



<u>Committee and Date</u> Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership 23 rd March 2023	<u>Item</u> 5
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BRIEF UPDATE ON OTHER AONB PARTNERSHIP TEAM AND NAAONB ACTIVITIES

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Summary

This paper provides updates to Partnership members on certain topics and areas of activity which do not need an agenda item of their own.

Recommendation

Partnership members are recommended to note the updates and offer comments.

Background

Farming in Protected Landscapes

An allocation of 10 grants in December was followed in January by a significant increase in Countryside Stewardship rates of grant for which many FiPL agreement holders were eligible. This has had the effect of moving us very quickly to very high levels of commitment against our grant budget, including for year 3 (2023-24). There has been considerable admin work in applying the new grant rates to around 26 eligible projects, which has also affected the phasing of some projects. We have had the opportunity to bid for more funding in 2023-24 and are seeking a grant budget of £1.5 million. Defra have also announced an extension to a year 4 (2024-25) and we have requested a grant budget of £1.37 million for this year 4. We hope also to receive some additional budget for advice & guidance and for admin. We have 65 projects funded to date.

'Access for All' capital works

Joy Howells has been working hard with partners to make best use of the 2022-23 allocation of Defra capital funding for 'Access for All' priorities. Projects being funded include benches at Cardingmill Valley, pond/wetland/dragonfly viewing platform replacement at the Discovery Centre, and weatherproof noticeboards, benches and an all-ability path at the Bog Centre. We are also looking at improvements to the AONB website and reprint of some leaflets. The research and development contract to Kate Garner covered in item 6 is also funded from this allocation. There is no funding for 2023-4 but a further allocation in 2024-25.

Climate Change Action Plan

The Action Plan has been updated and finalised following comments made at the last meeting and will be recirculated separately to members. Dates are being trawled for the proposed sub-group of Partnership members focussing on communications. We continue to work closely with the NAAONB collaboration group and with Zero Carbon Shropshire, especially on sharing knowledge of carbon storage and sequestration in land and soil.

Fix the Fort

Practical repair works on the hillfort at Caer Caradoc (by Church Stretton) are now substantially complete. The public appeal raised over £4,000 and this was matched by a £10,000 grant from the HF Holidays Pathways Fund (HF run the Long Mynd Hotel) and a £13,000 grant from Farming in Protected Landscapes. After a helicopter lift of 50 bags of soil and stone in November, the majority of the work was completed before Christmas, mostly by contractors, but also including two sessions with the Young Rangers groups. A couple of public engagement events linked to the project are programmed for the spring.

Young Rangers

Extension of the project has now been approved until the end of December 2023, using budget underspend. Weekend and half term/holidays activities continue to be well attended and popular. 80 young people (aged 12-16) are registered on the project and of these, around 30 have achieved at least one AQA Unit Award Scheme certificate on subjects relating to nature conservation. We hope to send two Young Rangers to the Europarc International Junior Ranger camp in Denmark in the summer.

Green Leaders

We continue to work with students at Ludlow College on Green Leaders sessions. 5 students have gained a level 1 Green Leaders AQA certification. We hope to connect the Green Leaders with the Partnership at some stage, with a view to improving the representation of youth voice into our governance and activity.

Shropshire Hills Shuttle Buses

Following a consultation with regular users, the 2023 service is being redesigned to provide a better service and to improve financial sustainability. The new timetable will be publicised shortly when finalised.

Shropshire Council Chief Exec visit

Andy Begley Shropshire Council's Chief Executive is spending the afternoon visiting the AONB team on Tuesday 21st March, including discussion at the office and a site visit.

AONB Partnership vacancies

Hilary Claytonsmith stepped down from the Partnership in December. The Strettons Civic Society may appoint a new representative, but Hilary was also one of our two Vice Chairs, so this role is now vacant. If anyone is interested in taking up this role, do please get in touch and we will arrange a nomination process. Mark Hughes of Llanfair Waterdine Parish Council also stood down in January so there is a vacancy for a Parish or Town Council representative. Unless anyone has a strong suggestion or nomination to make, we may leave this seat vacant until the biennial membership review this autumn.

Consultation on changes to National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

We provided comments on the NAAONB response to the recent consultation on changes to NPPF. The most significant change in relation to AONBs is probably changes to policy making onshore wind energy developments more feasible. The response welcomes this in principle recognising the need for increased capacity for renewables, but recommends continued care regarding wind developments in AONBs and measures to reduce potential conflicts with landscape quality. The response also recommends some improvements to the main policy paragraphs on AONBs, as well as identifying the climate and ecological emergency (including nature recovery) as justifying greater emphasis throughout the NPPF. The full NAAONB response is available at the link below.

National Landscapes rebranding

The National Association for AONBs has received funding from Defra this Financial Year to progress rebranding AONBs as National Landscapes, with a particular focus on making our areas more appealing to a wider range of society. A steering group representing AONB partnerships has been working with the NAAONB and the branding agency Nice & Serious to develop and define the National Landscapes brand, incorporating input from a Creative Council (representing people underrepresented in our landscapes). Unfortunately the face to face sessions at venues around the country (including Church Stretton) did not attract sufficient bookings, so have been cancelled and reconsidered. Without these briefings, we are not at the time of writing in a position to provide a full update on the rebranding strategy and proposals. Further opportunities to share this will hopefully follow shortly.

Landscape Parks & Trails Partnership

Defra has been progressing the formation of this Partnership (adapted from the Glover Review recommendation for a National Landscapes Service). Its purpose is to create a more collaborative way of working that amplifies and scales up the impact and influence of the (English) National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Trails. Two themes for strategic programmes have been identified for joint work, these are nature recovery and diversity of workforce and visitors. Financial support will fund dedicated resource within existing partners to support the partnership to develop and deliver the programmes. A Chair and Partnership Manager are being appointed and the Partnership will start to function in April 2023.

List of Background Papers

The full NAAONB response to the consultation on changes to the NPPF is available at https://landscapesforlife.org.uk/application/files/6816/7776/9804/NAAONB_Levelling_Up_and_Regeneration_Bill_NPPF_consultation_response_2.3.2023.pdf

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