

Item 9. Information Papers

1. Working Groups Update

- 1.1. Farming Working Group. Met on 13 March. Under a main agenda item of farming and climate change, a presentation was given by Tristan Haynes of Marches Energy Agency about energy efficiency and renewable energy related to farming. The group felt there was a real need for good advice and information available locally, and the potential was suggested for demonstration farms related to energy projects. A future meeting will look at the role of farming in managing non-energy carbon, e.g. in soils and via livestock. A number of activities about engaging with farmers were discussed – the findings of the AONB perception study relating to farmers, targeted one to one discussions carried out by the Community Officer in the Upper Onny area, and the Natural England Multiple Objectives Project (NEMO), under which 40 farmers in the AONB are being interviewed to inform Natural England's work. Updates were given on the Rural Development Programme for England and agri-environment schemes, and on local products work.
- 1.2. Access, Recreation & Tourism Working Group. Met on 8 March. The main agenda item was the Shropshire Countryside Access Strategy which is now at full draft stage. Some key principles of the Strategy were outlined – importance of maintenance on the current access network, strong demand for short circular routes, including close to where people live, with social inclusion and health benefits. Discussion centred on sustainability aspects, which were not felt to be strong in the draft chapters seen by the group. A greater emphasis on linking countryside access promotion with sustainable transport and sustainable tourism was suggested, influencing patterns of use as much as simply meeting demand, with a view to CO2 emissions from transport and the conservation needs of sensitive sites. Car parking provision was largely beyond the scope of the strategy but generated differing views. The policies on this outlined in our position statement on sustainable tourism were endorsed, but the need was recognised for further work to see how these would be applied in practice. A visitor survey and economic impact assessment of tourism is being carried out across the county in 2007, and will report data for the AONB as well as by district. Reprint and review of some of the Shropshire Hills circular routes leaflets was discussed, and the need to take a co-ordinated approach to the promotion of walking around Church Stretton. Updates were received on the Shropshire Hills Shuttles, the joint Shropshire Hills events programme, open access land, Blue Remembered Hills bridleway and cycle routes, local products work and SDF projects. The group agreed an addendum to the position statement on Access & Recreation in relation to off-road vehicles, as resolved at the AONB Partnership meeting of October 2006.
- 1.3. Long Mynd – Stiperstones Group. Met 20 February at Norbury. This was the first meeting of the new group, with farmer and community members. Representatives talked through the perspective and main priorities of different interests - farmers and landowners, the local community, conservation bodies managing land directly, and of conservation as achieved through agri-environment schemes. There was felt to be a good deal of common ground, and the process of communication between interests was seen to be important. The role of woodlands was discussed, along with information circulated about the range of initiatives and projects going on in the area. Key themes emerging which the group may want to spend more time on included affordable housing, agri-environment schemes, local products and woodlands. The next meeting would take the form of site visits in June hosted by some of the farmers in the group, with a further meeting in September.

- 1.4. Historic Environment Working Group. Met on 28 March. This was the first meeting of a new group. Updates were given on data gathering and monitoring through the State of the AONB report, and on the process just begun of review of the AONB Management Plan. Discussion centred on the situation with the historic environment in the AONB. The need to maintain the profile of the historic environment in the work of the AONB Partnership was emphasised. There was a need to gather more information through surveys of under-represented areas such as river valleys, and the AONB also had a role in disseminating information. Potential future changes in land use e.g. greater demand for growing food in response to climate change, could have a significant impact on the historic environment, and there would be a need to keep up to date. Guidance for land managers, especially linking to work to identify features at risk, was important.
- 1.5. Sustainable Development Fund Grant Advisory Panel. Met on 26 February and 23 March. The February meeting was the first time the panel had met other than to approve grants. A review discussion was held about SDF procedures, and site visits were made to SDF projects at Worthen School (school 'Ecolab' project) and The Park Farm, Minsterley (trial of anaerobic digester linked to dairy unit). The Panel found the opportunity to see projects at first hand very useful, and the knowledge and enthusiasm of the children at Worthen School was truly inspirational. The Panel met in March to consider 17 grant applications for projects in 2007-8, including 7 interviews with applicants. 15 projects were approved in principle, though formal grant offers cannot be made until the SDF grant offer is received from Natural England.

2. Proposals for 50th anniversary activities

- 2.1. Initial discussions have been held within the AONB Team about activities to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Shropshire Hills AONB designation in 2008. We felt the aim should be to raise awareness and profile of the AONB, in ways which promote involvement and celebration.
- 2.2. The basic idea is a series of events and activities from the start of 2008, leading up to a main celebration event on 29 July (date of signing of the designation order). We are assuming that activities should be manageable from core staff capacity (with help from partners) and core budget only. We need to achieve a big enough scale to make it feel significant, but without too much work. There will definitely be scope for others to link some of their activities during that year to the anniversary theme. Proposals include:
- 2.3. Beacon lighting on some key hills - proposed for Sunday 13 January (date of start of designation process). Practicalities to be investigated.
- 2.4. Photographic competition - good involvement, easy to organise. Start from late summer 2007 as lead-up, linked to Blue Remembered Hills celebration arts project. Judging in time for main celebration event in July, prizes for winners and then exhibition at key venues. Winners also to go in an AONB calendar doubling as Annual Review? Potential to broaden to other art - painting, sculpture, writing, film, performance??
- 2.5. Guided walks - spring/ early summer - themed to special qualities of the AONB.
- 2.6. Hosting the National AONB Conference (early July). This is provisionally agreed, but hosting is usually jointly by a number of AONBs, with field visits out from a central location. Cannock Chase also have a 50th anniversary in 2008, the Malvern Hills and others could also be involved. There is so far no obvious central venue for the conference in/near the Shropshire Hills.

- 2.7. Celebration event, 29 July (Tuesday) – Partnership members, dignitaries plus community - competition winners, plus ideally to be platform for launch of new 'Friends of the Shropshire Hills' group. Venue - in the AONB but 'neutral' - possibly Church Stretton school? Probably an evening event.

3. AONB Tour, June 2007

- 3.1. After consideration of other ideas, it has been decided that the Tour theme should contribute to our activities of project development, as this is the most pressing priority. The proposal is therefore to showcase current initiatives on local products, and facilitate networking, co-ordination and development of future priorities. Detailed organisation will progress urgently.

4. Regional AONB Liaison

- 4.1. The West Midlands Protected Landscapes Forum brings together AONBs in the region (ourselves, Malvern Hills, Wye Valley and Cannock Chase, plus the Cotswolds who have a small area with the West Midlands) with the Peak District National Park and Natural England. Meetings are held quarterly, with guest speakers on topics of common interest such as planning, agri-environment schemes, etc. The Forum is a very useful means of co-ordination and sharing of ideas and best practice. Recent meetings in January and February have considered the possibility of creating a Regional 'Protected Landscapes Co-ordinator' post.
- 4.2. The South West Region, with a similar Forum, have had such a post (full time) since 2002. The main roles of the post are to provide support to members (e.g. sharing best practice, input to individual AONBs, training, business meetings, research contracts, workshops) and influencing at a regional level on behalf of the areas (e.g. liaison with key regional partners, input to regional consultations, co-ordinated campaigns). The South West Region has 13 AONBs and 2 National Parks. After a three year pilot, the arrangement has been made permanent, and a further Co-ordinator for the South East Region was appointed in 2006. Funding comes from Natural England (75%) with match from the local authorities of all areas (this is in addition to each area's core budget).
- 4.3. Protected areas in the North East, North West and Yorkshire & Humberside Regions have been developing a proposal for a similar post, which currently also involves the East Midlands (Lincolnshire Wolds AONB). While the knowledge sharing role is just as valid in this scenario, the regional lobbying role would inevitably be harder with bodies in several regions to cover. Areas in the East of England have some links with the South East Co-ordinator. This leaves the West Midlands as potentially the only area of England not benefiting from this arrangement. The small number and size of protected areas in the West Midlands is a problem in terms of creating a sufficient critical mass, and it is acknowledged nationally that the scale of the lobbying task we have with some regional bodies is greater than in most other regions.
- 4.4. Unfortunately Natural England have indicated that they would not be able to fund such a post in addition to core grants to individual areas, and that in the foreseeable future we would have to achieve it by pooling funds from our core budgets. There is little enthusiasm among any of the areas to sacrifice local capacity in order to do this. There is a possibility that by working with the East Midlands (into which the majority of

the Peak District falls) there could be more potential. In the short term however it appears that co-ordination through the regional forum without a dedicated Co-ordinator is likely to continue.

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