

Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership Management Board

Minutes of Meeting 10th September 2015

AONB Partnership office, Craven Arms



Present:

James Williamson (Vice Chair)	Individual member
Veronica Cossons	Shropshire Wildlife Trust
Cllr Chris Turley	Telford & Wrekin Council
Cllr David Turner	Shropshire Council

AONB Partnership staff:

Phil Holden	AONB Partnership Manager
Alison Scimia	Administrator (minute taker)

1. Apologies

George Chancellor (Chair)	Individual member
Cllr Tim Barker (Vice Chair)	Shropshire Council
Caroline Beddell	Country Land & Business Association
Cllr Heather Kidd	Shropshire Council
Deb Hughes	Shropshire Council
Cllr Cecilia Motley	Shropshire Council
Elizabeth Thomas	Individual member
Michael Vout	Telford & Wrekin Council

James Williamson chaired the meeting in the absence of George Chancellor. It was noted that Tim Barker had written to George to say that he would be standing down from the Partnership. Tim's contribution over the years was gratefully noted.

2. Minutes of Last Meeting and Matters Arising

2.1 Para 2.1 – Planning – Phil said that a meeting with senior planners had not yet been organised. David Turner offered to help facilitate this meeting. **ACTION – Phil & David.**

3. Work Programme Update

Phil highlighted the following key points from the report:

- 3.1 Stiperstones & Corndon Hill Country Landscape Partnership Scheme (LPS) The LPS Board had agreed to terminate the contract with Walford College for the training programme due to protracted difficulties and delays. Phil explained that the Engine House scheme at Pontesford was subject to a Historic England capital grant, which was accompanied by a maintenance agreement, which the AONB Partnership would need to see through as a legacy of the LPS. Historic England would however fund any works required.
- 3.2 LEADER – The LEADER Co-ordinator had been transferred to Shropshire Council's Outdoor Partnerships team, working from Shirehall. The Southern Shropshire LEADER Delivery Plan had been submitted to Defra and it is believed a draft contract received. Recruitment would be taking place for the new Local Action Group (LAG). James asked if Partnership members would be able to apply to be on the LAG. Phil confirmed he would inform the Partnership when members could apply.

- 3.3 Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund – The first meeting of the four founding trustees (George Chancellor, Sarah Bury, Anthony Morgan and Phil Holden) had taken place. Agreement of the constitution would be discussed at the next meeting, followed by the process of application to the Charity Commission.
- 3.4 Rivers – The Rivers project was progressing well, with Alison Jones working part-time assisting Mike Kelly (Natural Environment Officer) on the four year WREN project.
- 3.5 Shuttles – The service was running well with a slight increase in passenger numbers from the previous year. Funding however would become problematic in future years as unfortunately Natural England would be withdrawing their contribution.
- 3.6 Sustainable Business Scheme – The Scheme had been through a process of review and relaunched as the Shropshire Hills Sustainable Business Network, which would have a two year membership cycle to reduce admin. The Shropshire Hills Buy Local website would be closed down in due course, with information transferred to the AONB website.
- 3.7 Wrekin Forest – Phil reported good momentum on the Wrekin Forest Partnership, with approval being achieved on the new Wrekin Forest Plan.
- 3.8 Upland Commons Project – Phil outlined the development work taking place for a proposed Upland Commons project, which would operate in five areas of the country. Facilitation work was taking place with commoners and discussions being held with landowners. David queried how organised the commoners groups were. Phil clarified that Clee Hill had a Commoners Association and the Long Mynd commoners worked with the National Trust. Stapeley Common had been helped to form a Commoners Association by the AONB Partnership's Farming Project. The emphasis in this national project on sharing experience between different areas of the country was welcomed.
- 3.9 Proposed Stepping Stones project – Several meetings including site visits had taken place discussing a landscape scale conservation project with the National Trust and Natural England, focussing on the Long Mynd and the Stiperstones.
- 3.10 Office Accommodation – Phil informed the Board that Shropshire Council's IT Department are required to replace the current broadband provision to the office by the end of October, which would necessitate physical works to the building. The landlord has subsequently refused permission to any works on the property unless a new lease was signed. They had offered to reach a compromise by the consideration of a temporary agreement that would be conditional upon Shropshire Council entering into a new lease without delay. This matter was discussed further under Item 4.3 below.

4. 2015-17 AONB Partnership Budgets

Phil highlighted the following key points:

- 4.1 Due mostly to the loss of LEADER income and an unexpected balancing service charge of £7k for the office for 2013/14, the projected deficit for 2015/16 has increased from £9.8k to £20.8k. Veronica asked about the Council's pledge to replace the lost LEADER income. Phil explained that George Chancellor would be writing to George Candler (Director of Commissioning at Shropshire Council) regarding compensation for the financial loss due to the relocation of the LEADER Programme. The Management Board endorsed this approach.

- 4.2 Shuttles – A balance of project contributions was being carried forward towards next year's service, and a management fee of 5% was again being taken towards AONB Partnership costs.
- 4.3 Office Accommodation – Further to para 3.10 above Phil continued to explain that the current IT provision may be able to continue for a short period after the end of October, however it was necessary to seek alternative premises and explore various options. After discussing the possibilities currently available, the Management Board agreed that pursuing the vacant Shropshire Council small business units in Craven Arms was the best option. The notice period at the current office was also discussed by the Board.
- 4.4 Phil indicated the total anticipated income for 2015/16 would be £10.5k. He said that income was getting harder to gain through externally funded projects, though the Commons project may offer opportunities. Phil summarised that the team would endeavour to keep costs down as far as possible and maximise income in the current Financial Year, but options would need to be looked at longer term, with office costs requiring the more immediate action. James suggested it would be helpful to show the reserve in the budget spreadsheets in future.

5. National Association for AONBs Update

- 5.1 Phil highlighted discussions that had taken place at the National Association for AONBs annual Conference this year. He said that all AONBs recognised there would be pressure from Defra and Local Authority funding, but hosting by a local authority was still overwhelmingly the preferred model. James questioned how valuable the AONB would be to residents and businesses if they were asked. Phil felt the support was stronger now than it had been 10 years ago. Veronica suggested that a series of options be considered in the event of further cuts in future. James agreed, and added that awareness in the community of the AONB should continue to be increased.

6. Tourism Related Activity

- 6.1 Phil summarised the Partnership's tourism-related activity over the last five years, stating that although tourism was not a primary AONB purpose, it was an important supporting means of delivering conservation. He explained that the creation of DDPs in Shropshire had timed well with our securing funding for the Sustainable Tourism Strategy and achievement of the European Charter. Phil continued to highlight that several practical delivery projects (Shuttles, Business Scheme, walking projects, etc) had reinforced the strategic work on tourism. Recently Shropshire Council had withdrawn their administrative support for the DDP, and with the support of the tourism sector in the area, the AONB Partnership had agreed to take this on, in order to maintain momentum.
- 6.2 Phil ran through several proposed directions for tourism work, such as continuing the sustainable tourism approach and message, more involvement with strategic management of visitor pressures at popular tourism sites, and connecting tourism to ecological and heritage projects.

7. Any other Business

- 7.1 Nothing raised.

8. Date of Next Meetings

21st January 2016, 12th May 2016 and 8th September 2016.