

## **Item 7. Discussion paper on AONB Partnership post-Brexit position statement**

### **1. Summary**

This paper does not go as far as a draft position statement, but presents a discussion paper scoping some of the issues in relation to the AONB, as a basis for debate at the Board.

### **2. Background**

The AONB Partnership organised a well attended 'Shropshire Hills Uplands Forum' event in February (report at <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Shropshire-Hills-Uplands-Forum-27-Feb-17-full-report.pdf>). At the last Transition Board meeting, it was agreed to progress this work towards a position statement for the AONB Partnership. A discussion paper is provided here in Appendix 1.

Copied below are the summary outputs from our Uplands Forum meeting. Note that the focus of this is on land management issues, which are not the only implications for the AONB from Brexit, and also that the 'we' in this context refers to the range of people attending that event, and not specifically the AONB Partnership.

#### Summary outputs from Shropshire Hills Uplands Forum meeting

The **public benefits** put to attendees which the uplands provide were agreed:

Food production, Flood management, Tranquillity and wellbeing, Carbon storage, Space, exercise & relaxation, Biodiversity and ecosystems, Clean air and water, Landscape, Wood products, minerals, Historic and cultural value.

Additional benefits added by discussion groups included: Tourism, Livestock in the landscape, and breeding livestock, Education & skills development, Source of income, Energy, Soil stability and health.

The following is a summary of key points raised in the discussion groups against four questions. There was a diversity of views and not necessarily consensus on every point, but the issues raised most often are towards the top of the bullet lists.

#### **Which public benefits from the uplands should government funding support?**

- Food production from farming is the basis for land management and keeps people in the uplands, but shouldn't be the only consideration i.e. not at any cost.
- Flood management – the way land is managed can make a difference to downstream water flow, but land managers are not paid for it, so there is little incentive. Government funding should support effective natural flood management measures.
- Biodiversity and ecosystems are a base from which other things follow. Climate change adaptation is important to consider.
- Some considered the landscape benefits for tranquillity, exercise, relaxation, etc – should be paid directly by visitors through accommodation cafes etc, while others recognised not all farmers and landowners can charge for the public benefits they provide. Infrastructure for visitors - car parking, footpaths, etc needs public funding.

- Clean water – this will be helped by managing land better for biodiversity, e.g. reducing sediment. Reducing pollutants such as pesticides will come from regulation and also action by water companies, but government schemes may also help.
- Education – programmes for schools and wider public awareness can help to underpin other benefits.

### **What principles should guide public funding for the uplands?**

- A locally targeted and focussed scheme within a basic consistent national framework. Use local structures for administration e.g. AONB?
- Integrated schemes – don't damage one thing to benefit another. More environmentally based, but also encourage employment opportunities and the local economy.
- Fair reward – being proportionate and realistic to actual costs and activity. .
- Easy to follow, simple and cheap to implement. Longer term funding.
- More public benefits = more money paying for outcomes, but these are difficult to measure and hard to verify. Need a variety of ways of monitoring.
- Landscape may be too large a scale – divided opinion within the group (some farmers thought it too large, other members thought it necessary).

### **How should public funding for the uplands work, to follow these principles?**

- Local continuity and planning – a contact advisor.
- Organisations involved need to be well linked up. Simplicity, less driven by technology.
- More to be done for young farmers – skills are being lost.
- Farm business tenancies have changed – grant must go to primary producer.
- Encourage certain enterprises that bring public benefits e.g. suckler cows
- Some of the best events have been farmer to farmer knowledge exchange, best practice – but internet is often not available, and real contact is invaluable.
- Train farmers to monitor outputs – use local knowledge and keep simple - cannot monitor individual species but can monitor habitat and guide local delivery.
- In some cases, farmers can work as group to collaborate e.g. commons.

### **What we need to do for the Shropshire Hills - 'Looking forward, we need to ...'**

- Build common ground between conservation bodies, farmers and wider community – to understand the needs of all users and managers of the land, to work together for common goals, and agree on a clear vision for Shropshire Hills.
- Get simple messages out to engage the wider public as to the importance of the uplands, the central role of farming (small/medium scale family farms) and the environmental, health and economic benefits they can deliver.
- Encourage new land management support schemes to have locally relevant delivery within a national framework – targeted schemes with local priorities for public benefits. Develop properly convened partnerships to involve farmers and landowners in scheme design. Link up business, research and government support.
- Identify what was good and worked well from the 25-year ESA schemes, from HLS and what is working well now, and incorporate these into a new scheme alongside new ideas.

- Consider and address resilience to climate change including flooding. Incorporate learning from around the world, more international perspectives.
- Ensure we join up between livestock production, land management, rural economy and communities. Support young people and new entrants into farming by addressing affordable housing, viable business opportunities and planning issues.

### **3. RECOMMENDATION:**

**The Transition Board is recommended to discuss the issues raised in this paper.**

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership post-Brexit discussion paper 17<sup>th</sup> May 2017**

The purposes of a post-Brexit position statement by the AONB Partnership may be as follows:

- To inform ourselves (Partnership members and the team) on the issues and their relevance to the AONB, and from that to influence our own work.
- To influence, and stimulate dialogue with, other stakeholders in the area, working towards an updated vision for the AONB in the next Management Plan.
- To contribute to the national debate and influence government policy (our influence may be fairly small in this regard and this purpose will require working in conjunction with others, including the NAAONB, Uplands Alliance, etc).

The statutory basis of AONBs lies in UK legislation and will not be directly affected by Brexit.

The two main issues arising from Brexit of direct relevance to the AONB are:

- The future of EU-based environmental legislation and mechanisms for enforcement.
- Government policy and funding regimes for land management (including both farming and forestry)

Other less direct but significant factors are:

- Loss of access to EU funding (including LEADER, structural funds etc) – this affects the AONB Partnership directly but also the area more generally. The loss is direct, but will also have the knock-on effect of increasing competition for key UK funds, e.g. HLF.
- Reaction of the UK economy – this is not predictable, but some commentators predict a slowing of the economy, which could affect likely levels of future government funding for AONBs, as well as impacting other sources e.g. private sector and charitable giving.
- The political climate and/or funding may affect the links of the AONB Partnership with other protected areas, and potentially lead to greater isolation, loss of opportunities for learning, good practice, etc.

A further issue particular to the Shropshire Hills AONB is the potential for Brexit to affect the outcome and/or timescale of the request to Defra to create a Conservation Board.

This paper will focus on the two main issues identified above.

### Environmental legislation

Environmental groups are reasonably unanimous in their calls for the government to maintain current standards of legal environmental protection post Brexit. The government are currently pledging to do this, but there are political pressures from some quarters for 'deregulation'. Some of these are overt, others more subtle, e.g. the government's admission that it may seek to 'correct the statute book' in some cases as part of the proposed transposition process through the Great Repeal Bill. Probably of most direct relevance to the AONB are the Habitats Directive and the Water Framework Directive, though other regulations and international commitments such as on climate change will affect us, along with everywhere.

Aside from maintaining the standards of environmental legislation, a key concern is over enforcement and oversight of these, which is currently undertaken by a range of strong EU institutions, often with powerful sanctions including fines. Under domestic legislation, these roles would fall to the UK judiciary, which although independent of government, will not have the same power and influence.

*Proposed position/ action – The AONB Partnership should add its voice to the prevailing view of environmental groups that existing standards of environmental legislation should be maintained, and adequate mechanisms for enforcement and oversight should be put in place.*

### Land management policy and funding

This is a complex area, in which the alternative scenarios are quite broad. These issues have been explored in the Shropshire Hills Uplands Forum of February 2017, and written up in a report of the event, which has been publicised by ourselves and the Uplands Alliance, and sent directly to Defra. Regardless of any views on Brexit overall, environmental groups have for decades been dissatisfied with the CAP. The UK for a long time led the EU in reform of the CAP towards less environmentally damaging policies, and would have gone further but for resistance from other member states. There is now therefore the opportunity for a UK based land management policy and funding regime to provide something much better.

Professor Dieter Helm, Chair of the Natural Capital Committee, has characterised the three broad options as follows:

1. Pursue food security and self sufficiency – which he argues is unrealistic (for reasons such as lack of domestic supply of agro-chemicals) and has many negative consequences, e.g. on food exports, on non agricultural uses of land, and through the imposition of import tariffs.
2. Move further from income subsidies to environmental subsidies – i.e. the equivalent of agri-environment schemes growing, with the likes of Basic Payment Scheme being phased out. This option he argues is unsatisfactory, not going far enough and creating perverse incentives e.g. by reversing the 'polluter pays' principle, through rewarding land managers for profits foregone by not damaging the environment.
3. Public money for public goods – in this scenario land managers would be paid from the public purse for defined public benefits. This could be in the form of 'contracts' which have the advantage of not being classed as 'subsidy'. Many environmental groups feel that this option would provide the best value for money, and integrate the environment with farming

and land management in the best way, recognising natural capital and ecosystem services. Discussion at the Uplands Alliance and our own Uplands Forum suggest that there may be quite broad support for this option, though some land managers and organisations representing them are wary of it. There remain many issues of detail about how such a scheme might operate.

The issue of transition from the current system to a new one is a key factor. The government has pledged to continue current funding regimes up to 2020 (and to honour agreements such as through agri-environment schemes which may extend beyond this).

All commentaries describe the different situation affecting the uplands, where land management is more heavily reliant on subsidy (and inherently less economically viable), and where the balance of delivery from land of food production to other public benefits is most clearly towards the wider range of benefits.

The scenario of paying for public benefits inevitably raises different views on what public benefits should be supported, with a range of positions from seeking payment to farmers to carry on just as they are, to calls for 'rewilding' the uplands with an end to uneconomic sheep farming. This polarisation can be divisive and deflect debate from the real issues. There is much to support in seeking to develop more complex and resilient ecological systems in the uplands, but abandonment of land to let nature 'do its own thing' will rarely lead to the best environmental benefits. There is potential for the 'cultural landscape' aspects of the AONB, or 'maintaining landscape character' to be in conflict with improving ecological condition, or used as arguments against such basically positive changes. Language and perceptions are important here – e.g. there is evidence that visual/pictorial representations of greater levels of native woodland cover in upland landscapes are nearly always welcomed as adding to attractiveness of the landscape. Verbal descriptions of much the same thing on the other hand may quickly be written off as 'scrubbing over the hills'.

*Proposed position/ action – The AONB Partnership should continue dialogue with local and national stakeholders on these issues. There should be an emphasis on finding and developing common ground rather than divisive language and approaches. We should not limit the potential of a new land management policy and funding regime to improve the landscape of the AONB, but also need to recognise that changes for many will feel threatening. Over a timescale of the next six months or so, the balance between continuing dialogue and setting out written positions needs to be determined – there is a risk that the latter could perhaps inhibit dialogue. We need to work towards likely forthcoming consultations by government and the next AONB Management Plan, so that we know what we are likely to say. This is however quite a fluid area, on which further knowledge and thinking will develop, so positions need to be relatively flexible.*