

Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund

Guidance for applicants 2019-20



November 2018

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1. Priorities and eligibility

The Fund is for projects which deliver either or both of the priorities:

- i. **Conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, landscape, wildlife or heritage of the Shropshire Hills AONB.**
- ii. **Educational and awareness-raising activities relating to the AONB and its conservation, especially involving young people.**

(See appendix 1 for more detailed guidance on conservation priorities).

- The Fund will focus on projects delivering practical and educational work on the ground, but activities such as feasibility studies or research, group development, and preparation of training materials may also be considered if the case is strong enough. Note that the Fund will not normally support activities which are eligible under government land management schemes (such as agri-environment schemes), unless there is a strong rationale as to why support from the Fund is necessary.
- The work carried out needs to be either within the AONB, or directly benefiting it. For example, restoration of a heritage or landscape feature outside the AONB would not be eligible, while education work relating directly to the AONB but taking place outside it would be eligible.
- Public, private, voluntary sector and community groups can apply, along with individuals and businesses, but in all cases the project must show a clear public benefit. You don't have to live or work within the AONB to apply, as long as your project delivers benefits to it. Priority may be given to applicants who have not previously had funding from the AONB Partnership or Trust.
- Grants will normally only be made for activity within a particular Financial Year (April to the end of March). This may mean breaking down longer projects and making an application for the part of the work which can be completed within the Financial Year, with worthwhile outputs. If the Financial Year timing is really not going to work for your project, it is possible that alternative dates may be considered.
- **The Fund cannot grant aid anything retrospectively.** Preparation work may be done, but costs incurred before the date of the grant offer letter cannot be claimed or used as match funding. However, if you have made significant expenditure on an earlier phase of the

project, do mention this in your application because it may provide justification for a higher rate of grant.

- Projects are more likely to be funded if they also demonstrate community support and fit with local and national strategies.

2. Size of grants

Grants will normally be in the range of £500 - £3,000. Smaller grants will not normally be considered due to the administration required. Larger grants will only be made in very exceptional circumstances.

3. Rates of grant and match funding

Grants can be of up to 75% for voluntary and private sector bodies and up to 50% for public bodies. (Voluntary sector bodies for this purpose include voluntary/local community bodies, National Trust, Rural Community Councils, Wildlife Trusts, Parish and Town Councils. State schools are classed as public bodies). **A minimum of 15% of the total budget must be cash match funding from other sources.** The remainder of match funding can be made up of in-kind and volunteer time contributions, and these should be costed in to the budget. Higher levels of cash match funding will strengthen an application.

4. Before making a full application

Projects must be discussed before a full application is made. You can start by sending in the brief project ideas form (available on our website or from the office) or by contacting Steph Hayes at the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership, Unit 9, Drovers House, The Auction Yard, Craven Arms, SY7 9BZ. Tel (01743) 254746. E-mail: stephanie.hayes@shropshire.gov.uk

After looking at your idea we will recommend to you whether the project should progress to a full application. If so, we will provide an application form at that stage. We will also try to provide advice on developing the project and how it can best fit the aims of the Fund. Please note that the application form has changed for 2019-20. If you have previously applied, please do not use the old form.

5. Writing the full application

You may fill in the form electronically or by hand, but **you must return a signed paper copy of the application.**

Remember that your application will be read by people who may know nothing about your proposed project. You may want to get a friend to read through the application to check if you have explained it well. In particular, when answering question 5 please make clear what will actually be done in the project. Pictures or plans should be included for any proposed works on the ground.

Budget

- The budget must balance on the expenditure and income sides.
- Check the guidance on match funding above.
- Please ensure you state whether any match funding has been secured or not.
- If your organisation is VAT registered and you are able to reclaim VAT yourselves, the grant offer will be made to you ex-VAT. If you pay VAT then you may include this in the budget and claim grant against it. If you only pay a proportion of your VAT, please include in the budget only that proportion which you pay, i.e. that part you are not able to reclaim from the Inland Revenue.

- If the project runs for more than one year, please ensure that the income/expenditure are clearly indicated for the current year in which you are applying for a grant. Details for other years may also be provided separately but will not form part of the application.
- In kind and volunteer time should generally be costed at £50/day (or £7/hour) for non-professional input, and £150/day (or £21/hour) for professional input. Travel expenses should be costed at 47p/mile. Other in-kind contributions should be included at their actual cost.

Checklist

- Have you answered all the questions?
- Does your budget balance and have you filled in VAT details correctly?
- Have you signed the paper copy of the application to send in?
- Have you enclosed any plans, pictures or further information about the project if appropriate?
- Have you enclosed any background information about your organisation if appropriate?
- Have you enclosed evidence of permission where required?

An application which does not have all the necessary information may be returned for further work. If you have completed the application form electronically, it will help us if you can email it to us as well as posting the signed paper copy.

6. Assessment of your application

The Fund's Grant Panel will meet on Thursday 21st March 2019. **The deadline for receipt of applications is two weeks ahead of the panel date, i.e. 7th March 2019.** For larger applications, you may be asked to come to the Panel meeting to answer some questions about your project. The Panel is made up principally of representatives of the funders and members of the AONB Trust representing a range of interests and with a broad range of knowledge. The Panel may seek external specialist advice if necessary. If your application is not approved, we will explain why and advise you whether it may be worth adapting the project to re-apply.

7. If your grant is approved

You will receive a formal offer letter, outlining the rate of grant and a maximum cash sum, the budget and the required outputs of the project. This grant offer is a contract between you or your organisation and the Shropshire Hills AONB Trust. Special conditions relating to your project may be set, and the general conditions of grant also apply (see Appendix 2). These set out the procedures for claiming your grant, and for monitoring and reporting. **The offer letter is a legal contract, and you will only receive the grant if your project meets the agreed outputs and conditions.**

If a project does not work out as intended, it may be possible to amend the grant offer, but it is preferable to avoid this. **If you have to abandon or curtail your project, or don't expect to claim the full grant, you must let us know as soon as possible, as the money may then be allocated elsewhere.**

Importantly, the grant is not paying for just a part of your project, but funding a proportion of the whole project you have described in your application. **You will therefore need to complete the project and provide evidence of all of the eligible expenditure and outputs in order to claim the full grant.** A short written report, with photographs where appropriate, is required from each project at the end of the year showing how the work met the aim(s) and delivered public benefits.

Appendix 1 Background information on conservation priorities

The statutory primary purpose of AONBs is to conserve and enhance natural beauty. This is the highest priority for the AONB Management Plan. Conserving our landscape includes looking after the biodiversity, heritage and geology found within it, as well as scenic quality and tranquility, improving ecological networks across the landscape, enhancing the benefits to people from the natural environment (ecosystem services) and engaging and involving people with the landscape.

Biodiversity and natural environment priorities are:

Maintaining in good condition the best quality sites and habitats.

Important sites include Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and county Wildlife Sites. Priority habitats in the AONB are:

- Upland heathland
- Purple moor grass and rush pastures
- Upland flushes, fens and swamps
- Native woodland
- Lowland wood pastures and parkland
- Traditional orchards
- Hedgerows
- Lowland dry acid grassland
- Lowland meadows
- Lowland calcareous grassland
- Ponds
- Arable field margins
- Lowland fens

Creation of new habitat

This is secondary to maintaining existing habitat, and will be most effective where it enlarges areas of existing good habitat or improves their connectivity.

Priority species (such as those identified by the Shropshire Biodiversity Action Plan).

There is an increasing move in conservation practice to managing species through better habitat management across large areas, but some species may still require bespoke management. The need for this should be clearly outlined for any project wishing to focus on particular species.

Ecological networks

Connecting areas of high quality habitat to enhance ecological networks will be especially valuable in the Shropshire Biodiversity Action Plan 'Priority Areas for Action' in the AONB:

- Long Mynd – Stiperstones area
- The Clun catchment
- The Clee Hills
- Wenlock Edge (linking to the Wrekin and the Severn valley)
- Stretton Hills

Rivers and catchment management

Priorities include improvements to water quality, riparian habitat quality, reduction in sedimentation and, where possible, measures to stabilise river flow rates by holding water further up in the catchment for longer.

Climate Change Adaptation

While not all changes from climate change are predictable, the aim of natural environment adaptation actions should be to retain ecological value, with a focus on resilience and robustness.

Geology

This is expressed across the whole landscape, but there is also a series of designated sites representing features of particular significance. The best are protected as geological SSSIs, as well as a network of Local Geological Sites which lack statutory protection. Such sites will sometimes need active management to maintain their value, specifically controlling vegetation and tree growth. Sites which are well used for education and study may need active monitoring and liaison to ensure that damage, either deliberate or accidental, does not occur.

Heritage

The historic environment covers a wide range of built and natural heritage assets including areas, buildings, features and landscapes with statutory protection, together with those parts of the historic environment which are locally valued and important, and also the historic character of landscape and townscape. Historic and natural aspects of the environment are closely inter-related. Many particular elements of the landscape have historic importance, such as hedgerows, veteran trees, parkland and ancient woodland. Assets are often at risk from neglect as much as from direct damage, and considerable work is needed on routine management, maintenance and repair. Retaining traditional building and craft skills is also important.

Involving People

Improving understanding of the special qualities of the AONB is a key part of increasing support for conservation. At the same time, most people's enjoyment will be enhanced by greater knowledge. There is a need to do more for young people across all areas, from schools work, to family-oriented and outdoor activities. Improving and broadening access to, and understanding of, local heritage and historic sites can be a valuable springboard to a wider understanding of the landscape. There is also a need to continue opportunities to experience and learn about wildlife and geology, and much scope to raise awareness of both environmental issues and food and farming. Volunteering provides a direct way for people to participate more closely with the Shropshire Hills, as well as bringing real personal rewards and benefits. There is a need to increase active involvement with the AONB's countryside through volunteering, and opportunities to support the area directly. In addition to promoting understanding and involvement, making the most of these and other opportunities will help retain valuable countryside management skills at serious risk of loss.

Special Qualities of the Shropshire Hills AONB

Diversity and Contrast

With a variety of geology unequalled in any area of comparable size in Britain, the Shropshire Hills have no single dominant feature or landform. The area's landscape character is one of variety and of transition – between the lowland plains of the English Midlands and the uplands of Wales, and between north and south of Britain. This is reflected in both ecology and patterns of human activity. The AONB contains within a quarter of Shropshire more than half of the Landscape Types defined in Shropshire's Landscape Character Assessment. The key **components of the Shropshire Hills landscape** are the hills, farmed countryside, woodlands, rivers and river valleys.

Hills

The rocky Stiperstones, the dissected plateau of the Long Mynd, the craggy volcanic Stretton Hills and Wrekin, the harsh quarried landscape of the Clee Hills, the long wooded scarp of Wenlock Edge, and the rolling enclosed hills of the Clun Forest all have their own distinctive character. The hills define the identity of the area, and are the backbone of our landscape. They contain commons, heath, moorland and rough grasslands, and are home to a variety of upland birds including curlew, red grouse and merlin.

Farmed Countryside

The patchwork of fields, mostly pasture bounded by hedges, results from generations of farming. Hedgerow and field trees, including many veteran trees, give the landscape a maturity. Remnants of valuable grassland and hay meadow habitats survive. There is some small scale arable cultivation - mostly for feed crops - with larger scale cropping in the valleys extending outside the AONB.

Woodlands

The area has higher than the national average cover of ancient and semi-natural woodland. Upland oakwoods are found mostly on steeper slopes and are important for birds, bryophytes and lichens, while mixed ash-elm-oak woods such as on the limestone of Wenlock Edge have a rich ground flora. There are also larger predominantly conifer plantations, many small farm woodlands, scattered valuable areas of wet woodland, parkland, wood pasture, and small, often remnant orchards.

Rivers and River Valleys

The Rivers Clun, Teme and Onny, along with many smaller rivers and streams, are relatively clean and natural in form, and of high quality. Many are lined with alder, and home to important species like the dipper, white-clawed crayfish and otter. The critically endangered freshwater pearl mussel is found in the River Clun just outside the AONB. Valleys vary from the steep-sided batches and dingles of the Long Mynd and Stiperstones, to larger expanses with some flood meadows, and the broad dales such as Corve Dale and Ape Dale which divide up the area. The AONB makes up the majority of the headwaters of the Teme catchment, and a short stretch of the River Severn within the AONB divides the Wrekin from Wenlock Edge. There are no large water bodies but many ponds, marshes and flushes.

Other special qualities are found in different ways across the whole area, including geology, wildlife, heritage, environmental and scenic quality, tranquillity, culture and opportunities for enjoyment.

Geology

The Shropshire Hills have the greatest geological variety of any comparable sized area in the UK, or indeed the world. Bedrock dates from the Precambrian almost continuously through to the Permian, and the influence of different rock types and structures on the landscape are clearly visible. There is a widespread mantle of more recent Quaternary deposits and along with landforms on the lower ground; these reflect the complex geological history of the last Ice Age. The AONB is important in the history of geological science – Murchison's study of the Silurian (including the Wenlock limestone) and its fossils being notable. The Ercall has a well-recognised example of the sudden transition from metamorphosed and barren rocks to sediments containing the earliest known hard-shelled fossils in the Cambrian period.

Wildlife

The valuable habitats of the AONB, especially heathland, grassland, woodland and rivers are linked to a long history of relatively sympathetic land management. Due to their transitional position, the Shropshire Hills have an unusual mix of species associated with both upland and lowland, including red grouse and dormice. The area holds some national rarities and is very significant in a regional and county context for upland species such as merlin, snipe, curlew, whinchat, dipper, emperor moth, small pearl-bordered fritillary and grayling butterflies. It is also significant for species of western oakwoods such as pied flycatcher, wood warbler redstart and tree pipit, and something of a stronghold for formerly more common or widespread species like skylark, black poplar and great-crested newt.

Heritage

Many ancient features survive in a landscape which has seen much less change than many parts of the country. Defences such as Offa's Dyke, Iron Age hillforts such as at Caer Caradoc and Bury Ditches, and medieval castles and fortified houses such as Clun and Stokesay tell of centuries of turbulent Marches history. The Shropshire Hills has the greatest concentration of medieval castle earthworks anywhere in Britain. Much of the field and settlement pattern is very ancient with tiny lanes, villages and scattered hamlets and farms. There are also estates, parkland, planted settlements and abandoned medieval villages, along with areas of later, more regular Parliamentary enclosure. Stone and timber-framed buildings in a variety of styles reflect the diversity of local materials available, and there is a rich variety of churches and churchyards. Parts of the area have seen periods of thriving industry, from charcoal burning to lead mining and stone quarrying, often accompanied by haphazard 'squatter' settlement.

Scenic and environmental quality

Panoramic views extend across and beyond the AONB which abounds in both wide open spaces and intimate corners. There are contrasts from relatively wild hills and valleys to softer, settled landscapes, as well as between varying seasonal colours of heather, grass, bracken and broadleaved trees. Clean air and water are accompanied by other valuable ecological functions including food and fibre growing, and water run-off control.

Tranquillity

Off the beaten track and remote in the context of this part of England, the Shropshire Hills are a haven of tranquillity – peace and quiet, dark skies and unspoilt views. Relatively low levels of noise and development are coupled with modest visitor numbers to create an unspoilt quality that is greatly valued.

Culture and Opportunities for Enjoyment

The Shropshire Hills span a wide spectrum of cultural settings, from the urban fringes of Telford and Ironbridge through the rural hinterlands of market towns such as Ludlow, Craven Arms and Much Wenlock to some of the sparsest areas of population in England along the Welsh border. Church Stretton, the only market town within the AONB, has a unique location in the heart of the hills and a strong Edwardian character. The Shropshire Hills have been a cultural inspiration for writers such as A E Housman, Mary Webb and Malcolm Saville. Opportunities for enjoyment and wellbeing are open to both locals and visitors with walks and outdoor activities respecting the area's qualities. The AONB has some of the best rights of way networks in Shropshire, most of its open access land, and a wide variety of sites, features and promoted routes.

The Management Plan is available on the AONB website <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/a-special-place/management-plan/>.

Appendix 2 General Conditions of Grant

The following conditions apply to all offers of Conservation Fund grant made by the Shropshire Hills AONB Trust, unless expressly deleted or varied in the formal offer letter to the applicant.

While some of the following conditions will not be relevant to all grant-aided projects, the decision whether to apply an individual condition remains solely at the discretion of the Shropshire Hills AONB Trust.

QUALITY OF WORK

1. All work grant aided through the Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund must conform to specifications submitted with the grant application unless agreed in writing.
2. The grantee will ensure at all times that works and activities covered by the offer of grant aid will conform to any relevant statutory obligations, bylaws, planning consents or building regulations.
3. The grantee will be responsible for ensuring all works are carried out to a high standard. Any physical works carried out through the project must be maintained in a satisfactory condition for a period of five years from the date of the final claim.
4. Where public access forms part of the project, the grantee will ensure that such access is allowed and no person is unreasonably denied access.
5. Where the land or feature to which this agreement pertains is sold or otherwise disposed of then the contents of this agreement shall be passed to the new owner of the land or feature. Where this is not possible then the Shropshire Hills AONB Trust may require any grant paid to be repaid in part or in full.

PUBLICITY

6. The support of the Shropshire Hills AONB Trust must be acknowledged in any publicity material about the project produced by the grantee.
7. The Shropshire Hills AONB logo may be used on publicity material, but must be unchanged in any way (e.g. no alteration of the horizontal and vertical proportions). Colour and black and white versions of the logo are available from the AONB Partnership.
8. The Shropshire Hills AONB Trust and Partnership may use information about the project (including photographs) to publicise the Fund, or refer publicly to grants offered and work undertaken either generally or specifically.

FINANCIAL CONDITIONS, CLAIMS & MONITORING

9. The offer of grant is made on the understanding that in the course of making the application, the grantee will have disclosed any other financial contribution which may be received for the same purpose from any other body. So far as any contributions have not been disclosed prior to any offer of grant from the Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund, the AONB Trust may subsequently vary or require the repayment of any grant to take account of them.
10. The offer of grant must be accepted in writing within 21 days of the date of the offer letter. The acceptance should be signed by the named contact in the application.

11. The offer of grant is made on the understanding that no grant will be paid for work carried out prior to the acceptance of the formal offer of grant, or after the end of the Financial Year in which the grant offer was made.
12. Claims for the grant must be accompanied by a progress budget related to the proposed budget in the grant offer, and backed up by evidence of expenditure (i.e. copies of receipts or invoices for all cash items, time sheets using the template provided for costs of in-kind and voluntary contributions).
13. Variation in approved items for expenditure or dates of claims will only be in exceptional circumstances and a written request must be made for any such changes. Significant changes of the division of expenditure between the headings above should also be requested in writing.
14. Abandonment of the project or significant delays affecting claim dates must be communicated to the AONB Trust at the earliest opportunity.
15. Final claims must be accompanied by a written report outlining the achievements of the project, relating these to the AONB Trusts's priorities, and summarising any lessons learned from the project. (A report may be 1-2 pages for a grant of £1,000 or less, and should be around 4 pages for larger grants). A small number of photographs illustrating the project should be included, which the AONB Trust or Partnership may use for publicity purposes. If possible these should be supplied in digital form. Copies of any written publicity must be provided, and photographs of other forms of publicity (e.g. events) if appropriate.
16. Information will be requested at intervals about progress with the project.
17. Members of the AONB Team, Trustees or the Grant Advisory Panel may need to visit the project or see its work either before or after completion, and must be allowed access to do this with reasonable notice, in order to:-
 - inspect any work carried out with Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund grant aid,
 - monitor the conduct and progress of any works listed in the formal offer of grant,
 - monitor usage of the site or features as defined in the formal offer of grant.

The grantee will give due consideration to any recommendations made following such a visit.

BREACH OF CONDITIONS AND DISPUTES

18. In the event of a breach of any conditions herewith the Shropshire Hills AONB Trust may declare any grant offer to be void or may vary the amount to be paid. Where the grant, or a portion of it, has been paid then the Shropshire Hills AONB Trust may require the amount to be repaid in part or in full.
19. Any dispute between an applicant and the Trust about the interpretation of these conditions, shall be referred to the arbitration of a person to be agreed between the parties, or, failing agreement within 28 days after each party has given to the other written request to concur in the appointment of an arbitrator, a person to be nominated at the request of either party by the President of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. In the event of arbitration, costs will be shared equally between the parties.
20. The offer of grant shall be governed by the Laws of England and Wales and shall be subject to the jurisdiction of the Courts of England and Wales.

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