

## **Item 5. Proposal to renew Europarc Federation Sustainable Tourism Charter**

### **1. Summary**

This paper proposes to the Transition Board that the AONB Partnership should renew the five year Europarc Federation's 'Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas', for the significant benefits this will provide in terms of positioning the AONB and our sustainable tourism aims over the next five years.

### **2. Background**

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership was awarded the Sustainable Tourism Charter in 2011 for a five year period, which has recently expired. The award of the Charter coincided with, and was linked to, the formation of the Shropshire Hills & Ludlow Destination Partnership and the production of a Sustainable Tourism Strategy for the AONB and nearby area (funded by Advantage West Midlands funds secured by the AONB Partnership). Having in place a Sustainable Tourism Strategy, along with a 'forum' linking the protected area body with the area's tourism industry to oversee its implementation, are the basic requirements of the Charter (see Appendix 1 for the Charter principles in more detail). Meeting these requirements in 2010-11 put the AONB Partnership in a very strong position to influence tourism in the area towards sustainability, for which there is wide grassroots support in the industry in the area, but also a need for leadership.

Five years on, we continue to run the Destination Partnership for the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow, now in conjunction with Shropshire Hills Tourism, which is recognised by Visit Britain as a Destination Management Organisation (DMO). This recognition from the tourism industry side is very valuable. The recent rounds of EU funding via Defra in the RDPE Growth Programme referred to the Destination Partnerships' strategies as the key guiding documents. This level of influence could easily slip away over the coming years if the Charter is not renewed.

Only seven AONBs of the 38 in England and Wales have obtained the Charter (see Appendix 2). The additional statutory purpose of a Conservation Board to "increase the understanding and enjoyment by the public of the AONB's special qualities" would provide an extra rationale for a strong involvement in tourism by us into the future, if this comes about.

While the principle of sustainable tourism has wide support in the area, since both visitors and local people appreciate the 'unspoilt' nature of the area, there are also pressures, including:

- Visitor numbers are increasing and localised impacts of certain activities e.g. mountain biking and large events, require more input to manage effectively
- Political pressure for less constraints on development through the planning system
- Reduced public sector resources into infrastructure important to visitors, including Visitor Information Centres, public toilets, footpaths and countryside sites
- Reduced sector support for tourism from Shropshire Council
- Changing public perceptions of sustainability, and a need to re-energise these initiatives.

Anything that the AONB Partnership can do to reinforce the status and importance of the AONB in relation to tourism will help to achieve our primary purpose to conserve and enhance the area. It will also position the AONB as a place where tourism can be developed further drawing on the special qualities of the area, but taking care not to undermine them. The key benefit of the Charter is the assessment criteria, which require a robustness of management frameworks and action across many headings – see the Charter principles in Appendix 1. The application process and assessment visit requires rigorously addressing these criteria. This gives both reward and incentive to those organisations which are taking actions which help evidence the criteria, and

also a reason to address any gaps, often by collaboration. Though there may be a general mood in favour of sustainable tourism in the area, this rigour and some of the resulting actions will simply not be present without the Charter application process to drive it.

The Sustainable Tourism Strategy is currently being updated to create a new 5 year Strategy through work of a sub-group of the Destination Partnership, since attempts to source funding for specialist input to do this have not been successful. Renewal of the Strategy for the Shropshire Hills will help ensure that any higher level tourism strategies pick up our objectives, especially as there has for some time been no Shropshire tourism strategy. Shropshire Council's new Economic Growth Strategy recognises the landscape of the county, including the AONB, and references the importance of the visitor economy. There is an ongoing need to influence planning decisions both directly relating to tourism developments, and those other decisions which affect the landscape resource which underpins tourism.

Organisationally, tourism is still fairly fragmented at a county level. We participate at this level as actively as possible, and the strength and external recognition of the Shropshire Hills as an important and well managed destination will help with this, to put us alongside well recognised and established destinations such as Ironbridge and Shrewsbury. Locally, our partnership with Shropshire Hills Tourism is strong, with many joint ventures and strong alignment of area and identities. We can help to secure the progress we have made over the last five years in tourism, and provide a strong tool for our influence over the next five years, by renewing the Charter.

#### Funding the Charter renewal

Renewing the Charter would cost €5,000 for the next five year period, plus a modest amount for the costs of the external validator's visit. This equates to around £900 per year, which arguably represents very good value for the influence it will secure. A £50,000 grant for tourism co-operation was secured in 2016 for the Shropshire Hills to implement actions from the Strategy which had been prepared specifically to meet the Charter requirements, and would not otherwise have been in place. The previous Strategy and the Charter evaluation process both indicated the importance of the Shuttles as a sustainable transport action supporting tourism, and renewal of the Strategy and Charter may help significantly in securing future funding for the Shuttles. It would also provide an excellent framework for the work of our Sustainable Tourism Officer, which is a key resource towards its delivery which we did not have in the first round of the Charter.

It is possible that organisations involved in the Destination Partnership may be able to contribute something towards the Charter renewal, and it is proposed to ask for contributions. The application however has to be made by the protected area body rather than the Destination Partnership. It is proposed therefore that the AONB Partnership funds whatever part of the Charter renewal fee cannot be raised elsewhere (in reality this is likely to mean funding the majority of the amount), from either in-year earned income, or if necessary from reserves.

### **3. RECOMMENDATION:**

**The Transition Board is recommended to support the re-evaluation for the Europarc Federation Sustainable Tourism Charter by the AONB Partnership.**

This paper has been prepared by Phil Holden, AONB Partnership Manager. For further details contact 01743 254741/ [phil.holden@shropshire.gov.uk](mailto:phil.holden@shropshire.gov.uk).

#### **Appendix 1 The Charter Principles for Sustainable Tourism**

#### **Appendix 2 Sustainable Tourism Charter Areas in the UK**

Additional information is available at <http://www.europarc.org/nature/european-charter-sustainable-tourism/>

## **Appendix 1 The Charter Principles for Sustainable Tourism**

**The underlying aims of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas are to:**

- **increase awareness of, and support for, Europe's protected areas as a fundamental part of our heritage, that should be preserved for, and enjoyed by, current and future generations;**
- **improve the sustainable development and management of tourism in protected areas, which takes account of the needs of the environment, local residents, local businesses and visitors.**

The **Charter principles** involve working in partnership, preparing and implementing a strategy, and addressing key issues. Charter protected areas make a series of commitments to achieve the underlying aims:

### **1 To involve all those implicated by tourism in and around the protected area in its development and management.**

A permanent forum, or equivalent arrangement, should be established between the protected-area authority, local municipalities, conservation and community organisations and representatives of the tourism industry. Links with regional and national bodies should be developed and maintained.

### **2 To prepare and implement a sustainable tourism strategy and action plan for the protected area.**

The strategy should be based on careful consultation and be approved and understood by local stakeholders. It should contain:

- a definition of the area to be influenced by the strategy, which may extend outside the protected area;
- an assessment of the area's natural, historic and cultural heritage, tourism infrastructure, and economic and social circumstances; considering issues of capacity, need and potential opportunity;
- an assessment of current visitors and potential future markets;
- a set of strategic objectives for the development and management of tourism, covering:
  - conservation and enhancement of the environment and heritage,
  - economic and social development,
  - preservation and improvement of the quality of life of local residents,
  - visitor management and enhancement of the quality of tourism offered;
- an action plan to meet these objectives;
- an indication of resources and partners to implement the strategy;
- proposals for monitoring results.

### **3 To protect and enhance the area's natural and cultural heritage, for and through tourism, and to protect it from excessive tourism development by:**

- monitoring impact on flora and fauna and controlling tourism in sensitive locations;
- encouraging activities, including tourism uses, which support the maintenance of historic heritage, culture and traditions;

- controlling and reducing activities, including tourism impacts, which: adversely affect the quality of landscapes, air and water; use non-renewable energy; and create unnecessary waste and noise;
  - encouraging visitors and the tourism industry to contribute to conservation.
- 4 To provide all visitors with a high-quality experience in all aspects of their visit, by:**
- researching the expectations and satisfaction of existing and potential visitors;
  - meeting the special needs of disadvantaged visitors;
  - supporting initiatives to check and improve the quality of facilities and services.
- 5 To communicate effectively to visitors about the special qualities of the area, by:**
- ensuring that the promotion of the area is based on authentic images, and is sensitive to needs and capacity at different times and in different locations;
  - providing readily-available and good quality visitor information in and around the area, and assisting tourism enterprises to do so;
  - providing educational facilities and services that interpret the area's environment and heritage to visitors and local people, including groups and schools.
- 6 To encourage specific tourism products which enable discovery and understanding of the area, by:**
- providing and supporting activities, events and packages involving the interpretation of nature and heritage.
- 7 To increase knowledge of the protected area and sustainability issues amongst all those involved in tourism, by:**
- providing or supporting training programmes for staff of the protected area, other organisations and tourism enterprises, based on assessing training needs.
- 8 To ensure that tourism supports and does not reduce the quality of life of local residents, by:**
- involving local communities in the planning of tourism in the area;
  - ensuring good communication between the protected area, local people and visitors;
  - identifying and seeking to reduce any conflicts that may arise.
- 9 To increase benefits from tourism to the local economy, by:**
- promoting the purchase of local products (food, crafts, local services) by visitors and local tourism businesses;
  - encouraging the employment of local people in tourism.
- 10 To monitor and influence visitor flows to reduce negative impacts, by:**
- keeping a record of visitor numbers over time and space, including feedback from local tourism enterprises;
  - creating and implementing a visitor management plan;
  - promoting use of public transport, cycling and walking as an alternative to private cars;
  - controlling the siting and style of any new tourism development.

**Appendix 2 Sustainable Tourism Charter Areas in the UK**

Yorkshire Dales National Park and Nidderdale AONB, awarded in 2013

Cairngorms National Park, awarded in 2011

Causeway Coast & Glens Heritage Trust, awarded in 2011

North Pennines AONB Partnership, awarded in 2013

Exmoor National Park, awarded in 2013

Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority, awarded in 2008

Brecon Beacons National Park Authority, awarded in 2007 and 2012

Northumberland National Park Authority, awarded in 2012

Broads National Park, awarded in 2006, 2011 and 2016

Shropshire Hills AONB, awarded in 2010

Cotswolds Conservation Board, awarded in 2005 and 2010

Forest of Bowland AONB Partnership, awarded in 2005 and 2010

Mourne Heritage Trust; AONB, awarded in 2008

Clwydian Range & Dee Valley AONB, awarded in 2009

Cornwall AONB, awarded in 2009