

Position Statement on Farming and Conservation

After geology and landform, it is human activity, especially through farming, which has had the greatest influence on the landscape of the Shropshire Hills. The continuation of farming, in ways that are sensitive and sympathetic to the landscape, is vital to the conservation of the qualities that are valued in the Shropshire Hills.

This statement is one of a series, intended to complement the statutory AONB Management Plan, and outline in a more detailed or more up to date way the inter-relationship between a particular issue and the AONB's purposes (principally to conserve and enhance natural beauty).

Some of the key aims of the Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan 2004-2009 have a direct relationship to farming:

- A. The distinctive landscape character and value of the Shropshire Hills is maintained through the positive management of change.
- B. The contribution of valued features to the landscape of the Shropshire Hills is maintained or enhanced.
- C. Valued features are maintained, restored or enhanced as appropriate, and their loss or degradation prevented through sustainable management.
- D. Farming, forestry and other rural businesses which contribute positively to the distinctive landscape character and value of the Shropshire Hills are supported.

Changes and trends in farming in the Shropshire Hills

Sheep and beef are the main enterprises in the Shropshire Hills, with smaller amounts of arable, dairy, pigs and poultry. Many parts of the uplands have in recent decades been grazed at higher levels than ideal for conservation, especially by sheep. Stock numbers are now reducing generally, but distribution is as important as the overall number, as overgrazing and undergrazing may both be happening at the same time in different places. The decoupling of agricultural subsidies from production is widely expected to accelerate the withdrawal of agricultural grazing from economically marginal areas. Loss especially of cattle could have serious consequences for maintenance of grasslands, valuable both in the landscape and as wildlife habitats.

Recent changes in patterns of land holding are expected to continue, with middle sized farms declining, units amalgamating and an increase in smallholding and purchase of land by those not intending to farm. The average age of farmers is quite high, and there are low levels of recruitment of younger entrants to farming.

A conservation approach to farming is widespread in the Shropshire Hills, and for many farming is a way of life as much as a business. The two Environmentally Sensitive Areas (Clun and Shropshire Hills) have high levels of uptake of agreements (around 90%). Key bird species such as lapwing and curlew (identified in the Biodiversity Action Plan and national Defra targets) are still

declining however, and local deterioration of habitats, especially grasslands, continues alongside improvements elsewhere.

The management of this nationally protected landscape is guided by the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership. The Partnership is funded by the Countryside Agency, Shropshire County Council, South Shropshire and Bridgnorth District Councils, Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Council and the Borough of Telford & Wrekin. The AONB office is managed by Shropshire County Council.

National and other strategies

Defra's 'Strategy for Sustainable Food & Farming' (backed up by a West Midlands Food & Drink cluster strategy) stresses the need to establish closer links with the market, and recognises the range of public benefits created by farming in addition to food – including landscape, biodiversity, historic environment, flood protection and access. Public subsidy for farming is the subject of an ongoing national debate, and there is a need to prove to the public that these benefits are worth continuing financial support.

The changes resulting from decoupling and reduced subsidies require a big shift in thinking and approach for many farmers, and there is widespread uncertainty and lack of optimism. Livestock farming and the beef sector especially seems unlikely to be able to compete in the global market, and will need to seek local markets, supported by high quality, high environmental standards and local distinctiveness.

Consumer preferences in food are changing, with increasing interest in quality, local food and environmental standards. Some niche markets are still quite small, but are slowly growing. The development of local markets and sustainable tourism can help to support this approach. Collaboration between farmers is likely to be increasingly important, as well as along the supply chain.

Defra's recent consultation on the Rural Development Programme for England 2007-13 signals a strong ongoing commitment to agri-environment funding. Changes to additional upland support to replace the Hill Farm Allowance are also shifting towards environmental objectives as part of this programme.

Farming and conservation

Many of the special features of the AONB depend on appropriate farming regimes for their conservation. Heath and moorland, unimproved grassland and hay meadows are Biodiversity Action Plan habitats. The patchwork of pasture, hedgerows and trees, even where habitat quality has been lost, is still important to the appearance of the landscape and to wildlife. Appropriate livestock management regimes should be regarded as a form of conservation grazing, in the wider landscape of the AONB as well as on specially protected sites.

Sound resource management is also important, and the EU Water Framework Directive will require significant reductions in diffuse pollution over coming years. Flood management too is a significant issue in the Severn catchment. In the long term, climate change will have an impact on plant growth and types of farming, and is likely to increase the importance of food security. The potential role and local impacts of energy crops need further consideration.

Principles/policies for farming in relation to the Shropshire Hills AONB

1. The current pressure facing the viability of farming, and especially livestock farming, is arguably the greatest threat to the special qualities of the AONB in the foreseeable future. Attention is therefore needed to supporting a sustainable future for farming, as well as conserving features found on farms.
2. Farmers and land managers should be supported as the main stewards of natural beauty. Agri-environment schemes are the key mechanism for conservation through farming, and every effort should be made to ensure targeting of the AONB and maximise levels of uptake, especially of the Higher Level Stewardship scheme. Continuation of local advice and grants through projects, to complement the limited funds of agri-environment schemes is highly desirable.
3. The development of supply chains and enlargement of local markets for quality local products should be supported (e.g. through farmers markets and public and tourism sector procurement). Links to the environmental benefits of local products should be made where possible, e.g. through accreditation schemes.

4. Hill farm support over and above the Single Payment Scheme should recognise the importance of traditional livestock farming in maintaining landscapes of national value, and support the trend towards better environmental management.
5. Planning policy should allow and actively support appropriate and sustainable forms of farm and diversification enterprises in order to help keep farms in business. These enterprises need to be in harmony with environment and not degrade this resource, which provides the best economic future for the area. Consideration will need to be given to a range of potential impacts, e.g. on soil, water, air and wildlife as well as on visual aspects. The AONB Partnership is developing agricultural buildings design guidance, and advice is also available from a variety of sources on sustainable tourism, energy and waste management.
6. There is a need to integrate business and environmental advice, in a whole farm approach. The combination of reaching local markets, accessing environmental subsidies and reducing costs including through environmental measures such as waste and energy combine to provide a sustainable alternative model to intensification. Grants supporting diversification should take into account the needs of small businesses in rural areas and make connections with environmental schemes.
7. The best quality habitats on farmland (such as SSSIs and Wildlife Sites) require especially sensitive management, and should be under a management plan or agreement, drawing on advice and grants which are available. Accurate environmental information in right form with right people has an important role to play in conservation.
8. Public support for farming is increasingly linked to environmental benefits. A supportive advisory approach should be taken with regulation, but a willingness on the part of farmers is also needed, and regulatory powers e.g. under cross compliance, should be used where necessary.
9. There is a need for awareness raising and education focusing of the links between food, farming and the landscape. This might include farm walks and tours, school visits and publicity.
10. Effort will be needed to retain traditional skills for managing landscape features, e.g. hedge laying, traditional buildings. New commercial skills will also need to be developed, related to farmers getting more involved in the supply chain, e.g. on collaboration, direct selling, adding value, etc.
11. Support should be made available for farmers to work together to plan for the future, and to build alliances with other interests including environmental groups and the wider community. The AONB Partnership has a role in drawing together interests, encouraging communication and common understanding, especially through its Land Management Working Group.

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