

## **Item 6. Wrekin Conservation Plan and AONB governance**

### **1. Summary**

This paper considers links between the draft Wrekin Conservation Plan and the AONB Management Plan, and outlines possibilities for creating a 'devolved' structure to serve more effectively the interests of the Wrekin area, but formally linked to the governance of the AONB.

### **2. Background**

2.1. The Shropshire Wildlife Trust is currently consulting on a draft Conservation Plan for the 'Wrekin Forest' area. This, along with practical and community work, forms a part of their 'Wrekin Forest Project', which is a development from the Wrekin appeal of 2004-5, which resulted in the Trust's purchase of Forest Glen. The draft Plan outlines the importance of the area and the issues affecting it, and proposes a series of practical initiatives:

1. Collaborative group for woodland owners and managers
2. Deer Management Group
3. New woodlands and hedges
4. Woodland biodiversity monitoring project
5. Agri-environment scheme case study, Leasowes Farm
6. Hazlehurst Pastures restoration project
7. Veteran Trees
8. Steeraway Limestone Workings
9. The Wrekin Hillfort
10. The Devil's Dingle ash disposal site
11. The Wrekin Café and Forest Glen
12. Forest Trails - for foot, bike and horse
13. Wrekin Forest Ranger Service – visitor management
14. Conservation volunteering
15. Wrekin Forest School

At this consultation stage, the initiatives have not yet been costed.

2.2. The Conservation Plan is intended to provide the basis for funding bids, and is therefore part of a move to raise the levels of conservation activity in the area, led by the Shropshire Wildlife Trust. The relationship of this work with the AONB is important, and the AONB Team have sought to be involved and make the most of this link throughout the project. Stronger links between the Wrekin Conservation Plan and the new AONB Management Plan need to be made, and should strengthen both. In particular there is perhaps a need to define policies as well as projects.

2.3. The unique geography and the history of involvement of different organisations raise some fundamental questions about what it means for the Wrekin to be within the AONB, and also some interesting possibilities, as outlined below.

2.4. The Wrekin is untypical of the Shropshire Hills AONB, being located on the urban fringe of Telford and Wellington. The issues affecting the Wrekin are much more focussed on managing visitor pressure, though land management remains important too. The boundary of the AONB is drawn very tightly around the hill itself, and excludes settlements to a greater extent than elsewhere in the AONB. It is unsurprising that the Wrekin Forest Project has chosen to operate in a larger area. While the AONB Partnership has been actively promoting the 'Shropshire Hills' identity, we have deliberately pushed this less strongly in the Wrekin area, as the Wrekin's own identity is

very strong in its own right, and a much greater motivator for conservation and support among the local community. Shropshire Wildlife Trust's activity regarding the Wrekin has moved from a focus on land purchase and direct land management to a broader approach, seeking to steer and influence conservation over a wider area, and work more with private landowners. This has created some overlap with the core functions that the AONB Team are employed to fulfil.

- 2.5. It could be argued that none of the three main elements of the model of managing an AONB are currently serving the Wrekin especially well:
1. Partnership structure to represent appropriate stakeholders. Representation from the Wrekin area is quite poor, and attendance by those representatives has also been poor, perhaps partly because much of the AONB's business is focussed on the south of the County.
  2. Management Plan to guide strategy and action for the area. Because the Wrekin is a small proportion of the AONB and untypical, its issues are not especially well represented in the AONB Management Plan.
  3. Dedicated staff team. The AONB Team probably do put at least a proportionate amount of time into the Wrekin area considering its area in relation to the whole AONB. This remains a small amount of time however, and the many different local contacts and significant distance from the AONB Team's base at Craven Arms are also practical obstacles.
- 2.6. One approach to making this model work could be to recreate the three elements at a smaller, more local scale, specific to the Wrekin area, and to some extent the current Wrekin Forest Project is already starting to do this. A clearer definition of how this relates to the AONB's governance structure would help to avoid confusion and could also help to put conservation work at the Wrekin on a stronger long term footing. This could be a 'devolved' structure where a stakeholder partnership group and Plan for the Wrekin gain status by being 'official' sub-units of the statutory AONB. Longer term funding for dedicated staff capacity (which need not be delivered directly through the AONB Team) may become easier to secure under such an arrangement. The long term vision ought to be to provide a permanent structure which befits the Wrekin's importance, and to secure long term funding for an adequate level of on-the-ground management, linked to the development and expansion of Telford (e.g. through planning gain).
- 2.7. Two factors are important in this scenario – the move to unitary local government in Shropshire and the effect on the main structures of the AONB. Under local government reorganisation, 99.4% of the AONB will lie within a unitary Shropshire and 0.6% will remain in Telford & Wrekin. Ironically, managing the Wrekin area (north of the Severn for convenience) would involve the two local authorities, while the remaining c98% of the AONB would only involve the unitary authority. A fuller 'devolution' might save having to involve Telford & Wrekin Council in issues well beyond their Borough. The Wildlife Trust's involvement in relation to roles defined as core AONB functions could be clarified. The possibility could also be opened of adopting the AONB Management Plan (or parts of it) into the planning system as a Supplementary Planning Document for the vast majority of the AONB, but needing only to go through approval with one authority.
- 2.8. It would be important however that any 'devolved' structure did not weaken the main AONB Partnership. Funding implications would need to be looked at in detail. The statutory designation will remain as one unit, and the CRoW Act specifically requires local authorities to 'act jointly' in the preparation and review of the AONB Management Plan. In most cases, an AONB's best interests are likely to be served by

seeking to build unity and consistency across the whole area. The unusual geography of the Shropshire Hills perhaps points to a more tailored approach.

**3. RECOMMENDATION:**

**The Management Board is requested to comment on the issues raised, and is recommended to support a more detailed evaluation of options and their advantages and disadvantages.**

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