

Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership

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Your Ref:
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Dear Mr Boulton

CONSULTATION ON THE NEXT RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR ENGLAND 2007-2013

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on these proposals. This response focuses on some key points and does not attempt to address all of the questions posed. An outline of the response has been endorsed by the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership Management Board.

At this level, the themes and priorities outlined in the consultation can be broadly supported, but questions are immediately raised about the more detailed aspects of delivery. Given the importance of agri-environment schemes in delivering the AONB's aims, the commitment to the Environmental Stewardship scheme is welcomed. However, the socio-economic measures are also very important, as retaining a healthy rural economy through active land management is vital to maintaining the special qualities of a farmed landscape such as the Shropshire Hills. There is concern that insufficient funds will be available for these measures.

We fear that the delivery arrangements for the socio-economic programmes, through the RDAs, will lead to a lack of integration with other aspects of the Programme. Advantage West Midlands have a record of focussing their rural support on larger scale capital projects, and this does not necessarily fit well with the needs of our area, and the emphasis this consultation document makes on supporting micro-businesses and very local level schemes. There is concern that the AWM are not adapting rapidly enough their corporate plans and priorities to take account of the new responsibilities they are gaining. We ask that Defra provide a strong steer to the RDAs regarding appropriate delivery of the Programme, and to ensure good consultation on Regional Implementation Plans, including with AONBs. AONB Management Plans will be a useful source of local priorities to feed into the RIPs.

Achieving sustainable development requires connection of environmental, social and economic factors, and the split delivery arrangements for the Programme could prevent this. For example, decisions by a farmer to go into an agri-environment scheme, to sell direct into local markets and to diversify into tourism enterprises can reinforce each other if the links can be made. The Countryside Agency's programme of Land Management Initiatives demonstrated the value of local teams providing integrated advice. This approach has also been supported by the Hills Task Force and other reports. AONBs offer great potential for this kind of delivery. Many are already doing project work to 'add value' to existing ERDP schemes, part funded by the Countryside Agency. Natural England will take over the role of funding AONBs from the Countryside Agency, but also the agri-environment schemes themselves from RDS, and will need to look carefully at the future of

this useful 'added value' work in relation to the mainstream programmes, and how best to use AONBs in this respect.

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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.

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It is important however that the potential role of AONBs is not just considered with regard to the environmental schemes. With their purposes, and the recent directions of involvement brought on by the Sustainable Development Fund, AONBs are also well placed to provide the necessary local integration of socio-economic strands. In particular, we are keen to see whether we can act as a delivery mechanism for Leader, and feel that this would be very complementary to our existing work in the AONB.

I hope these comments will prove useful, and would be pleased to clarify any points if necessary.

Yours sincerely

Phil Holden
AONB Manager