

Wrekin Forest Partnership

Minutes of meeting, Monday 17 February 2014, Little Wenlock Village Hall

Present:

Phil Holden, Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership, Manager (Chair)
Michael Barker, Telford & Wrekin Council, Assistant Director: Planning Specialist
Cllr Jacqui Seymour, Telford & Wrekin Council
Robert Saunders, Wellington LA21
Bob Coalbran, Wellington Walkers Are Welcome
Brian Herring, Wellington LA21
Colin Preston, Shropshire Wildlife Trust, Director
John Winterbourne, Forestry Commission, Woodland Officer
Jayne Davidson, Little Wenlock Parish Council
Juliet Esp, Little Wenlock Parish Council
Paul Kalinauckas, All Friends Round The Wrekin
Jim Roberts, landowner, Upper Huntington Farm
Dorothy Roberts, Wellington Town Council

Apologies

George Chancellor, individual member and AONB Partnership Chair
Harry Vane, landowner, Raby Estate
Mike & Jackie White, Wellington Civic Society

1. Welcome

Phil welcomed members to the first meeting of the Partnership since 21 Jan 2013.

2. Brief updates from partners

Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/>

Phil said that the new AONB Management Plan 2014-19 was currently going forward for formal approval by Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council. The short section of this on the Wrekin Forest had been circulated.

The 2009-13 round of LEADER funding, from which there had been a project in the Wrekin Forest, had ended. The AONB Partnership was preparing for the next round of LEADER funding, which would be different, with more economic focus.

Some charitable funding had been secured to boost the AONB Partnership's Sustainable Development Fund, which was available to projects in the Wrekin Forest area.

The AONB Partnership is still closely involved with sustainable tourism work, including the Destination Partnership for the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow area, which comes right up to the Wrekin <http://www.shropshirehillstourismpartnership.org.uk/>. Practical projects had included support for Walkers Are Welcome towns.

Telford & Wrekin Council

Michael said that the AONB Management Plan was due to be approved by the Council's Cabinet later this month. Restoration on the Huntington Lane opencast coal site was to be carried out over the next year or so, with a maintenance requirement of five years following that.

The Shaping Places Local Plan was progressing, and the next stage of public consultation would be April to June 2014.

http://www.telford.gov.uk/info/1004/planning_policy/1218/shaping_places

Jacqui expressed her support for the sections from the AONB Management Plan about the 'quality of the surrounding area is very important to the AONB' and T&WC 'propose ... to explore mechanisms for the protection, promotion and management of the Wrekin Forest area.'

Wellington LA21 <http://www.wellingtonla21.org.uk/> <https://twitter.com/wellingtonla21>

Robert referred to the written update circulated:

LA21 will be launching our latest publication, entitled 'Walk Around The Wrekin' (the third and final instalment of our 'Explore The Wrekin' series), this spring. The 20-page booklet is a select guide to some of the best public paths and byways around the wider Wrekin Forest, plotting a course from Dothill Wildlife Site, in the northern suburbs of Wellington, to the banks of the River Severn at Coalbrookdale, and covering all points in between. To coincide with the launch we will be hosting a number of themed events, and unveiling a designated 'Explore The Wrekin' zone on our website, where all of the booklets from the series will be available for download. At the moment, we are also exploring funding avenues that will allow to post more content on the site, so that visitors will eventually be able to enjoy a virtual tour of the various wildlife sites within the Wrekin Forest and find out more about its flora and fauna. Our aim is to provide the most comprehensive resource for The Wrekin Forest on the web.

Wellington Walkers Are Welcome <http://www.wellingtonwalkersarewelcome.org.uk/>

Bob said that WAW now have a signed-up group with the Council doing path maintenance. A networking day with other WAW towns is being hosted in March in Wellington.

Shropshire Wildlife Trust <http://www.shropshirewildlifetrust.org.uk/>

Colin outlined that the Trust were involved with the AONB Management Plan and also with commenting on planning policy and applications in the Wrekin area. They have direct involvement with wildlife sites, and work closely with various companies including Alcoa and Veolia, and the Bourneville Trust. Local groups do ecological survey work, and provide advice to private landowners. Some work is being done on water quality in the Lyde Brook.

<http://www.shropshirewildlifetrust.org.uk/Shropshire+landscape/Telford+and+the+Wrekin+Forest>

Forestry Commission <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/westmidlands>

John updated that following a recent change in Forestry Agent on the Raby Estate Woodlands, activity to manage (control, cull) deer is in the process of being increased. [This is also the case in the woodlands in Ironbridge managed by the Severn Gorge Countryside Trust.] This is welcomed by the Forestry Commission and Natural England, as the current damage to woodland habitat in the wider landscape, and particularly in woodland SSSIs is increasingly unsustainable. Detailed longer term plans will be drawn up by the Raby Estate, in the form of a formal 'Deer Management Plan'. The arrangements are yet to be finalised, but the plan will probably be written for the Estate by the Deer Initiative, either through core funding to the DI (provided by FC and NE) or by an FC grant to the Estate. The plan will necessarily address issues of 'stakeholder involvement'. There is also a parallel likelihood of

the Deer Initiative holding public awareness events, but they will be relevant to the wider landscape, not just the Raby Estate.

Little Wenlock Parish Council <http://www.littlewenlock.org/>

Juliet queried whether the 'management of the main visitor access point at Forest Glen had improved', as written in the AONB Management Plan. The work undertaken by SWT was described, but it was accepted that more could be done. LWPC had been pushing the issue of speed limits and Quiet Lane designation for a number of years and nothing had happened. Planning permission had been given for a car park at the Donkey Field but this had not been built. At a recent orienteering event, the Rifle Range was opened for parking, and this worked very well. The PC are very concerned about road safety at Forest Glen. Bob and Dorothy echoed these concerns, and it was agreed this was a topic the Partnership should come back to.

Jayne queried the status of the Wrekin Forest area, and Michael talked through the earlier work by the Council and this Partnership looking at a possible 'Wrekin Forest Park', as well as his more recent exploration of Community Forests. It was clarified that there was no 'off the peg' mechanism that would easily bring either planning protection or funding to the Wrekin Forest area beyond the AONB. Members were however in favour of some kind of structure which would better reflect and support the value of the area.

All Friends Round The Wrekin <http://www.wrekinfriends.com/>

Paul said the group was 'there in the background' at present, and basically wanted to keep the Wrekin in its 'natural' state.

Jim Roberts, Huntington Farm

Jim said that housing development of the land now within the coal site had been within plans going back to the 1960s, and though later taken out, it had been back on the agenda for many years. He said he had often suggested that the Steeraway Farm could be some kind of educational centre. He supported the need for deer management.

Wellington Town Council <http://www.wellingtontowncouncil.co.uk/>

Dorothy said that the Town Council were trying to promote visitors to the Wrekin to come to Wellington and walk from there, but this was difficult. They were trying to get more space for advertising and information in a noticeboard at the station.

Raby Estate

Phil read the email received from Harry Vane:

"I would like to advise the Wrekin Forest Partnership that the Estate intends to erect signs on the part of the Wrekin in the private ownership of the Raby Estate (Shropshire). The Estate recognises the importance of recreational activities on the Wrekin but there are no real formal arrangements between the different user groups and in addition the general public are dispersed more and more throughout the whole woodland area. Timber production has always been part of the Estate's long term sustainable management of the woodlands on the Wrekin, and public safety needs to take a high priority when timber harvesting.

The Estate has begun discussions with cycling groups to see if zoning cycling (not permitted at present but nonetheless widespread), downhill mountain biking, and walking, can be

agreed, to minimise conflict and ensure that everyone uses the land safely. Meanwhile signage and maps are to be erected at all the main entrances to the Wrekin woodland owned by the Estate and all paths will be waymarked where walkers are permitted.”

Wellington Civic Society

Mike & Jackie White had circulated an email with apologies which described their involvement with opposition to the proposed housing development at Haygate Fields, at the west edge of Wellington, north of the M54.

3. Planning issues affecting the Wrekin Forest

This had come out to some extent earlier in the meeting, but there was some further discussion of the issues around the five year land supply for housing. Michael explained that Telford & Wrekin had a very good land supply for housing, and that most sites were viable. The problem was that the rate of current building and the way the calculations are done mean that the Council are currently unable to demonstrate the five year supply which is required. He reiterated the next stage of consultation on the Shaping Places Local Plan in April.

4. Aspirations and next steps for the Wrekin Forest Partnership

Discussion moved on to the desirability of a Management Plan of some sort for the Wrekin Forest area, looking at conservation, access issues, etc. This was seen as related to the land use planning, as it would provide important evidence (backed up by public consultation) to underpin the group’s aspirations to protect the area in relation to development. The background to the previous Wrekin Forest Plan (2008-13) was discussed. This had been drawn up as part of a Shropshire Wildlife Trust project supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, when their bid to buy part of the hill had proved unsuccessful. A brief for a new Plan had been drawn up in 2012 between the Trust, Telford & Wrekin Council and the AONB Partnership, and an application submitted to the Coal site Community Fund, but this had been unsuccessful. It was agreed that Colin, Michael and Phil would look again at this brief and circulate it to the group, considering ways to take it forward – **ACTION**. There was enthusiasm among those present for the Partnership to try to take forward developing a new Wrekin Forest Plan, using the skills of members of the Partnership, and perhaps seeking some external funding.

5. AOB

There was no other business.

6. Date of next meeting

Tues 15 April 2014 (to be confirmed).