



<u>Committee and Date</u> Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership  8 <sup>th</sup> November 2022	<u>Item</u>  <b>6</b>
---	-----------------------------

## **STEPPING STONES PROJECT UPDATE AND SUSTAINABILITY**

**Responsible Officer** Phil Holden, AONB Partnership Manager  
e-mail: [phil.holden@shropshire.gov.uk](mailto:phil.holden@shropshire.gov.uk) Tel: 01743 254741

### **Summary**

This paper gives members a further update on the Stepping Stones Project including recent project delivery and current work on a Sustainability roadmap and Needs Assessment. This is in support of presentations which will be made at the meeting by Andrew Hearle and Anam Choudhury of the National Trust.

### **Recommendation**

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

### **Background**

#### Project overview

Stepping Stones is a landscape-scale nature conservation project covering more than 200km<sup>2</sup> in the Shropshire Hills AONB. The project is listed as one of the AONB's Area Initiatives contributing to the delivery of the AONB's Nature Recovery Plan and wider AONB Management Plan. The overarching aim of Stepping Stones is to connect wildlife habitats by strengthening and creating 'stepping stones' and corridors of wildlife habitat between the core sites of Long Mynd and the Stiperstones, extending to Stapeley Hill in the west and the Stretton Hills in the east.

In practice, this means creating and linking areas of heathland, flower-rich grasslands, broadleaved woodland via a network of wildlife-rich hedgerows, road verges, hillsides, and streamside wetlands. The project also aims to deliver a wide range of other public benefits such as cleaner water, regulated river water flow, carbon sequestration, conservation of the historic heritage, as well as opportunities for public recreation and benefits for personal health & wellbeing.

#### Project management

The project is currently led by the National Trust, who employ three FTE project staff: project manager, project officer and a part-time project coordinator. An informal strategic partnership oversees project delivery with contributions of staff time from the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership, Natural England, and Shropshire Wildlife Trust. The project is delivered by working in partnership with people who live, work and visit this part of the Shropshire Hills. Currently, the project is working closely with a group of 19 farmers (Upper Onny Farmers

Group, coordinated by Cath Landles of the AONB Partnership), 10 local community environmental groups, as well as with numerous local communities, recreational groups, and volunteers.

### Funding

The project has received external funding from the Green Recovery Challenge Fund for the period October 2021 until March 2023 and from the Defra Test & Trials Programme from February 2022 until June 2023. Summaries of funded activities are given in the tables below.

### Towards a sustainable project

The project is looking to build on the successful work delivered to date and embark on the next phase of the project. Early in 2023 we will be commissioning a comprehensive Project Needs Assessment that will consult with stakeholders to identify the social, economic, and environmental needs of the communities living in this part of the Shropshire Hills.

A key outcome of the Needs Assessment will be the co-designing of projects that deliver the 50- year project vision and that are partnership led, measurable, and fundable.

<b>List of Background Papers</b> None
<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 Stepping Stones Project delivery 2022-23 Appendix 2 Stepping Stones Sustainability Roadmap

## Appendix 1 Steeping Stones Project delivery 2022/2023

### Green Recovery Challenge Fund Themes and Funded Activities

<b>NATURE RESTORATION AND CONSERVATION</b>		
<b>Objective</b>	<b>Targets</b>	<b>Main delivery partners</b>
Enhanced management, restoration, and creation of wildlife habitats.	183ha hay meadow 68ha heath & upland grassland 12ha broadleaved woodland Plant 11,000 trees and hedgerow whips	Marches Meadow Group Private landowners CPRE Hedgerow Heroes Project National Trust
Increased wildlife habitat connectivity by restoration of wildlife corridors:	21km of roadside verge 5km of restored/new hedgerows	Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project Private landowners National Trust
Species conservation - Bats	Radiotracking bats to map roosting and feeding sites in Steeping Stones' countryside	Shropshire Bat Group
Species conservation - Curlew	Mapping Curlew nests and radiotracking chicks to track fate of curlew	Shropshire Ornithological Society
Species conservation - Dormouse	Erection of Dormouse boxes for monitoring Dormouse populations & distribution	Shropshire Dormouse Group
Species conservation - Pine Marten	Monitoring distribution of Pine Marten with 14 camera traps and 4 nesting boxes.	Shropshire Wildlife Trust Steeping Stones volunteers
Species conservation - Bilberry Bumblebee	Bumblebee ID training courses x3 Surveys of Bilberry Bumblebee (40 volunteer days) Information leaflet	Steeping Stones volunteers
Non-native invasive species control	Removal of Himalayan balsam - River Onny	Upper Onny Wildlife Group
Habitat opportunity mapping	Analysis of habitat data and preparation of opportunity maps for 5 priority habitats	Shropshire Council Natural England National Trust
Species Action Plans	Analysis of species distributions and development of costed Species Action plans for 5 priority species	Shropshire Council Natural England National Trust
<b>THE FARMED LANDSCAPE</b>		
<b>Objective</b>	<b>Targets</b>	<b>Main delivery partners</b>
Upper Onny Farmers Group – Coordinate and facilitate meetings and events	Provide farm group facilitator for 8 meetings and events	Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership Upper Onny Farmers Group
Upper Onny Farmers Group – Organise programme of farm demonstrations	Farm demonstration events: - Hay meadow creation - Wood pasture creation - Wetlands and watercourses - Holistic farming in practice - Regenerative farming - visit to Cumbria organic dairy farm and sheep & beef farm	Upper Onny Farmers Group

Provision of specialist on farm environment advice	i) Farm water management assessment and plan ii) Woodland & heathland restoration and management assessment iii) Hedgerow condition assessment and management plan iv) Assessment of wetlands (rush pasture, wet flush) for Small pearl-bordered fritillary	Upper Onny Farmers x6
Promote community led events for landowners to explore farming & environment	Regenerative Agriculture Conference Verges, Ditches, Hedgerows Conference	MMCLT Landowners
<b>SUPPORTING COMMUNITY CONSERVATION GROUPS</b>		
<b>Objective</b>	<b>Targets</b>	<b>Main delivery partners</b>
Building capacity and capability of 10x Community conservation groups	Health & safety and risk assessment Effective Communications iRecord training Using Mailchimp Dragonfly Identification	Upper Onny Community Wildlife Group Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group Rea Valley Community Wildlife Group Camlad Community Wildlife Group Marches Meadow Group Middle Marches Community Land Trust Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project Shropshire Dormouse Group Butterfly Conservation Caring For God's Acre
Funding of 10x Community conservation group's delivery programmes	Purchase of machinery & tools (tractor, flail mower, hand tools) Purchase of materials: fencing posts & wire, electric fencing, verge signs Purchase of wildflower seed, shrubs, and trees Purchase survey equipment: camera traps, nets, nest boxes Site management: Norbury Hill bracken control, Cudwell Meadow pond creation, Anaerobic digester pilot Survey: butterfly surveys, dormouse survey, breeding bird surveys, plant surveys Promotion & publicity: Cudwell Meadow, Norbury Hill, Pontesbury showcase meadow, Long Mynd Butterfly Trail Training: Riverfly monitoring, species identification	Upper Onny Community Wildlife Group Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group Rea Valley Community Wildlife Group Camlad Community Wildlife Group Marches Meadow Group Middle Marches Community Land Trust Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project Shropshire Dormouse Group Butterfly Conservation Caring For God's Acre

<b>CONNECTING PEOPLE WITH NATURE &amp; HERITAGE</b>		
<b>Objective</b>	<b>Targets</b>	<b>Main delivery partners</b>
Listening project, giving people a stake in the future of the Stepping Stones landscape	<i>Listening to the Landscape</i> - an oral and photographic record of 24 local people and visitors' connection to the Stepping Stones landscape  Listening to the Landscape publication and Story Map	Project commissioned from professional Creative Artists  24 individuals who live, work or visit the Stepping Stones project area
Stepping Stones volunteer team (20 events)	Fencing hedgerow planting Yellow rattle seed collection Hedge laying Scrub management Meadow raking Yellow rattle seed sowing	Stepping Stones volunteers (187 individuals)
Stepping Stones volunteer training events (7 events)	Hedge laying Fencing Scything Archaeological site condition assessment	Stepping Stones volunteers (44 individuals)
Promotion of the historic heritage	Assessment of the heritage of the Stepping Stones project area LiDAR survey of Long Mynd to Stretton Hills Public presentation of the heritage of the Stepping Stones project area	Fearne Heritage & Archaeology Consultancy Local people and general public
Heritage restoration and promotion of heritage conservation	Heritage restoration action plans for 4 sites	Fearne Heritage & Archaeology Consultancy 4 local farmers Volunteers
Stepping Stones recreational routes	Design, and printing 12 routes that link up key Stepping Stones sites for hikers, runners, cyclists and horse riders.	Local cycling, running, walking and horse-riding groups
Wildlife Gardening Project	Series of training and online events: Gardening for pollinators Connecting with nature in the garden Healthy gardens for thriving wildlife Gardening to support cycles of nature	Stepping Stones Project Natural Gardener General public
Community	3x Community field trips to explore the Stepping Stones landscape and showcase community conservation group activities	Stepping Stones Project Community conservation groups General public
Communication & promotion	Monthly Newsletters – 300 members Talks and webinars Stepping Stones Introductory Film BBC TV and Radio	Stepping Stones Project General public Numerous local groups and societies

## Defra Test & Trial Delivery Headlines

<p><b><i>Integrating Heritage into Land Management Plans Test &amp; Trial.</i></b> The principal aim of is to address where and how land managers and the bodies administering the new schemes will get heritage <b>data</b> and <b>advice</b> (with a particular emphasis upon the role of Historic England as an ALB and ALGAO as a delivery partner), testing different formats of data and advice provision within <b>Land Management Plans</b>.</p>		
<b><i>Objective</i></b>	<b><i>Targets</i></b>	<b><i>Main delivery partners</i></b>
Develop and test a methodology for integrating historic heritage into land management plans	Retro-fitting heritage into 5 existing Whole Farm Plans	Upper Onny Farmers (5 farmers) Historic England Stepping Stones project
	Integrating natural environment and heritage from the outset in a further 5 new Whole Farm Plans	Upper Onny Farmers (5 farmers) Historic England Stepping Stones project
	Pulling together both sets of Whole Farm Plans to evaluate wider landscape-scale opportunities.	Upper Onny Farmers (10-15 farmers) Historic England Stepping Stones project

## STEPPING STONES SUSTAINABILITY ROADMAP

Key Steps	STEP 1	STEP 2	STEP 3	STEP 4	STEP 5	STEP 6	STEP 7
Key Activities	Stakeholders & Audience Development Plan.	Confirming NT priorities for Stepping Stones Programme	Stepping Stones Programme Development Group Setup.	Stepping Stones Programme Needs Assessment.	Stepping Stones Programme Identification and Planning.	Discuss project proposition (incl costs and timescales) with NLHF Midlands Team	Submission of EOI to NLHF and other relevant Funders.
Why do we need to take these steps?	<p>To establish a clear understanding of the current and future stakeholders of the Programme and enlist help of key players.</p> <p>To gain early support among all stakeholders on goals, plans and working together principles.</p> <p>To create a practical blueprint for growing audiences, increasing reach, building deeper relationships and doing those things to the best of abilities &amp; resources.</p> <p>To help address conflicts or issues early on and avoid duplication.</p>	<p>To confirm the scope for the next phase of the project.</p> <p>To identify NT's priorities for a NLHF application: which activities NT will lead and those we will encourage partners to lead with our support</p> <p>To agree NT preferences for application and programme management</p> <p>To provide a clear statement of NT position and preferred options for an EOI prior to setting up a wider Programme Development Group with partners.</p>	<p>To support the delivery and evaluation of the current Stepping Stones Programme.</p> <p>To support the co-design of new programmes of activities and services beyond 2023.</p> <p>To represent the interest of relevant partners and stakeholders in projects.</p> <p>To create a bottoms-up and partnership culture in project design within the NT.</p>	<p>To ensure that the community's perceived needs are addressed and that they share in identifying solutions.</p> <p>To assess the interest, commitment and capacity of potential partners, volunteers and wider stakeholders.</p> <p>To evidence a thorough and committed approach to collaboration with stakeholders and partnership working in support of applications to funding partners, and approaches to donors and in-kind contributors.</p>	<p>Use the Needs Assessment Report as the basis on which to co-design a sustainable programme with key partners and stakeholders involved through the Programme Development Group and other means including digital platforms.</p> <p>Develop monitoring and evaluation framework to evidence the new and proposed Stepping Stones programme delivery.</p>	<p>To gauge level of NLHF interest in the proposition and take on board any indications for modifying the proposals to give greater certainty to the likelihood of a successful application.</p>	<p>To secure interest of the relevant funders in the design of a new programme.</p> <p>To secure short term, medium term and long-term funding.</p> <p>• <i>EOI Must be well evidenced, persuasive and align with the National Heritage and other funders Priorities and Outcomes.</i></p>
Resources and Board Approval Requirements	Community & Participation (C&P) Consultant, E&E Curator & SS Delivery Team.	Project Board and wider Project Team workshop	Community & Participation Consultant and SS Delivery Team.	External Consultancy, supported by C&P Consultant and the SS Delivery Team.	Funding Consultant supported by C&P Consultant/Delivery Team.	Funding Consultant supported by C&P Consultant/Delivery Team.	Funding Consultant supported by C&P Consultant
Key Actions/ Outputs	Produce Stakeholders and Audience Development Plan/Spreadsheet detailing levels of participation (min-max).	Confirm programme priorities for NT lead in a Heritage Grant application	Organise a Partnership Day to discuss a draft action plan with key milestones, expectations. Secure consensus for sustainability.	Develop a Needs Assessment Brief, secure its approval, recruit consultancy and produce the Needs Assessment Report.	Build as project proposition: A clear, well-cited, and easily deployable project ideas and project plans.	Funding consultant to meet with NLHF Midlands Team	Submission of Expression of Interest for sustainable development and funding procurement.