



Committee and Date
Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership
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Item
5

AONB PARTNERSHIP ACTIVITY UPDATE

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Summary

This paper provides members with a summary update of recent activity of the AONB Partnership staff team, and a staffing update.

Recommendation

The Partnership is recommended to note the information provided and offer comments.

KEY AREAS OF PROGRESS IN 2015-16 (April 2015 – present)

Take and co-ordinate action to conserve and enhance natural beauty, to promote enjoyment and understanding and to further sustainable development.

- **LEADER programme handover** Following decisions made by Defra and Shropshire Council in June, the running of the Southern Shropshire LEADER programme has been handed over to the Council's Outdoor Partnerships team. The LEADER Programme Manager Pete Banford has been transferred. The AONB Partnership Chair and Manager have provided support and input to the new arrangements where necessary. A new Local Action Group (LAG) is being formed, and George Chancellor has volunteered to represent the AONB Partnership on this. Shropshire Council made a commitment to make good the loss of the AONB Partnership's expected earned income from running LEADER (from claimable management, admin and office costs). This has been confirmed as a cash contribution towards rental and service costs of the team's new office, totalling £49,970 over the 5-6 year period of the LEADER programme.
- **Stiperstones and Corndon Hill Country Landscape Partnership Scheme**

The Scheme is now half-way through its five-year duration, and a mid-term review is currently being completed, largely by an external consultant.

The focus of activity over the summer has included the second season of Community Wildlife Group bird and plant surveys, and completion of the first year's curlew nest surveillance and monitoring project. This has highlighted the desperate plight of the local curlew population - of 13 nests monitored, no chicks were successfully fledged.

The £115k four year contract for mixed heritage skills apprenticeships awarded to North Shropshire College was regretfully terminated due to lack of delivery. Some of the money already paid to the College was returned. The Training element of the Scheme is being redesigned with reduced outputs for mostly in-house delivery through the team with an extra part-time post.

The 'Buzz in the Borders' pollinator and wildlife gardening project is progressing well with continuing community projects in Pulverbatch, Stiperstones and Chirbury.

Small-scale meadow managing equipment (a small tractor and accessories) was purchased and gifted to the newly formed Marches Meadow Group. Although there have been teething issues with the equipment and contractor (and the weather), the machinery has been making hay over the late summer months.

Going into the autumn a new season of Tuesday Task Team has started with practical habitat management at mining/quarrying, castle and hillfort sites throughout the Scheme area, as well as a new programme of Open Hills archaeological fieldwork.

Finally, the Scheme has progressed a number of access projects this summer and is also planning interpretation at a number of sites with support from Nigel McDonald. In the three months between July-Sept 2015 the Scheme has benefitted from the support of 108 volunteers, completing 97 days work and amounting to a voluntary contribution of over £8,900.

See <http://www.stiperstonesandcorndon.co.uk/> for further information.

- **Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund** 14 grants awarded for 2015-16, totalling £25,300 including contributions from Jean Jackson Charitable Trust and Millichope Foundation. The Jean Jackson Trust have just confirmed an annual contribution of £15,000 for the next three years, which is greatly appreciated. For further information and a summary of the projects funded in 2015-16, see <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/aonb-partnership/conservation-fund/>.

- **River Clun Recovery Project**

Practical habitat improvement work on the two recovery sites for Freshwater Pearl Mussel has begun, following the production of Management Plans, landowner liaison and obtaining necessary statutory consents. Advisory visits to over 30 farms or holdings, where issues affecting the conservation status of the River Clun SAC have been identified. These include sites adjacent to the SAC up to the top of the catchment near Anchor, plus tributaries such as Folly Brook and the Unk.

Working towards implementation of the Management Plans for the Recovery Sites; involving liaison with 7 landowners adjacent Recovery Site 1 (Bush Farm), and 2 landowners adjacent to Recovery Site 2 (Lawn Farm). Engaged with landowners to secure 8 practical projects, with farmers signed up to work with the Project, with several more under development. Completion of detailed riparian surveys, Felling Licence applications and Ordinary Watercourse Consents. Engagement of contractors (local) for tree management, fencing and track restoration work.

See <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/looking-after/projects/rivers/> for further information.

- **Other Clun Catchment work**

Natural England are funding an additional **Recovery Site Monitoring project** with input from Plymouth University and West Country Rivers Trust.

Input made to the Natural England/APEM **Sediment Survey** of the Clun Catchment.

Leading on work on **highways runoff** in the lower Clun Catchment – working with Environment Agency and Shropshire Highways Team to map sediment pathways to the river.

Consultee re highway modification at Clun SAC - worked with Parsons Brinkhoff, Herefordshire Council and Environment Agency.

Developed Area Plan/Proposals to manage diffuse and point source pollution in vicinity of Clun SAC.

The AONB Partnership leads the **Clun Catchment Partnership** which met on 17 June and 7 October. Input to the Clun Freshwater Pearl Mussel Steering Group, Clun Field Officers Group and Teme Catchment Partnership.

Working with Woodland Trust, Land Life & Livelihoods and Severn Rivers Trust on a project to encourage **woodland creation** in upper Clun and Teme catchment.

- **Shuttles** services for 2015 completed in late September for the Long Mynd & Stiperstones service, and early October for the Castle Connect service from Ludlow. Passenger numbers have increased by 3.4% over 2014 levels, with over 6,700 people making using the two services in 2015. Two roadshow events were held to publicise start of season. Some very good feedback facilitated through the use of an evaluation form included with the timetable. Also great feedback from communities and business as well as via social media. 2016 services are in

preparation, but unfortunately the longstanding £5,000 Natural England contribution (from the Stiperstones NNR) has been lost. For further information see <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/enjoying-the-shropshire-hills/shuttles/>.

- **Shropshire Hills Sustainable Business Network** The original Sustainable Business Scheme has been relaunched as a Sustainable Business Network with a stronger focus on sustainable tourism. Membership of the Network is now for a minimum period of two years. New members apply for membership by completing a sustainability pledge. At the end of the two years they are awarded a certificate. A bronze, silver and gold certificate hierarchy has been adopted, reflecting the businesses' commitment over 6 years. All the businesses in the old scheme have been invited to join the new network. Workshops are being held to help businesses transfer their membership. See <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/enjoying-the-shropshire-hills/buy-local-be-sustainable/>.

- **Promotion activity.**

The **Newsletter** has moved to a completely web based format allowing us to share it more easily. This also makes it easier to promote it through our social media platforms as well as by direct mail. The new system allows a greatly improved management of newsletter subscriptions in line with the Data Protection Act. The new format also allows us to produce more frequent news 'bulletins' where necessary to highlight upcoming events and share information. We are working on targeting bulletins most relevant to certain audiences – such as Business Network members.

Social media continues to be one of our most effective platforms for sharing information about our and partners activities locally. The Facebook page currently has over 1,000 likes and is building its list of followers. Twitter followers have now reached 2,257 for the AONB site and 1,584 followers for the Buy Local Twitter feed. Our Twitter use continues to develop with the objective of driving more traffic towards our website and newsletter, as well as engaging in direct conversation with our followers locally and nationally.

The **website** has been simplified to give greater prominence to visitor-oriented material (about the AONB [area](#)), and bringing up to date the more technical sections on the Partnership's work. Contributing to the new Outdoor Partnerships website www.shropshiresgreatoutdoors.co.uk.

Press - 1 double page Shropshire Magazine article and 1 four column news item in the Shropshire Star about our Bruce Bairnsfather walk (October 3rd). This was achieved in collaboration with writer Keith Pybus one of our volunteer walks leaders and Friend of the AONB. The walk celebrated the connection between the famous WW1 cartoonist and landscape painter's work and the Shropshire Hills.

Other activity has included: a BBC Radio Shropshire interview (River Clun Recovery Project), attendance at a number of shows, and talks to: Bishops Castle Town Hall, Westhope WI, Worthen Garden Club, Church Stretton Rotary Club and Market Drayton branch of SWT. Guided walk on Stiperstones for Church Stretton Women's Refuge (women and children).

- **Advice and support** to a range of activities and projects, including Western Power undergrounding programme, Memories of the Landscape (joint work with CPRE, Clwys Powys Archaeological Trust, Clun Forest History Group and Newcastle School), HeARTland project (joint work with National Trust, Arts Alive & Ben Osborne), Upper Gravenor (developing the farm for educational and community benefit), Sophie Holt (local food project), Tru Wood (social forestry) and Friends of Pontesford Hill.
- Several meetings held of a revitalised **Wrekin Forest Partnership**, and the new Wrekin Forest Plan has been approved. <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/aonb-partnership/area-initiatives/wrekin-forest/>

Project development

- Involvement in 'Stepping Stones' feasibility work for a **landscape-scale conservation project focused on the Long Mynd and Stiperstones area.**

- Input into proposals by the Foundation for Common land for a **possible Commons project**, with activity in the Shropshire Hills AONB and other upland areas (see paper at agenda item 9).
- Discussions with Woodland Trust, Small Woods Association and Woods for Wellbeing about the possible development of **new woodland project work**, e.g. on PAWS (Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites), woodland social enterprises and Social Forestry.

Develop policy and strategy for the area through the AONB Management Plan, and influence the policies and strategies of others.

- Text version of approved **AONB Management Plan 2014-19** available on website. Work in progress on a basic designed pdf with figures and some images.
- **Sustainable Tourism Strategy and Action Plan** The AONB Partnership now has the leading and coordinating role for the **Shropshire Hills & Ludlow Destination Partnership**, following the withdrawal of Shropshire Council staffing support for DDPs.
<http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/aonb-partnership/area-initiatives/shropshire-hills-and-ludlow-destination-development-partnership/>.

Working closely with partners in support of **Irresistible Offa**, which is the development of the Walking with Offa cross-border collaboration project. Current focus of work has centred on researching and discussing potential EU funding (such as InterReg) to support new project initiatives identified in the Irresistible Offa Business Plan.

Working closely with **Shropshire Hills Tourism** on the production of a new visitor map of the Shropshire Hills to replace the now out of print Discovery Map.

- Input to southern Shropshire Walking Forum and various steering groups led by others.
- **Planning.** Submissions on nine planning applications –
 - [Spring Cottage extension, Leighton – 12.10.15](#)
 - [Anaerobic Digester, Bitterley – 11.9.15](#)
 - [Proposed Development, Land North & East of Cwms Lane, Church Stretton – 18.8.15](#)
 - [Solar Farm, Henley, Acton Scott – Appeal – 23.7.15](#)
 - [Church Stretton Housing, Land east of Shrewsbury Road – 2.6.15](#)
 - [Springbank Employment Site, Church Stretton – 2.6.15](#)
 - [Whitton Solar Farm, Caynham – 23.4.15](#)
 - [Proposed dwelling NW of the Fishpools, Pontesford Hill – 23.4.15](#)
 - [Newcastle Hall Barns, Newcastle, Craven Arms – 14.4.15](#)
- Input to other **non-planning casework and strategies**, including EA River Basin Management Plans, response to EU Habitats and Birds Directives consultation, Ordinary Watercourse Consent consultations, Natural England Environmental Impact Assessment screening decision consultations.

Develop the AONB Partnership as an inclusive and effective organisation.

- Input to **National Association for AONBs**, through annual conference and frequent information sharing and consultations. <http://www.landscapesforlife.org.uk/>. The Shropshire Hills AONB will be one of the host areas for the 2016 Conference.
- Support and input to establishing the Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund as a **charity** (see paper at agenda item 6).
- Further discussions about possible **relocation of office** to Church Stretton, and formulating proposal to manage the **Church Stretton Visitor Information Centre** on commissioned basis with financial support from Shropshire Council.

Support the involvement of the community in the management of the AONB (also a cross-cutting theme in some items above).

- Support and advice for a wide range of **community projects**.
- 2015 **volunteer-led guided walks programme** completed and review going on.
- **John Muir Award** programme with schools (education/activity programme themed on wild places), currently working with Bucknell and Rushbury primary schools. Training day for leaders on John Muir Award planned for mid-November. AONB talk and guided walk on Long Mynd for 120 students from Idsall Secondary School, Shifnal. Attended Growing Up Green & Global Conference, picked up two new schools for possible involvement in JMA next year (Kinlet and Shrewsbury St. George's). Organising field study trip for students from University Centre Shrewsbury, part of their new geography module 'Border Regions: landscape, place and identity'.
- **Friends of the Shropshire Hills AONB** currently has 89 members (counting joint couple/family memberships as one). Andrew Wood is helping as a volunteer with member recruitment. The annual social event was a tour of the Clun uplands on 12 July.
- David Tomkins is currently helping as a volunteer on the River Clun Recovery Project in a technical research role. Volunteers assisted with work to tackle a Himalayan balsam outbreak on the River Kemp, and volunteer tree planting is planned in the Clun Catchment for this winter.

FINANCE SUMMARY

The AONB Partnership budgets are reported in detail to the Management Board. Due to the ongoing squeeze on core funding and the difficulty in obtaining contributions to core running costs from projects, the 2015-16 budgets are currently predicting a deficit for the first time. All possible savings and economies are being made, and the office move will reduce ongoing costs (after meeting one-off expenses associated with the move). Any deficit will be met from the reserve of earned income held from previous years.

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| <p>List of Background Papers Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan 2014-19. The full 2015-16 Team work programme can be made available to members on request.</p> |
| <p>Human Rights Act Appraisal The information in this report is compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998.</p> |
| <p>Environmental Appraisal The recommendation in this paper will contribute to the conservation of protected landscapes.</p> |
| <p>Risk Management Appraisal Risk management has been appraised as part of the considerations of this report.</p> |
| <p>Community / Consultations Appraisal The topics raised in this paper have been the subject of earlier consultations with Partnership members.</p> |
| <p>Appendices None</p> |