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Conserving the natural beauty of the Shropshire Hills

A report provided to Shropshire County Council's Community Services Scrutiny panel this week, will outline plans to conserve and enhance the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

Following the very successful Blue Remembered Hills project which is now in its final year, the AONB Partnership is working to develop new projects including strengthening economic incentives for conservation through support of products such as food and drink, wood, and tourism.

Shropshire Hills AONB Manager, Phil Holden said, "The Blue Remembered Hills project has been very successful in working with communities and landowners within the AONB to develop local engagement and to deliver conservation, landscape and access improvements. Revision of our Management Plan will need to address challenging issues such as the future of farming, maintaining wildlife habitats, heritage features and climate change."

Councillor Peter Corston, chairman of the Community Services scrutiny panel said "It is vital that we continue to plan and develop new ways to sustain and regenerate the Shropshire Hills AONB. Apart from the economic benefit that the area brings to the rural communities, engaging with the local community gives residents a chance to show and share their pride in their local landscape and contribute to their well being and quality of life."

The Shropshire Hills are designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). This is a national designation with the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the landscape. There are 40 AONBs in England and Wales, and along with National Parks they make up our finest landscapes. Shropshire County Council acts as host authority for the AONB Partnership.

For more information about the AONB and the work of the AONB Partnership, contact Phil Holden, Shropshire Hills AONB Manager, on 01588 674088 or log on to www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk or www.shropshire.gov.uk

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Editors Notes:

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The Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is one of 40 AONBs in England & Wales. This designation is recognition of the national value of the area's landscape, and brings duties on local authorities to conserve and enhance its natural beauty. The Shropshire Hills AONB extends from the Wrekin to the Clun Forest and from the Stiperstones across to the Clee Hills. It is a landscape of contrasts with meandering rivers and fertile valleys, rolling pastoral fields and patches of woodland, picturesque villages and historic buildings, hillforts and ancient monuments. The AONB covers an area of some 80,400 ha, with 99.4% falling within the county of Shropshire and the remaining 0.6% within the authority area of Telford and Wrekin. The total population within the AONB boundary is estimated at 18,500 (based on 1991 census data) and is distributed between the local authorities in broadly similar proportions to their areas.

The management of the AONB is guided by a statutory Management Plan produced by the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership which comprises 5 local authorities, 31 other organisations and independent community members. The AONB staff team are funded by the Countryside Agency and the local authorities, and work with others to implement the AONB Management Plan. Shropshire County Council acts as host authority for the AONB Partnership.

Current activities include the Blue Remembered Hills project (2003-7), supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Grants and advice are offered to landowners for management of features such as riverside and veteran trees, meadows and orchard. The project also includes events, schools programmes, and support for volunteers and community groups.

In the past four years the Blue Remembered Hills project has:

- Worked directly with over 500 landowners, trained over 600 people in more than 20 different conservation management skills, organised more than 130 events and clocked up over £76,000 worth of volunteer time.
- Managed a free tree scheme that has resulted in over 50,000 local provenance trees being planted.
- Managed 60 orchards and over 1200 ha of Wildlife Sites
- 172km of river bank under management plans
- Developed 19 community projects from wildlife groups to stone wall restoration, oral history and farmer consultation.
- Carried out detailed education work with 30 different schools and produced 28 education projects.
- Added value to local products by; helping develop a Farmers Market that now runs monthly, developing alder flooring and firewood markets from coppice timber and working with two local community juicing schemes.

Other activities include:

- The Sustainable Development Fund - a grant fund (£85,000 in 2006-7) for projects which have environmental, social and economic benefits relating to the AONB.
- 'Down to Earth' community projects in six areas, and support for parish plans and community strategies.
- Extensive support to development of a farmer network in the Clun Forest, exploring the future of farming in the area.
- Support for the development of local Farmers Markets and wood products including for energy.

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership plays three main roles:

- To develop policy and strategy for the area especially through the AONB Management Plan, and influence the policies and strategies of others
 - To take and co-ordinate action to conserve and enhance natural beauty, promote enjoyment and understanding, and further sustainable development
 - To support the involvement of the community in the management of the AONB.
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