

ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE EMERGENCY – RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE TWO COUNCILS

This paper follows the meeting of the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership on 8th October 2019. The recommendations here were agreed by the Partnership, which is a formal Joint Advisory Committee to the two Councils, and workshop discussions were held to identify priority actions.

Summary

The AONB Partnership has been championing shifting to low carbon and nature recovery for a long time, and the declarations of Climate Emergency by Shropshire Council and by Telford & Wrekin Council are welcomed. Without wishing to detract in any way from the urgency of action on climate change, the Partnership recommends the Councils also to look at nature decline as a connected issue and to take actions to address this, which will also support carbon reduction. Virtually all of the actions in the Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan contribute to nature recovery and lowering carbon emissions. The AONB Partnership welcomes the inclusion of the AONB Partnership Manager on Shropshire Council's Climate officer group, and the Partnership and organisations within it will work together and with the Councils to maximise action on these vital issues.

Background

The House of Commons declaration in May 2019¹ was of an Environment and Climate Emergency. In addition to the urgent need to lower carbon emissions to mitigate climate change, the declaration notes that the UK is currently missing almost all of its biodiversity targets, with an alarming trend in species decline, and that cuts of 50% to the funding of Natural England are counterproductive to tackling those problems. In addition to carbon targets it calls on the Government to lay before the House within six months urgent proposals to restore the UK's natural environment and to deliver a circular, zero waste economy.

The National Association for AONBs made in July 2019 the Colchester Declaration² on nature recovery in AONBs which sets out a firm intention to significantly step up the scale and pace of action on nature recovery in the context of the Environment and Climate Emergency. The recent report of the national Glover Review³ of designated landscapes also highlights the need for greater action on nature recovery.

The Partnership group and the team together have the roles of delivery and of influencing. Direct delivery by the AONB team of 8 people is relatively small and very targeted. Partner organisations however have a lot of combined delivery capacity and the Partnership seeks to help them work effectively together. The Partnership encourages members bring their knowledge and also to take back things to their organisations and/or communities.

We believe action is needed from Governments, businesses, communities and individuals. These layers inter-connect and action by one of these can support the others. The Councils should use their influence with businesses, communities and individuals, as well as with central government. We believe that action planning should focus on what we need to do next and in addition, and not just what we're already doing, as we know this isn't enough.

Recommendations to Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council and rationale

Recommendation 1 - Nature recovery: Nature decline is as threatening an emergency as climate change and both are inextricably linked. Nature recovery and restoring resilient ecosystems also provide some of the essential solutions to reaching zero carbon emissions, as well as addressing many other factors vital for our survival and quality of life. These are not just distant global issues, they are the main challenges now for the Shropshire Hills. It is strongly recommended that the Councils include nature recovery in their formal declarations.

"The IPBES assessment has shown the strong interrelationship between climate change, the loss of biodiversity and human wellbeing. Climate change has been identified as a primary driver of biodiversity loss, already altering every part of nature. Likewise, the loss of biodiversity contributes to climate change, for example when we destroy forests we emit carbon dioxide, the major "human-produced" greenhouse gas.

We cannot solve the threats of human-induced climate change and loss of biodiversity in isolation. We either solve both or we solve neither. As policymakers around the world grapple with the twin threats of climate change and biodiversity loss, it is essential that they understand the linkages between the two so that their decisions and actions address both."

From article "**Loss of biodiversity is just as catastrophic as climate change**" 6th May 2019⁴, Sir Robert Watson - Chair of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), and former Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

We need to halt and reverse the loss of good quality habitats. In the Shropshire Hills this is still happening mostly through land management practices. Development is also a factor. To reverse nature loss we also need to restore and recreate habitat networks across the landscape. The Stepping Stones project is one example of where this is starting to happen. It needs more resourcing to really deliver, and we need more similar projects in other areas⁵.

The Marches Nature Partnership and Shropshire Biodiversity Partnership need proper resourcing to raise their influence and activity, working with the LEP and other sectors.

A whole range of mechanisms for looking after nature need to deliver more, including:

- Planning decisions and enforcement action by various regulators to prevent direct harm
- Agriculture and land use policy supporting sustainable activity
- Government schemes for farm conservation with good incentives and minimal barriers, and good advice for private landowners
- Ownership of key sites by conservation bodies and trusts and linking them with wider landscape
- Ambitious projects to recreate and restore habitats, needing public, private and third sector finance and partnership working
- Grassroots action by communities and individuals.

Like climate change, loss of nature can be subtle and not very visible. Our landscape still looks pretty, and may not appear to be in emergency. But we have lost and are losing 'bio-abundance' as well as biodiversity. As well as some extinctions, once common species are becoming rare. Baselines shift and people may not notice. Some 'keystone' species have an especially vital role in ecosystems, such as pollinators which enable crops and flowers to reproduce, earthworms which aerate soil, trees which bind river banks. We are already losing these and seeing the effects, but they can recover.

We need big programmes to engage and re-engage young people and adults with nature, to harness their energy and improve their wellbeing. Providers joining up more will improve these opportunities.

Recommendation 2 - Farming and land management for zero carbon and nature recovery:

The Councils have an important role shaping and influencing the future of their areas, as well as directly providing services. While they have less direct involvement in land management than some other factors, making change in this area will be vital to achieving net zero carbon emissions and nature recovery. It is strongly recommended that the Councils play an active part in this and consider increasing their capacity to do this, including training of members and senior officers.

Agriculture accounts for 10% of greenhouse gas emissions in the UK, through methane and nitrous oxide as well as CO₂. Ammonia has serious implications for air quality and nature. The NFU have set out a plan⁶ to get UK agriculture to net zero by 2040, based on productive efficiency, carbon storage and bioenergy and renewables. The expected contribution of bioenergy in this may not be compatible with allowing enough capacity in the land for nature recovery. The RSA's Food, Farming and Countryside Commission says that *"little is more important than tackling the global climate and nature crises and securing the nation's long-term health and wellbeing"*.⁷

Land management also has a vital role for carbon sequestration, to help us reach net zero as a whole. Planting trees has an important role, but this is about much more than carbon offsetting. Soils are also a vital means of carbon storage, and they need better management to do this. Peatlands are especially important and need to stay wet - the AONB has only 44ha of peatland, but the lowlands of Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin have much more. Pastures store carbon, some of which is lost when the land is cultivated. Increasing the organic matter in soils stores more carbon as well as help with water retention and natural fertility, reducing the need for artificial fertilisers (the main source of nitrous oxide greenhouse gas). Soil organic matter in pastures can be raised by techniques such as mob grazing where stock are rotated at fairly high densities for short periods, followed by resting the pastures while plenty of grass is still left. This is also good for productivity.

More trees and woodland will help with carbon sequestration, as well as providing many other benefits, but offsetting shouldn't be seen as an easy way to avoid challenges of reducing emissions in other sectors. To be effective, trees planted need to be of suitable species for the location and the landscape, and need maintaining. Enthusiasm should be harnessed, but advice and support is needed. The availability of land can be an issue - at the current transition in agricultural policy many farmers are cautious of changes which reduce their options in future. We welcome Shropshire Council's Tree Bank scheme and proposal to plant a tree for every person in the county.

Some of the calls to cease livestock farming because of methane production and to convert grazed land to growing food for direct human consumption or for nature are too simplistic. Especially in the uplands, land which is less fertile will not grow human food directly, and ploughing sloping land can result in loss of soil and harm to rivers. We need also to remember that land can deliver multiple benefits – for example the best heathland conservation sites in the AONB are maintained by low intensity grazing which provides a food output. High quality pasture-fed livestock from nature-friendly low input systems has an important place in a low carbon agriculture and is not at all the same thing as intensive livestock rearing on arable-grown feeds⁸.

The steps we need to take to zero carbon and nature recovery may alter the character of our landscape – but these changes can enhance it. Ecosystem functions matter, natural beauty is not a static thing, and the AONB designation should not be seen as a barrier to the right kinds of change.

The New Environmental Land Management System will be a vital tool and needs the best thinking and engagement in its development to make sure it works well. There should be a collaborative programme of visits and workshops about zero carbon and nature friendly farming, as well as demonstration farms and links with universities.

Recommendation 3 – Development, energy, transport & tourism for zero carbon and nature recovery:

In these areas the Councils have a greater lead. Net zero and nature recovery cannot be achieved if the political and corporate focus is on economic growth at all costs. It is strongly recommended that the Councils build the goals of net zero and nature recovery into their visions at the highest levels. Doing this can deliver better quality of life for people as well as new forms of economic activity which are truly sustainable. On energy and transport we need to talk about managing demand as well as changing supply. This may mean people consuming less and travelling less. This future is not unthinkable, and can benefit people.

Planning policy and decisions are aiming to support sustainability, e.g. by providing homes close to where people work, but this isn't currently adequate to achieve carbon targets.

"Local Plans in England are not dealing with carbon dioxide emissions reduction effectively, nor are they consistently delivering the adaptation actions necessary to secure the long-term resilience of local communities. This inaction is partly due to a chronic lack of resources in local government, which had contributed to a loss of skills on energy and climate change."

RTPI 2019, Rising to the Climate Crisis – A Guide for Local Authorities on Planning for Climate Change⁹

Natural capital needs to become a central principle in planning and economic development. The potential of natural flood management techniques and biodiversity net gain need to be maximised.

Renewable energy is a challenge for protected landscapes, and the only real potential conflict between conserving natural beauty and other environmental goals. Policies are against industrial scale developments in the AONB, while being positive about small scale renewables. To justify this, protected areas will increasingly need to make big contributions to reaching net zero in other ways.

The House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee is currently running an enquiry on sustainable tourism¹⁰, and some main points from our evidence of 12th September 2019 were:

- The huge challenges of net zero carbon emissions will mean structural change in the tourism industry as in every other part of the economy. There are however growth opportunities in expanded domestic markets and high-quality sustainable tourism products.
- Sustainability remains a fairly fringe consideration in many parts of the industry, and greater incentives and guidance are needed from government.
- Sustainable tourism needs to be planned in a collaborative way between the industry and public sector bodies on a location-specific basis. Much good practice exists, but many Destination Management Organisations are not equipped to lead on sustainability.

The Councils should provide more support and leadership for tourism businesses on sustainability – addressing energy and transport, supporting plastic-free initiatives and managing as well as promoting our areas as environmentally sensitive destinations.

The emergency we have reached is partly the result of some extreme excesses which need to stop. But it is also created by lots of 'normal' behaviour by us – 'normal' agricultural practices, 'normal' amounts of travel and energy consumption. These norms cannot be sustained, but solutions exist¹¹.

There isn't consensus about the problems, or the solutions. So alongside action, we need to keep raising these topics and challenging ourselves and others. Restoring nature will mean looking outside our own area, and to respond to the global climate issue the Councils should use their influence on the wider scale solutions as well as heading to zero carbon in their own areas.

Actions identified in workshop sessions at AONB Partnership meeting 8th October 2019

	Nature recovery	Farming and land management	Development, energy, transport and tourism
What's going well?	<p>Recovery of Pine Marten, Otter and Red Kite - as a result of historic initiatives/legislation.</p> <p>Positive 'doing' initiatives such as Water Environment Grant and Unmuddying the Waters – but need lots more of this.</p> <p>Better understanding e.g. Shropshire Bird Atlas – but a long way to go.</p>	<p>Some good events happening to highlight carbon- and nature- friendly farming.</p> <p>Farmers are becoming more receptive to change.</p> <p>Opportunities from new environmental schemes - Defra Tests & Trials now going on.</p>	<p>Active community groups e.g. Stretton Climate Care.</p> <p>Shuttle buses, Co-wheels, Ring & Ride.</p> <p>National Trust management.</p> <p>Sustainable Tourism Charter held by AONB.</p> <p>Councils support for access to nature.</p> <p>John Muir Award activity.</p>
What further things can partners and organisations do?	<p>Foster positive cultural change, be inclusive and engage.</p> <p>Communicate positive stories of nature recovery – it's not a hopeless situation and people respond to positive messages.</p> <p>Support grassroots initiatives.</p> <p>Facilitation Fund work is engaging land managers well but is only in a few places.</p> <p>Stop stripping conservation agencies of resources.</p> <p>Help with education and knowledge sharing especially with land managers.</p> <p>Lead by example.</p> <p>Stigmatise unsustainable behaviours.</p>	<p>Encourage and support sustainable development in farming.</p> <p>Support the idea of a Development Plan Document (DPD) for the AONB.</p> <p>Encourage pasture-fed meat.</p> <p>Information exchange.</p> <p>Joint organisation and promotion of events – use everyone's networks to get people involved.</p> <p>Try to remove barriers and disincentives e.g. financial penalties to putting land down to trees.</p>	<p>Meetings and publicity to raise awareness.</p> <p>Lobby for better public transport.</p> <p>Engage civil society, promotion.</p> <p>Work with the LEP.</p>

	Nature recovery	Farming and land management	Development, energy, transport and tourism
What should the AONB Partnership do to support?	<p>Give stories of success that relate to people's lives.</p> <p>Show that biodiversity is a direct measure of environmental health and therefore human health/wellbeing.</p> <p>Better collection of data and data/information sharing – knowledge hub.</p> <p>Be a 'sounding-board' for people's ideas.</p>	<p>Better guidance for land managers, along with active engagement – a joint conversation about solutions.</p> <p>Sign up demonstration farms.</p> <p>Discuss issues with Parish Councils.</p>	<p>Provide advice.</p> <p>Speak at meetings.</p> <p>Design guides for development.</p> <p>Push for interconnected transport and electric car charging network.</p>
What else should the Councils do?	<p>Explanation of why nature matters to people's lives, Shropshire landscape and economy.</p> <p>Condition planning decisions to incorporate positive biodiversity measures.</p> <p>Lobby for increased planning powers to protect biodiversity.</p> <p>Needs to be a top down cultural change.</p> <p>Make Nature Recovery a human rights issue.</p> <p>Enforcement of existing policies to protect biodiversity – the economic imperative should not override everything else.</p>	<p>Take part in and promote joint events.</p> <p>Discuss farming and land management futures and the specific needs of the AONB with a wide range of farmers and interests, and use this to inform planning policy and decisions for agricultural development.</p> <p>Work towards a DPD or better policy for the AONB.</p> <p>Contribute to data and knowledge exchange.</p> <p>Encourage more sensitive management of hedgerows.</p> <p>Discuss issues with Parish Councils.</p>	<p>Improve recycling mechanisms.</p> <p>Incorporate sustainability more into planning.</p> <p>More funding for Shuttles.</p> <p>Make more of train links for tourism.</p> <p>More community-focussed housing through planning.</p>

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