

Response from Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership to consultation on the Marches LEP European Structural and Investment Funds Strategy 2014-2020: Five Strategic Priorities document

21 January 2014

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership welcomes the additional document setting out further detail on proposed delivery of the Strategy's five Strategic Activities (the terminology in the document mixes use of 'Priorities' and 'Activities').

Strategic Activity 2 Supporting the Shift towards a Low Carbon Economy

In this section the references to decreasing energy use are welcome. This is so often omitted, and the challenges of rising energy demand are frequently quoted and rarely challenged. The role of energy reduction as part of 'whole place' initiatives is especially welcome as this will usually make use of renewables more viable and also have real potential to cut costs for businesses, enhancing their competitiveness. The need for low carbon initiatives not to compromise other economic assets such as high quality landscape, should be mentioned.

Strategic Activity 3 Supporting the Environment

The introduction to this section seems unnecessarily to frame the environment as a hindrance to growth, this sort of wording being used three times in the first 12 lines. This kind of language perpetuates such a myth and is unhelpful. Evidence is clear that looking after the environment makes long term economic sense, and that failure to manage the environment soundly will create significant economic costs and problems, e.g. flooding and water quality problems exacerbated by poor catchment management. The terminology used of 'tackling environmental issues' when set beside 'removal of barriers to growth' conjures up the image of trying to sweep away a problem rather than the more positive angle which we would recommend, of basing economic recovery on sound environmental management.

The introduction refers to 'protecting the natural and historical assets by supporting sustainable tourism and greening activities'. This is not realistic. Sustainable tourism and greening activities should indeed be supported, and they may help to make assets more valued, but they will not do much actually to protect assets. Where assets are under threat, legal and regulatory mechanisms are needed, including planning controls. Too often in our high quality landscape, planning decisions are failing to protect assets in favour of damaging short term economic gains, and thereby allowing degradation of the landscape assets on which the valuable tourism sector depends.

Subpriority 3.1 We are unclear about much of what is proposed in the five bullet points under this heading, and suggest that this should be the subject of further discussions with the Local Nature Partnerships. The first bullet point relating to regeneration of brownfield sites is a reasonable area of activity, but describing these as 'key sites' is misleading. They

are certainly not the highest quality natural environment sites, and action to develop these high quality sites into networks of valuable green infrastructure is also needed but absent from the document. We support the second bullet point on volunteering and training. The third bullet point covers some important areas regarding the water environment, but we are unsure what 'identify areas of defined work' means and what activity is proposed. The EU funding should support structures which are in place to improve integrated catchment management for multiple benefits, such as in the Teme and the Clun catchments. The fourth bullet point refers again to constraints on growth but it is not clear to what this refers.

We would like to see some reference in this section to business advice on environmental issues, which would link also with Strategic Activity 1. Adopting good environmental practices will often save a business money, and properly taking into account environmental issues and constraints when developing new business initiatives will again save time and money e.g. in lengthy planning disputes. Support from EU funding for the development of good guidance for areas such as the AONB on how business development can draw on the high quality environment without harming it would help considerably to overcome barriers or perceived barriers to economic growth, and also to help make that growth sustainable. This is true across a range of geographical settings, but we would suggest there is a strong case for specific support for the upland areas of the Marches. Uplands are areas of economic need, but also high environmental value. One to one business advice aimed at businesses in the uplands (including farms) has proven to be of benefit and to have potential to be continued and expanded. In addition, a pilot scheme for payments for ecosystem services in the uplands would deliver economic benefits to this valuable sector, as well as creating significant economic benefits elsewhere e.g. in improving water quality and flood attenuation. This may usefully be backed or informed by research demonstrating the extent of economic benefits delivered.

There should also be specific reference in this Environment priority to the woodlands sector, as there are multiple benefits from soundly managed woodlands including landscape, timber, recreation, water management and renewable energy.

Subpriority 3.2 We welcome the recognition of the importance of cultural, heritage, landscape and tourism infrastructures, and proposals to support the development and protection of such assets. Funding for such work has tended to come from other sources in the past, and tourism has been able to benefit from this. However as many sources of funding are reducing, to make in some cases even the most basic of maintenance of countryside and visitor infrastructure a problem (access routes etc), supporting this from tourism priorities within the EU funding is very much now justified. There is potential also to develop new infrastructure, in particular cycle routes which in other areas such as North East England, the South West and the Peak District, have become enormously important to the tourism economy. Road routes using some of the many quiet roads of the Marches will encourage cycle touring, while easy off-road routes such as using former railway lines have great potential for day use by families, including cycle hire. Recent work by the Walking With Offa project along the Welsh – English border has proved that there is also great potential to tap into the enormously popular activity of walking (at all levels), and that investment in new products and infrastructure has a direct effect in terms of visitor numbers and return to businesses. The EU funding could also provide very valuable match funding into heritage and natural environment projects (especially landscape-scale area projects) on account of their benefits to tourism.

We welcome support for destination management, product development and marketing. In the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow we have a well-established Destination Development Partnership with an agreed strategy and good support from business and community representatives, but which has been very limited in its capacity to deliver by having no funds. Funding for delivery of this agreed strategy (including staff capacity) would make an enormous difference and be efficient given the ground work which has already been done.

Strategic Activity 4 Employment and Skills

The rural angle to this theme should be drawn out more, as the Marches is a very rural area. Practical rural and environmental skills will often provide a very appropriate focus for young people who struggle with academic work, and are more likely to lead to employment which may enable them to stay in their rural home area. Countryside and environmental management is also a sector offering opportunities to a range of people, both young and perhaps older people changing careers, including at the middle and higher parts of the spectrum for skills and education. Maintaining the landscape resource on which much economic activity depends is also reliant on maintaining and perpetuating traditional skills, alongside new ones. For both young and older people with multiple barriers as described, the fact of practical work in a high quality natural environment with other people is proven to have enormous benefits to wellbeing and confidence. There is great potential to expand and create countryside training and volunteering schemes, and these should be supported by the EU funding programme.

Strategic Activity 5 Social Inclusion

Similarly, we support the use of countryside volunteering as a means of promoting social inclusion.