

Farming in Protected Landscapes programme - Shropshire Hills AONB local priorities, at 30/6/21

Projects funded through the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme in the Shropshire Hills AONB are expected to deliver against at least one, preferably more, of the priorities of the AONB Management Plan 2019-24 and the Nature Recovery Plan. These relate closely to the four priorities of the programme (climate, nature, people and place), but the topics are inter-related and applications will be stronger by showing how any of these priorities will be met by the project. Integrated projects which deliver against a number of priorities are especially encouraged e.g. projects enhancing nature and having climate benefits, as well as offering new opportunities for visitors and improving business resilience.

Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan policies which projects should support:

- Existing areas of high quality habitat should be retained, and networks developed of higher quality habitat through targeted improvements.
- Pro-active adaptation to climate change, focusing on natural processes and wildlife, is essential to retaining the natural beauty of the AONB and must be given a high priority.
- Management of water resources should be given a high priority, including water quality and quantity, habitats and species. Integrated catchment management approaches are supported.
- Broadleaved woodland comprising native species should be expanded, with restoration prioritised on Plantation on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) and Plantation on Wood Pasture.
- Planting of new trees outside woodlands should be a high priority, to combat the effects of tree diseases.
- The conservation and enhancement of the area's historic environment and heritage assets is a high priority and all activities should seek to enhance or better reveal their significance as well as promote their wider understanding and enjoyment.
- Solutions which enable environmentally, economically and socially sustainable farm businesses should be supported.
- Sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) should be used to aid water quality and slow the speed of water runoff to lessen flooding.
- Priority should be given to protecting key features of the landscape.
- Community low carbon initiatives in keeping with the AONB's purposes should be supported.
- Existing resources in the AONB, such as woodfuel and agricultural byproducts, may contribute usefully to biomass energy as well as sustainable land management.
- Tourism activities which draw on the special qualities of the area without harming them should be encouraged. This may include the development of access infrastructure (such as off-road cycle routes and rights of way); the use of public transport, historic and natural sites; interpretation to help aid understanding; enterprises based on the special qualities of the AONB (like wildlife watching, landscape painting, walking festivals); and cultural events.
- Environmentally sound leisure and recreation activities in keeping with the AONB should be encouraged and promoted - including low resource-use activities, those with minimum damage to the landscape, and following 'quiet enjoyment' principles with minimum disturbance to residents and other visitors.
- Recreation activities which are inherently noisy or intrusive should be discouraged, and where possible prevented. Recreational off-road use of motor vehicles should not be encouraged or promoted within the AONB.

Desired outcomes based on the AONB Management Plan which projects should support:

Climate change mitigation and adaptation:

- Soil organic matter is optimised to safeguard carbon stores and increase sequestration.
- Previously modified peatlands are restored to be wet, accumulating and sequestering carbon.
- Native woodlands are expanded to sequester carbon, support nature and increase infiltration.
- Woodland and scrub along rivers moderates water temperature and safeguards riverbanks.

Soils:

- Erosion and loss of soils is minimised. Soil structure and health is maintained and enhanced.

Water, catchment and nutrient management:

- Natural Flood Management measures result in greater water retention in catchments to reduce flooding and prevent rivers drying up in periods of low rainfall.
- Raised awareness and improved techniques and equipment to reduce amounts of nutrient and silt washed into rivers.
- Good habitat structure for biodiversity in rivers and along their banks.
- Rivers free of artificial obstructions limiting the natural range of fish.

Biodiversity and natural environment:

- A resilient Nature Recovery Network of 'bigger, better and more joined up' habitats.
- No net losses of priority habitat, and better habitats in favourable or recovering condition.
- Halt and reverse declines in key wildlife species.
- More people engaged with biodiversity and taking positive action.
- Collaborative approaches to managing invasive non-native species, e.g. Himalayan balsam

Woodlands and trees:

- All ancient woodland sites are in a UK Forestry Standard management plan which is based on condition assessment and long-term resilience.
- Landowners are enabled to actively manage towards their objectives and ancient woods are managed to optimise biodiversity and to be sustainable.
- Other existing woodlands are managed for a range of benefits and are resilient with a diverse species mix of trees.
- Increase in woodland and tree cover, and widespread planting of new trees to offset losses from tree diseases. Trees and woodland are more integrated with farming and valued for their agricultural benefits.
- Ancient trees are recorded and have appropriate management plans.
- Traditional orchards are managed, restored and re-created.

Geology

- Designated and important geological sites are conserved and available for educational use.

Historic environment:

- All Scheduled historic sites are in favourable condition and management.
- A reduced number of heritage sites are 'At Risk' and 'Vulnerable'.
- Heritage is better understood and more people are actively involved in its care. The historic environment contributes to people's sense of place and belonging and to the economy.
- Historic buildings are in sustainable and appropriate use where possible.

Enjoyment and understanding

- New opportunities are established for low impact recreation activities such as walking, cycling, riding and swimming.
- More opportunities are provided for people to experience and connect with nature, and to learn about and understand the countryside.

More diverse audiences

- More people from under-represented sections of society (e.g. young, elderly, minority ethnic groups) are enjoying and connecting with the countryside, through appropriate support and enablement activities.

Public engagement in land management

- Members of the public have more opportunity to learn about farming and are willing to buy quality food produced by environmentally sustainable farming practices.
- Greater participation in practical conservation activity with associated skills and knowledge.

Farm business resilience

- Agro-ecological and regenerative farming techniques are developed and disseminated.
- Improved resilience to climate impacts e.g. water storage and rainwater harvesting.
- More farmers derive some income from visitors and from recreation activities compatible with the AONB.
- Strengthened farmer networks and links between farmers, conservation groups and other interests.

Specific AONB Management Plan Actions which projects are encouraged to support:

- Continue to improve habitat and water quality in the River Clun for Freshwater pearl mussel.
- Restorative management of Plantations on Ancient Woodland sites (PAWS).
- Develop social forestry activity.
- Management of trees and woodlands along with natural flood management in the Wenlock Edge area.
- Action to manage hay meadows and species-rich grassland.
- Better understanding of the geology of the AONB, and the conservation and management of geological and geomorphological sites.
- Training for land management and conservation.
- Good conservation management of county Wildlife Sites.
- Support activities contributing to a low carbon Shropshire Hills, compatible with the AONB's special qualities.
- Promote less well known locations in order to spread the load and benefits of visitors.
- Improve provision and promotion for cycling of different kinds and levels.

For further information and context see <https://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/our-work/management-plan/2019-24-management-plan>. This includes Management Plan local area priorities which may be useful to applicants.

Shropshire Hills AONB Nature Recovery Plan priorities

- **Best possible management of existing high quality habitats** as 'core areas' of a nature recovery network.
- **Improving margins and buffer areas to heathland and rough grassland hills** – to soften transitions, including mixed and mosaic 'ffridd' habitats, scrub and woodland.
- **Renaturalising catchment headwater areas** – rewetting and roughening improved and drained pastures, including restoration of locally extensive hilltop peatlands and small upland flushes.
- **Regenerating and expanding upland semi-natural woodlands** by excluding stock.
- **Woodland creation to improve habitat networks**, especially on steep banks, upland gullies and streams, field corners, and new planting of trees outside woods including hedgerow trees and agroforestry. Restoration of Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) and sensitive management of commercial woodland. Also new tree planting as a response to tree disease and restoration of hedges.
- **Habitat improvement of river and stream corridors** including buffer strips with tree and shrub planting and control of stock access. Restoration of flood plain wetland habitats.
- **Managing and re-creating wildflower meadows and species-rich grasslands**, including roadside verges.
- **More sustainable regenerative management of farmland** e.g. pasture regimes which increase soil organic content and reduce water run-off (e.g. through reduced compaction, buffering streams and wetlands), arable farming avoiding soil loss and harm to rivers by avoiding steep slopes and erosion-vulnerable land.
- **Management of invasive non-native species** such as Signal Crayfish, Himalayan Balsam.
- **Connecting people to nature.** Nature's future depends on people caring about it, which only comes from people connecting with nature in their lives. This also has huge benefits for people's wellbeing and quality of life.

More information is available at <https://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/our-work/aonb-partnership/nature-recovery>.

Indicative example projects which would deliver national and local programme priorities

(these deliberately include elements across the themes, which is encouraged but not essential)

A naturally wet area of upland peaty soils which has been agriculturally improved is re-wetted by reversing past drainage (e.g. ditch blocking, fracturing or removing land drains). A suitable light grazing regime is established to help wet heath and bog vegetation to develop. An adjacent small area of conifer trees on the peat soil is removed, and some native trees and shrubs are planted along the small stream leading from the peatland.

A catchment headwater stream is enhanced for habitat quality and natural flood management. Flush areas at the source are protected by reducing agricultural pressure but retaining some grazing. Working collaboratively with a neighbouring holding, further down the stream a series of leaky dams are installed to hold back water and slow the flow, and in some sections stock are excluded by fencing and trees and shrubs are planted. The work is demonstrated to other farmers in the catchment.

A farm track linking a stock yard and a road is in poor condition and is acting as a pathway conveying runoff to a roadside ditch that runs to a small stream. It is upgraded to include cross-grips and a swale to divert and capture runoff and sediment to prevent pollution of the watercourse.

A watercourse is accessible to livestock, and has poaching of riverbanks, erosion and loss of soil to the river. There is little vegetation structure on the riverbank and some over-mature alder. A fording point on the watercourse and an area where livestock congregate to access water is in poor condition and provides a pathway for sediment and faecal matter to enter the watercourse. A number of disease-susceptible alders are coppiced, and tree planting carried out to restore riparian woodland. The riverbank is fenced and the approaches to the ford are upgraded with concrete sleepers and gated to exclude livestock. Alternative livestock watering is provided by a solar pasture pump which feeds a large drinking trough mounted on an area of hardstanding.

A field is thought to be compacted due to vehicle movements and stocking over many years. A number of soil pits have been dug confirming the field has restricted grass root structure and reduced soil fauna, preventing water infiltration leading to runoff. Rather than ploughing and reseeded which releases soil carbon, the field is aerated/subsoiled to encourage grassland and soil fauna regeneration. After this the field is managed to build up soil organic matter.

A section of river which has previously been straightened, culverted or altered in form is renaturalised by removing engineered features and reintroducing meanders. (Note that such projects require legal consents and would need careful planning with specialist advice). A new permissive access route is put in place along the river and publicised. At a suitable viewpoint location, picnic tables are provided and there is access to the water for paddling.

An upland semi-natural woodland is fenced to exclude stock and allow regeneration of young trees and shrub and field layers. Some protection of young trees is carried out and new planting if necessary. An adjoining area of low value grassland (which is not species-rich) is included in the fenced area to allow the woodland to expand and connect to another nearby woodland.

A small farm pond is known to support an important population of amphibians, but is isolated and therefore at risk. Old maps show the farm used to have several ponds, but these have been lost. New ponds are created within foraging distance of the existing pond to bolster the amphibian colony and to create new open water habitats for other wildlife such as dragonflies.

A bank and gully area with mixed and mosaic habitats is enhanced by some bracken control, tree and shrub planting of native species in suitable areas and maintaining good quality open areas of grassland and wetland. A section of fence or track is realigned to enable the wetland feature to reach its optimum and to prevent it affecting farming operations. A suitable grazing regime is put in place.

A programme of planting of new hedgerow and in-field trees is drawn up and implemented across the farm, along with care of existing trees (such as avoiding vehicle use and cultivation in or close to the root zone). Some volunteers assist with survey and practical work.

An old orchard is restored with new planting and a meadow grassland management regime, working with volunteers from the local community. Public access is allowed during blossom season with links to local artists/art festivals. An area is put aside for a community beekeeping scheme and some equipment purchased to enable a community juicing initiative.

An upland farm has some areas of improved grassland which are becoming increasingly marginal and require expensive inputs to maintain productivity. Adjoining areas of rough grassland are not large enough to support viable populations of upland birds. By reverting the improved grassland and aggregating it with adjoining rough grassland a larger area of habitat is created which is more viable for upland birds.

A species-rich hay meadow is created on a suitable site using green hay from a nearby existing meadow. Part of the meadow is created by enhancing the existing flora and in another part some topsoil stripping is carried out to lower nutrient levels. A late-cut meadow regime is put in place. The area is promoted to the local community for quiet enjoyment (linked by permissive and or public rights of way) and members of a local wildlife group assist with survey and monitoring.

An important archaeological feature or monument undergoes some restoration work using traditional techniques. Training in traditional skills is provided to volunteers from the local history/archaeology group so that they can carry out the work under supervision, and new public access and interpretation is provided. The local group agrees to provide ongoing walks and talks to local people and visitors to raise awareness of the site (note that appropriate consents would be required for work on a scheduled monument).

A small new car park is created with a picnic area, links to local footpaths and some interpretation about habitat, landscape and historical features nearby. The car park is located in a suitable place where there is demand, and charging for use creates a new income stream for the farm. (Note that such a project would require planning permission and careful planning and liaison with organisations).

Working collaboratively a number of landowners improve a section of an off-road cycling route to a standard that can be used by families and also by people with different mobility. The increased uptake of use helps to sustain a farm B&B, which is able to publicise the route.

Working with urban community groups and a farmer, an organisation sets up a series of visits to the countryside aiming to raise the confidence of under-represented groups to visit countryside close to where they live. The project includes research to understand the barriers to enjoyment of the countryside, as well as practical conservation tasks and guided visits to learn about farming and food production.