

Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership

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Dear Mr La Touche

West Midlands Economic Strategy Review: Consultation on Policy Choices

This letter forms the response of the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership to the above consultation. The response outlines the relevance of the strategy, makes some general comments and then addresses the specific questions raised in the consultation, though in order of the importance we attach to the issues.

Relevance of the Regional Economic Strategy to the Shropshire Hills AONB

'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' is a designation reflecting the national importance of a landscape area, and government policy is that AONBs have equal landscape quality and protection to National Parks. The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership is the body established by five local authorities, with 33 other members, to fulfil the purposes of AONB designation, which are:

- The primary purpose of designation is to conserve and enhance natural beauty.
- In pursuing the primary purpose of designation, account should be taken of the needs of agriculture, forestry, and other rural industries and of the economic and social needs of local communities. Particular regard should be paid to promoting sustainable forms of social and economic development that in themselves conserve and enhance the environment.
- Recreation is not an objective of designation, but the demand for recreation should be met so far as this is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and the needs of agriculture, forestry and other uses.

The strong connection of the Regional Economic Strategy to our remit to promote 'sustainable forms of social and economic development' should be noted, and our response relates more to this aspect than a defensive approach to the AONB. The comments below relate mainly to our views on the applicability of the policy options to the Shropshire Hills, but also relate to consideration of environmental issues across the region and will have wider applicability other rural areas.

The Shropshire Hills are a significant environmental asset in the region, comprising roughly the same area as all other protected landscape (AONBs and National Parks) in the region combined. Extending to 804km² (23% of Shropshire), the area has a population of 18,000 – a number of market towns lying just outside the boundary and Church Stretton the only town included. There is considerable diversity within the area – from the Wrekin right at the edge of Telford's growing conurbation, to the Clun Forest - the most sparsely populated area in the region. As well as being a concentration of high quality scenery, biodiversity and heritage, the Shropshire Hills is an economically lagging area by many indices. Though not as deprived as some urban wards it represents the rural face of deprivation in the region, often side by side with relative affluence and therefore easily hidden. The area has quite low levels of skills, but higher than average levels of enterprise and self-employment, with a very high level of small and micro-businesses.

General comments on the consultation document

We recognise that the Shropshire Hills is untypical of the region, indeed it represents the rural, sparsely populated end of the spectrum even within Shropshire. Its characteristics do however give it particular needs, and opportunities, in relation to economic development, and **our overall feeling is that the particular needs of the Shropshire Hills are not well reflected in the generalised policy choices presented.** There is little evidence that Advantage West Midlands has considered its legal duty under s85 of the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000 to have regard to the purposes of AONB designation in the review of the economic strategy so far. We would very much welcome a written response to the points made here or preferably a meeting to discuss how the AONB Partnership can help to develop and implement an economic vision for the region which is more aligned with our own area's needs.

Though relatively 'natural' from a West Midlands perspective, the landscape quality of the Shropshire Hills derives significantly from economic activity over a long period. Economic development is therefore intricately linked with conserving natural beauty. The right kind of economic activity (e.g. in farming and forestry) can sustain the quality of the landscape, and the quality of the landscape can in turn sustain other economic activities (e.g. tourism). **Our overall vision for the economy of the Shropshire Hills is of this virtuous circle of environment-led regeneration, in which a pattern of relatively small-scale dispersed enterprise will be key to maintaining the right balance.**

A place for this vision seems completely absent from the consultation document. Sustainable development is not just about quality of life as described, and restricting consideration of rural and environmental issues to the 'quality of life' section is a very blinkered and partial portrayal of the links between the environment and the economy. A simplistic view is presented of the environment being relevant only in order to attract business and investment – as a pretty backdrop to knowledge-based industries. Though some economic sectors have little direct connection with the land, the environment still provides resources and raw materials, sources of energy, and basics such as food, for urban and rural populations alike. Ecosystem services such as clean, air water and catchment management (affecting flooding in many of the region's major towns), all have a huge bearing on economic activity. Ultimately the environment sustains life, and the consequences of climate change will draw into sharper focus the need to remember these basic needs. Shortening supply chains, and developing localised energy and food production will not only help to mitigate against climate change, but will also be important adaptation measures.

Responses to specific questions

Q12. Climate Change

The policy choices as a whole do not begin to take adequately into account the huge implications of climate change, and the new economic strategy needs an over-arching vision to move the region swiftly towards a low-carbon economy. The document acknowledges that the Vision does not highlight environmental sustainability, and an amendment should be made to the Vision to include this. The accompanying 'Sustainability Appraisal, Strategic Environmental Assessment and Future Proofing' document indicates serious sustainability problems with some of the policy choices, in relation to climate change and other issues. We commend the analysis of this document overall and urge that it be taken fully into account when choosing policy options. It also highlights many of the significant economic opportunities posed by development of environmental technologies, which can build on the region's expertise in this field, on its manufacturing base and its rural hinterland, while also addressing major environmental issues such as CO2 emissions.

Q11. General strategies for intervention

The Shropshire Community Strategy, and others like it, outlines local people's agreed aspirations for the future. In these a balance of social, economic and environmental aims are found. This is a good guide to the policy options, and suggests that **a focus solely on maximum economic growth and GVA may not deliver broader wellbeing.** Indeed the statement in the consultation document that the RES Vision is not just about total wealth, but also access to it and economic inclusion, also surely reveals that policy choices in general will need to focus on tackling need. The 'Tackling Need' approach generally fares better in the Sustainability Appraisal than 'Investing In Success', as it meets social objectives as well as often having less environmental impact.

3.

Q5. Quality of Life

As suggested above, the consideration in this section is very blinkered. The high quality environment of much of the region is a significant economic asset in its own right. However, choices 3 (greening the region) and 5 (attention on social aspects of quality of life) are supported. Choices 2 (limited number of cultural beacons) and 4 (channelling attention into the suburbs) are likely to result in a very poor deal for rural areas. Stress and mental illness are significant factors affecting economic productivity and it is proven that contact with nature and high quality countryside has significant benefits in this regard. Recent research by CPRE shows that the Shropshire Hills is a real concentration of tranquillity in the region, and the uncosted but real economic benefits of this should not be overlooked.

Q7. Role of places

This section is especially important as it is only here that broad generalisations give way to a realistic acknowledgement of the widely differing situations in different parts of the region. Both the RES and the Regional Spatial Strategy need to move beyond the simplistic view of designations such as AONB as restrictive protection mechanisms, and acknowledge their sustainable development remit. The concept of focusing most development on the major urban areas is clearly correct, but there is also a need to trickle down the right amount and sort of development (including both housing and employment) to the most rural areas in order to maintain their vitality. The government's Sustainable Communities policy does not take adequate account of rural areas by discouraging this trickle down, as recently highlighted by the report of the Rural Affordable Housing Commission. Rural areas are of importance in their own right, and should not be seen merely as a hinterland to urban areas. **The AONB Partnership sees the continuation of appropriate land management (through economic activity in land-based industries) as the major medium term issue for conserving natural beauty in the Shropshire Hills,** rather than the threats posed by development. In support of this, our work with local planning authorities focuses heavily on encouraging appropriate sustainable forms of development.

The economic strategy and its implementation mechanisms should support planning policy in this regard, but implementation measures must be appropriate to the area's needs. We support the continuation of a Rural Regeneration Zone, but its focus on large scale capital investment is a major limitation on its applicability to rural areas such as the Shropshire Hills. It is no surprise that with this approach, most of the investment has been in the market towns – the urban areas of the Zone. **Revenue support available in smaller packages and addressing the needs of small and micro-businesses is needed.** Our own recent work to support the development of six Farmers Markets around the Shropshire Hills has illustrated at a small scale the effectiveness of this approach. This point about the type of support given by AWM is of over-riding importance and must be taken account of in review of the economic strategy. In order to address better the needs of rural areas in the West Midlands we would commend the work of RDAs in the South West and the North East. In these regions the greater centrality of the environment as an economic driver has resulted in a better consideration of rural matters than the very urban focussed approach found in the West Midlands.

The analysis in the 'Rural Commentary' report by Alison McLean Consulting which accompanies the consultation document is useful and we urge that this be taken fully into account in developing the next stage of the economic strategy.

Q8. Role of sectors

Focus on particular sectors is one very good way of ensuring that intervention is appropriate to the needs of particular areas. For the Shropshire Hills we would regard the following sectors as being appropriate for sustainable development and in need of support:

Food and drink In rural areas the land-based industries are still of great importance, farming in the Shropshire Hills employing 25% of the workforce. National strategies support the development of local supply chains and markets, and though there is some activity going on with this, there is great potential for more. For livestock farming in particular, which is vital to conserving the Shropshire Hills landscape, this is really the only foreseeable way ahead. Consumer awareness is rapidly growing at present and the potential is significant for the local food sector to move from a relatively small niche into public procurement, tourism and the larger population centres of the region.

4.

Economic support schemes for food and drink need to be locally based, as some of the regional scale initiatives have been limited by lack of local relevance.

Tourism Shropshire's landscape and its rich culture are the main draws of the area for tourism. Visitors attracted by these are discerning and generally receptive to a sustainable approach. The Shropshire Hills is not a National Park and receives nothing like the numbers of visitors as the Peak District or the Cotswolds. If it had the potential to be a major visitor destination with a large regional significance, it would probably have become this already, as such patterns are much more driven by the intrinsic nature of an area than any amount of marketing. To try to make the Shropshire Hills a major national tourism destination would certainly impact greatly on the qualities of remoteness and tranquillity which are so valued by residents and visitors alike. Tourism in the Shropshire Hills should not aim to be a significant prop for the region's economy, but it can definitely be a major prop for the economy of the area itself and help to address its social needs. Climate change will probably result in an increase in domestic tourism as the cost of flying increases and weather patterns change. The Shropshire Hills can accommodate growth in tourism, but infrastructure to make this environmentally sustainable is vital. Improvements to public transport, including train services on the Heart of Wales line, our Shuttle bus service, and other bus routes are needed. Support is also needed in the Shropshire Hills to develop environmental accreditation in tourism, use of local food, capacity in the sector to address accurately the appropriate markets, and to build sense of place and association of the area with a sustainable approach.

Energy Improving energy efficiency in all sectors will minimise costs and improve productivity as well as benefiting the environment. Advisory services helping to achieve this need further support. Development of renewables will support both the technology and land-based sectors. There is limited potential for energy crops in the AONB itself, where arable land is a small proportion. There is significant potential however for use of existing biomass from woodlands, which will also result in biodiversity and landscape benefits from reinstating something like traditional management.

Creative industries These include technology-related areas such as design, though the focus on these in the consultation is excessive, and the sectors described above are more significant in the Shropshire Hills. Creative industries also include more traditional craft-type activities including wood products. In these, an emphasis on localness, quality and environmental sustainability will be key.

Q6. Infrastructure

It is accepted that transport infrastructure is of importance, and public transport in rural areas especially so. There is need for great care however with the development of roads in relation to the countryside and in particular areas such as the Shropshire Hills AONB. As has already happened, upgrading of roads leads to more and faster traffic, eroding the rare and irreplaceable qualities of the area such as tranquillity. This limits future opportunities to exploit sustainably the environmental assets of the area. Of particular concern is the A49 corridor which cuts right through the centre of the AONB and through Church Stretton, the greatest concentration within the Shropshire Hills of tourism activity.

It is easy to portray remoter areas as having poor access to services. It must be remembered however that the remoteness and unspoilt quality which goes with this is what many local residents, both indigenous and incomers, value most about the area. Key services need to be improved to help those most in need, but this needs to be done in ways which preserve those qualities.

Questions 1-4. Enterprise, Innovation, Skills and Economic activity

While these themes are accepted as major factors in economic development, the policy choices in all these areas need to acknowledge the different rural dimension. This will include a need to relate new activity to existing patterns and sectors. For example in terms of encouraging greater participation of those at the lower end of the skills range, added value land-based activities such as those suggested above are likely to be much more appropriate than relying solely on the hi-tech sectors. In innovation and enterprise, there is a need to support existing businesses to develop, as well as encouraging new ones to start. Small businesses in particular often have limited capacity to look broader and relevant support and advice can help greatly with this. Access to training is also an important factor and different methods may be needed in rural areas to ensure that opportunities reach the right people. With regard to economic activity, there is a particular need to encourage retention of young people in rural areas. A range of opportunities, including added value activity in the land-based sector will be appropriate for this.

5.

We look forward to your response to the points raised above and to the next stage of the RES consultation.

Yours sincerely

Phil Holden
AONB Manager