

Item 4. Bid to deliver LEADER under the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE)

1. Summary

This outlines progress with a bid by the AONB Partnership to deliver the 'LEADER' element of the Rural Development Programme for England. The implications of this for AONB governance and structures are outlined, and approval is sought to finalise and submit the bid by 4 January.

2. Background

- 2.1. On 4 September the Management Board supported further steps to be taken to developing a bid by the AONB Partnership to deliver 'LEADER'. Background on LEADER and RDPE is contained in the paper for that meeting and is not repeated here.
- 2.2. On 31 October Advantage West Midlands invited Expressions of Interest for bids to deliver LEADER, and published their guidance "Taking the Lead", available at <http://www.advantagewm.co.uk/working-with-us/rural-development-programme-for-england.aspx>. Following a simple registration process which we have completed, full Expressions of Interest must be lodged by 4 January 2008. Groups successful at this stage will go on to further detailed work including preparing a 'Local Development Strategy', but in doing so will be certain of going ahead. A modest Expression of Interest document therefore has the potential to unlock six years of funding totalling over £1m.
- 2.3. A meeting was held on 2 November by the Shropshire Partnership to gauge interest in LEADER within the county and ensure effective involvement of partners. From this it emerged that there are no other groups or Partnerships intending to bid to deliver LEADER over any of the AONB area. There is nevertheless considerable interest from partners, especially the local authorities, to include their priorities within a LEADER programme. The Northern Marches Leader+ group (including part of North Shropshire) intend to bid, and a partnership for the Severn Valley is possible. Neither of these partnerships would have Shropshire County Council as the accountable body, leaving ours as the only one directly linked to SCC. Overall therefore, our position seems strong, but there is a need to balance the aspirations of other partners with the strengths and focus of the AONB Partnership for the bid.
- 2.4. Partner meeting. The AONB Team convened a meeting on 23 November of key partners to work on clarifying aspects of the bid; this is likely to be the only meeting possible before the Expression of Interest has to be submitted. Clare Greener from Shropshire County Council, who led the work of the Shropshire Rural Pathfinder on Access to Services, is working closely with us on the bid. This is very helpful as one of the LEADER 'measures' is on basic services, and this is the area where our own expertise is weakest. At this meeting, partners identified key social and community issues affecting the area, leading to objectives for the programme to address these. The first write-up of these is given in Appendix 1, and we will probably need to reduce these to around five key priorities. Possible actions which partners wanted to see delivered under the four main measures were also discussed, and the first write-up of these is given in Appendix 2.
- 2.5. Working area. Another area of discussion was over the area for the LEADER programme. The main criteria are that the area must be clearly defined, coherent and relevant to the issues identified, and contain a population of between 5,000 and 150,000. The local authority and local strategic partnership representatives felt strongly that the AONB itself (c18,000 population) was too small an area and would limit the number of beneficiaries. Mindful of the difficulties caused by having other boundaries, our preference would have been to operate flexibly outside the AONB

boundary where relevant to the work in hand, but without another line being drawn (as with the Sustainable Development Fund and some other project work). As it is clear that this is not possible, we have accepted that another boundary is necessary, and will work to minimise any negative effects of this in practice. A working area for LEADER has been defined based on the identity of the 'Shropshire Hills', and includes communities who identify with this. Thus the whole of parishes lying partly within the AONB are included, the market towns lying just beyond the boundary are included, and some other extensions are made, informed also by the landscape 'Joint Character Areas' defined by Countryside Agency/ English Nature. The area is similar to the Blue Remembered Hills Project area, which was the area of the previous (pre-CRoW Act) Shropshire Hills Management Plan. A map will be shown at the meeting.

- 2.6. Structure and governance. The organisational requirements for LEADER are to have an identified 'Local Action Group', with broad representation (maximum 50% public sector). The operational tasks are largely with the appraisal and approval of grant applications, and oversight of strategic issues. Initially the option of the AONB Partnership being the 'Local Action Group' was favoured, with a LEADER 'Panel' under it approving grants (similar to the current arrangement for the Sustainable Development Fund). We have however moved towards an alternative option of the LEADER Panel being the Local Action Group itself, and reporting up to the AONB Partnership for strategic issues. The proposed structure is shown in Appendix 3.
- 2.7. Finance. The bid is likely to be for around £250,000 per year (approximately a sixth of the budget for the Region). Up to 20% of this can be used for administration. This would allow for employment of a full time Co-ordinator and part-time admin support. It will probably be necessary to use the full 20% allowance to achieve these workable levels of staff support, though efficiency gains of linking to the existing Partnership structure should mean that less draw will be necessary on the measures for establishing and 'animating' the Local Action Group.
- 2.8. Conclusions. There are some risks to the AONB Partnership in taking on this funding programme. It carries significant and quite long term responsibilities for delivery. The different working area and focus on social and community issues could be seen as diverting attention from the AONB's core business. On the other hand, it would provide an excellent opportunity to build on the community work of the Blue Remembered Hills Project, and on the funding and facilitation role we have developed also through the Sustainable Development Fund, which is now vulnerable. There are many opportunities to put the landscape and environment in the 'mainstream' of social and economic issues, to build the sense of place of the Shropshire Hills, and to improve the connections between the countryside and the surrounding market towns. LEADER offers us the opportunity to play an important role in linking the axes of RDPE, to improve our relationships with AWM and the local strategic partnerships, and to take a prominent place within the new unitary authority.

3. RECOMMENDATION:

The Management Board is recommended to approve the finalising and submission of the LEADER bid.

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Appendix 1. Shropshire Hills LEADER - issues and objectives, first draft

Issue	Objective
Access to Services	
Access to basic services remains difficult for some, especially those in need in remoter areas	Support targeted improvement of basic services
Existing services are not always adequately known about or co-ordinated	Improve publicity, awareness and co-ordination of services
Venues for multiple service delivery and community activity (e.g. village halls) not always adequate for need.	Support improvements to venues, e.g. development of projects and capital funding bids
Quality (i.e. speed) of broadband connection still poor.	IT is not an objective of RDPE, but premise for this of almost total broadband coverage hides an ongoing issue
Community capacity	
Community activity is patchy	Build capacity, including identifying local issues, forming and running groups, finances & funding. Support collaboration between parishes.
Reliance on small number of activists	Broaden engagement, including with 'hard to reach' groups
Inadequate professional support for communities	Enable voluntary and public sectors to support community development.
Population trends and community structure	
Loss of young people	Improve engagement of young people in the community, and encourage development of appropriate training and employment
Skills & training	
Sections of population with low skills	Improve provision of learning opportunities
Difficulty keeping skills up to date with changes in land management and environmental technology and practices	Support a diverse range of approaches to skill building and knowledge dissemination
Wellbeing	
Sections of population with low levels of physical activity	Improve appropriate opportunities for activity, especially in the countryside
Rural stress and isolation	Strengthen community activity, support specific initiative tackling stress
Landscape, heritage & environment	
Interest in heritage and countryside	Harness support to achieve local environmental improvements
Strong support for landscape and conservation; weakening links with land-based industries; willingness to learn and understand more.	Use landscape as a focus for community engagement; strengthen links to land management and local products; improve opportunities for learning and involvement
Strong attachment to the area and pride	Develop sense of place of the Shropshire Hills and more local identities to motivate community action
Lack of confidence to act on bigger environmental issues, e.g. climate change	Support awareness raising of environmental issues and community responses
Appreciation of relative remoteness of the area and mixed feelings about tourism	Seek to safeguard tranquillity and promote a sustainable approach to tourism, including improved benefits to the local community
Transport	
High dependence on travel, especially by car	Reduce need to travel by strengthening local services and community activity; optimise use of public transport services
Poor transport services in some areas	Support targeted improvements to transport services

Appendix 2. Possible areas of activity under LEADER measures

321 Support for better and more basic services for the economy and rural population

Cultural and leisure – Health walks, guided walks, involvement of hard to reach/ priority groups, e.g. youth, reminiscence with older people. Community transport, with links to tourism.

Development of community buildings to provide services – Improvements to local venues to enable service delivery, build on existing infrastructure e.g. broadplaces.

Developing community enterprises to provide key services e.g. care – support for volunteering. Build access network according to local needs.

Energy services – Energy audits and advice for community buildings, wood-fuel based heat for village/ community buildings.

Training – Trialling and disseminating innovation in service delivery. Local service mentoring, local service loyalty scheme.

322 Support for village renewal and development

Develop capacity, knowledge and skills – support for preparation of Parish Plans. Support for village design statements, especially in Conservation Areas. Evaluation of local service needs and understanding needs of hard to reach groups. Development of existing local groups.

Small scale infrastructure – implementing actions from Parish Plans and design statements. Village greens, play facilities, industrial heritage.

Links with agri-environment – traditional boundaries in and around villages.

Collaboration/ social enterprises – support for parish lengthsman/ warden and Tree Wardens schemes, local sourcing of materials for public facilities – benches, play equipment, etc. Local festival and cultural events.

Support for ICT for community benefit

Improving functionality of community facilities

Community renewable energy projects – e.g. low carbon communities & energy conservation initiatives, renewable installations, e.g. woodfuel and ground source.

323 Support for conservation and upgrading of the rural heritage in the area

Research linked to maintenance, restoration and upgrading of cultural and environmental heritage (complementing agri-environment) – Local heritage studies. Features of public significance e.g. significant buildings, village greens and public green space, village wells, ponds, landmark trees, churchyards, paths, ruins and industrial remains.

Environmental audits and action plans – Community-led conservation projects. Links to Parish Plans as above.

Small scale infrastructure improvements – especially features as under research above. Access & interpretation projects.

Studies and investment associated with maintenance, restoration and upgrading of cultural heritage and rural landscape – ‘Down to Earth’ approach – locally identified projects, publication of local interest books, consolidation of features with access and interpretation. Community woodlands.

331 Training and information for economic actors operating in the fields covered by Axis 3

Training and information in support of rural micro-enterprises, non agricultural farm diversification businesses and rural tourism businesses –

Sustainability advice to tourism businesses, collaborative networks of tourism businesses, especially with sustainability focus, networking of accommodation and catering outlets with local food producers, training for hosts on landscape and sustainable activities (including wildlife and geology), environmental accreditation and approach to marketing and promotion.

Training (incl for volunteers and young people) on traditional rural skills e.g. maintaining old buildings.

Financial advice and training for community groups.

Learning champions/ advocates.

Training for hard to reach businesses and individuals.

Appendix 3 Proposed Structure for LEADER delivery within the AONB Partnership

