – Phil and Nigel both presented topic sections at the national staff webinar on 10<sup>th</sup> March to disseminate the work of the Collaboration group and the five topic sub-groups. In early April the new Framework and Toolkit along with Chairs Statement were launched.

Phil has been leading the group on Nature-Based Solutions. As part of this an NAAONB contract has been let to Cranfield University for carbon audit (of land and habitats) of all English AONBs. There was a national webinar to disseminate the findings on 14<sup>th</sup> June.

Nigel is involved with the Sustainable Tourism & Transport sub-group, which has prepared a national survey of AONB teams on sustainable tourism.

Steph attended a NAAONB Communications meeting.

The NAAONB team met in Church Stretton in early March and Phil met with them informally to discuss some local issues.

AONB team and office

We are currently recruiting for a permanent Natural Environment Officer to replace Mike when he retires. We will run the two posts in parallel for some months as an extended handover/learning period for the new postholder. We still have occupancy limits affecting our use of the office due to ventilation issues, and the team continue to use a high proportion of home working.