

Item 3. Update on new project development

1. Summary

This paper informs members of the Board of progress with new project development as part of the exit strategy for the Blue Remembered Hills (BRH) project.

2. Background

- 2.1. Work has continued as outlined in the paper to the Partnership on 7 February, i.e. developing one main project proposal focussing on strengthening the economic sustainability of environmentally sensitive land management.
- 2.2. Defining the needs to be met. The Blue Remembered Hills Project Manager has taken over the lead for the Team in work on food and drink, and has been establishing some new contacts and building on work already done in this area. The AONB's Land Management Working Group had a very productive meeting on 16 March discussing what needs to be done to help the viability and sustainability of farming. Partners were strongly supportive of the role that the AONB can play in this. An outline of a possible project, aiming to capture the aspirations of that meeting, is attached here as Appendix 1 for discussion.
- 2.3. Exploring funding opportunities. Through contact with the Regional Food and Farming Team (Defra RDS), we have submitted a project idea to support a programme bid to the new Big Lottery Changing Spaces Fund. The Lottery have limitations about their funding leading directly to financial gain for businesses, but the programme does have a priority area on 'local community enterprise – making the links between food, exercise and health, encouraging the sustainable use and reuse of resources and building sustainable local economy'.
- 2.4. Role of the AONB Team. The project outline includes the idea (not a new one) that the AONB Team could play a more 'mainstream' role in delivery of programmes. This approach has been used more in National Parks than in AONBs so far. It could enable to AONB to achieve more, but does perhaps carry some risks of losing the 'independent broker' role. Views on this are especially welcomed.

3. RECOMMENDATION:

The Management Board is requested to comment on the issues raised.

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Appendix 1 Project Outline for Shropshire Hills AONB

Aims

Changes in traditional farming prompted by new subsidy regimes provide both threats and opportunities to the special qualities of the AONB. At this time of transition the overall aim of conserving and enhancing the AONB may be most effectively fulfilled by focussing more on supporting the development of sustainable farming and rural industries than narrowly on the conservation of particular features. More specific aims include:

- To support rural businesses to capitalise on the high quality environment of the AONB and contribute to its long term management.
- To support the development of local markets and supply chains for food and drink, and other products such as wood.
- To increase mutual understanding between farming and other sections of the community.
- To engage and actively involve local communities in management of the landscape, especially through food production, and maximise public benefits of health and wellbeing.

How?

The principal mechanism would be **to provide integrated environmental and business advice to help farming adapt in sustainable ways, with the optimum environmental, social and economic benefits.** Priority areas would include:

- maximising the uptake of agri-environment schemes,
- developing local products, including food and drink and wood products,
- supporting appropriate forms of diversification,
- supporting resource protection and energy efficiency and self sufficiency.

These aspects, often viewed in isolation, combine to provide for farming an alternative model to intensification, which uses the environment positively to support business, and is inherently more sustainable. Key features of the project's approach would be integration and local relevance, well proven in the Countryside Agency's Land Management Initiatives, and not found to this extent in current mainstream schemes.

The project would be proactive as well as reactive, taking support to identified target groups, e.g. medium sized family farms and the beef sector (which are among the most vulnerable), farms which are reaching the end of ESA agreements, and those with significant environmental features but which are not currently under any scheme.

Why the AONB?

The AONB Team is well placed to undertake this role, adding value to other schemes, for a number of reasons:

- The Team are locally based, established and with a good track record,
- Advice can be tailored and appropriate to local circumstances,
- A back-up of data and knowledge within the Team is readily available. This would be especially relevant to the preparation of Farm Environment Plans for the Higher Level Stewardship scheme.
- The Team has valuable links with planning authorities and many other organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors,
- The AONB also has a role in developing and influencing policy,
- The Team can provide continuity of support,
- The work would build on the Team's activity and experience through the Blue Remembered Hills project, and other work such as LongStones.

Other outputs/activities may complement advice offered to support businesses, and also support involvement of the wider community:

- Provide a programme of demonstration events and case study factsheets supporting sustainable approaches to farming, e.g. wildlife and heritage management, diversification, collaboration and direct selling.
- Provide a package of grant support for local products and diversification initiatives.
- Support development of local supply chains, e.g. events to connect food producers to tourism and catering businesses, developing public procurement of local food.
- Provide support for farmer networking and collaboration, building on techniques pioneered in the AONB.
- Provide seminars and support to aid adaptation of farm businesses, e.g. on cross compliance, planning issues, financial planning.
- Provide a programme of events and publicity in the AONB and surrounding area, to raise public awareness of the role of farming in maintaining the landscape, the links between food and health, etc. (to include activities with schools).
- Provide events, training and volunteering opportunities to encourage community involvement in land management, and support the development of links between farmers and the wider community.
- If possible provide land management advice (and grant aid?) targeted at lifestyle and 'hobby' farmers to complement other activity. This would build on current work by the Blue Remembered Hills project.

Proposed scale of project

Probably ideally three or four full time staff over a five year period.

Possible funding sources:

- Big Lottery Changing Spaces programme – expression of interest requested.
- Programme funding approach commissioned by Advantage West Midlands? Linked to new socio-economic programmes under ERDP2?
- Future round of Leader+?
- A more radical approach to delivery would be to combine with RDS (Natural England) resources for agri-environment scheme advisers and provide a one-stop shop service.
- Local authorities