

**Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership**

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## Position Statement on Access and Recreation

The Shropshire Hills are enjoyed by many residents and visitors for recreation, but the fact that they do not experience the very high numbers and associated pressures which are found in some areas is widely valued. This statement aims to highlight principles for how access and recreation can be managed and promoted in harmony with conserving the special qualities of the AONB. It also sets out the roles of the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership and others in supporting these principles.

### Recreation and AONBs

The purposes of AONBs state that *"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."* (Countryside Agency, 2001). There is justification however, in a more positive approach to recreation in the Shropshire Hills, for a number of reasons:

- People's enjoyment of the area through recreation is strongly linked to support for conservation.
- Outdoor recreation brings people enormous personal benefits in terms of physical and mental health and wellbeing, and sense of connection with the area.
- Recreation can benefit the local economy, and public enjoyment is increasingly seen as a justified benefit of the considerable public funding which supports the countryside.
- Promotion of countryside recreation and the benefits deriving from it is an objective of key partners in the AONB, including the Countryside Agency and the local authorities.

### Conservation and Recreation

The links between recreation and conservation in the Shropshire Hills are similar to those observed nationally:

- There is little evidence of a widespread over-riding conflict between recreation and conservation. In heavily used places however there can be localised pressures, such as path erosion and disturbance to breeding birds, especially by dogs. Much of the impact of these pressures can be contained if such sites are well managed, e.g. by site planning, path maintenance, providing information, wardening, and in some cases temporary access restrictions.
- Increasing road traffic is probably the most significant impact on the special qualities of the AONB resulting from recreation. Measures to promote public transport and manage car parking will be a high priority.
- Walking is the most popular activity, and is enjoyed by a significant proportion of the population. Overall levels of participation in outdoor recreation are relatively stable, but patterns of use continue to change, and specialised activities may raise particular issues for conservation.
- Recreational off-road use of motor vehicles is likely to detract from the special qualities of the area, and from the enjoyment of others. Motorised activities of all kinds are likely to have greater impacts in terms of noise pollution than non-motorised activities.
- Large organised groups and events can concentrate impacts, and require careful planning and management. Some types of event may not be suitable for the area.
- Residents and visitors alike value the tranquillity of the area.

Aim E in the Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan 2004-9 is *“Public enjoyment and access to the Shropshire Hills supports the local economy and contributes to people’s quality of life while conserving the special qualities of the AONB.”* The preferred approach to managing recreation in the Shropshire Hills AONB is outlined below:

- People should be encouraged to get out and experience the countryside directly, and helped to do this in ways which are not damaging. A principle of ‘quiet enjoyment’ should apply, and activities not in keeping with this discouraged. The special qualities of the AONB should be highlighted in any promotion of access and recreation in the area, and the Countryside Code promoted, to encourage a sensitive and responsible approach by users. The aim should be that greater understanding of and care for the countryside will enhance rather than curtail people’s enjoyment.
- Conservation value is widely spread around the AONB, but the most heavily visited sites are also some of the most valuable in conservation terms (e.g. the Long Mynd – especially Carding Mill valley). To help minimise impacts on these sites, the overall strategy should therefore be one of encouraging dispersal of access (planned with care), while ensuring high standards of management at well used sites and the retention of quieter areas. This strategy fits with a positive message of encouraging people to explore and to see and learn new things.
- Open access land defined under the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000 often coincides with high quality conservation habitats including Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Potential issues will need to be monitored and promotion of open access should take account of particular sensitivities, such as ground nesting moorland birds.
- Walking, cycling and horse riding are inherently low impact forms of access and, with appropriate planning, can be actively promoted without conflict with conservation. Recreational off-road use of motor vehicles can have a significant physical impact on soils, vegetation and paths as well as on tranquillity. This type of use should not be encouraged or promoted within the AONB, and measures including legal restrictions may be necessary to prevent significant impacts. Illegal motorised activities should as far as possible be prevented.
- Built facilities for recreation should only be allowed where their location and the activities they support are appropriate to the AONB. The re-use of existing traditional buildings should be encouraged wherever possible. The siting, design and specification of new facilities should be to high standards of environmental sensitivity and sustainability. Large, industrial scale buildings are unlikely to be acceptable. Infrastructure associated with access should also be sensitively designed and appropriate materials should be used, e.g. stone for surfacing of a type appropriate to the location, preference for wooden signposts and gates on rights of way, rural character in the specification and signage of cycle routes.
- Development of access networks should be guided by the Shropshire Access Strategy. Path networks should in particular be developed close to settlements to help ease of enjoyment and minimise the need for travel by car. The location of any additional provision of car parking will need to be carefully planned to minimise increases in traffic on rural roads.
- There is greater potential for sensitive development of new access or recreation opportunities to provide economic benefits to farms and rural businesses, either through direct income, grant support or indirectly through accommodation and catering enterprises. It should be recognised also that statutory public rights of access and the thoughtless actions of a minority of visitors can result in financial costs to landowners.
- There should be targeted action to encourage participation from under-represented groups, including the young, the elderly, disabled and minority ethnic groups. Events and sites with facilities have a particularly important role in this, and planning and training for these should take account of social inclusion and guidance on best practice.
- The potential for people to use public transport for recreation should be maximised by planning and promotion of services and financial support. Initiatives which work against this (e.g. promotion of car touring) should not be supported.
- A variety of access routes should be promoted suited to the needs of different types of user. Starting promoted routes at settlements will often help to make them more accessible by public transport,

reduce parking problems in the wider countryside and encourage users to support local businesses. The development of promoted routes should be guided by Shropshire County Council and the Shropshire Access Strategy.

- Consistent use of the 'Shropshire Hills' identity in promotion, and developing its association with high environmental quality and standards of environmental management, is likely to benefit both conservation and the economy of the area.

### **Role of the AONB Partnership and partners**

Shropshire County Council has a key role in access and recreation, having statutory responsibilities for managing rights of way and open access land. These functions are fulfilled through its Countryside Service, which also takes a positive and pro-active role in promotion of access and community involvement. Parish Plans are a good mechanism for highlighting local access needs and issues, and support is available for voluntary Parish Paths Partnership Groups to help with maintaining and promoting local path networks. The Countryside Agency as well as being the major funder of AONBs, is the national body for promoting countryside access and recreation. The new body Natural England will take on these roles as well as responsibilities for nature conservation.

The AONB Partnership includes organisations representing private landowners, organisations which own or manage land and actively promote access to it, and voluntary sector organisations representing access interests. It therefore provides a means of communication and co-ordination between interested parties on access and recreation matters relating to the area, especially through its Working Group on Access and Recreation and links to the Local Access Forum. The AONB Team will advise on conservation aspects of access and recreation in the AONB and on interpretation of the area's special qualities, and may take a supporting or leading role in the development of specific access or recreation initiatives.

June 2006

### **Off-road vehicles - Addendum to Position Statement on Access & Recreation**

Since approving the Position Statement, the AONB Partnership has considered in further detail the issue of recreational use of off-road vehicles. The Partnership wishes to re-emphasise the incompatibility of this activity with the special qualities of the AONB, in particular through disturbance of tranquillity. The proactive work of the County Council Countryside Access Team in dealing with this issue is supported, including collaboration with the Countryside Recreation Access Group (CRAG). In the past, some routes in the AONB have become quite seriously damaged by vehicle use, and on vulnerable routes with little or no stone surfacing, especially where heritage or conservation designations apply, a preventative approach is strongly preferred to avoid damage occurring.

Wording approved by Access, Recreation & Tourism Working Group 8 March 2007