



Project Green:

Shropshire Hills Sustainable Business Scheme

Evaluation 2010

Executive summary

The Shropshire Hills Sustainable Business Scheme has been running for two years, and this project seeks to evaluate how efficiently the scheme is working for its members, and whether it has achieved its original aims of providing a network for local businesses to improve their sustainability and reduce their energy and cost consumptions. This evaluation is needed in order to provide evidence-based recommendations for future development of the scheme, and to allow the members an avenue in which to raise their opinions of the scheme and the service it provides.

The evaluation relied on feedback from the members via an online questionnaire and follow up interviews. An additional customer questionnaire was conducted, with little response, so this was not focused on in the body of this report.

Through the analysis of the findings, four key recommendations have been made to improve the running and delivery of the Sustainable Business Scheme.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Aims and objectives

This research project aims to evaluate and provide recommendations for the Shropshire Hills Sustainable Business Scheme.



Figure 1. Sustainable Business Scheme Logo

The Sustainable Business Scheme has been running for two years, and this project is needed to provide an up to date evaluation of the scheme in order to assess what difference the scheme has made to its business members and their customers. The aim is to determine whether the scheme has achieved its goal of improving sustainability for local businesses and promoting it further to customers. This research project will

aim to discover this through business and customer questionnaires, one-to-one interviews, and a focus group with the Sustainable Business Champions.

1.2 Background

The Shropshire Hills AONB is a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty which covers 23% of Shropshire (as shown in Figure 2).

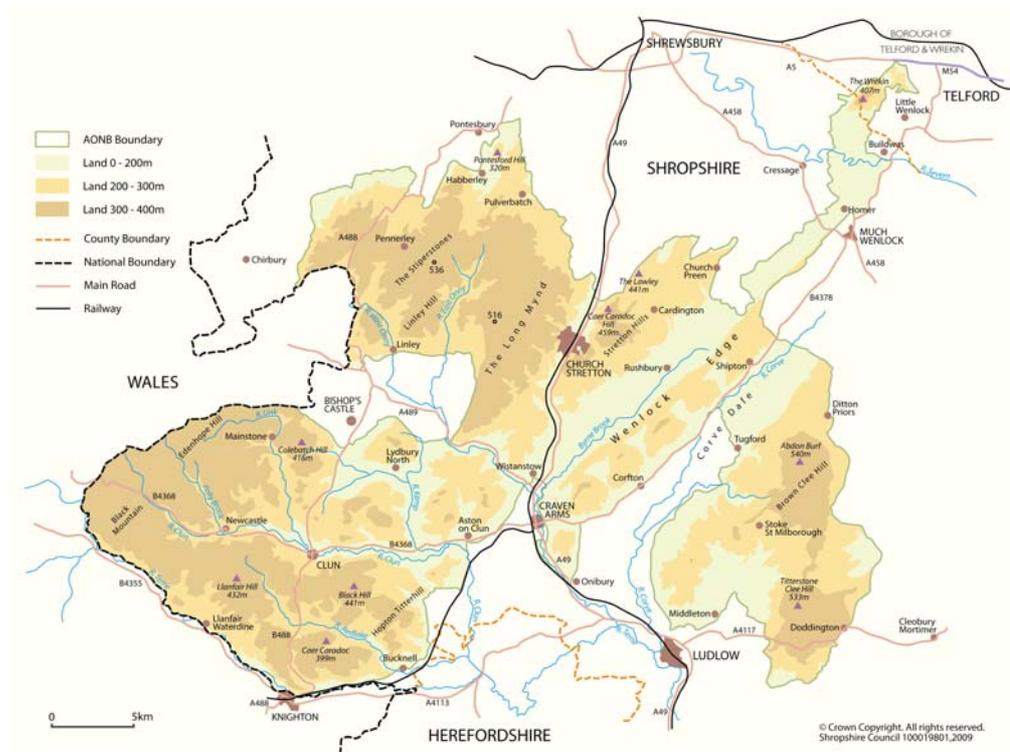


Figure 2. Map of the Shropshire Hills AONB within Shropshire.

The Shropshire Hills AONB management plan 2009-14 (Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership, 2008) outlines five strategic priorities:

1. Valuing, conserving and enhancing what we have
2. Keeping the Shropshire Hills countryside thriving
3. Shifting to low carbon
4. Adapting for the future, working alongside nature
5. Helping people connect with the AONB

The Sustainable Business Scheme helps to deliver against these five priorities through its own five aims of; reducing impact on the environment, benefiting wildlife and the landscape, involving local people and visitors, supporting the local economy and participating in a network of likeminded businesses.

The Sustainable Business Scheme was set up by Shropshire Hills AONB in 2008, after requests by local tourism businesses to be able to have use of the Shropshire Hills AONB brand. As the Shropshire Hills AONB works towards improving the landscape, the scheme focused on a sustainability agenda to promote a more sustainable future through the local businesses.

A research study conducted in 2006 concerning the use of local farmers markets (Dockerty, T., Encouraging Local Produce Market Sustainability, 2006) showed that local people shopped in farmers markets primarily to support local producers, which supported the development of the Shropshire Hills Sustainable Business Scheme.

Wider research has shown that there isn't another local initiative that addresses all of the issues that the Sustainable Business Scheme does, as it is the only scheme found during the research that caters for all types of local business, as most other schemes focus on tourism and accommodation businesses.

Other initiatives that are similar to this scheme include the Green Tourism Business Scheme (2010), which is a national scheme and uses a rating system to classify its members. Another similar scheme, The Green Achiever Scheme (2010), also works on a rating system, which makes the process more challenging and expensive to join. The Sustainable Business Scheme is the only local programme that caters for all types of business and offers a cheap, easy and useful way to be recognised as working towards sustainability.

1.3 Importance and need of the project

This research project is important as it will lend informed support to developing the scheme for the future. The Sustainable Business Scheme has a membership of 88 businesses, with around 40 who have renewed their membership at least once. There was a small evaluation questionnaire distributed in 2009. However, this project plans to be more in-depth and collect both business and customer feedback to assess the scheme and provide a list of recommendations.

The research project will look into how effective the Sustainable Business Scheme is in promoting and increasing business sustainability, and what issues and barriers the members feel that they face, as SME's, to become more sustainable.

The project will research into new ideas and events that businesses would like to see administered by the Shropshire Hills AONB, and assess the interest in a new aspect of the Buy Local initiative, 'Discover Local', which is being proposed. 'Discover Local' is a new theme that is being developed under the Buy Local scheme, it involves encouraging the use of local produce that enhance and conserve the natural landscape. The initiative will outline events and workshops surrounding the ideas of foraging, buying and cooking local produce.

2.0 Methodology

This seven week research project included four different categories of primary data collection:

- A business questionnaire, consisting of ten questions focusing on the members' experience of the Scheme and what could be done for the future (see <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/S5DVWHV>), which was emailed out to all of the Sustainable Business Scheme members
- A customer questionnaire, consisting of nine questions focusing on use and effectiveness of the website(see <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/2SQBSQ3>), which was posted on the Buy-Local website (www.shropshirehills-buylocal.co.uk)
- 20 semi structured interviews, with a random sample of consenting Sustainable Business Scheme members
- A focus group, which was held with the Sustainable Business Champions

The two questionnaires were created using SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool, which self-analyses quantitative data.

The interviews aim to be conducted with 20 business members. The interviews were one-to-one discussions about the Sustainable Business Scheme, following a loose structure, giving the members a greater opportunity to express their views and recommendations for the scheme. The interview structure also included a specific question about the new initiative 'Discover Local'.

All of the Sustainable Business Champions were invited to join a focus group discussion about how the scheme is currently running and to develop recommendations for the future.

Secondary data will be collected from a previous evaluation conducted in 2009. This information will feed into the final results to support the recommendations and conclusions.

The intention of these research methods is to achieve the project aim of finding out what the Sustainable Business Scheme has achieved for the members, what barriers they face in terms of improving sustainability and what recommendations can be made for future development of the scheme from the research evidence.

3. Results and Interpretation

Of the online business questionnaire that was sent out to the 88 Sustainable Business Scheme members, 34 replied, giving a 39% response rate. 11 out of the target 20 business questionnaires were conducted; this was due to time constraints and lack of response.

Due to problems launching the customer questionnaire on the Buy-Local website, alternative distribution was sought through emailing the SurveyMonkey questionnaire link to the 54 Buy-Local Newsletter subscribers, of which only 2 have completed. As this is such a small response rate, this section will focus on the feedback from the Sustainable Business Scheme members.

3.1 General results from the members.

The business questionnaire focused on why the members joined the Sustainable Business Scheme, and how useful they have found it to their business.

Figure 3 explains the reasons and motives people joined the Sustainable Business Scheme, using a Likert Scale to assess the importance of each set response choice.

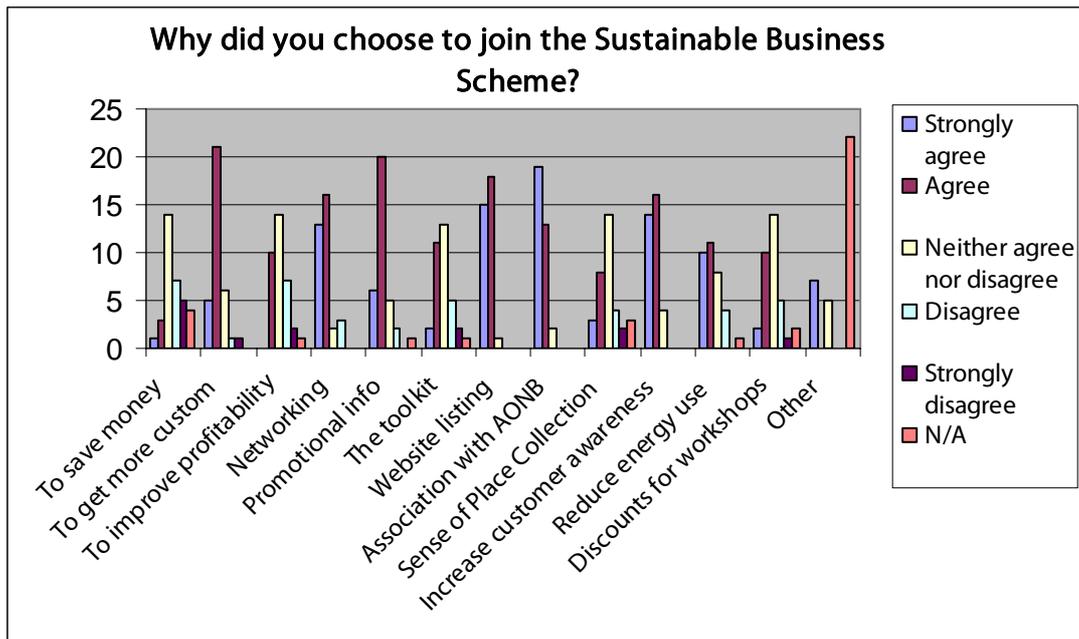


Figure 3. Graph showing responses to Question 3 of the Business Questionnaire ‘Why did you choose to join the Sustainable Business Scheme?’

This graph (Figure 3) shows that the most important reasons businesses chose to join the Scheme were to get more custom, become part of a business network, receive the promotional information that comes with membership, and to be associated with the Shropshire Hills AONB. This was an interesting finding, as it was presumed that small businesses would be more interested in the money saving aspect of sustainability by reducing energy costs. However, it does confirm the initial research by Dockerty, T. (2006) that businesses in the Shropshire Hills area wanted more connection with the AONB and use of the logo in their own promotion. This is useful information, as it shows that one major ‘catch’ of the Sustainable Business Scheme is the connection it provides to the AONB and the benefits that come with it, such as the logo that shares the Shropshire Hills brand image of the ‘bumps’.

This information also gives a sense of the types of businesses who are attracted to the Sustainable Business Scheme, as it seems that people joined the scheme to have accreditation of sustainability, rather than to increase their knowledge and delivery of sustainable practices, as people were less interested in the information provided by the Toolkit and Sense of Place Collection. The interview analysis also supports this, as 6 of the 11 businesses interviewed said that they joined the Sustainable Business Scheme because they agreed with the ‘ethos’ of the scheme and were doing a lot towards sustainability already.

Analysis of Question 5 of the business questionnaire (see Figure 4) shows that the majority of respondents thought that the Sustainable Business Scheme helped increase their own awareness of sustainability issues. This shows that the scheme is successful in developing people’s knowledge and awareness of sustainability issues, as Figure 4 also shows that the scheme has also helped businesses increase customer awareness. This is positive feedback as it shows that the scheme has helped expand knowledge and interest in sustainable business practices to a wider audience.

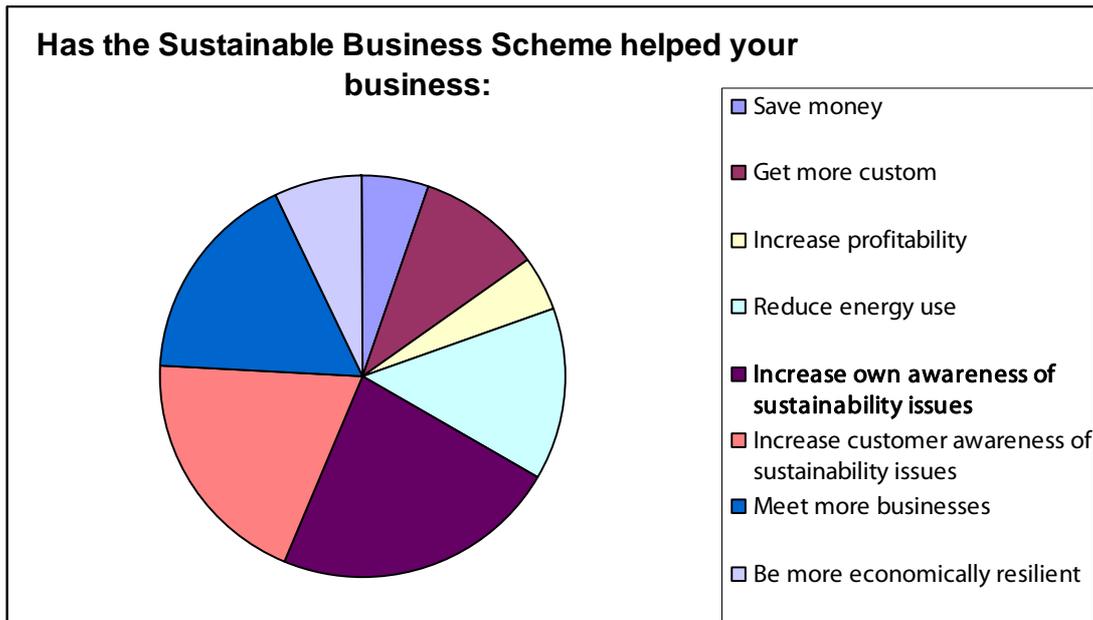


Figure 4. Pie Chart showing the positive responses to the title question.

Dragonfly Dawn said that joining the scheme was “the best £25 I ever spent!” explaining that the networking opportunities and business workshops that the Shropshire Hills AONB provide were invaluable. Other businesses also agreed that the business workshops were very valuable. This shows that the scheme has been successful in providing a network for like-minded businesses to share details and ideas, as can be seen in the example of Dragonfly Dawn, who now supplies home-made soap products to The Long Mynd Hotel and All Stretton Bunkhouse, and is setting up deals with Hopton House B&B, Chalet Pavilion and at other wider National Trust sites.

This next graph (Figure 5) goes in to more detail about the benefits that the scheme offers, and how useful the members have found them. This again shows the importance of the association the scheme provides to the Shropshire Hills AONB, as this link, along with the promotional information are seen to be very important benefits of the scheme. The offer of promotion through the website and directory are

most valued by the members, showing that it is advertising and spreading awareness of their commitment to sustainability that they value.

The ‘workshops and events’ may have a low positive response because the 40% who answered ‘neither’ had most likely not attended any Sustainable Business Scheme events, explaining this data.

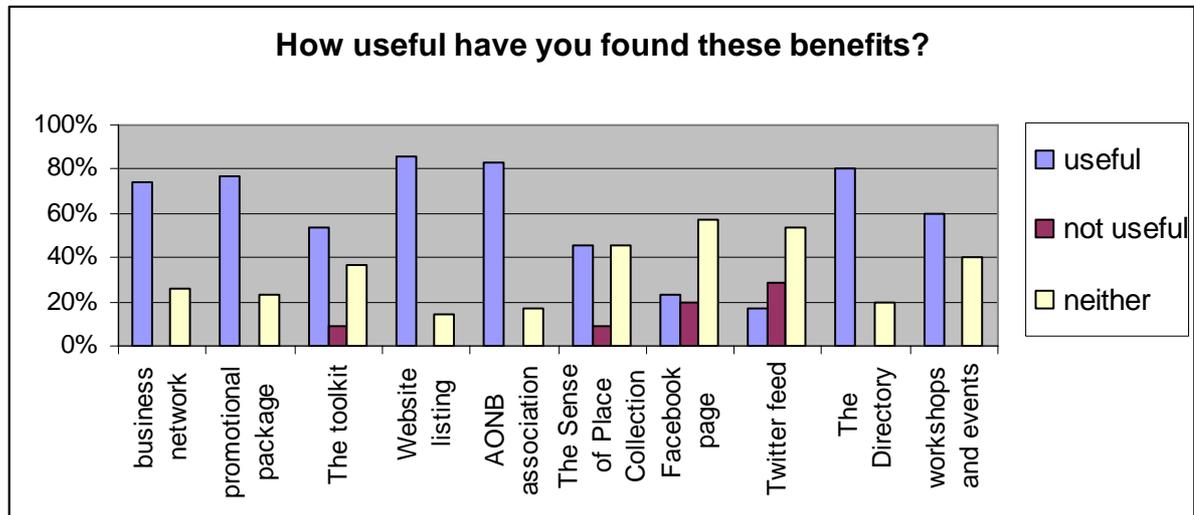


Figure 5. Graph showing members’ responses to the benefits of the scheme

3.2 Interpretation of networking and events opportunities

One theme that came out of all of the interviews was that there should be more networking and events, both informal social gatherings and business workshops, to help increase the networking between the members and also help them improve their sustainability through the sharing of ideas and the information workshops.

Figure 6 below shows the types of events people would most like to see organised by the Sustainable Business Scheme. This is very informative, as it gives an insight into the types of workshops small businesses would find useful, which can give direct recommendation to the AONB organisation as to what type of events would be most popular and worthwhile providing. The results show that businesses are interested in ways to better the running of their business, through marketing and strengthening the supply chain, and also in events that promote the Shropshire Hills AONB area and activities within it.

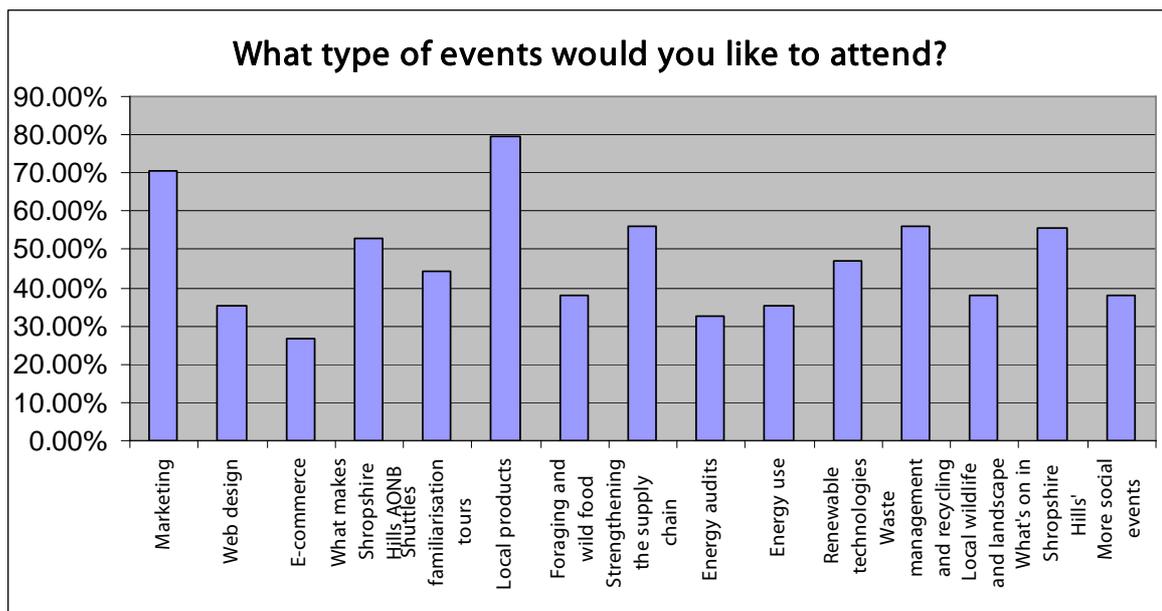


Figure 6. Graph showing the type of events members would like to see the Sustainable Business Scheme organise.

Figure 6 shows that people are most interested in local products; this is very positive information, as it provides support for the Discover Local initiative.

Information about Discover Local was given in the questionnaire and interviews and had positive responses; 74% of the questionnaire respondents indicated that they would be interested in getting involved. This shows that there would be significant interest in and support for the new venture.

3.3 Champion Focus Group

4 out of the 6 Champions attended the focus group. All filled in a short tick-box questionnaire about the activities they had completed in their roles as a Champion, as show in Table 1.

	TD	CC	KT	ER	JM	GG
Increase awareness of Shropshire Hills Sustainable Business Scheme	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Promote and market the scheme	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Give presentations to local networks		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sign up new members		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Identify other Sustainable Business Champions for future development of the scheme						
Identify organisations that would like to develop a partnership or 'franchising' arrangement						
Inform future development	✓	✓				
Other (website management etc.)	✓		✓		✓	

Table 1. Table displaying the activities the 6 Champions had completed during their allocated time.

Because of the Champions' direct involvement with the scheme, they have a deeper insight in to the needs of the scheme and its members, so were able to offer informed advice and suggestions about the scheme.

The focus group provided interesting analysis of the scheme, and the Champions discussed ways in which it could be improved.

All of the Champions agreed that there needed to be more tangible benefits for joining the scheme, to try to increase the membership beyond those who are already interested and involved in increasing their sustainability. One idea was to offer a promotional discount at another member's business for signing up to the scheme. This would also encourage the businesses to use each others services, which was an initial aim of the scheme, to increase local business support and supply chains. However, this would require the co-operation of all of the members in order to take effect.

Another major theme to come out of the Champions focus group was that the Buy-Local website, which lists the Sustainable Business Scheme members amongst other things, could be improved so that there was more of a benefit to joining the scheme, as other businesses can be registered on the website as being 'local' for free.

Also, as with the interviews, the Champions thought that there needed to be more social events, to increase networking opportunities and a sense of a collective identity between the members, as one person put it "so it is more like a club" (Lee Chapman, Long Mynd Hotel).

4. Recommendations

Following on from the results, it is clear that there are several recommendations that can be made to the Shropshire Hills AONB to improve the Sustainable Business Scheme. These recommendations are supported by the results that have been collated from speaking to members of the Sustainable Business Scheme.

This research project will put forward four main recommendations for the Sustainable Business Scheme.

1. Improve promotion and marketing of the scheme: There has been significant comment to suggest that members would like to have national recognition of the Sustainable Business Scheme, and to promote the members more widely outside of the Shropshire Hills area, to increase the tourism interest to the area. Suggestions to have more continual marketing of the scheme have also

been made, and to promote the businesses themselves to potential customers, not just to target potential members.

Improving the promotion of the scheme would increase awareness of the scheme itself, its members, and the Shropshire Hills AONB in general.

2. More networking and events: There has been overwhelming support for the need for more informal networking opportunities, through social events. Some members even suggested having a regular meeting, so that the members had an opportunity all to meet up and share ideas and generate more business links within the scheme. People have also expressed an interest for there to be more business workshops, as seen in Figure 6. Marketing of the events needs to be more widespread, promoted further in advance, and targeted more at non-members (Lee Chapman, Long Mynd Hotel).

Providing more networking and workshop events would increase knowledge for the members, and also encourage more businesses to join, because of the discounts offered under the scheme. However, providing more workshops and social events would require extra funding and management from the AONB team. One option would be that the members take ownership of their own networking events.

3. Improvement of the Buy-Local website and use of social networking facilities: There seems to be confusion on the website as to what the benefits are of joining the Sustainable Business Scheme, as free online listing is one of the main benefits, but businesses can be listed on the website as a 'local' business for free any way. Also, there is no clear distinction between the two types of business in the online directory. As one Champion said "everyone on the site gets treated the same, the scheme on the site isn't special".

The Sustainable Business Scheme has both a Facebook page and a Twitter feed, which not many of the members knew about. These are ideal ways for the members to promote their businesses and offers to other members and reach a wider customer base.

Encouragement to use these sites would improve the service for the members, and increase awareness of the scheme. Again, this requires the input of the members to give the AONB information to promote via the social networking sites.

4. Improve the renewals process: Both the Champions and other members have expressed that it is much easier to complete the renewal process of drawing up a new Sustainability Pledge when they are with a member of staff.

This would make the renewals process easier for the members, and less admin work for the Shropshire Hills AONB because the renewals would be dealt with quicker. Dealing with the renewals via phone may help to speed up the process, as emails are easy to ignore!

5. Conclusion

To conclude this report, the research has shown that the Sustainable Business Scheme members are happy with the service that is provided, and value the promotion and events opportunities that are offered. The findings support Dockerty's (2006) report about Local Farmers Markets, that businesses in the Shropshire Hills are wanted to have more of a connection with the AONB and share the logo.

However, the main key areas for development are in promotion of the scheme and providing more events and networking opportunities. Overall, the scheme has helped improve the sustainability of its members and increased awareness of sustainability issues within and beyond its membership of 88 local Shropshire businesses.

References

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