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Your Ref:
Our Ref: ph_151106_AWM RDPE RIP
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Dear Ian

West Midlands Regional Implementation Plan (RIP) for the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the second draft of the Regional RIP, which we received through the Shropshire Partnership. The RDPE, like its predecessor, will provide a very important means of implementing the statutory AONB Management Plan, and not just through the Axis 2 environmental measures. Economic and social factors, especially changes in farming and forestry, are key to conserving the special qualities of a high quality managed landscape such as the Shropshire Hills.

Overall we welcome the content of the Regional Implementation Plan, and agree that in general the priorities are appropriate to the region and to the Shropshire Hills. This response is informed by our aspiration that a large scale project proposal which we have been developing, based on development of supply chains and markets for local products in and around the Shropshire Hills, can be a delivery mechanism for RDPE in the region. We have discussed this idea with Jamie Inglis and are happy to provide further information, but do not go into detail about the proposed project in this response. The project's proposed approach could deliver against all four main themes of the RIP and potentially also enable us to add value to RDPE through additional community-based activity supported by other funders (as suggested in para A.6). The AONB Partnership undertakes work at a strategic level as well as having an excellent track record in delivery work with local communities and businesses. Our governance structure linking public, private, voluntary and community sectors may help in meeting requirements of the Leader methodology. The coincidence in the Shropshire Hills of a high quality environment with an economically and socially lagging area makes it an ideal setting for a targeted programme.

Our main comment on the national RDPE consultation in May (also identified by Defra as the main message overall from this consultation in their recently published analysis) was concern over the integration of socio-economic aspects of the programme with environmental aspects, given the different delivery organisations. We would reiterate this concern, and suggest that a key means of achieving such integration may be at a local scale, through organisations such as ours with contacts in both areas. We welcome recognition in the RIP of the importance of cross-axis work, and the potential to use the environment to drive economic opportunities (a particular opportunity here may be to link environmental land management with marketing of environmentally sound products by exploring the use of Environmental Stewardship as a form of environmental accreditation). We feel that to fit better with the national RDPE documents, the introductory sections of the RIP should give a stronger emphasis to sustainable development as the overarching theme. We would also question whether seeking the balance of environmental, economic and social benefits mainly at the programme level will achieve the necessary integration, and would suggest that most individual projects should be expected to generate benefits across all three areas (Section 1.1).

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We welcome the link made in the RIP to the environmental economy work recently carried out in the region, and the reference to its focus on AONBs. The regional group leading this work had the aspiration that it would result in pilot or demonstration projects in the region's four AONBs, and this has never been fully realised. The AONBs have picked the idea up and been able to link it to existing mechanisms, but it has not resulted in any significant new programmes. We have used the environmental economy model to inform our proposed project approach, and RDPE provides an excellent opportunity to develop this into more practical delivery. Though the context and situation of each of the West Midlands AONBs varies, we believe there is scope to explore a regional approach to RDPE delivery in relation to the AONBs, perhaps linked especially to tourism, food & drink and wood-related aspects of environmental technology. The Malvern Hills, Wye Valley and Cannock Chase AONBs are all supportive of exploring such an approach.

The suggestion that projects for Axis 1 & 3 should be "large and strategic" should not count against the needs of smaller dispersed businesses typical of deeper rural areas. A programme approach working with a sufficient number of such businesses to show a good scale of results probably provides the answer here. The revenue focus of RDPE will also be appropriate to meeting this need, and will make it a valuable complement to AWM's other capital-focused programmes. While programme costs obviously need to be kept to a reasonable minimum, in a revenue programme aiming to support businesses and communities, staff costs associated with support and facilitation roles should not be confused with administration – they are genuine delivery roles and often represent very good value for money.

We welcome the approach proposed of facilitating activity using existing mechanisms, and understand the important role of the Rural Hubs as a region-wide structure for the programme to link with. We hope that the enthusiasm of other established groups, including ourselves, to participate in the programme will be seen as supporting the Hubs in delivery of a very challenging agenda, rather than as competing. We are very happy to work co-operatively with any party and this indeed is a key feature of the way we work. We would see the Local Strategic Partnerships also having an important role, but would suggest that Market Town partnerships may in general be too focussed on the towns, and insufficiently on the rural hinterlands to which RDPE most relates.

We would be happy to discuss any of the ideas raised and look forward to the opportunity to develop more detailed proposals for delivery. We have also had some input into the Shropshire Partnership response to this consultation.

Yours sincerely

Phil Holden
Shropshire Hills AONB Manager