

SHROPSHIRE HILLS AONB LONG MYND – STIPERSTONES GROUP
Notes of Meeting 20 February 2007, Norbury Village Hall

1. Present:

John Hughes	Shropshire Wildlife Trust
Peter Carty	National Trust
Alison Jones	Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group
Tom Wall, Dave Cragg	Natural England
Bob Evans	Forestry Commission
Phil Holden, Cath Landles	Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership
Stuart Morris	Worthen with Shelve Parish Council
Oliver Goode, John Muller	Community members
Mark & Michiala Pinches	The Hollies Farm
John Sankey	Brow Farm
Peter Sargent	Lodge Farm Estate

Apologies: Keith Mansell	Myndtown Combined Parish Council
Leo Smith	Upper Onny Wildlife Group

2. Background and purpose of the group

Phil welcomed members to the first meeting and outlined the role of the group in relation to the AONB's purpose to conserve and enhance natural beauty and pursue sustainable development. The AONB does not directly own or manage any land, so has to work closely with landowners and the community. The group should help to enable better understanding between different parties, and provide an opportunity to influence decisions affecting the area e.g. on policy and funding. He stressed that the AONB was not a 'project' but had been in place for nearly 50 years, with longstanding management arrangements. The group could support and advise, or develop actions for itself or its members, and there was deliberately no firm future timescale as the issues were of a long term nature.

3. Understanding the perspectives of key groups – what's important, now and for the future

Cath outlined a summary of her recent discussions with **farmers and landowners**. Changes in subsidies were a major concern, including the shift to Single Farm Payment and from ESA to Environmental Stewardship. Changing markets were also very relevant and there were concerns about ongoing viability. Bureaucracy was increasing. Succession to the younger generation was a concern, along with other changes in the rural community. There was an interest in local food, and a feeling that marketing of local lamb and beef was effective in Wales, but poor here. Alternative approaches were being looked at, including agri-environment schemes, organic conversion, diversification, etc. and guidance was needed.

Oliver outlined some views of **local communities**, mainly from the perspective of the preparation of a parish plan. The landscape and environment was very important to people, but meant different things to different people. There was a feeling that sensitive tourism should add to the area and not take away from it, and that visitors should be encouraged to understand more about the area. Village life was valued, though there was not enough planning for sensitive growth. People's livelihoods were still linked with the area – 40% of people were employed locally or worked from home. Oliver hoped that involvement with this group would help the Parish's Environment Group to move forward. John Muller added

that the parish plan had started a big exercise which would take time. John Sankey raised the affordability of housing and this was discussed, along with rural services such as village halls, Post Offices and transport.

Pete Carty described **conservation** priorities – with climate change there was a need to look beyond designated sites at how wildlife could adapt and survive across the whole landscape. Organisations locally had gathered computer mapped information through the 'LongStones' project. The hope was that this could be used to inform grant proposals by farmers, to link habitats where particular species were found nearby, e.g. hedgerows for dormice. Links to the Long Mynd and Stiperstones could also strengthen conservation schemes carried out by farmers. John Hughes added that recently there had been a change from receiving income from farmers to graze conservation sites to having to pay farmers to graze. The Wildlife Trust had trialled selling meat from conservation grazing through its membership, and had found that people were willing to pay where they trusted the origin and production methods. The Trust are keen to do more on this and see how they can work more with farmers. Tom Wall added that there is an economic link between landscape, visitors and livelihoods.

Dave Cragg outlined the current situation on **agri-environment schemes**. Many ESA and Countryside Stewardship agreements had quite a few years to run, and commitments under these would be honoured. Success rates on applications for Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) had reduced markedly as there was less money now available. Entry Level remained open to all farmers who could meet the threshold points score. The new Rural Development Programme for England 2007-13 (RDPE) should have started but was delayed due to disagreements between Defra and the EU. There will be money in future but it is not clear how much – an increase in voluntary modulation would help.

Discussion followed on the points raised. Phil suggested that in the main areas affecting farm income (grants, markets and costs) there was increasingly an overlap between farmers' and conservationists' aims. Oliver said that the type of visitors who come would be willing to pay for local products. Pete Carty asked if more could be done to target agri-environment schemes. Dave said that the priorities in the HLS targeting statement would mean that the AONB is likely to remain a focus for HLS agreements. It was agreed that there was potential for farmers to work together to develop stronger applications, but this could also add complexity.

Bob Evans asked how others saw the role of forests and woodlands. It was agreed that they were important for wildlife and could be increasingly important for energy. Bob highlighted factors which could hinder woodland management - most of the area had been classified as 'sensitive' on a 'woodland opportunity map', and changes to the Habitats Regulations regarding bats and other species could discourage owners from managing woods. Phil understood that the 'sensitive' classification did not mean discouraging new planting, but that it would have to be carefully designed. It was agreed however that a blunt reading of this could be seen as discouraging. The natural regeneration of trees where grazing levels are lowered was discussed. It was agreed that while some increase of trees and scrub could be beneficial in conservation terms, a large increase at the expense of moorland and rough grassland would not be, and that continued grazing was vital to prevent this.

4. Brief review of current activity.

The list circulated of policy influences and local activities was discussed, and the amount going on locally was noted. The prominence of climate change as an over-riding issue was agreed. John Muller drew attention to key points in the summary report from the Upper Onny Wildlife Group. The group were keen to extend their monitoring to other species, although curlew and lapwing would remain the priority. John Hughes said how valuable

this information was, and Phil thanked the group for their efforts and the high quality of their work.

5. Identifying what's next – actions for the group or members, issues/themes for future meetings.

Phil picked up on some themes which had come out so far – affordable housing, agri-environment, local products and woods.

There was further discussion of the potential for group applications to Higher Level Stewardship. John Sankey said that climate change could bring more pressure to produce, and see farmers going back to the plough and improving. Money for conservation schemes could be wasted if the work was not carried on. Peter Sargent felt that farmers had come a long way in quite a short time in terms of understanding of conservation, and that there was a willingness to continue this.

Oliver felt that it was a red herring to chase available money and the focus should be on what is of value.

Outcomes and actions arising from the meeting focused on agri-environment schemes and on development of the group. (The notes below result partly from further discussion and consideration after the meeting).

Agri-environment schemes. These are vital as they are still the key means of implementing conservation aims on farmland.

Action: FWAG will pursue an application to the AONB's Sustainable Development Fund for further farm advisory work in the area. This will focus on proactive work to get good HLS agreements through.

Action: The AONB Partnership will continue to seek appropriate opportunities to lobby Defra and Natural England on agri-environment funding. This could involve the National Association of AONBs or other national bodies.

Action: AONB to continue discussions about a possible study looking at the economic impact of ESAs and identifying measures necessary to help the areas adapt to their ending.

Action: AONB to pursue availability and application of SWT's LongStones datasets.

Group development/ future meetings.

Agreed that the next meeting would be a site visit focusing on farms. John Sankey and Mark Pinches offered to host. Date agreed - Tuesday 26 June, 1.30pm. Purpose of this will be to understand farmers' perspective better, understand implications for conservation of likely future approaches to farm management, and look for ways in which environmental and farmers aims can overlap. A further specific angle could be to look at the potential to expand local marketing of meat – consider inviting someone appropriate to talk about this. Action: Cath Landles to make arrangements for visits and circulate details to group.

There was agreement for a further meeting in September. **Action: Cath Landles to arrange.**

Action: AONB Team will provide more information to and maintain contact with members of the group. Information which may be of interest includes AONB position

statement on farming and conservation, AONB response on SSDC affordable housing policy, notes of Farming Working Group, and position statement on sustainable tourism. All these are available at www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk.

Action: Cath Landles to conduct further one to one discussions with farmers in the area, to help engage wider farming community. Consider organising events on topics of interest, as successfully done in Clun Forest area.

Action: AONB to produce factsheets with contacts aimed at farmers/landowners on local food initiatives, tourism and energy. These can be used directly and through FWAG work.

Action: AONB to continue to link with Myndtown Combined Parish Plan implementation.

Action: Organisations to whom recommendations are addressed in the reports on lapwing and curlew to respond to the Upper Onny Wildlife Group on those recommendations.

Ideas for future meetings

Input from members about what they want/ hope to get out of involvement.

Update on Advantage West Midlands programmes under RDPE.

Briefing on the Stiperstones grazing feasibility study?

More on conservation vision for the area - linked to review of AONB Management Plan.

Themes:

Agri-environment

Local products

Woods

Energy

Affordable housing and rural services

Tourism/ access

More about wildlife – key species & habitats and understanding their needs.