

# Context, Baseline and Scoping Report for Sustainability Appraisal (incorporating Strategic Environmental Assessment) of the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2014 - 2019

14 December 2012

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## 1. INTRODUCTION TO THE SHROPSHIRE HILLS AONB

The Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty was designated in 1958. It covers 802 km<sup>2</sup> in the two unitary Council areas of Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin, extending from the Wrekin to the Clun Forest and from the Stiperstones to the Clee Hills. The area is one of 46 AONBs in the UK, those in England and Wales regarded by government as having equal landscape quality and protection as our National Parks. The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership, with 36 members from a broad range of sectors, is formally a Joint Advisory Committee to the two Councils and oversees the Management Plan process. A small staff team hosted by Shropshire Council work on behalf of the AONB Partnership.

Lying between the Welsh uplands and the English Midland Plain, the Shropshire Hills is a landscape of diversity, with a very varied geology reflected in the different landforms, habitats and wildlife. The hills themselves, rolling pastoral farmland and woods, rivers and river valleys are the main elements of the landscape. Heritage and antiquity is ingrained in the landscape – in settlement and field pattern, hillforts, traditional buildings, and industrial heritage from charcoal burning to lead mining and stone quarrying. The AONB remit also recognises factors including tranquillity and remoteness, local community and culture, and opportunities for quiet enjoyment.

## 2. SUMMARY OF MANAGEMENT PLAN STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND POLICIES

Four strategic priorities for the 2014-19 AONB Management Plan have been proposed (these are a slight adaptation on those from the 2004-9 Plan and fit with the recently adopted national objectives for the AONB family):

### **Conserving and enhancing our outstanding landscape**

Wildlife, heritage, tranquillity, appropriate development

### **Helping our local communities thrive more sustainably**

Farming and land management, prosperity and wellbeing, low carbon

### **Promoting personal enjoyment, understanding and participation**

For local people and visitors, sense of place and belonging, doing and taking part

### **Maintaining and enriching the natural services on which we all depend**

Ecosystem services (air, water, food, climate, etc) and wider benefits to society

**Policies** from the 2009-14 Management Plan are being reviewed and refined, on topics including:

Protection, Regulation

Heritage

Biodiversity

Landscape character

Housing

Design Statements

Conservation Areas

Farm building conversion

Minerals and quarrying

Telecommunications

Wildness

Agricultural buildings

Tourism

Rural business

Recreation

Walking

Tranquillity

Transport

Public car parking

Farming

Agri-environment funding

Farm diversification

Climate change and lowering carbon emissions

Energy conservation

Low carbon community initiatives

Renewable energy

Wind turbines

Adaptation to climate change

Habitat networks

Ecosystem services

Woodland and forestry

Sustainability

Access and enjoyment

Health and wellbeing

Education

Volunteering

The 'Shropshire Hills' identity

Area sections of the Plan will also be developed for the following parts of the AONB:

Long Mynd – Stiperstones

Clun Forest

Clee Hills

Stretton Valley, Wenlock Edge & Dales

Wrekin Forest

### 3. DESCRIPTION OF METHODOLOGY AND TIMETABLE

The methodology used for this Sustainability Appraisal (SA) is based on Natural England's guidance for the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of AONB Management Plans, and that used for the last Management Plan. It has also been informed by the work of the Shropshire local authorities on sustainability appraisal for Local Development Frameworks, SEAs and SAs undertaken by other AONBs and government guidance on SEA. The SA is being developed in parallel with the revision of the AONB Management Plan. Natural England's guidance is that because AONB Management Plans aim to benefit the environment, the SEA/SA process should be strategic and focus on the policies within the Management Plan.

The natural beauty of the Shropshire Hills is particularly affected by economic and social influences in the area. A broad approach to sustainability in the work of the AONB Partnership is particularly valued by members. **We have therefore opted again to go beyond the legal minimum for Strategic Environmental Assessment and decided to do a fuller Sustainability Appraisal.** In line with Natural England's guidance however, this process does not need to be as rigorous as that undertaken by planning authorities for Local Development Framework documents.

#### Proposed stages in the process

##### 1. Scoping

###### 1.1 Identification of current issues and objectives (2012)

Developed through:

- Distillation of issues arising from community projects and public engagement
- Consultation with the AONB Partnership and other groups
- Review of available data and changes from earlier 'State of the AONB' report
- Analysis of significant national, regional and local plans and strategies
- Monitoring linked to Sustainability Appraisal of previous Management Plan

###### 1.2 Confirmation of SA objectives

###### 1.3 Identification of evidence to support SA and Management Plan (2012)

###### 1.4 Submission of Scoping Report to the statutory agencies (Dec 2012)

###### 1.5 Analysis of responses from Scoping Report consultees (early 2013)

##### 2. Developing Sustainability Appraisal Report (Spring 2013)

##### 3. Consultation on draft Sustainability Appraisal Report and draft Management Plan (12 weeks May – July 2013)

##### 4. Analysis of responses to consultations and consideration by AONB Partnership of necessary changes (July- Aug 2013)

##### 6. AONB Management Plan submitted for formal observations by Natural England (Sept 2013).

##### 7. AONB Management Plan submitted for adoption by local authorities (Winter 2013).

##### 8. AONB Management Plan published and launched (Spring 2014).

##### 9. Sustainability Appraisal monitoring.

## 4. STATEMENT OF KEY ISSUES

The following key issues facing the Shropshire Hills have been identified as the most significant. (These have much in common with those identified for the last Plan, but have been added to especially in Development & economy and Connecting and joining up).

### **The future of farming**

Livestock farming in particular is vital to maintaining the character of the Shropshire Hills, and needs help to adapt to changing subsidy regimes. Developing local supply chains and emphasising environmental quality will be crucial.

### **Maintaining wildlife habitats and heritage features**

Birds such as lapwing and curlew are still declining, and high quality grassland habitats are still at risk. Some features are neglected, others damaged through lack of understanding of their importance. Good quality advice and funding is needed for both established and new landowners, and ways of passing on skills.

### **Transport**

Increasing travel on roads and in the air uses more and more resources and erodes tranquillity. Further incentives are needed to influence patterns of employment and leisure and provide alternatives including reduced travel and use of public transport.

### **Development & economy**

There is a need to balance short term needs for economic gain with longer term sustainability of the area. Housing appropriate to local need, tourism and business development are needed to allow rural communities to survive, but these need to be of a scale, design and quality which complements the special qualities of the area.

### **Climate change**

Wildlife and farming will need to adapt to changes, and the economic and political consequences are very uncertain. We need to play our part in shifting to a low carbon economy and way of life, conserving energy and developing appropriate small-scale renewables.

### **Awareness and involvement**

Local people and visitors have a great love of the Shropshire Hills, and a willingness to understand more and contribute to the area's wellbeing. Opportunities through volunteering, community activity, business engagement and public events need to be continued, along with renewed efforts to connect young people with the countryside and outdoors.

### **Connecting and joining up**

There is a need to continue integrating more. Within the AONB, this means working locally in the different areas of the Shropshire Hills, and linking the environment with the local community and economy. In terms of connecting the AONB with the area around it, this means working with the nearby towns, along river catchments and across administrative boundaries.

## 5. SUMMARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL BASELINE

The following information is an update on the summary of environmental, economic and social factors relevant to the AONB from the last AONB Management Plan. The main changes are shown shaded – these may be from changes identified or new understanding. More limited work on baseline information has been carried out so far than for the last Plan, partly due to diminishing resources in many of the organisations which provide data. This summary is likely to be updated further as the Plan review process continues.

In a national context, the character and quality of the Shropshire Hills landscape is **relatively stable**, and continues to be of high importance. However, the **overall condition and trends** of the special features and qualities of the Shropshire Hills AONB **are mixed**. **Improvements** in some areas linked to a significant scale of conservation activity are accompanied by **declines** in other aspects. **Land management** practices remain a crucial determining factor, alongside **wider economic and social factors**.

- The area's very high level of geological diversity underpins all other aspects of landscape. Key **geological sites are in good condition**, but there is potential to raise awareness of geology further and to incorporate it into other areas of work.
- Protection of the most important features of the AONB is now generally good. The ecological integrity of the area has suffered significantly in the past and **high quality habitats are very fragmented**. **Direct loss of biodiversity and heritage features has slowed but continues**.
- Many of the special features and qualities of the AONB are only maintained by **sympathetic land management**. This dependence makes some features (e.g. unimproved grasslands) very sensitive to adverse land management practices.
- **Structural change in agriculture** will continue to have a significant impact on the special qualities of the AONB. The **future of the livestock sector**, especially beef cattle and sheep, is especially important to the AONB, and good quality advice and support to upland farmers will make a big difference to achieving the AONB's purposes.
- Levels of participation in farm conservation (**agri-environment**) **schemes remain very high**, but with the end of the Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme, some farms are reducing conservation activity. There is concern that the value of Higher Level Stewardship agreements may be limited by uptake of options not meeting the most important strategic issues.
- A wide variety of **conservation projects** are having a significant impact within the AONB.
- The main **heathlands** are improving in condition, and arrangements for management of a number of **commons** are improving.
- The rising demand for woodfuel and provision of advice have resulted in improvement in management of many **woodlands**. Sites remaining undermanaged are largely those with the most difficulties in terms of often owing to lack of resources and practical difficulties.
- **Rivers and river catchments** have become a significant focus for activity, but **face significant challenges**, including water quality and flow regimes, nutrient and sediment input, riparian habitat quality.
- Key upland and farmland **bird species** such as lapwing, curlew and snipe have declined to **critically low levels**.
- Levels of maintenance of traditional **field boundaries** (mostly hedges) are high.

- Good land management and increasing awareness is conserving many **historic features**. Maintenance of traditional buildings requires considerable ongoing funding. A number of historic settlements are using Design Statements to help retain their character.
- Business activity within the AONB itself is strongly focused on **land management** and associated industries, plus tourism and services. The **environmental resources** of the AONB are increasingly recognised as important to businesses in the surrounding market towns.
- **Levels of transport are increasing**. This is the major source of intrusive noise, resulting in a **gradual erosion of tranquillity**. Air quality is however good.
- A peripheral location coupled with sparse population and strong protective policies continue to mean that **development pressure is generally low**. There is however an ongoing need to ensure that farm developments, housing, tourism and renewable energy are achieved sensitively within the high quality landscape.
- The **economic downturn** is putting pressure on a range of rural businesses and communities, and this may threaten the adoption of more environmentally friendly practices as margins get tighter. **Rising costs of energy and fuel** are influencing business choices.
- The population has a generally high age profile but with widely varying levels of income. Access to services is often poor, and many initiatives are operating to address this. Many residents, both longstanding and incomers, nevertheless **value the relative remoteness of the area**.
- Levels of **investment in countryside access** such as rights of way have peaked, and maintaining standards in the light of local authority cuts is a real concern.
- **Community support** for conservation is high, and **awareness of and involvement with the AONB continues to increase**.
- **Climate change will intensify pressures on the landscape**, through indirect social and economic effects, e.g. pressure of land use, as well as through direct effects on wildlife and habitats.

## Headline indicators related to special qualities of the AONB

**Headline indicators** are key statistical measures which help to summarise the condition of the AONB. They relate to the special qualities, but are also dependent on what data is available, and are not intended to be comprehensive. Those shown below are influenced by national guidance on monitoring for AONBs as well as by local priorities. New data is not available on all the indicators, but the likely trend and notes on change are shown below.

Special qualities of the Shropshire Hills AONB		Headline Indicator and status for 2009-14 Plan	Trend	Change since 2009-14 Plan	National level for comparison (2009-14 Plan)
Overall	Diversity and contrast (landscape character)	Character is classed as being 'maintained' in the two National Character Areas in which the AONB falls <sup>a</sup>	➔	No new data from Countryside Quality Counts project.	51% of England is 'maintaining' character (10% is enhancing).
Elements of the landscape	Hills	70.5% of farmed land (46,625ha) is managed under some form of agri-environment scheme <sup>a</sup>	➔?	Uptake remaining high but levels of actual activity likely to be decreasing	13% (2007)
	Farmed landscape				
	Woodlands	50% of overall woodland (6,800ha) is managed under a Forestry Commission Woodland Grant Scheme agreement <sup>b</sup>	⬇	No new data at present but anecdotal evidence suggests may be decreasing	Not available in this form but estimated c30%
	Rivers and river valleys	0% of river SSSIs (one site – River Teme including River Clun SAC) are in favourable or recovering condition <sup>a</sup>	➔	Considerable activity but no sections are yet in recovering condition	National level higher
Characteristics of the landscape  (found in different ways across the whole area)	Geology	99.6% of geological SSSIs (by land area) are in favourable or recovering condition <sup>a</sup>	⬇?	Likely to be some deterioration due to minimal management?	National level probably lower
	Wildlife	58.2% of biological SSSIs (by land area) are in favourable or recovering condition <sup>a</sup> Key farmland and upland bird species are declining <sup>c</sup>	↗	Continued improvement	National level probably higher
			⬇	Some declines are slowing	stable
	Heritage	52% of Scheduled Ancient Monuments (86) are classified as 'At High or Medium Risk' <sup>d</sup> 2% of Listed Buildings (3) are classified as 'At Risk' <sup>d</sup>	↗ ➔	54% (100) at Medium or High Risk 2.5% At Risk	Not available 3.2% (2007) Listed buildings and structural SAMs
	Environmental and scenic quality	60.3% of all SSSIs (by land area) are in favourable or recovering condition <sup>a</sup> 32% of river length is 'good' water quality <sup>e</sup>	↗ ↗	Likely to be still improving improving?	80.06% (Defra PSA target to reach 95% by 2010) 72% good biological, 69% chemical (2006)
	Tranquillity	70% of the AONB is classified as 'tranquil' <sup>f</sup>	⬇	No new data	National figure not available but AONB level higher
Culture and enjoyment	86.8% of rights of way are classified as 'easy to use'	➔?	Maintenance budgets reduced. Data no longer collected?	All of Shropshire 78%	

a Data supplied by Natural England, JCA data as at 2007 <sup>5</sup>, agri-environment and SSSI data as at Feb 2008.

b Data supplied by Forestry Commission, as at 2007

c Based on data from Shropshire Ornithological Society and Upper Onny Wildlife Group, up to 2007

d Data supplied by English Heritage, as at 2007

e Data supplied by Environment Agency, as at 2007

f Data supplied by CPRE, 2005 <sup>6</sup>. Definition of 'tranquil' based on green colour

## 6. PREDICTED ENVIRONMENTAL TRENDS IN THE ABSENCE OF MANAGEMENT PLAN INTERVENTIONS

- Loss of landscape character
- Continued loss of wildlife and heritage features
- Loss of scenic quality and tranquillity
- Unsustainable patterns of land use and development
- Missed opportunities for positive impacts

## 7. REVIEW OF RELEVANT PLANS AND POLICIES

The following plans and policies have been identified as relevant to the Management Plan review. These are the main directives, plans and strategies that influence the aspects of the AONB that the new Management Plan is seeking to address. Often the documents are further refined by interpretation at a 'lower level' (e.g. national strategies translated into local strategies). As the AONB Management Plan seeks to be a summary and reflection of local policies and actions, the scoping review has often been directed at the most pertinent local level documents. A table outlining the key thrust of each plan/strategy and its implications for the Management Plan review is published separately as an Appendix to this report.

<b>INTERNATIONAL</b>
Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (1979)
Bonn Convention on Conservation of Migratory Species (1979)
The Convention on Biological Diversity (The Rio Convention) (Adopted June 1992, entered into force December 1993)
Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Adopted December 1997)
Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International importance, especially waterfowl habitat (1971)
Rio Declaration of Environment and Development 1992
The World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg (2002), Commitments arising from the Johannesburg Summit
Copenhagen Accord United Nations Climate Change Conference 2009
<b>EUROPEAN</b>
Aarhus Convention, UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters 1998, ratified February 2005)
The Birds Directive (Directive on Conservation of Wild Birds) (79/409/EEC) Adopted 1979
The Environmental Noise Directive (2002/49/EC) (2002)
Our life insurance, our natural capital: an EU biodiversity strategy to 2020, European Commission 2011
The Habitats Directive (Directive on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and Wild Fauna and Flora) (Directive 92/43/EC)

The Landscape Convention (entered into force 1 <sup>st</sup> March 2004, ratified by UK in November 2006)
Draft EU soil framework Directive (2006/0086) (COD)
Renewed EU Sustainable Development Strategy (June 2006)
The Waste Framework Directive (75/442/EEC) (October 2000) and The Landfill Directive (99/31/EC).
The Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC)
<b>NATIONAL</b>
'The Natural Choice', the Natural Environment White Paper (Defra, 2012)
The Carbon Plan (DECC, 2011)
UK Bioenergy Strategy (DECC, 2012)
Code for Sustainable Homes (CLG, 2009)
Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000
Annual Energy Statement (DECC, 2011)
Business Plan 2012-2015 (Defra 2012)
Sustainable Energy Act (2003) Department for Trade and Industry
Business Plan 2012-15 (DCMS, 2012)
Creating a sporting habit for life, A new youth sport strategy (DCMS, 2012)
Water for Life, the Water White Paper (Defra, 2011)
Natural Environment & Rural Communities Act (2006)
Securing the Future – UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy (DEFRA, 2005)
Mainstreaming sustainable development – The Government's vision and what this means in practice (Defra, 2011)
Secure and Sustainable Buildings Act (2004)
Healthy lives, healthy people: Improving outcomes and supporting transparency (DH, 2012)
Safeguarding our Soils – A Strategy for England (Defra 2011)
Business Plan 2012-2015 (Department for Transport, 2012)
Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services (Defra 2011)
Government Review of Waste Policy in England 2011 (Defra 2011)
The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended)
Rights of Way Circular (1/09) Guidance for Local Authorities (Defra 2009)
National Planning Policy Framework (CLG 2012)
Strategic Framework for Tourism in England 2010 – 2020, Visit England
<b>WALES</b>
People, Places, Futures - The Wales Spatial Plan 2008 Update
TAN 8 Renewable Energy
Powys Unitary Development Plan 2001-2016 (Adopted 1st March 2010)
A Living Wales - Natural Environment Framework (NEF)
Energy Wales: A Low Carbon Transition (Welsh Government March 2012)
Sustainable Tourism - A Framework for Wales 2007
<b>SHROPSHIRE</b>
Shropshire's Community Strategy 2010-2020 A Flourishing Shropshire (Shropshire Partnership 2010)
Shropshire Local Development Framework : Adopted Core Strategy 2006-2026 (Shropshire Council 2011)
Schedule of remaining and replaced local and structure plan policies (Shropshire Council)
Supplementary Planning Document: Sustainable Design Part 1 (Shropshire Council 2011)
Site Allocations and Management of Development (SAMDev) Preferred Options 2012

Shropshire Place Plans - Bishop's Castle, Bridgnorth, Church Stretton, Cleobury Mortimer, Craven Arms, Ludlow, Minsterley and Pontesbury, Much Wenlock
Shropshire Biodiversity Action Plan Delivery Plan 2009
Evolution, Revolution and Innovation - the Cultural Strategy for Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin
New Economic Growth Strategy for Shropshire 2012-2026 (in preparation)
Shropshire Geodiversity Action Plan (August 2007)
Shropshire Local Transport Plan (LTP) 2011-2026 (near completion)
Shropshire Hills and Ludlow Sustainable Tourism Strategy and Action Plan 2011-16
<b>TELFORD &amp; WREKIN</b>
Telford & Wrekin Core Strategy 2006 - 2016

## 8. IDENTIFICATION OF STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY APPRAISAL OBJECTIVES

The following objectives have been selected against which to appraise key aspects of the AONB Management Plan. The environmental objectives, which form the essential legal SEA requirement of this process, are those set down in Natural England's guidance. The additional discretionary sustainability objectives have been defined as part of the scoping process, and are based partly on Natural England's guidance and partly on local priorities. (All are the same as for the 2004-9 Plan, with the addition of new objective S12).

### **Environmental objectives (essential)**

- E1 To protect and where practical enhance biodiversity (habitats)
- E2 To protect and enhance fauna and flora (individual species)
- E3 To ensure no adverse effect arises on population (i.e. demographic balance)
- E4 To safeguard human health
- E5 To protect and enhance soil quality
- E6 To protect water
- E7 To protect air and climate
- E8 To maintain cultural heritage (including architectural and archaeological heritage)
- E9 To protect and enhance landscape
- E10 To protect material assets including natural resources
- E11 To avoid significant adverse effects between the above interrelationships

### **Additional sustainability objectives (mostly focused on economic and social goals)**

- S1 To sustain a thriving economy
- S2 To reduce poverty and deprivation
- S3 To optimise employment opportunities for all
- S4 To maintain and improve quality of life, health and wellbeing for all
- S5 To sustain vibrant, cohesive, safe and sustainable communities
- S6 To promote social inclusion and improve accessibility of services and facilities
- S7 To raise standards of education and training and promote employment skills
- S8 To encourage the use of locally sourced goods and materials
- S9 To encourage the continuation and appropriate diversification of farming
- S10 To protect the environment, people and properties from flood risk
- S11 To reduce the demand for travel and promote modes of travel other than private motor vehicles
- S12 To enhance resilience of communities and infrastructure to climate change

## 9. PRELIMINARY REVIEW OF EFFECTS AND POSSIBLE CONSIDERATION OF ALTERNATIVES

Some of the principal issues emerging from the sustainability appraisal are:  
(this analysis is similar to that for the 2004-9 Plan but has been refined and updated)

- **The approaches of the Management Plan are generally strong for sustainability, and there are many more positive interactions between issues than negative ones. The Plan provides an important means to navigate some of the key issues for the area.**
- The high quality of the AONB's **environment is a huge economic asset** which, if sensitively used and not damaged by inappropriate development, can deliver great long term economic benefits. In the need however to take a long term view and protect this asset, there is a risk of the designation being perceived as hampering economic progress.  
*Demonstrating the positive economic effects of the environment and of looking after it remains crucial.*
- As a largely very rural area, **people are very dependent on transport by private car.** Policies to limit the impact of transport and traffic on the area need to avoid negative social and economic consequences.  
*Influencing patterns of behaviour will be a long term process and will require significant investment and commitment to alternatives. There is evidence of the economic and social value of reducing transport, and the level of homeworking is increasing in the area.*
- Large scale development of **wind energy** seeking to lower carbon emissions would have a level of impact on the landscape unacceptable to many people.  
*Further work is necessary to determine an acceptable scale and level of development of wind energy in the AONB, and alternative means of reducing carbon emissions need to be actively promoted, including energy conservation, carbon management in soils, biomass and small scale renewables.*
- **Renewable energy** technologies need to be carefully applied to avoid damage to biodiversity, heritage, landscape and resources.  
*Good information and guidance will be key to achieving this.*
- In the longer term, **climate change** will intensify conflicts between basic human needs (food, energy, etc) and maintaining nature and landscape.  
*Demonstration is necessary to show that maintaining landscape and nature is important to long term human needs and compatible with food and energy production.*
- The AONB's high quality environment and protection of it contribute to problems of **affordability of housing**, through high demand and limits on supply. Affordable housing may be allowed in the AONB where other forms of development would not be.  
*A robust system is required to ensure that affordable housing can be provided to meet social needs, but in keeping with the landscape.*
- The **higher standards, e.g. of design**, sought in the AONB may add to costs.  
*This may be somewhat overcome by good guidance and economies of scale. Some of the higher costs are more likely to return to the local economy (e.g. through using local materials), with knock-on benefits.*