

Wrekin Forest Partnership

Notes of meeting, Tuesday 13th January 2015, Little Wenlock Village Hall

Present:

George Chancellor, individual member and AONB Partnership Chair
Jayne Davidson, Little Wenlock Parish Council
Brian Herring, Wellington LA21
Chris Hogarth, Natural England
Phil Holden, Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership, Manager (Chair)
Sheila Hutchison, Little Wenlock Parish Council
Andrew Jenkinson, Shropshire Geological Society
Pete Lambert, Shropshire Wildlife Trust
David Ragbourne, Natural England
Dorothy Roberts, Wellington Town Council
Robert Saunders, Wellington LA21
Cllr Jacqui Seymour, Telford & Wrekin Council
Michael Vout, Telford & Wrekin Council, Team Leader Environment and Planning Policy
John Winterbourne, Forestry Commission

1. Apologies

Michael Barker, Telford & Wrekin Council, Assistant Director: Planning Specialist
Bob Coalbran, Wellington Walkers Are Welcome
Jim Roberts, landowner, Upper Huntington Farm
Harry Vane, landowner, Raby Estate
Mike & Jackie White, Wellington Civic Society

2. Notes of meeting 2 December 2014

These were accepted.

Actions - circulating the full results of the consultation had been done, stages and timetable for completion of the Plan had not.

3. Developing the new Wrekin Forest Plan

The full results of the opinion survey were discussed. Reference was made to the value of promoting different places and routes across the area as a way of dispersing people and reducing pressures on the hill itself.

The need for clarity about the planning issues was agreed, and Michael Vout outlined the situation regarding planning and the development of policy for the Wrekin area. It was expected to launch public consultation in June/ July 2015 on the first formal draft of the Shaping Places Local Plan. The Plan had to adopt the up to date thinking in Green Infrastructure planning, which required greater rigour and evidence than previously. The Wrekin was valued highly in this process, but the best method to incorporate it into policy was not clear. Use of local landscape designations (such as Areas of Special Landscape Character) was not now favoured by government, and the Council had decided not to pursue this. The Wrekin Forest clearly had a very close relationship with the urban area, as reflected even in the identity of the Council. Members asked if a Wrekin Forest area with a defined boundary was practical in planning policy. This was not yet certain, but Borough-wide rural/ landscape policies also had a role to play as well as or perhaps instead of this.

Andrew commented on the geological importance of the Wrekin/Ironbridge area and mentioned the Geopark 'designation' (as at Abberley & Malvern Hills and in the Black

Country), which was defined locally rather than officially, and had never been recognised in planning.

Michael referred to the Green Infrastructure Evidence and Analysis document and the Needs Analysis (both available at http://www.telford.gov.uk/info/20172/planning_policy_and_strategy/556/green_infrastructure). The question was raised whether policies in this Local Plan might be a stepping stone towards stronger policies in future, but members had concern that development pressure was felt now, and that the policies could be in place for a long time. Michael said that the Telford Green Network was formerly just urban greenspace and didn't include the Wrekin at all. It was possible that the Green Network would be redefined more broadly in the new Plan, but the need for evidence was crucial, and clarity about what any policy was seeking to achieve, what was being protected, etc.

Following his conversations with Michael, Phil was concerned that there was perhaps a mismatch between the aspirations of the Partnership to protect the area and what was actually going to be possible in the Local Plan. The group could stick to their preferred option of putting forward a defined Wrekin Forest area with a boundary, but this might not make it into policy. The best way for the Partnership to work with the Council on policy development was discussed, and further dialogue was agreed as important.

The potential for a trust of some sort to raise awareness and build more recognition of the importance of the area was recognised.

Pete said that in absence of a project structure to deliver actions (as had been present during much of the last plan period), the proposals the plan put forward needed to be modest and realistic. John mentioned co-ordinated work on deer management. George asked if a co-ordinator was needed for implementing the plan? He asked Phil to outline his idea for a part-time Ranger on the hill. This was focused mainly on visitor management on the hill itself rather than pursuing initiatives in the wider area, but Phil suggested that with a modest pot of money put together by partners along with public donations through a trust, a part-time presence could be perhaps be established (with agreement of the landowners and clarity on the role, etc) relatively easily. Focusing on litter clearance, engaging with visitors about appropriate behaviour and organising some volunteer tasks would make a real, tangible difference to the quality of the surroundings and visitor experience, and give people more of a sense that the hill was being looked after. This in turn might help to build support for a trust and fund-raising.

ACTION – Pete to progress drafting of the Plan and circulate to the Partnership ahead of the next meeting, for discussion at the meeting.

4. Date of next meeting

Tues 24 February 2015, Little Wenlock Village Hall.